

GOSPEL

MATTHEW 18:21-35

‘And so the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who decided to settle his accounts with his servants. When the reckoning began, they brought him a man who owed ten thousand talents; but he had no means of paying, so his master gave orders that he should be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, to meet the debt. At this, the servant threw himself down at his master’s feet. “Give me time,” he said, “and I will pay the whole sum.” And the servant’s master felt so sorry for him that he let him go and cancelled the debt. Now as this servant went out, he happened to meet a fellow servant who owed him one hundred denarii; and he seized him by the throat and began to throttle him. “Pay what you owe me,” he said. His fellow servant fell at his feet and implored him, saying, “Give me time and I will pay you.” But the other would not agree; on the contrary, he had him thrown into prison till he should pay the debt. His fellow servants were deeply distressed when they saw what had happened, and they went to their master and reported the whole affair to him. Then the master sent for him. “You wicked servant,” he said, “I cancelled all that debt of yours when you appealed to me. Were you not bound, then, to have pity on your fellow servant just as I had pity on you?” And in his anger the master handed him over to the torturers till he should pay all his debt. And that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother from your heart.’

A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

This Sunday’s Gospel passage offers us a lesson on forgiveness which does not deny wrongdoing, but recognizes that human beings, created in God’s image, are always greater than the evil they commit. Saint Peter asks Jesus: “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”. To Peter, forgiving the same person seven times already seemed the maximum possible. And

perhaps to us it may already seem too much to do so twice. But Jesus answers, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven”, meaning always. You must always forgive. And he confirms this by telling the parable of the merciful king and the wicked servant, in which he shows the inconsistency of the man who was first forgiven and then refused to forgive.

The king in the parable is a generous man who, spurred by compassion, forgives an enormous debt — “10,000 talents”: enormous — to a servant who beseeches him. That same servant, however, as soon as he meets another servant like himself who owes him 100 dinarii — which is much less — behaves in a ruthless way and has him thrown in prison. The servant’s inconsistent behaviour is the same as ours when we refuse to forgive our brothers and sisters. Whereas the king in the parable is the image of God who loves us with a love that is so rich in mercy as to welcome us, love us and forgive us continuously.

From the time of our Baptism, God has forgiven us, releasing us from an intractable debt: original sin. But that is the first time. Then, with boundless mercy, he forgives us all our faults as soon as we show even the least sign of repentance. This is how God is: merciful. When we are tempted to close our heart to those who have offended us and tell us they are sorry, let us remember our Heavenly Father’s words to the wicked servant: “I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?”. Anyone who has experienced the joy, peace and inner freedom which come from being forgiven should open him or herself up to the possibility of forgiving in turn.

Jesus wished to introduce the teaching of this parable into the *Our Father*. He linked the forgiveness which we ask from God with the forgiveness that we should accord our brothers and sisters: “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”. God’s forgiveness is the symbol of his “overflowing” love for each of us. It is the love that leaves us free to distance ourselves, like the prodigal son, but

which awaits our return every day. It is the resourceful love of the shepherd for the lost sheep. It is the tenderness which welcomes each sinner who knocks at his door. The Heavenly Father — our Father — is filled, is full of love and he wants to offer it to us, but he cannot do so if we close our heart to love towards others.

May the Virgin Mary help us to become ever more aware of the gratuitousness and the greatness of the forgiveness received from God, to become merciful like him, Good Father, slow to anger and great in love.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- How has being forgiven, by another person or Jesus, impacted your life? How did you feel upon being forgiven?
- What does forgiveness mean to you? When have you struggled to forgive someone?
- Jesus implores us to forgive others just as we have been forgiven. How might you strengthen your relationship with Jesus in order to live this out more completely in your life?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. “Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray”)
3. Move to prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others’ prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps reciting the ‘Glory Be’ or similar prayer.