

*Matthew 18:21-35 'Forgiveness'*

The Christmas following our arrival in France, Barbara and I invited our neighbours in for mince pies and sherry. From the six houses in the hamlet, eight people joined us for the occasion. There was animated conversation between us all, except that we noticed two couples who, despite talking normally to us, never spoke directly to each other.

Somewhat disconcerted by this behaviour, we made discrete enquiries and discovered that this silence between them had gone on for some years. It transpired it was as a result of one of the couples complaining to the Maire about the other pair for regular occurrences of excessive noise(despite requests to tone things down).

As a consequence, the two couples had stopped relating to each other, and their other neighbours were forever 'walking on eggshells' when they met them. Such lack of forgiveness brings bitterness into the lives of both parties and produces nothing positive.

The story is told of John Wesley that, when he was sailing for America, he witnessed the keel-hauling of a crew member for an offence on board ship. This was a particularly cruel form of punishment as it involved being tied to a rope, thrown overboard, drawn under the vessel and out the other side. There was always the possibility that you would drown, or come to grief in some other way.

The captain said to John Wesley as he watched, 'You see, Mr. Wesley, I never forgive'. John Wesley, not wanting to challenge the captain's power of total command on his ship, simply said, 'Then, sir, I just hope you never sin'.

In our reading from Matthew's Gospel we hear how Jesus tells a story about two debtors with whom the king wished to settle accounts. A man was brought to him who owed him 10,000 talents. This was an enormous sum of money, more than the total income of Samaria or of Galilee. In other words, it was impossible for the man to pay off such a level of debt. Yet, the king forgave him the whole of this debt out of mercy, and concern for the man's wife and family.

However, having himself been forgiven such a vast debt, the man then attacks a fellow slave who owed him a hundred denari, Pocket money by comparison! He certainly showed the slave no mercy and went on to put the man in prison till his family could pay off the debt.

Other slaves were distressed by this and told the king. The king, being a just man, was very angry and had the unforgiving man put in prison until he could pay off his huge debts -which he would never be able to do.

So Jesus tells us what happens to an unforgiving heart. Resentment, hatred or vengeance can poison our lives - and God cannot forgive the unforgiving! As we receive, so we must give. Like love, forgiveness only grows when we give it to others.

We cannot claim God's forgiveness if we are unwilling to forgive others.

In Northern Ireland in a TV programme on 'truth and reconciliation' a soldier admitted killing a man, expressed his remorse, and asked his widow for forgiveness. The widow said 'I have not the power to forgive anyone, but thank you for telling the truth.

She was right, of course, forgiveness does not come instantly. Try to imagine how you would feel. First comes a period of rage and anger. That's essential if we're responding to a terrible deed, such as a murder or injury through someone else's deliberate action, but it's also true of the smaller situations when we feel slighted or betrayed in any way. Anger is a normal and right response to injustice, the sheer unfairness of it all.

The key trigger for eventual forgiveness of the soldier was his remorse, his repentance. It's impossible for forgiveness to develop when there's no such repentance.

The reason why so many people find it difficult to forgive is confusion about what forgiveness is. It does not mean, 'There, there; forget about it; what you've done does not really matter'. Of course it matters! If someone killed my son, ruined my reputation, or injured a friend of mine, it would certainly matter to me! Again, if we hear of someone saying something bad about us; it matters! But what we then do is more important.

The one thing that matters more than remembering the wrong someone's done is the need to change the relationship between two people, who have learned to hate each other, into an acceptance that we're all sinners in our different ways and that we need to find a way to live together in an imperfect world.

Forgiveness is a long journey. Jesus did not say it would be easy when he told us to forgive our enemies.

Yet when we get to the point of offering forgiveness, we can also achieve reconciliation. Forgiveness is not an alternative to justice, but a radical new form of justice. For Jesus, our human forgiveness serves as a channel, if we allow it to, for God's unfailing forgiveness of all who repent.

Thank God that he does not keep count of the number of times we hurt him. When he says, 'I forgive you', he's not saying, 'Forget about it, what you've done doesn't matter'. Our sins really do matter to him, and forgiveness is costly. But our relationship with him matters even more; he wants it to be a warm relationship of mutual acceptance and love. That's why he forgives us and why we must forgive our neighbour, no matter how difficult it may be.