

## SERMON PREACHED AT SJH TRINITY 14 WEEK 24 YEAR A 13 SEPTEMBER 2020

Last week's gospel was about sin within the church community – the sort of sin which required a community response. We were reminded that the church has a duty to protect its most vulnerable members. Discipline may be necessary, but it can always hold out the possibility of restoration, forgiveness. S. Peter has figured prominently in the gospel passages of recent Sundays, whether it's walking on the water, or being given the insight to recognise Jesus as the Messiah, or being rebuked for trying to persuade Jesus not to take a course that would lead to his death. Now he asks a question about forgiveness; a question that any disciple could ask, but Peter acts as spokesman or representative.

‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’

Jesus answers,

‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’

The obvious and correct meaning is that forgiveness should be offered repeatedly, without end. The numbers seven and seventy seven aren't just plucked out of thin air. Those of you who are interested in links within scripture might like to look at what's written about Cain and Lamech in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis. Cain and Lamech are two figures from the early history of humankind, and both were killers. The unstated message is that Christian forgiveness undoes the evil in which humanity has participated from the beginning.

Jesus goes on to tell a parable, which isn't directly about the number of times forgiveness should be offered. It's about the importance of forgiveness, which is why we should continue to offer it. The parable has been given different names. Last week I called it the Unmerciful Servant. It could also be called the parable of the Two Servants, or – a title which explains it a bit more – the parable of the Two Debtors.

We shouldn't be too worried that its details beg some questions. It's the overall message that matters. There is a king, who stands for God. He has slaves – other translations call them servants – but they're more like ministers or civil servants, entrusted with financial responsibilities. They stand for church members. Like a number of the parables in S. Matthew's gospel it's in binary terms, to use the modern expression. One servant is bad, the other good. The rest of the servants, the church at large, exercise their concern for the member who's been mistreated. The straightforward division between bad and good also features in the parable of the wheat and the

weeds, and the parable of the sheep and the goats. Like those parables, today's concludes with the condemnation of the wicked, in this case the one who would not forgive even though he'd been forgiven himself. It's a working out of part of the Lord's prayer, which in the version from earlier in S. Matthew's gospel (6.9-15) contains the petition

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

We're used to saying trespasses, or in modern versions of the Lord's Prayer sins, rather than debts, but the meaning is clear: we will only be forgiven if we forgive those who sin against us.

This parable is a starting point for thinking about forgiveness. The test of whether or not we have received forgiveness, internalised it, is our readiness to forgive others. Today's Old Testament reading is to some extent an example of this. It's the end of the story from the book of Genesis about Joseph and his brothers, sons of Jacob. Joseph is not a particularly likeable character in the early part of the story. You'll remember how the brothers conspire against Joseph, who ends up as a slave in Egypt, but rises to become Pharaoh's right hand man. In time of famine the brothers travel to Egypt looking for food, and after various goings on Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, and shows that he forgives them for what they did: it was part of God's plan to provide for them and Jacob. They return to fetch Jacob to Egypt and there is another joyful reunion. But when Jacob eventually dies, the brothers ask,

'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?'

They have not truly received the forgiveness Joseph offered earlier. They are still living in fear. So they make up a request from Jacob that Joseph should forgive them – there's no record of such a request earlier in the story. They still think Joseph may intend evil towards them. So we can add another test about forgiveness: we can only receive forgiveness when we are ready to forgive ourselves for what we have done. That isn't something that can be done lightly. In the language of the parable we may become our own torturers, until we return to the kingdom of heaven: that community where God's forgiveness is truly given, received, and practised by its members.