24th Sunday in Ordinary Time September 13, 2020

A Christian lawyer who had been studying the scriptures made the decision to cancel the debts of every client that owed him money for more than six months. The lawyer wrote a letter explaining the biblical principles that he used to make his decision. In all he sent out 17 debt canceling letters via certified mail to verify that the clients had received the letters.

16 out of the 17 letters were returned unopened. Why would anyone turn down a cancellation of their debts? After talking with some of the people the lawyer found out the reason that none of the people accepted the letter. Many of them believed that the lawyer was sending the letter to tell them he was suing them for their debts.

How sad that most people cannot be open to the understanding of forgiveness? As Christians, we are not only meant to understand forgiveness but to put forgiveness into practice in our lives.

There is no slightest suggestion that we are offered forgiveness on any other terms. It is made perfectly clear that if we do not forgive, we shall not be forgiven. There are no two ways about it. C.S. Lewis

In today’s Gospel Reading Peter begins by asking Jesus a question, "how many times must I forgive my brother, up to seven times?

This would have been a very generous act in those days, as God had finished his work of creation and on the seventh day He rested, seven was a perfect number. So, Peter thought he was being very generous offering to go that far but Jesus’ answer went a great deal further! He said to forgive seventy times seven times! This was not a precise number because at that time one hundred was the largest number that could be envisioned and indeed it does not actually put a limit on forgiveness, rather makes it limitless. Jesus here is making the point that as many times as a person needs to be forgiven, we ARE to forgive.

Now I want to look more closely at forgiveness and what we mean by it and what Jesus means by it.

Often people forgive with their mouths but then you may hear comments such as, "well, I have forgiven but I cannot forget or an argument brings back cries of "you did .such and such.. last year" and the old hurts are trotted out for an airing.

Is this forgiveness? What does Jesus tell us of forgiveness?

Hebrews 8:12 "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

This is what true forgiveness is, the forgiveness we are to strive to attain, nothing else is truly forgiveness. Jesus shows his love when hanging there on the cross he says, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing". If Jesus can show such forgiveness to be able to say Father forgive them - the very people that had beaten him, spat on him, jeered at him, and finally nailed him to a cross to die a very humiliating death whilst still taunting him.

That is all very well, I hear you say but what about the terrorists that flew into the world trade towers? That is unforgivable. Was nailing the Son of God to a cross to die as a common criminal unforgivable? Where would we be if God could not forgive us for the death of His son?

Let’s look a little more closely at this parable. First of all, parables are stories using everyday situations to describe something spiritual in this case, the Kingdom of God and often end with a proverbial kick in the pants!

First of all the characters here are the king (God) the first servant who owes a huge debt (we owe a huge debt to God) and the second servant owing a small debt to the first servant (owing another human being is infinitesimal compared to what we owe God!) The first servant is threatened to being sold together with his wife and all his possessions as slaves in order to repay the debt but, the master is lenient when he hears the servants pleas and knowing the man could not possibly hope to pay his debts, the king mercifully cancelled them (it was the equivalent of millions of dollars) and so the servant went out free not only from being sold but also from the burden of debt. Just imagine the relief!! This is how we should be feeling having been released from the burden of sin, completely forgiven and our sins forgotten. One would think then that this would put the servant into a happy frame of mind at peace with all but no, he sees a fellow servant and grabs him by the neck demanding immediate payment of a tiny debt the equivalent of a few dollars. But oh no the reprieved servant would not have compassion and had him thrown into prison. We have been forgiven EVERYTHING we are free and with no burden and we should therefore be willing to forgive our brothers and sisters because nothing they need forgiveness for is a fraction of what we have been forgiven by God.

The result of this unforgiving heart was that the master when he heard about it was angry and had him thrown into prison to be tortured until every bit of the debt was paid. Originally if you recall, the debt would have been millions of dollars too much to pay back in fact, now he was going to have to pay it all himself. The original punishment would have been less because of the fact that he, his family and all they possessed would have been tallied together to be paid towards the enormous amount of that debt but now there was no help at all.

Here comes the kick in the pants!!

Jesus says in verse 23, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Now before you panic and say but I am trying to forgive someone but what they did was so bad I can’t do it, God is gracious and merciful and if you have a problem with forgiving someone and you KNOW you should forgive as God forgave you, take it to God and ask for the grace to forgive, it maybe you need to understand why first. Maybe you need to forgive yourself as part of your being able to forgive others.

Remember when you forgive others it makes you more like Jesus.

The simple truth of the matter is this when you forgive those who have hurt you; you take one more step closer to being like Jesus. Those who deserve your forgiveness the least need it the most.

Forgiveness is far from easy. In fact, forgiving others after they have hurt you is against human nature and if you try to forgive out of your own strength, your own heart or your own love, you will always fail. It is only when you are empowered with the love of Christ and the strength of the Holy Spirit that you will be able forgive like God.

I want to share a short prayer to help us all as we work to forgive others and more importantly learn to forgive ourselves.

Lord we come to you now and ask that if there is anyone we know we should forgive but have not been able to, please give us the grace to forgive and show us how to forgive In Jesus name. Amen.