

Acceptance and forgiveness

A sermon preached by Dr Tony Lemon, Lay Minister, on the 14th Sunday of Trinity, 13 September 2020, in St Peter's Wolvercote

Refs: Genesis 50, 19 'But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the face of God?"; Romans 14, 5 (part) 'Let all be fully convinced in their own minds'; Matthew 18, 35 'forgive your brother and sister from the heart'

I'm sure many of you watched in horror last week as the Republican convention has unfolded in the United States, as protests about racial discrimination have become widespread and in many places violent, and as Donald Trump has sought to use this as an electoral weapon, putting law and order at the centre of his message without even mentioning the causes of resentment and protest. His reactions this week are clearly a matter not just of instinct but of electoral calculation. Viv preached about the growth of a blame culture three Sundays ago, and no one exemplifies this better than President Trump. When criticised, his instinct is to lash out, always trying to give much more than he got, with little regard for truth or reflection. He is good at blame, but forgiveness appears totally alien to his nature. His character flaws are so obvious that they do at least help to make most of us feel better about ourselves!

Today we are asked to think about the place of forgiveness in our Christian faith. Our three readings all deal with themes of condemnation and judgement, forgiveness, acceptance and mercy. First our reading from Genesis, part of a story that I remember finding really exciting as a child - where Joseph's brothers sell him to Egypt, but he rises in Pharaoh's household and eventually becomes the country's *de facto*

prime minister; famine leads Jacob and his sons to come to Egypt where they and Joseph recognise one another. Now that their father has died, Joseph's brothers fear that he will take revenge for the great wrong they did him decades before. They beg forgiveness – claiming that this was their father's dying wish – and offer themselves as Joseph's slaves. There is little sign of genuine contrition here – their dominant feeling is simply for their own future, and Joseph clearly knows this – but his reaction is saintly: he realises that he must carry their wrongdoing, as he has for most of his life, and he forgives them for an action that could have condemned him to a lifetime of slavery, making it clear that he will continue to provide for them and for their children. By saying 'Am I in the place of God?', Joseph is clearly recognising that it is not for him to judge the deeds of others – that is for God.

In our Gospel reading from Matthew, Peter does recognise the need to forgive, but he wants to quantify this. How often must we forgive the same person for the same offence? He probably thought he was being very generous when he suggests 'as many as seven times', because the Rabbis taught that a man must forgive his brother three times. So Peter doubles this and adds one for good measure. As happens on other occasions, Peter's impetuosity draws from Jesus teaching which is profound and enduring. 'Not seven but seventy-seven' is Jesus' immediate reply, but it is obvious that he doesn't mean this literally. What he means is 'Don't even think about counting: just do it'. And there follows the parable that compares the kingdom of heaven and the King who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. One owes him a huge sum – 10,000 talents – again not meant literally, but rather in the manner we might have said 'a million pounds' or perhaps a billion pounds today – an unimaginably large sum. This particular servant was probably governor of a province, and therefore responsible for overseeing collection of its taxes and delivery of them to the King. His debts suggest either incompetence or, more probably, corruption – but the King has mercy on him, forgiving him this huge debt. Yet his response is to have no mercy at all on a fellow slave who owes him a tiny sum – 100 denarii – and have him thrown into prison until he can pay the debt. Other slaves see the monstrous hypocrisy and injustice of his action and tell the King what has happened. Not surprisingly he rescinds his forgiveness, furious that his servant has ignored the example of mercy shown to him and treated another so brutally.

The lesson from this parable could not be clearer. We must forgive in order to be forgiven. If we do not forgive others, why should God forgive us? If our hearts are open, able and willing to forgive others, they will also be open to receive God's love and forgiveness. Jesus says this clearly at other times too – in the Beatitudes he tells us 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy'. In the Lord's prayer itself, do we not say 'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us'. In the epistle of James we are told 'judgement is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy'. The message of the New Testament could not be clearer in this respect, yet how easily we forget it as we leap to judgement of our fellows.

Does this mean that we should always swallow all resentment, forgiving and forgetting as though nothing had happened? No: there will be occasions in both our private lives and in the public arena when evil must be confronted, when it is necessary to stand up for good. The key thing is that we should never give up making forgiveness and reconciliation our goal. If confrontation has to happen, and all too often it does, it must always be with forgiveness in mind, never revenge. If those who negotiated the Treaty of Versailles after World War One had borne this in mind, it is even possible that the Second World War might have been avoided.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul also tells them not to judge. He is writing at a time of argument in the church, between those who felt that in the new liberty of Christ, the old taboos no longer mattered, and those who continued to observe those religious laws about such things as eating meat and rigid observance of the Sabbath. Paul says, essentially, that there is room for both of them. But he does describe those who follow rigid rules as 'weak in faith' – weak because they do not appreciate the meaning of freedom in Christ: they still think that faith is a matter of rules and regulations, and they still believe that God's favour is gained by following rules rather than through God's grace. So Paul's own sympathies are clearly with the broader viewpoint, but – and this is the important point here – he doesn't want others to be criticised or excluded.

The significance of Paul's stance has clear relevance for the church through the centuries, and not least our own Anglican church and communion when it suffers similar divisions between those who want to keep precisely to traditional rules about gender, sexuality and marriage, and liberals who feel that the church should reflect what is positive about changes in these attitudes in wider society. Those of us with liberal attitudes to faith must try to be understanding towards those with more traditional views, even when they are militantly expressed. We must avoid ridicule, because when people's views are laughed at, this may make them withdraw with greater determination into the rigidity of their views. Above all we must avoid contempt and judgement, rather seeking to accept and respect the genuinely held nature of views very different from our own.

As in our other readings today, there is again the injunction that we should not judge our fellow Christians: 'Who are you to pass judgements on servants of another?' Paul reminds the Romans of the common aim that should unite us: 'whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's'. We should certainly think for ourselves and form our own convictions, but we should allow others to have theirs without regarding them as beyond the pail. We are all individuals, we all have different families, friends and life experiences, so we all develop views and convictions individual to ourselves, but we live within a wider community, a community of people who are interdependent. As John Wesley famously said, 'No man is an island'. We have to accept others as they are – our fellow Christians within God's church, our neighbours and fellow human beings in whatever the communities to which we belong, leaving judgement to God. Forgiveness and acceptance are at the heart of the Gospel, and to experience these things ourselves we must find the inner resources to offer them to others.

Amen