

A sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Proper 19A September 11th 2011

Psalms 103.8-13, Rom 14.1-12, Matt 18.21-35

Forgiveness on the Larger stage

Today's readings, uncomfortable as they are, are clear enough for us to go away and ponder in relation to our own lives and struggles without a great deal of commentary; we all know how hard it is, sometimes, to forgive. We may also acknowledge in ourselves that on occasion we find it difficult to be tolerant in the sort of way St Paul was recommending in our reading from Romans. But, if we are Christians, we take as our starting point the fact that each one of us is a debtor – a debtor to God, because we never live up to the law of love which he has set for us; we always fall short of his pattern of perfect, utterly generous love; and sometimes we do worse than that – we consciously turn our backs on the claims of love and choose another path. We give our first loyalty to ourselves, instead of to God; and we give our second loyalty those who are *like* ourselves – our own little circle

– rather than the neighbour whom God sends us, of whatever kind or culture that neighbour might be.

We have much to be forgiven for, but sometimes we take God's costly forgiveness for granted; there's much that God puts up with in us – yet sometimes we don't put up very well with other people... And sometimes we don't forgive them, either...

Pondering our readings today should give us a jolt, and send us back to God for help; he isn't only full of compassion and mercy to forgive our sins; he's also there to help us in our weakness, so that stage by infinitesimal stage, we can become more like him - utterly generous to others, and self-forgetful, not keeping a score of wrongs committed against us, and patient of people's differences.

Well, that's about as much as needs to be said about today's readings, as they apply to our personal lives. There's enough to think and pray about in these few thoughts alone.

So, for this reason, I had intended to give over most of this sermon to something different – a celebration of the Mission Action Plan which St Mark's has had for the last three years, and largely completed. But although that was my intention for today, and I think I mentioned it to those of you who were here last week, since then it's been borne in on me that today is a special day - the tenth anniversary of the attack on the Twin Towers, and the other attacks in the US which were associated with it – and for this reason it would be better to put off our celebration of our Mission Action Plan completion for another Sunday, and think a little about this issue of forgiveness, which arises from our readings, not on a personal scale, but in relation to nations, ethnic groups, religions, and so forth. We most often think of forgiveness as a personal thing, but it has some important things to say on the larger scale, too.

What is forgiveness – this very difficult thing which Jesus makes so central, lodging it right in the middle of the prayer he gave us, and telling some of his most powerful parables about? What do we know about forgiveness, which we can translate

from the sphere of personal relations onto the stage of world politics?

We know that forgiveness is the attitude that looks for reconciliation. It isn't the same thing as reconciliation, because for that it takes 'two to tango'. Reconciliation isn't always achieved, if one party doesn't want it; but forgiveness is the attitude of the one who waits, and longs, and works for reconciliation, never giving up, even despite discouragements. Jesus gives us such a powerful picture of forgiveness in the story of the waiting father – the one who was looking out every day for his wandering son to come home – and when he saw him in the distance, he ran out to meet him and embrace him. There's a similar picture of forgiveness back in the Old Testament – really early on, in the book of Genesis, when Esau welcomed his younger brother, Jacob, who'd cheated him of so much; and Jacob exclaimed – shocked by the kindness he was being shown – '*truly, to see your face is like seeing the face of God*' (Genesis 33.11) – words of much greater resonances and truth than he could know. The sad ending to that story is that Jacob went on to show by his actions that he couldn't really bring himself

to trust Esau's proffered olive-branch; he preferred to journey on alone, rather than having the company of his brother or accepting any help he might offer.

Since this ancient tale is seen as the foundation story for the relationship of Israel (the descendant of Jacob) with one of her most significant neighbours, Edom (the descendants of Esau), when we read it we can feel the sadness of the fact that forgiveness offered, but not fully accepted, can have consequences in conflict not just for individuals, for whole nations - generation upon generation.

