

Date: 11th September 2011

Sermon: Rev Dr Brenda Robson

Reading: Matthew 18: 21 – 35 The Unforgiving Servant

BACKGROUND TO THE READING

It seems to me that this parable of Jesus of one of the most straightforward to understand but one of the hardest to put into practice in our own lives. Peter asks Jesus, how many times must I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times? Peter is being very generous here, radical even. The rabbis taught that if a man commits an offence once, he should be forgiven. If he commits an offence twice he should be forgiven, a third time he should be forgiven – but if he commits an offence a fourth time, he should not be forgiven.

This teaching comes from the book of Amos where various nations three times and God forgave them but on the fourth transgression, he punished them. The rabbis argue that people could not be more generous than God and forgive a fourth time.

So Peter probably thought he was being very clever in suggesting to Jesus that he could forgive twice as many sins and one more than that. But Jesus is much more radical and says not seven times but seventy seven times. He does not literally mean seventy seven times, he means indefinitely, there is no limit to forgiveness.

To illustrate this he tells a story that extreme, even quite amusing! He tells of a man who owed the king 10,000 talents. Now that was a ridiculous amount. One talent was the equivalent of 15 years wages! The total annual revenue of a wealthy province like Galilee was 300 talents. By contrast, the man's servant only owed him 100 denarii – the equivalent of a day's pay for a working man.

Willie Barclay wrote about an interesting illustration of this difference. If the 100 denarii debt was paid in 5p coins, they would all fit into a man's pocket. If the 10,000 talents was paid in 5p coins, it would take 8,600 men each with a sack of 5p coins weighing 60lbs and they would form a line five miles long!

Jesus was making the point that nothing other people can do to us can in any way compare with what we have done to God and if God can forgive us the debt we owe him, then we can surely forgive others the relatively small debt they owe us. Human sin caused the death of God's own Son.

Some commentators focus on this passage as being about forgiving others within the church fellowship who sin against us – largely because Jesus had previously been speaking to his disciples about how to deal with someone in the church who has been at fault, and because Peter refers to forgiving a brother.

Jesus' whole teaching on love and forgiveness is much wider than this.

Thomas Watson wrote a bible based definition of forgiveness 300 years ago – Forgiveness is “**when we strive against all thoughts of revenge, when we will not do our enemies mischief but wish them well, we grieve at their calamities, pray for them, seek reconciliation with them and show ourselves ready on all occasions to relieve them**”

Each part is from the bible –

Resist thoughts of revenge – Romans 12 :19 **Never take your own revenge beloved but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’**

Don’t seek to do them mischief – 1 Thessalonians 5:15 **Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong**

Wish well to them – Luke 6 : 28 **Bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill treat you**

Grieve at their calamities – Proverbs 24 : 17 **Do not gloat when you enemy falls, when he stumbles do not let your hearts rejoice**

Pray for them – Matthew 5 : 44 **But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you**

Seek reconciliation with them – Romans 12 : 18 **If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with everyone**

Be always willing to come to their relief – Exodus 23 : 4 **If you come across your enemy’s ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there, be sure to help him with it**

Our forgiveness is to extend to all men and women just as the forgiveness of God through Christ is for all people. Sometimes the most striking witness to this forgiveness comes when people are able to forgive others who have committed the most awful crimes against them and who have not expressed any remorse for their actions.

Sermon

I was listening to a remarkable BBC interview in the summer when Ben Freeth was speaking about his life in Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe. Ben is a white farmer who joined his father in law Mike Campbell in Zimbabwe many years ago. During the years when many white farmers left the country and left everything behind, Ben and his family stayed and fought for basic human rights for all citizens, taking the fight to the highest level of government even although this was dangerous.

Two weeks before a significant tribunal when he would present his case against the government, he and his wife and his parents in law were abducted and badly beaten during a nine hour ordeal. Mike never really recovered and died in April of this year.

Ben's testimony is remarkable. He was beaten, bound and lying on the floor in the dark. He had a severely fractured skull and many broken ribs. He said in the interview "As I was lying on the ground I remember saying to God, if it is my time I am ready but if you've still got things for me to do down here, then I'm also ready. The verse in the bible that I'd always found most difficult, from the sermon on the mount, was where Jesus says – Love your enemies and bless those who persecute you – came to mind."

He remembered something almost physical happening to his body and he said "I reached out to the people that were all surrounding me in the darkness and I said 'May the Lord bless you' and I touched their feet and I had this supernatural love for these people that were doing this terrible thing to us."

Ben went on to say "loving your enemies is an impossible thing to do in the natural, it has to be something supernatural, from God, and I was blessed with the grace to be able to find love for the people who were doing this terrible thing to us."

This was three years ago and Ben revealed during the interview in June that he has not yet succeeded in his campaign against Mugabe's government, he has lost his home, it was burned down with all his possessions, he has lost his farm and his livelihood. But he speaks about having hope for the future, there is a peace about him which in his circumstances could only come from God.

