

13th September 2020 – Pentecost +15 – Chris's Sermon

Matthew 18. 21-35

“...Peter came up and said, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven...”

In all honesty, this is one of the passages of scripture that I really struggle with – sometimes it makes me cringe (and I'm sure I'm not alone).

The reading calls us to examine our actions – it calls us to examine the hardness of our hearts. In a sense, Peter was asking Jesus how much he had to take – how long he had to wait before he could really let the other guy have it. At what point he was justified in his anger – in his refusal to forgive. Peter didn't even wait for Jesus to answer – he had one ready – seven times.

To me, seven times sounds about right. Jewish teaching held that we must forgive our neighbour 3 times – so Peter doubled that and then added an extra one for good measure (it sounds reasonable).

By any measure, to forgive someone for the same wrongdoing seven times sounds generous (most of us feel a bit frustrated if we have to forgive someone twice). But, it's the idea of a limit that Jesus rejects – Jesus responds to Peter – “...not seven times, but seventy times seven...”

I can imagine another awkward moment between Jesus and Peter (they seemed to have quite a few of these) – I can see Peter in my mind staring back at Jesus in the silence, mouth hanging open. Seventy times seven – that's 490 times – Oh...”

Like most people, I find it hard to forgive my brother (at times) – forgive those who sin against me. Every day of my life, I pray the words of The Lord's Prayer – every day I ask God to forgive me my sins, as I forgive those who sin against me.

In a way, this passage of scripture brings those words to life – this is what it looks like. Yes, when we ask for forgiveness, we must also examine our own willingness to forgive.

“...How often shall I forgive my brother?” This is the question we are called to consider today. And, lets make no mistake, it's a very uncomfortable question.

Are we prepared to accept the teachings of our Lord and forgive our brother or sister over and over again?

Over the years, theologians have argued that this passage gives us a description of God's love – God's boundless capacity to forgive. Some have argued that only God can forgive sins in this way. But, I think this is rubbish – we all have the capacity to love in this way – we all have the ability to forgive over and over again.

I've said this before (but it's a good example) – as a father, I will always love my children (I have 4 of them). I children could spend the rest of their lives sinning against me and I would continue to forgive them over and over again – for the rest of my life.

We can do it – we can love and forgive in this way (we just find it very hard to do it, at times). In our passage today, Jesus isn't talking about how to be good Christians – he's talking about how to be fully human.

Forgiveness only becomes possible when we value our brothers and our sisters – when we love and respect and admire our brothers and sisters. In other words, forgiveness only becomes possible when we feel connected to our brothers and sisters – when we value the relationship that we share with them. (Imagine what the world would look like today if we all did this – if we loved this way. There would be no war, no suffering, no neglect, no starvation or poverty.)

Think for a moment about the root cause of every act of violence or hatred in the world today – every war, every robbery, every cruel word or spiteful act. Without exception, every act of intolerance that the world has ever known flows from a broken relationship. After all, it's very hard to hurt or reject a loved one.

Forgiveness is the fruit of a loving heart. Sadness and pain and loss and brokenness encourage more of the same. When we are hurt by others, we often feel the need to protect ourselves from those around us – sometimes we even feel the need to meet the intolerance of those around us with more intolerance. This is how wars start – this is what happens when angry words are exchanged and friendships fall apart - and friends become enemies. These are the experiences and the actions that harden our hearts.

But, today we are reminded that there is another way. Through forgiveness, healing becomes possible.

Through forgiveness, broken people are reminded of their finer qualities – through forgiveness, relationships are mended and love becomes possible.

“...So, how many times do we forgive our brothers and sisters who sin against us – not seven times, but seventy times seven...”

The Lord be with you.