

**Sermon for Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> September 2020**  
**Genesis 50:15-21    Romans 4:1-12**  
**Revd Sue Lepp**

**Proper 19/Trinity 14**  
**Matthew 18:21-35**

As the children have gone back to school, we find ourselves being educated at the Jesus School of Hard Teaching over these few weeks in our lectionary readings. It is not that we haven't heard it all before, but we can be slow to learn sometimes. In Robin's sermon and in the kid's story last week, the focus was on how we should behave when people do wrong to us. This is continued today as we look at that old chestnut – forgiveness!

I trust that this won't be the first or last sermon you hear preached on forgiveness, but I do hope you find something new in it. It is a tough subject. I am sure we all have stories we could share about times when we have needed to forgive or be forgiven. I would also venture to guess that we have stories that we do *not* share about times and situations of forgiveness and unforgiveness. It seems that the untold stories are that ones that often go unresolved; they often come out around the deathbed and by then – let's be honest – it is usually too late to do anything about it.

Why do we let it get like that? Pride, needing to be right, needing to get one up on another? Not wanting to let whatever happened go – keeping the offending party on our hook for a little longer? Sadly, none of these apparent rewards live up to what we want them to be. They don't satisfy!

Forgiveness is an act of the will. It acknowledges that something negative, awful, traumatic and damaging happened but that it will not rule our lives. We take the power out of the event. It is not in any way saying that what happened was okay or acceptable. Forgiveness does not mean that we must continue a relationship with the person/people who caused the event. We don't have to trust them again.

In the Genesis and Matthew readings this morning we see something of the power of both forgiveness and unforgiveness. The story of Joseph is a remarkable one. Joseph was the first-born son of Jacob and Rachel but not the first born of all Jacob's sons. Joseph was a tattletale and generally disliked by his brothers. The abridged version is that the brothers disliked him so much they decided to kill him, make it look like a cover-up but changed their minds and sold him to some traders. Joseph ended up in Egypt and working for Potiphar and becomes hugely successful. Time goes by and famine hits the rest of the family and the brothers are sent to Egypt and meet Joseph, whom they no longer recognize. Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, big family reunion ensues and Joseph gets to see his father before he dies.

Jacob has now died, and the brothers are nervous about what might happen next. All through the story of Joseph is the tension between him and his brothers. The fighting, jealousy, the arrogance and finally the brothers do something that frankly seems unforgiveable. Finally, the brothers admit they have wronged Joseph and go to him.

Joseph's response is amazing – *'Do not be afraid! Even though you intended to harm me, God intended it for good. I will provide for you and your little ones.'* He spoke kindly to them, he reassured them. Can you picture how those brothers must have felt at those words? Oh, the relief that comes when we are let off the hook! It is physical sometimes.

Now I know, you probably do to, that this seemingly ideal model of asking for and receiving forgiveness might not happen in real life! But we will still have to do it. We must ask for forgiveness if/when we have wronged someone else. We also must extend forgiveness to those who need it from us. This can be a slow process! We may have to remind ourselves repeatedly.

This is what Peter wants clarified in the Matthew reading. Jesus has taught the disciples about forgiveness when he taught them how to pray. What Peter wants to know is how this works out practically – what is the limit? The Jewish rabbis were teaching that forgiving someone 3 times for the same sin was good enough. Peter thinks that by offering seven; he is doing better. Seven being the number of fulfilment or perfection.

Jesus' reply is much greater than that – Jesus tells Peter and us that there is no limit to forgiveness. It is something that we are always going to have to do! As long as human beings exist together in community, in families, in church, school or at work, forgiveness will need to be a cornerstone to good relationships. The parable that Jesus goes on to tell about the king and his servants is to underline what Jesus has just said about unrestricted, unlimited forgiveness.

The debt of the first servant is beyond what he could ever pay back. The king was within his rights to order the man, his family and possessions to be sold to pay it off. The man falls on his face and asks for mercy. The king was moved with compassion; the only other times this word is used in Matthew is in relation to Jesus. This king showed the compassion of Jesus. This is a show of the unlimited grace of God. The servant has a rather short memory. When he encounters a fellow slave, who owes him much less, the scene is repeated but the response to the plea for forgiveness is different and wrong. The consequence for the first servant's lack of forgiveness is a life sentence in prison.

There are consequences if we don't – our own forgiveness can be revoked! This is scary stuff. We will be treated as we treat others. Therefore, we must love our neighbours, forgive our neighbours as ourselves. I need God's forgiveness – a lot. I need to forgive and be forgiven. This is not easy, and I am not trying to make light of that or suggest that it can happen in the blink of an eye. It can take a long time – but if we can hold to and remember the unlimited grace of God – we can do it.

Let him help you! The prison of unforgiveness is not a place you want to be in.

Joseph freed his brothers from the prison of their anxiety and worry. Not only that, he looked after them, cared for them and their families. The king and the servants show us what happens if we don't free others. Jesus has all the love, grace and mercy we will ever need – we can use his when we don't have enough of our own. Forgiveness comes at a high price – but ultimately a price paid for by Jesus.