

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
13/09/2020
St Cuthbert's Anglican Church – Tweed Heads

Exodus 14: 19-31 Crossing the Red Sea

Psalms 114 Praise the Lord, he allowed the Israelites to escape Egypt

Romans 14: 1-14 Weak and Strong Christians exist together

Matthew 18: 21-35 Jesus teaches about forgiveness

Introduction

Today I'd like focus on the reading from Matthew's Gospel about forgiveness.

Last week we heard Jesus say:-

If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.

This week we hear Jesus say in a conversation:-

'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

We have to be very careful when we read the Bible not to cherry pick bits, or twist bits so that we get what suits us. We need to be aware of how it all comes together, how Jesus is the central character, and what it means to follow him in our lives.

Forgiveness is central to Christianity, so let us explore some aspects of forgiveness today.

Last week - Jesus - Dispute Resolution (Matthew 18:15-20)

Last week we were challenged to look at what it means to be part of a faith community. Jesus gave us what could be considered today as a Dispute Resolution Procedure. It gives us a way of working through issues to try to resolve them. God wants us to live in harmony with one another. We are called to endeavour to live together in peace. Even though Jesus talks about treating an unrepentant sinner like a Gentile or a Tax Collector, Jesus is not telling us, not to forgive. Sometimes we will need to be apart from those who are unrepentant for our own wellbeing or safety, or to help them recognize their bad behaviour, however we are still called to forgive.

Is there someone you need to be reconciled with at the moment?

This week's call to Forgive

Central to the Christian Faith is that in Jesus, we are forgiven and reconciled to God. God has done this not because we deserve it, but rather because God loves us.

Matthew 18:21-22

In the Gospel reading today we hear Peter in a dialogue with Jesus. We hear Peter ask if he should forgive someone seven times. This seems like a lot. A couple of times maybe but seven? It appears Peter may have been trying to make Jesus see how good he is, after all seven was a significant number in Jewish Culture. But Peter gets rebuffed. Jesus tells him not seven times, but seventy-seven. Jesus is not saying to stop once you get to seventy-eight, but rather such a large number is there to indicate that we are called to continue to forgive.

Matthew 18:23-35

After Jesus answers Peter's question on how much we should forgive, he tells a parable to illustrate his answer.

It is of a Master who forgives a slave. The numbers Jesus uses in this parable are incredible to say the least. The first slave who the master initially forgives the debt of, owes him 10,000 talents of gold. I googled this and it would equate to approximately 4.5 billion dollars today. By contrast the forgiven slave was owed 100 denarii which would equate to about \$45.00 today.

What Jesus is trying to get at here is that if we are forgiven by God through Jesus (the \$4.5 billion), then how much more do we need to forgive others (the \$45).

Every time we say the Lord's prayer we say:-

"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

I believe we need to first acknowledge how wonderful it is, that by accepting what Jesus has done for us, we are forgiven and reconciled to God. I believe when we know that we are forgiven, we can then be enabled to forgive others.

Forgiving Others

Because we are forgiven we are called to forgive.

Of course this is very easy to say, but forgiving others can be the hardest thing we may be called to do in our lives.

In fact, I've heard many people who claim to be Christians, say they just can't forgive someone.

There are some very good reasons for us to forgive though, so let us look at them:-

Firstly, Jesus tells us to. If we are really following Jesus in our lives then we will want to do what he asks of us. To not forgive is a rejection of our own forgiveness from God.

Secondly, it is actually good for us. There is another story I've heard about forgiveness which goes like this:- Not forgiving someone is like drinking a bottle of poison and waiting for the other person to die. It ain't gonna happen. If we do not forgive we hold onto the anger and the bitterness, and it can eat us up inside. Forgiving others helps to release negativity from within us. Forgiving is a decision we have to make, but it may be something we need to work our way through. Interestingly, I once read a book on wellbeing by a health professional who claimed to be an atheist. He had a section on forgiving those who hurt you. It talked about how letting go of the negativity can help you. It was interesting to see how even those who don't believe in God can see benefits of following what Jesus calls us to do.

And thirdly, we will all need forgiveness at some stage ourselves.

Forgiveness does not mean that we excuse the wrong or say it is ok that someone has harmed us, rather it acknowledges the wrong done to us, but says we will not hold it against that person, it releases the anger and the bitterness and the need to get even.

Some examples

I remember a story of a priest in London who lost her daughter when a terrorist bombed a bus. She actually stood down from her position as she could not forgive the terrorist at the time. I believe she was working through it, and I didn't hear the outcome, but I really hope she was able to forgive.

I once had a supervisor who was very difficult. At one stage I had to physically hold back a foreman who was intent on punching him. I held him back not because I didn't want to punch the supervisor myself, but because I didn't want the foreman to get in trouble. I left that job, and had to forgive the supervisor myself. Not that he was at all seeking forgiveness from me. I'm quite sure he couldn't have cared less. I needed to release the bitterness from within myself.

Conclusion

Forgiveness can be a very hard thing to deal with. If someone we love sincerely apologizes for something trivial it might be easy to forgive. When the hurt is much greater, it may be much harder to forgive.

Today I've shared a bit on forgiveness. I believe it is easier to forgive if we have first accepted that we need forgiveness, and we have accepted the forgiveness that God offers us in Jesus.

Today may God forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Amen.