

September 2020

Matthew 18. 21-35 13th

A Sermon by the Rev. Jackie Bullen

Talking about forgiveness is difficult but after today's Gospel reading we cannot avoid it.

We heard of someone who had an enormous debt, beyond anything reasonable or understandable. So large that he would never be able to repay it and the king was moved with compassion. He does something amazing. The king not only releases him, he also forgave the debt.

But as the man walked away from the king, he happened to spot out of the corner of his eye a man who owed him some money. The Bible says it was 100 denarii. The equivalent of a few pounds. The man grabbed him by the throat, And said "Pay what you owe".

When the fellow slave begs for patience, just as the man had done to the king, the servant would not forgive the smaller debt. And Verse 30 says, "Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt."

Of course, it wasn't the fact that the servant would not forgive his friend that probably shocked those listening to Jesus. It was that he was so unforgiving to another person after having found such mercy himself.

The king had forgiven the man an enormous debt. Forgiven him when he could have enslaved him for life. The man deserved

punishment but instead found mercy. Shouldn't that forgiven man have done the same for somebody who owed him a smaller debt?

But there's no forgiveness this time. And I ask these questions of us all: Who are we like? Are we like the unforgiving servant?

As Christians, we come before God as debtors and say, "I cannot pay." And God who is rich in mercy says, "I forgive you". Then we rise from the pew or from our armchair walk outside and when we see someone who has hurt us or upset us, how do we feel towards them? Do we feel loving and generous and patient? Or do we feel a surge of anger and bitterness?

Please don't think that I am in any way suggesting that forgiveness is easy or that I myself find this an easy topic, because I don't.

But, in reading about this passage I have realised that this kind of deep level forgiveness we are talking about today doesn't just happen overnight. We don't just go to church one Sunday, recite the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us", and go home whole, healed people. Sometimes it takes years for God's love and grace to have a healing effect on us.

When we think about the subject of forgiveness, someone will usually say "I can forgive but I can't forget?"

Almost all of us have experienced the problem of forgiving someone the best way we know how and then discovering that angry thoughts still fill our minds.

But, moving towards forgiveness can be a choice we make. It does not mean we somehow wipe out of our mind the record of what

happened. But we can choose not to dwell on it. So in that sense, to forgive means to choose to leave things behind.

That's not easy but it is the way forward. It's what Christians are called to do for we have the example of Jesus himself who when he hung on the cross, an innocent man put to death for crimes he did not commit, prayed, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Forgiveness is a way of letting go of the past and moving forward with God in peace and love. It won't be easy if you have been deeply hurt. But the message of our text is clear: Unless we can let go of the past, we are doomed to live there forever in that sad and painful place of hurt and bitterness and that is not where we are called to be.

If I were to put this sermon into one phrase, it would look like this: Forgiveness is not easy, but it is necessary, and as forgiven people followers of Christ called to be people of peace with the help of God we must keep trying until we can do it all the days of our lives.

Amen