

**Sunday 17 September 2023, Trinity 15 Parish Eucharist**  
**Romans 14. 1-12, Matthew 18.21-35**  
**The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams**

Forgiveness is not something to be earned.

I think this morning it's best to start at the end. The conclusion of my sermon, the lesson I want you to take home with you is this: forgiveness is not something to be earned. Over the years, and in many different contexts, people have said something like this to me: 'I haven't forgiven so-and-so because they haven't earned it.' Or even, 'They don't deserve my forgiveness.'

I understand the emotions that often live behind these prosaic remarks. Pain of many kinds, damaged or broken relationships, and complex histories can all produce scenarios in which forgiveness is withheld. It is, we might say, a natural state of affairs. But both of our New Testament readings this morning tell of another way. This way is counterintuitive, difficult, and unnatural. We might even say that, as Jesus teaches it, it is super-natural. 'How many times should I forgive another Christian?' asks Peter. 'Is seven enough?' I can almost see a playful grin flickering on Jesus' lips, 'No. Seventy-seven times.' Not seven the number of perfection, but double seven, a number of super-perfection. It is not enough to forgive perfectly; you must forgive superabundantly.

And then Jesus tells a story. Servants in the king's household owe debts. One owes an astronomical sum. The other owes a little. The one who owes much is brought before his Lord and threatened with poverty and prison. He owes so much. Banking on his Lord's mercy, he asks for more time, though he knows cannot possibly pay. His gracious Lord looks on him with pity and, knowing his circumstances, forgives the debt. That same man, rejoicing in his forgiveness runs into, as it were, the next servant in the queue. The man grabs him by the throat, shoves him against a wall, growling 'Pay me what you owe.' 'I cannot pay you now; please give me more time.' The man is trembling. But there is no pity. The king's gaoler is called and into prison he goes.

The other servants are shocked. 'Did you see what happened? He's thrown our friend into prison.' 'And after our Lord forgave his debt, too!' 'Do you know how much he owed? He never could have paid.' Before long, word reaches the Lord. The sad tale is revealed. And he is angry. 'How dare you treat a fellow servant this way! When you came to me with a debt you could never repay, I took pity on you and forgave it all. And yet you refuse to show the same pity to one who owed so little.' The king called the gaoler and his roughest guards and threw the ungrateful servant into the darkest cell to be tortured. Thus, says, Jesus *my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*

Now, I have some questions for you to consider in your heart. Did the servant who owed a huge debt deserve forgiveness? And did the servant who owed a little deserve forgiveness? I think Jesus makes it clear that neither deserved their debt to be forgiven. The king was right to demand repayment. And so was the servant who was owed by his fellow. Neither of them could repay their debt, neither could they earn forgiveness. Yet to the one who owed so much, it was given freely because the Lord pitied him. Why then could he not show that same pity on another servant who owed him so little? Perhaps it was pain, a damaged or broken relationship, a complex history. Perhaps he was simply angry and wrathful. But does that excuse his behaviour? Not in the eyes of his Lord. The servant is not better than his master. And his master's way was forgiveness without condition, without deserving, without expectation of repayment.

'How many times should I forgive another Christian?' asks Peter. Jesus' response is that he should forgive seventy-seven times. Superabundantly. Completely freely. Because that is how the Lord of All forgives those who serve him faithfully. And he expects his servants to imitate his behaviour amongst one another. St Paul concurs in his letter to the Romans when he writes, *Why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.'* So then, each of us will be accountable to God. We servants of God owe him a debt because of our failure to live up to his expectations, because of our sins. We stand next to each other, as equals before him, and say 'I cannot pay'. And when we ask, he forgives because he has pity on us. How can we, having received forgiveness through the cross of Jesus Christ, because of his immeasurable pity, take each other by the throat and say 'Pay me what you owe'?

I mention the Cross because, as you know, there is no such thing as a forgiven debt. Someone, sometime, somewhere has to pay. What it cost the king to forgive his servants we do not know. But we do know what it cost our Divine King to forgive us: it cost his only Son. There is no excuse for withholding forgiveness. There is no reason, no matter how compelling or emotionally difficult, that stands above the command and the example of our heavenly Lord who, when we beg him, grants his unfathomable forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ. This way of being is counterintuitive, difficult, and unnatural. It goes against the grain of our feelings and of our cultural expectations. But it is the super-natural teaching of Jesus who, in his own body broken and bleeding, tortured by the imperial gaolers of this world, has brought ultimate and lasting forgiveness to us. What great pity our Lord has for us! How can we fail to forgive one another from the heart? Amen.