



Sermon: - 17th September 2017

The numbers speak for themselves

Psalm 114; Matthew 18:21-35

I once heard “if only” described as the saddest words in the English language. If only I had not done that... or this... If only I had said to him, or her... If only I had known, or not known... The saddest words in the English language, ... but perhaps also the most dangerous! And the most seductive.

The most dangerous because they can so easily warp our relationships with another person... If only he or she were different... if only they were more like me... if only she or he could see things from my point of view... if only they wouldn't do this... or that... if only... they would change, then we would be able to get along with one another ... be happy... it would all be okay.... If only!

They are the most seductive because when we pray for someone else these words can lead us to imagine that the prayers we are praying are for the good of the other person. “If only they would hear your voice, Lord...” “If only they would realise how unchristian their behaviour is...” But the problem with this is that before we can pray that God will change another person, we must have judged them and found them wanting, and that, of course, is not for us to decide. In fact, we are on very dangerous ground indeed if we allow ourselves to be the judge of another person. Jesus tells us to “judge not that you be not judged” Matthew 7 v 1. What would happen to us if God were to judge us by the standards we use to judge other people? Yet he offers us, not judgment, but forgiveness... So, what do we offer to others?

If only... Dangerous words indeed, because to wish that someone else would change is the opposite of forgiveness.

Peter thought he was being pretty generous in his forgiveness. “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how many times must I forgive him, seven times?” We can almost hear the subtext, the assumptions behind Peter's words... “Seven times, do you hear that, Lord, that's pretty good, don't you think? I'm not going to demand an eye for an eye! I don't want

a tooth for a tooth. I'm going to forgive seven times, seven times, Lord, what do you think of that, eh?"

But Jesus shocks him, as Jesus always shocks. The answer Jesus gives is never the expected one.

"No, Peter, seventy-seven times!" Or, to be more accurate, the Greek is seventy times seven.

Seven is a significant number for the Jews. It means perfection or completeness. Was Peter smug? "If I forgive seven times, Lord, I'll have forgiven perfectly. I'll have forgiven completely. Then I'll have done all I can, and it will be up to the other person to mend his ways."

But Jesus punctures the over-inflated balloon of Peter's complacency. "No, Peter, seventy times seven ..." in other words, forgive until you've lost count!

Then, just to ram the point home, Jesus goes on to tell the parable of the unforgiving servant. This parable makes the point about forgiveness in a way that cannot be misconstrued, the numbers speak for themselves. In this parable, the amount owed by the first servant was ten thousand talents. Ten thousand was the largest Greek numeral. And the talent was the largest unit of currency. Some authorities think that the talent weighed about thirty-three kilograms. The international price of gold at the moment is about £30 per gram. Thirty-three kilograms of gold therefore, is worth almost £1 million. So, one talent was a small fortune, and ten thousand was an enormous amount of money. On the other hand, one denarius was equivalent to about one day's wage, so the second sum owed, one hundred denarii, was around one hundred days', or just over three months' wages. That's a lot of money, but it's not the incredible amount that the first man owed. Yet the first man, having decided not to forgive the second man's debt, was basically saying, "you need to change your ways, but I'm not going to change my ways!"

The temptation to change others... the opposite of forgiveness. But we cannot change another. We have no right to pray that God will change another person.

The author Anthony de Mello tells the story of a man who has grown old without achieving any of his youthful hopes... They were good hopes... God-centred hopes. He had wanted to do so much for God... to heal the sick, and raise the dead, and cleanse lepers, and cast

out demons. Now he is old and he reflects on his life and he asks himself where he went wrong.

“I was a revolutionary when I was young and all my prayer to God was ‘Lord, give me the energy to change the world’

As I approached middle age and realised that half my life was gone without my changing a single soul, I changed my prayer to ‘Lord, give me the grace to change everyone who comes in contact with me, just my family and friends, and I shall be satisfied’

Now that I am an old man and my days are numbered, my one prayer is ‘Lord, give me the grace to change myself’ if I had prayed for this right from the start I should not have wasted my life”.

Changing ourselves. The only alternative. The only thing we actually have any power over. There is a prayer which is found on cards and posters. Like many popular sayings it has perhaps become too familiar and so overlooked. You will know it. “Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Or, as I found it on Facebook the other day, “God grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change, the courage to change the one I can, and the wisdom to know it’s me!” We all know that we have things in our lives that we need to change. But to change ourselves takes energy and determination, and perhaps, like Peter, like the unforgiving servant, like the old man in the story, we would rather spend our energy and determination waiting for others to change.

If this is true of us as individuals, it is also true of the church, because the church is full of individuals. And the church needs to change. We have one thing left to offer society that it cannot find elsewhere... forgiveness. When society finds in the church forgiveness rather than condemnation, perhaps then we will see lives changed, hope restored. We may bemoan the state of the church today, we may lament the godlessness of society and weep for the days when pews and Sunday Schools were full, when God and authority were respected, and the church had a voice in society. But we cannot expect that society will suddenly see the light and come flooding back. Why should they? Our responsibility is to change ourselves, to seek always to live out the gospel more truthfully, and by doing that we will affect the society around us.

The story of the unforgiving servant illustrates the huge debt that we owe to God. In celebrating our service of Harvest Thanksgiving, we are recognising this debt. God's grace, his generous, forgiving grace, is as unimaginable as owing ten thousand talents, ten thousand million pounds in today's money, and having the debt paid for us. At great cost God has forgiven us in order to re-establish a relationship with us. All the other things he gives us, this world to live in, friends and families to love and be loved by, gifts and talents to enrich our lives and enable us to earn a living, all these things we celebrate today, are simply further examples of his immense, overwhelming, unfathomable grace. He loves us, he forgives us, and he gives us endless gifts which make life worthwhile. In response to this amazing, incredible, undeserved grace, we offer our gifts in return, harvest gifts, but also our weekly giving in the offering plate. Not grudgingly, I hope, but gladly, gratefully, generously.

But, being honest with ourselves, how often are we like the unforgiving servant? It comes down to this, if we want God's forgiveness for ourselves, if we want renewed and peaceful relationships with all our fellow Christians, if we want the church once again to be a light to society, it will come only if and when we learn to appreciate the great gift that God has given us, and consider our own response to that in love and humility. It will not come when our enemy repents. It will not come even when we forgive those who have sinned against us seven times, nor seventy-seven times, nor seventy times seven, although that might be a good place to start. The church will not reflect the love of God to others by us asking those others to measure up to our standards. It will be renewed when we are prepared to contemplate change within ourselves. When we truly realise the size of the debt we owe to our God and Father, and the incredible gift he has given us in his forgiveness.

Many years ago, there was one of these ongoing exchanges in the letters column of the Times newspaper. Over several days letters were printed which discussed the problem of evil. Eventually this letter written by G.K. Chesterton appeared.

Dear Sirs

You ask what is wrong with humanity?

I am!

Yours sincerely

G K Chesterton

The temptation to change others. To put a limit on our forgiveness, to forgive conditionally, hoping that others will see the error of their ways – the most subtle of temptations. Let us be on our guard against it. Let us be aware and wary. As we seek to grow in fellowship together, Christ's body here on earth, a beacon of hope for a broken world, let this be our prayer...

Renew your church today O lord, and begin with me...