So, the attitude of forgiveness has a reality even in international affairs – seeking for reconciliation – accepting reconciliation when it's offered, these things matter for nations, ethnic groups and religions as much as for individuals. When we think of the events of 9/11 we know that the individuals concerned – the suicide bombers – have gone beyond the reach of our forgiveness to stand before the judgement seat of God; we can be content to leave them there, to his inscrutable wisdom. And we also know that others who have

committed, or plan to commit other such hideous outrages, must be sought out and stopped - and subjected to proper justice within the human sphere. But, on the other hand, the horror of those events should have driven Christians in the West not to thoughts of vengeance, but to renewed efforts of reconciliation with their Moslem neighbours; renewed efforts to seek forgiveness, as much as to offer it – for there's much blood on the hands of those who've represented the Christian West to the Moslem world – some of it very historic – but some of it all too recent. It's up to all Christians who can do so to make efforts in conversation, efforts to reach understanding with our Moslem neighbours, to reason over our scriptures with each other, to stand up for each others' rights where those are under attack – of course, and to mourn together the unnecessary deaths of people from both cultures and religions in conflicts, outrages and wars.

If forgiveness is about seeking reconciliation as much as possible, what it *isn't* is about seeking revenge. Accepting that justice must run its course is a very different thing from vengeance. Systems of justice, after all, have their place in society at

least partly to deflect and defuse our instinct for vengeance. We can support forgiveness, and also support justice; Pope John Paul II forgave the man who made an attempt on his life – he expressed that by visiting him personally in prison; but he didn't say that Ali Agca shouldn't serve his due sentence. We can seek justice, because it's necessary for society, whilst also pursuing forgiveness as our own attitude under God – but if we have forgiveness in our hearts what it will drive out is revenge.

Someone has observed that vengeance is often seen as the appropriate way to honour the dead; two sides that are at war with each other will redouble their efforts in hostility as more and more are killed on each side, and people say that their blood calls for vengeance. You can see this dynamic, too, in the kind of conflict that has dogged our society since 9/11; Islamist radicals have justified disrupting honour paid to the troops returning from Afghanistan – even disrupting honour paid to the dead – on the grounds that their dead – the Moslem dead, civilian men, women and children – are not honoured by us. We know that it is these very civilian casualties which provide the

spur to drive young men into the camp of Jihadis and terrorists. Meanwhile, outrage about disrespect for British war dead drives others into the ranks of the English Defence League.

How can this ugly cycle of vengeance and anger be broken? Only by extraordinary efforts, to ensure that we mourn the dead of different ethnic groups and religions, different nations and situations *equally*. We have to learn to mourn together.

It's a difficult thing to do, especially on the national stage; many of you will remember how offended some were after the Falklands War when the Archbishop of Canterbury prayed for Argentinian victims alongside British ones in the official commemoration of that war. But he was right to do it. And perhaps it's taken even longer for people officially, in acts of remembrance, to remember the dead of those we fought in the world wars, alongside our own. It's a very difficult, painful path which leads us beyond our own tribe to mourn those of another tribe just as deeply – but it's the Christian path, and we should lead the way in treading it more quickly than others.

But there are stories of other people than Christians who have learnt to mourn together – and thus made a powerful witness for reconciliation, across even the most entrenched divides. In the Holy Land there's an association of relatives who've lost loved ones on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They get to know each other; they have painful encounters, where they share their grief, but also their mistrust; and they speak to the wider world about the common humanity they discover in each other. They're not always popular in their own communities for doing this. I pray they may continue, because in such movements must lie the only seeds of hope, where there seems to be so little to hope for, in terms of real reconciliation.

These are just a few thoughts about forgiveness and its relevance on the international, inter-ethnic, and inter-religious stage. I offer them to you for your reflection and prayer, alongside your thoughts and prayers about any struggles you may have to forgive in your personal relationships.

We have a responsibility to make the forgiveness and reconciliation we see in Jesus realities in the world we live in, on every level; we have this

responsibility under God - we have this responsibility with the help God offers.