



17th September 2017 Ordinary Sunday 24 Revd Tony Gardiner

Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times? Jesus said, I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. (Matthew 18:21-22)

A televised debate was discussing forgiveness. Various people, who had suffered grievous hurts at the hands of others, were asked if they could contemplate forgiving those who had offended them. A man whose child had been killed in a terrorist incident confessed that for the first time since it happened, he'd been made really angry by the suggestion that he should forgive the villains who had done it. Others sympathised with this, because none of the terrorists had shown any repentance for what they did. It's almost impossible, they agreed, to forgive someone who has no regrets for what they've done. But another man, whose son had been killed by a drunk driver, reported how the police told him that the driver, who himself had a son of the same age, had gone to pieces with remorse. Eventually the parents wrote a letter for the driver to show to the judge, which was summed up in three words: "We forgive you."

One good result of their actions was that the tabloid newspapers discussed the Christian doctrine of forgiveness on their front pages, though most of them thought that drunk drivers should never be forgiven. But the reasons the parents wrote as they did were complex. First, it was for the sake of the driver's family: if he'd been sent to prison, his wife and children would have found it hard to make ends meet, and his family might have been broken up. After seeing the letter, the judge decided to give the driver a large fine and ban him from driving – but no prison sentence. Yet, the main reason the parents had felt bound to offer forgiveness was for their own sakes. They had seen people making a public career, to put it bluntly, out of their refusal to forgive somebody, and they had no wish to consume the rest of their own lives by nourishing a grudge. Third, they were Christians. How could they say

the Lord's Prayer, they asked, with the request that God should forgive us as we forgive those who sin against us, if they refused forgiveness to another human being?

The reason why so many people find forgiveness difficult is that they don't understand what forgiveness means. They imagine, quite wrongly, that "I forgive you" means, "There, there, just forget about it, what you've done doesn't really matter." Of course it matters! If you've killed my child, it matters all the world to me, and I shall never forget. But after the case was over, the father and the driver met outside the court, put their arms around each other, and sobbed on each other's shoulders. Gradually the father learnt that there's just one thing that matters more than remembering the wrong that somebody's done. And that's changing the relationship between two people who had hated each other, into an acceptance that we're all sinners, in our different ways, and we desperately need to find a way to live together in the same, imperfect, world.

Last week John Hughes in his sermon spoke about the necessity of fronting up and talking to people with whom we have a disagreement, rather than let the issue smoulder and poison a relationship. Well, here, Jesus is telling us that when we have been hurt by another person, we must be ready to forgive. Offering forgiveness can be hard. Forgiving a person means "taking it" when a person hurts us and forgiving that person in spite of it. It can seem so unfair. Yet we have the example of Jesus himself. God the Son "took" all the sins of all mankind, and, by suffering as man, brought about our forgiveness. It cost him his life to do this. Forgiveness is costly. It was costly for Joseph as we heard in today's Old Testament reading, forgiving his brothers after all they had done to him. God does not want us to be consumed with a refusal to forgive. In many families relationships are never healed because of that.

Thank God that he doesn't keep a score of how many times we hurt him, whether it's seven times or seventy times seven. When God says to us, "I forgive you" He doesn't mean, "there, there, just forget about it, what you've done doesn't really matter." Our sins matter a lot to God, and forgiveness is costly. But our relationship with Him matters even more; He wants us to be a relationship of acceptance and love. That's why God forgives us. That's why we *must* forgive our neighbours, no matter how hard it seems.