

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH, HOLY TRINITY, ANSLOW, AND S. MARY'S, ROLLESTON,
14th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY WEEK 24 YEAR A 17 SEPTEMBER 2017

Early church often cited as an ideal for the church of later centuries.

But it wasn't perfect. Example of Paul having to give advice and direction on problems; James with rich people in church assembly despising the poor; and we have today's gospel about forgiveness.

Mt 18 is about church life. It's the only chapter in any of the gospels where the word for church occurs. You may remember that last week's gospel was about good order in the church – what to do if one church member offends another.

Peter then asks how often one should forgive. Jesus answers (70*7), and then tells a parable that doesn't directly address the question, 'How often?'. It's more fundamental than that. It sets forgiveness at the heart of life in the kingdom, implying that churches should also be places where forgiveness is central. The church is not identical to the kingdom, but it should live by the values of the kingdom.

Parables are often NOT realistic stories. What king or master would lend a slave a vast amount of money? But the story is told to make a point, not to reflect normal practice in the ancient world. (Think of parables of sower and labourers in vineyard.) The king stands for God; the slaves for church members. God forgives each of us abundantly – therefore we should do likewise. Think of LP.

Why then is the unforgiving slave sent to the torturers? What does this say about God? Well, God forgives, but forgiveness can only be received if there is repentance, and this is shown by action. Judgement is self-inflicted – we punish ourselves if we reject forgiveness and the liberation that brings.

In the life of a parish church there may be occasions where one member is being unfair on another. Dealing with that situation is not easy, but the Christian gospel does not tell us that we have to be nice to people whatever they are doing. Like the fellow servants in the parable, we have to be aware of what is happening, support the vulnerable party, and find some way in which the offender can be challenged.