

Today in the Gospel reading from Mathew Peter asks Jesus about how much he needs to forgive – what follows this question is a difficult example which invites us to live out the fact that we are forgiven by God.

Forgiveness seems to be something which is uncomfortable for most of humanity, on either side of the experience. But as Christians it is not something we can shy away from – as it is the heart of the Gospel message. I have always felt encouraged by the words of C.S. Lewis on this topic when he said *“To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.”*

Forgiveness requires a great level of self-awareness and a level of strength, as well as vulnerability. Three virtues which at times are quite difficult to hold together at once.

When Peter asks Jesus about forgiveness, I am sure he was not expecting the answer that he received. He may have even been hoping for a reason not to be able to forgive someone. But Jesus provides a very profound answer – not just in the perfect number of forgiveness – but in what we hear about the nature of non-forgiveness.

Jesus tells a parable of a slave and king. While Jesus uses the story to give an example of God’s actions – we shouldn’t be too quick to equate God’s actions with the King’s! This is a story about not allowing something to happen.

The figures in this parable are exaggerated, as so often in parables, the king and his slave represent and follow scripts that would have been familiar to ancient Mediterranean audiences. Kings used agents like the “unmerciful servant” to organize lower levels of agents, from tax-farmers to torturers (Matthew 18:34), who together made up a system that ensured the continuous flow of wealth, power, and honour to the top of the pyramid. The example Jesus gives of the unforgiving servant – who had accrued a great deal of debt – would have given to Jesus audience the image of a servant who was quite high up in the order of this system.

What this would mean is that the forgiving of his debt had a pass on effect on others within the system. This would have been a very public act, and it would have given an example of not just this one act – but on future acts. The expectation would have been that such an action of forgiveness would have resulted in ongoing loyalty to the King, and within the system. The forgiving of the servant’s debt would have created a kind of year of jubilee within the system and in many ways would have been felt by others in the system. The failure of the servant to act in the same way as his master; breaks the new system. The whole system, which would have been changed by forgiveness, now reverts back to the old obligations and violence.

In this story, accepting forgiveness is as much of a key as offering forgiveness. So often we are unable to forgive others; or even unable to accept the forgiveness that others have offered us because we are unable to forgive ourselves.

At the heart of the Christian faith is the message that God forgives us. God forgives us for our inability to love ourselves, for our inability to love our neighbours and

friends and families, for our inability to care for God's creation. God forgives us individually and as a community. This is the heart for the message that Jesus was sent to teach – but such forgiveness requires to pass this love and forgiveness on.

God isn't asking us to be perfect, but to notice what a big deal it is that we are forgiven and in turn to do our best to live out this forgiveness in the way we go about our daily tasks and lives. We won't always get it right – but by living intentionally that we know what it means to be forgiven means that we too can change a system.

If the servant had passed on the forgiveness in the story, the whole system of guilt and debt would have changed for that time and that generation. The same is true for us, if we live out our forgiveness. If we live with the same grace and generosity that we have received from God – we change a system. But this takes a great deal of self-awareness and a level of strength, as well as vulnerability.

As a society now there are large number of historical and current actions that we need to ask for forgiveness for. Even in the face of the pandemic we need to consider how our choices and actions impact on others. But our faith, should guide us in this - we know God's love, and we know God's forgiveness, and as such we seek to live and work in a way that expresses that love and forgiveness. We are called to pass it on. Amen.