

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
17/09/2023
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

In today's reflection I would like to look at the theme from our Gospel Reading which is all about Forgiveness.

Firstly, I would like to look at how we need forgiveness in our own lives, and then I would like to look at how because God forgives us, we are also called to forgive others.

Being Forgiven

So, let's look first at the proposition that we need forgiveness.

I recall teaching Religious Education in Primary School and to try to get the class to understand that each of us has a need for forgiveness I would ask the children to put up their hand if they had never been bad or done anything wrong in their lives. Occasionally there would be some kids who would put their hands up, and it wasn't long before the other children around them would be pointing out to them things that they had done, and why they shouldn't have their hand up.

None of us are perfect. We have all been selfish at times. We have all done things in our lives that have hurt other people. It's a normal part of being human that we fail at times.

A simple definition of sin is doing things our own way and not God's way. And sin is a problem because it cuts us off from God.

So, the reality for even the best of us, even people like Mother Teresa, is that we need forgiveness.

And the wonderful Good News of the Gospel is that in Jesus we can find forgiveness, and be reconciled to God. Central to the Christian faith is that God loves us. In God's love and mercy for us, Jesus came and died on the cross to take the punishment for our sins, and he rose from the dead to give us hope for the future.

We can be forgiven, if we accept what Jesus has done for us on the cross.

We all have a need for forgiveness, and the way to find that forgiveness is Jesus.

I want us to think about what a wonderful gift it is, that we can have forgiveness, by accepting what Jesus has done for us.

Think about a time that someone has done something wonderful for you, but you can't really pay them back.

I thought of a time when I was driving between Cloncurry and Mt Isa in Western Queensland. I passed a truck, but the road was narrow and when I came back onto the right side of the road I hit the gravel on the verge, lost control, and rolled the car several times. The truck driver stopped and radioed for help. The Police came and picked me up and gave me a lift back to Mt Isa. I was on my way to getting another vehicle before I realized I didn't get any of the names of the people who helped me and whilst I had thanked them at the time, I really had no way of repaying the favour.

This is only a small example. The example in today's Gospel reading is much more exaggerated to get us to understand the enormity of the fact that God offers us forgiveness as a free gift, if we accept what Jesus has done for us.

In the Parable that Jesus tells today, we first hear 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.

When the slave begs for mercy, the master relents and forgives the debt.

This is what Jesus has done for us on the Cross.

I often see two dangers people fall into when trying to understand our need for forgiveness from God.

First is that people think they don't need forgiveness. They figure they've never been to jail, they may have had the odd speeding ticket but have always tried to be pretty good, so nothing to see here, no need for forgiveness. This is patently wrong, because by definition we all need forgiveness from sin.

The second is that people think the things they have done are so bad, that God would never forgive them. This is patently wrong because it denies God's love and power to forgive. And also, if we know God has forgiven us, this will help us to forgive ourselves.

We all need forgiveness and the way to find forgiveness is by accepting Jesus.

Forgiving Others

When we accept the amazing gift of forgiveness that Jesus offers us, we are drawn into God's family and called to live as God's children. Just as we have been forgiven, we are called to forgive others. In the prayer that Jesus taught his followers to pray, we say,

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

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.

In the parable today we hear how the first slave is forgiven a debt which seems incredibly extreme 10,000 talents of gold (4.5 billion dollars in today's money), but then we hear how this same slave who has been forgiven so much refuses to forgive a fellow slave a tiny amount by comparison, 100 denarius (\$45 in today's terms).

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, but then 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.

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 forgive him, 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.