

SUNDAY 24A

We often hear people calling for harsher penalties for crimes. Our very British sense of justice and fair play comes to the fore when crime seems to be treated lightly. We are also imbued with the Old Testament teaching of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Strict and equal justice seems embedded in us. Let the punishment fit the crime.

On the other hand, when a harsh sentence is imposed on an offender there's also an outcry. We are then filled with a sense of pity for the offender and we really want mercy to be shown to the offender. Our legal system has the difficult task of deciding on the punishment required and yet at the same time trying to rehabilitate the offender. Somehow, while justice needs to be seen to be done, there's also a need for mercy and forgiveness to be shown.

I don't know how to hold both together in these situations. They are often far too complex for any

easy answer to be given. While there is a need for justice, I am also concerned about the need for forgiveness. Forgiveness for myself and for others. In the complexities of the legal system I don't know how to hold justice and forgiveness together. I have to start with forgiveness where I am, with something smaller than difficult legal cases. But at the same time remembering the need of these complex situations and the people who have to adjudicate them.

What I think is best to start with is my own relationships with others. It is best to start forgiveness with family and friends. Just as we do not impose court proceedings and legal systems on our family life and friendships, neither can we transfer Jesus teaching on forgiveness directly onto our legal system.

Jesus teaching on forgiveness began with his own disciples. Today's Gospel parable was not a general lesson on forgiveness to be applied in all situations. This teaching was specifically concerned with forgiveness in the life of the

community of Jesus followers. Likewise our starting point for forgiveness is within families, among friends, and in the Christian community. Perhaps part of the reason we find the complex situations so difficult to deal with is because we've not yet learnt to deal with the simple ones – family, friends, our faith community.

It seems to me that many of the problems in our society are caused by the inability of people to forgive. Lack of forgiveness breeds resentment, anger, revenge, hatred and jealousy. These are the basis of much of our crime. Resentment, anger, revenge, come because we have not learnt to forgive. The result of lack of forgiveness can be seen in broken relationships and broken friendships. Unfortunately it can even cause broken relationships in the Christian community, a place which is supposed to be a community of reconciliation.

Forgiveness is the basis of good relationships in any community of people, be it our homes or here in the church. Everyone is going to make

mistakes and in making them someone may be hurt. How we deal with that hurt is vital to us as individuals and also to our life as a church.

It is forgiveness which heals guilt. It is forgiveness which mends rifts. It is forgiveness which brings harmony. It is forgiveness which gives us the chance to start again. The results of forgiveness given and received are all good. Even with such good results forgiveness seems so difficult to do. Maybe we find forgiveness difficult because we forget we are forgiven. I think we often treat our own forgiveness too lightly. We neither realise nor appreciate the overwhelming generosity of God in forgiving us.

In the parable of the Kingdom about forgiveness the debt of the servant was huge. Ten thousand talents is the equivalent at that time of the wages of 16000 men for 10 years. That's the size of the debt the king cancelled. The servant obviously didn't accept that forgiveness for he went out and demanded to be paid what he was owed by another. He was owed the equivalent of three

months wages for one man. He had been forgiven so much but somehow it made no difference to his attitude to others. He was unable to forgive so little.

It seems that if we are unaware of how much we have been forgiven, if we are unaware of the excessive generosity of God towards us, then we are going to find forgiveness difficult. Start then with God's forgiveness of us. Then we may be able to look at our forgiveness within the Christian community, with our family and friends. When we have dealt with that we may be able to deal with the more complex and difficult issues which often face us.

We say the Lord's Prayer so often that its words roll glibly off our tongue. "Forgive us our sins and we forgive those who sin against us." Don't forget that when you say these words and pray for a forgiving spirit God will give you opportunities to practice the forgiveness you have asked for.