

The 24th Sunday of Year A: For God to forgive, we must do the same.
1st Reading: Ecclesiasticus 27:33-28:9: Forgiveness: from God & each other
2nd Reading: Romans 14:7-9: No-one is an island: we all affect one-another;
Gospel: Matthew 18:21-35: Parable of the unforgiving debtor: a warning!

If you were returning from a desert island, these readings might make you think you had landed in the middle of Lent! You haven't - it is just that the Church, in working through St Matthew's gospel, has reached chapter 18, where Jesus gives practical moral teaching for the future members of his Church. Last week, we read about settling disputes; this weekend, Jesus argues that our being forgiven by God depends on our willingness to forgive others.

Can I start with the middle reading? It is very short (oh bliss!) and is often chosen by families for loved ones' funerals, since it is St Paul at his very best: clear, concise and pastorally effective. *"The life and death of each of us has its influence on others...alive or dead, we belong to the Lord."* This simple but profound teaching is the reason why the forgiveness of others matters so much. For the Christian, all life has its ultimate origin in God, so we are all 'part' of each other: our path through life is never solitary. (A reclusive person reacts to others, even if it just by shying away from them.) We cannot separate how we behave with each other from the way we relate to God: in other words, good treatment of others is part of how we worship God. Jesus makes this very clear in his famous parable of the 'sheep & goats' in Matthew 25:31-46: *"I was hungry and you fed me, etc..... Whatsoever you did to the least to the least of these, you did to me..."*

This Sunday, the other two readings extend this idea to the forgiveness of wrongs committed against us. The first reading is from the later Old Testament book of Ecclesiasticus (or 'Sirach', after its author). Unless you go on-line, to read it you'll need either an RC Bible or a post-1970 missal, as non-RC Bibles either don't have it, or put it in their "Apocrypha" ('hidden away') section. The writer gives good advice: *"If a man nurses anger against another, can he then demand compassion from the Lord? Showing no pity for a person like himself, can he then plead for his own sins?"* (Many people wish some of the hard-line priests of past years had read that and taken it to heart!)

Jesus taught about 150 years after Sirach wrote Ecclesiasticus, and showed a similar attitude. St Peter had asked Jesus: *"How often must I forgive my brother - as often as seven times?"* Jesus' reply was *"not seven, but seventy-seven times."* He then gave the parable, in which a king was settling accounts with a servant who had built up a huge debt - 10,000 talents - almost what our country owes. The master ordered that the culprit be sold into slavery - along with his wife and family. The servant begged for mercy: *"Give me time, and I will pay the whole sum!"* This was clearly impossible, but the king felt sorry for the pathetic man, so cancelled the whole debt. On the way out, the newly-pardoned man met a

fellow servant who owed him 100 denarii. (That means 100 of our old pennies – about 42p today.) This second servant begged for mercy, just as the other had begged it from the master for his huge debt. He was refused, and this caused consternation among the other servants, who knew what had gone on. They told their master; he then withdrew his previous forgiveness from the servant, and *“Handed him over to the torturers till he should pay all his debts”*. That was a ghastly fate. Jesus concluded: *“That is how my heavenly Father will deal with you, unless you each forgive your brother from your heart”*.

Before mentioning any pastoral relevance of this parable for us, I will clarify one point. We tend to regard the amount owed by the second servant to the first as utterly trivial, to make the unforgiving chap seem all the worse. But it was not that simple: the denarius (our old penny, hence the “d” bit of our old currency, ‘£.s.d.’) was in Roman times a day’s wage for a labourer. Therefore 100 denarii was a third of a year’s wages for the average workman – a serious sum of money to most people then. What the second servant owed to the first was important to any family. Jesus’ point was that we must be prepared to forgive others their serious “debts” – whether monetary or emotional – if we want God to forgive our even more serious ‘debts’ (or ‘trespasses’) against Him.

We are not told what Peter made of what Jesus had said; perhaps he was as shocked as you or I may have been. I shall make two practical comments on Jesus’ words. The first is that ‘forgiveness’ may have to be unlimited in the number of times it is given, but it is not totally unconditional: it assumes that the person being forgiven is sorry for what he / she has done. The person must accept that they have done real harm, and offer sincere apology – not just words of sorrow, but some sort of change of heart. Words can be glib, but a ‘change of heart’ is much deeper, as it leads to a change in behaviour, and a desire to put right the wrong that was done. Of course, we can always forgive someone in our own mind – and this relieves us of the tense burden of grievance - but it not the same as reconciliation, for which there has to be a meeting of minds.

The second point is that our behaviour reflects our true personality. As adults, we need to be realistic about this. Someone who is usually calm and then, when provoked, lashes out, may say “Sorry: it was totally out of character.” Well, it wasn’t. He is just a normally calm person who occasionally erupts – and must accept that. We need to see our weaknesses and flaws as part of who we are; they are not ‘unfixable’, but we need to pray about them, and work to try to correct them – it may be a life-long task! When we ask forgiveness of God, we must accept our faults as part of who we are; so, when others ask for our pardon, we must realise that they are the same as us – terribly human! *Fr Jim Dunne.*

