

## *Forgiveness*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor  
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost—17 September 2017  
Revd Martin Johnson

*Exodus 14.19-31; Psalm 114; Romans 14.1-14; Matthew 18.21-35*

Are you a vegetarian? If you are then you are weak in faith and you need to consider very carefully your relationship with God. Here endeth the lesson!!

Okay, so I'm joking! But what I am highlighting is how our scriptures can so easily be misread, misinterpreted. That is, of course, an extreme example, but a superficial reading can lead us so easily to misinterpretation which does no justice to the wonderful wealth of our scriptures. St Paul, who seems to suffer more than most, in this instance is telling us that many new Christians were cautious about eating meat because they feared it had been used in some ritual, offered to a god and then sold in the marketplace. The more mature Christians, not better but more mature, didn't believe in any of that, so they didn't worry and enjoyed their steak! So, whilst the context is quite alien to us the demands are not. Paul is telling his correspondents to *get along with each other!* All very well but then, as now, there needs to be an ethic whereby we can do that, and, importantly, fix it when we fail. We call it forgiveness—and it's as central to our lives and our faith today as it was for those Roman Christians. The New Testament says much about forgiveness but we need to be careful how we read it, for there is both comfort *and* challenge to be found.

Being a curate can be a wonderful thing; I enjoyed my curacy, but there were the inevitable times when you would be sent out to represent the parish at an event or service that the parish priest didn't like. The priest that trained me wasn't particularly interested in ecumenism so when the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity came around or the World Day of Prayer I would inevitably be sent forth. I attended one service and the minister chose a text from Matthew about forgiveness. It was that difficult one ... if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will forgive you, but if you don't ... You know the one!

The sermon started promisingly but I soon realised that it was not going to have a good ending; the message I left with was quite clear, I was not going to find forgiveness.

I harboured too much that was unforgiven to ever hope that *I* might be forgiven. I went away disconsolate and read everything I could about forgiveness; I'm still reading ... and thinking and praying. Is the forgiveness we can offer of a different order to that of God? Is the gospel suggesting that? Can our forgiveness ever be unconditional? Does not forgiveness offered too easily make it seem as if suffering does not matter? Aren't we also called to strive for justice? How do the two go together? Helmut Thielicke, a German who had lived through the horrors of Nazism, writes: 'This business of forgiving is by no means a simple thing. I am always on the point of forgiving, but I never forgive. I am far too just.'<sup>1</sup> The only remedy, Thielicke concluded, was his realization that God had forgiven his own sins and had given him another chance.

God's forgiveness, the forgiveness of the parable in which the King forgives the debt of his servant, and let's get that into context—the talent was the largest monetary unit and 10,000 was the largest number, it was a vast, vast debt—the stuff of the International Monetary Fund! God's forgiveness is beyond anything we can ever hope to achieve or even conceive of. The forgiveness of God is of a different order to our pale imitation.

---

1. Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father: Sermons on the Parables of Jesus* (Cambridge: Lutterworth 2015), 112. First Published 1957.

Let's begin by imaging a scenario. You are knocked off your bike by Joseph! He very quickly picks you up, brushes you off, apologizes for the accident and you are on your way. No offence was meant, there was no intent on his part to hurt you physically or emotionally, there is no need to be angry to feel angry or threatened. At worst, there might be a matter of compensation, perhaps insurance. You might be inconvenienced. Yes, it is irritating, Joseph was not paying attention, but these things happen.

Forgiveness however needs to come into play when someone *does* intend to hurt, demean or insult, when there is intent. When a person asks for forgiveness they are acknowledging a deliberate fault, they are reassuring you that you do matter and they are in effect asking you not to seek vengeance. And when that forgiveness is sought and is accepted it is a real act of love, of reconciliation, both parties are renewed, recreated, it is one of life's resurrections.

But what of God? Can we talk in the same way? We can get some hints from the way we deal with one another but is it the same? Back to Joe: let's say he has knocked us off our bike but rather than stopping has laughed at the sight of us sprawled on the nature strip and ridden on. We have been physically hurt but, more than that, we have been insulted, demeaned, our pride has been dented, to say the least. Joe by his actions is saying 'You don't matter' and at worst it upsets our sense of worth; our vulnerability shows through! Perhaps later you may say I have forgiven Joe. That's a good thing, but Joe is not changed in any way. True reconciliation, which is what forgiveness is all about has not occurred.

When we ask God for forgiveness, it is really almost a figure of speech. If we acknowledge our need of forgiveness and are contrite this *is* God's forgiveness. Our reconciliation with Joe is not the same as being reconciled with God, because God is not changed. I don't believe for one moment in some vengeful God who needs to be convinced to forgive. That is not the nature of God who is love. It's not logical. One writer noted of God's forgiveness 'it is anchored in the very being of the God of the Bible.' We are already forgiven, even before we have sinned, what is required is a change in us to accept it and live its truth. As one of our hymn writers today wrote, 'Know by heart the table of forgiveness'—your 70 times table! It's all part of the life time journey of repentance. Change" it's no one-off; it requires a life time ... and more!

Forgiveness is in the very nature of God, it is not in ours. Today we hear that the call to repentance is ever present, but it is more than matched by the breadth of the outrageous, limitless forgiveness of God which is there for us all. ... Even vegetarians! Amen.