

SUNDAY 24A

Well this week has seen the Church put in a bad light. It has emerged that some of the recent Covid-19 Church cluster were not happy to be tested or quarantine as they didn't believe 'the science'. It is easy to speculate what was exactly their reasoning but it is hard to really know. Regardless this has seen a huge amount of abuse come their way with people calling for some sort of retribution.

Perhaps we are all a bit on edge and sick and tired of our situation. Whatever it is it seems our sense of justice and fair play comes to the fore when things like this happen. We seemed to be 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, though it does some basis there.

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, for all time. 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, and 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.

The key it seems here is that first one, resentment. We can resent someone because they have personally done us wrong but it is also just as easy to resent someone for other reasons,

be it that they are better looking, smarter, wealthier, black or white, this always seems to lead to anger and a desire for revenge. And the consequences of such feelings can be catastrophic. Because it easily lead us into justifying violence towards someone who we resent, whether it is founded or not. This can be the disastrous result of not wanting to forgive.

The result of lack of forgiveness can be seen in broken relationships and broken friendships and as noted, much worse things. Unfortunately if you just take a quick glance at Church history you will see it can cause broken relationships in the Christian community which lead to division and terrible atrocities. And this is in the very place which is supposed to be a community of reconciliation. So forgiveness is hard especially when you think that your right and everyone else is wrong. It is hard to form relationships with that mind-set.

And so 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's love towards us.

In the parable of the Kingdom about forgiveness the debt of the servant was huge. This is hyperbole at its best. 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 face our society.

For Jesus' response to Peter's question including the parable takes forgiveness out of the "countable" category and places it into the realm of the incalculable. The forgiveness to which Jesus points is beyond one's capacity to keep tabs, beyond one's capacity to offer on one's own strength or ability. It is God's compassion and abundant mercy that make forgiveness possible, whether transgressions are large or small.

In a time when it seems more than ever people want to hold on to resentments from the past, we have to articulate quite clearly that no one is without fault or sin. No culture is 'pure'. But rather under God we are all the same, imperfect human beings in need of forgiveness.

So perhaps this sort of forgiveness is only possible when we truly understand God's forgiveness towards us. This at the heart of the Gospel of course, that God became flesh and lived among us and faced an unjust death to show us his incalculable love and forgiveness. Therefore it is our Lord who is the model for forgiveness.

And it is the same Lord who taught us that prayer that so often rolls 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 might just give you opportunities to practice the forgiveness you have asked for, however difficult it may seem.