Jesus often linked forgiving others with receiving peace. In our reading, the consequence of not forgiving the person who has wronged you is punishment and torment. To forgive others brings peace, the same peace that we can experience every day because we have been forgiven – **I cancelled all your debt because you begged me to.**

Jesus knew that peace and forgiveness go hand in hand. And because it is so hard for us to be forgiving, he gives us the Holy Spirit to help us and to strengthen us. This is what Ben was speaking about, unable to be forgiving in his own strength. In John 20 Jesus appears before his disciples after his resurrection. He said three things, he said "Peace be with you" and then he breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit" and then he said "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven." – Then he breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit." Having given them the Holy Spirit he was then saying now, you can forgive people's sins, you can love others, even those it is difficult to love, in the strength of my spirit.

You see, hatred does not bring peace

Negative anger cannot create hope

Revenge does not solve any problems

Jesus knew that forgiveness is a hard act for people. Pride and hurt and anger get in the way. We can be quick to judge and slow to forgive. Pride prevents us from taking that first step to heal a relationship. It is true that words and actions can sometimes hurt us deeply. Perhaps they were meant

to hurt us, perhaps not but the hurt can fester away and the wound become even deeper. We do not know peace.

The God of the Old Testament people, of Abraham and of Jacob, could be an angry God and a God frustrated by his people but primarily he was a patient and forgiving God. In Isaiah, God says **“forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing.....I am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more”**

The new thing God did was to send Jesus to show us the meaning of forgiveness. Jesus gave sight to the blind, clean skin to the leper, wholeness to the lame, but the greatest miracle of all was forgiveness of sins. When the paralysed man was lowered through the roof of a house at Jesus' feet, it was not Jesus' words “take up your mat and walk” which shocked and upset the teachers of the law but rather the words “Son, your sins are forgiven.” In this meeting with the paralysed man, Jesus established that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. Jesus gives us a new start, we can leave the past behind us.

But there is a caveat. Because Jesus made it very clear on many occasions that we do not only receive forgiveness, we are also called to forgive those who hurt us. We know this very well, we say it every week – forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Do we really mean it?

Sometimes the pain is too great. It seems beyond our human strength to forgive. It is around 18 years since the appalling death of Jamie Bulger. It is hard to believe so many years have passed. The horror of the events surrounding Jamie's abduction and murder are clearly fixed in our minds as if it happened yesterday. Jamie was a toddler abducted and murdered by two ten year old boys. For Jamie's father, the grief, anger, hatred and anguish stayed with him. Mr Bulger was the subject of a documentary made to mark the tenth anniversary of Jamie's death. Cameras followed him for several weeks. He talked about being a different person, hating the person that he is but unable to change. He thought about Jamie every day. He had another child with Jamie's mother but their relationship broke up under the pressure. He had two further children to his new partner but he said that he could not be the dad to them that he wanted to be.

In the programme, we saw him travel to Ireland to meet the priest who supported him at the time of Jamie's death and conducted the funeral service. The priest realised that Mr Bulger's hatred and anger towards the two boys who committed the terrible deed was destroying his life but he observed that it had been impossible for Mr Bulger to forgive. The priest simply said to him “You need to let go”. Mr Bulger acknowledged this and he also acknowledged that in travelling to see the priest, he was seeking healing from God. But we left Mr Bulger at the end of the programme still trapped in his prison. God wanted to do a new thing in his life but he couldn't at the moment because Mr Bulger was unable to let go.

Today is 11th September, or 9/11 in America, the 10th anniversary of the attacks on the twin towers in New York and on the Pentagon. I would imagine

that hundreds and perhaps thousands of people struggle with their feelings today, feelings of loss and devastation and hopelessness and grief and sadness, struggle with the impossibility of forgiveness, wrestle with God and question their faith.

Many people are trapped in prisons of unforgiveness – because of broken relationships and betrayal, abuse and breakdown of trust, perceived injustice and deception.

If our lack of forgiveness eats away at us, so that we cannot be ourselves, our lives are clouded by unresolved pain from the past, we cannot find peace, we might just have to “**Let go and let God**” – put judgement aside and put the matter in God’s hands.

Jesus let go and let God. Peter, in his first letter, spoke of the Christ who suffered no sin. On the cross, they hurled insults at him but he did not retaliate. He suffered but he made no threats. Instead, he looked down on the crowd below him -

people who loved him and people who hated him,

people who revered him and people who feared him,

people who had kissed him and people who had flogged him,

people who had cheered Hosanna and people who had cried “Crucify him”
.....and experiencing all the pain and agony of one betrayed and broken, he said “Father forgive them”

When we stop judging and start forgiving, we experience a real inner freedom

When we stop judging and start forgiving, we can begin to love

When we stop judging and start forgiving, we can receive that peace which Christ offers