

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Sirach 27:30-28:7 / Matthew 18:21-35)
17.09.207

Dear brothers and sisters,

A king cancels the huge debt of a servant who asks for mercy and time to pay back the whole sum. An unimaginable debt is written off by the king and the man is not even sacked! But that servant to whom such mercy was shown cannot find the same mercy in his heart to remit the tiny debt of a fellow-servant. Not only that: he will not even give his fellow-servant – his social equal – a reasonable time and an opportunity whereby he can repay what he owes.

The king who cancels the debt is an image of our merciful God who freely and lovingly forgives any sin. We cannot but recognize in him the merciful father of the prodigal son spoken of in the parable of Luke's gospel, chapter 15.

The King who had been moved with pity by the cry of desperation of his servant becomes angry when he sees that the recipient of such forgiveness cannot find it in his heart to be merciful in his turn. "In his anger the master handed him over to the torturers till he should pay all his debt." And Jesus adds: "This is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother from your heart." This last verse is terrifying! With it, we are a far cry from the merciful God in whom we believe. Perhaps Jesus wants to tell us that forgiveness is of the essence of Christian life, and for this reason something that we cannot make light of. In any case, at this point some verses from the psalmist come to mind which bring us hope: "The Lord is compassion and love, slow to anger and rich in mercy. His wrath will come to an end; he will not be angry for ever. He does not treat us according to our sins nor repay us according to our faults" (Ps 102:8-10). Perhaps what Jesus says and the psalmist's words have to be held together. Even if there appears to be a tension between them, both are true and important.

If we are honest, we have to recognize that "this wicked servant" is an image of each one of us. We ask God for forgiveness, the forgiveness of our sins which are many and can sometimes be quite heavy to bear... and then we refuse to forgive the slightest offence committed against us by a fellow human being.

In the "Our Father", we pray using the words given to us by Jesus and we say: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us".

We cannot ask God's forgiveness without engaging ourselves to forgive those who have offended us in any way. The forgiveness that Jesus offers us requires of us that we forgive in our turn and that we do so without counting: we are to forgive "seventy-seven times". It is important to understand that this is not an over the counter transaction. We are not to forgive others simply in order to be forgiven by God. It is not a matter of buying God's forgiveness by first forgiving others. The point is that forgiveness received from God and forgiveness shared with others are inseparable: they are linked, like two faces of the same coin. God's forgiveness received should invite us and help us to forgive others. Sometimes we cannot ask for God's forgiveness or receive it because we are refusing to offer forgiveness to others. Our refusal is closing the door to God's forgiveness in our lives.

The Lord asks us today: Where do you stand in relation to forgiveness? We might ask ourselves: Is it easy for us to ask and receive God's forgiveness in the sacrament of reconciliation? Do we feel the vital need to do so? Is it easy for us to forgive one another as soon as a difference arises between us?

Forgiveness is not a simple apology. To ask for God's forgiveness is not just to say: 'sorry' to God. It is to be aware of our sins as acts of idolatry; it is to be aware of our infidelities to God's covenant of love made with his people, made with each one of us. We have sinned against God, we have hurt God and we need to be reconciled with Him if we want that His life continue to circulate between us. When we see things in this light, then the sacrament of reconciliation is something to which we aspire... We long to be forgiven and are happy to be reconciled.

If we have hurt someone, we should ask for forgiveness; and if someone hurts us, we should offer it, so that life may circulate among us again. It is a question of death or life. A refusal to forgive a brother in humanity can hinder us from asking and from receiving God's forgiveness, just as a neglect to ask the Lord for His forgiveness can hinder us from forgiving our neighbour.

We might ask: Why do we find it so difficult to forgive others? Frequently this is because we take God's forgiveness for granted and don't see what its reception demands of us: generous mercy. The Lord says to us as He forgives us: Be merciful as I am merciful. If we really appreciated the full dimension of God's forgiveness in our regard, then we could not but forgive our neighbour immediately and as often as needed.

It is also difficult for us to forgive others because our memories, our hearts and minds are filled with hurts caused by the harsh words and actions of others. That might also be their failure to speak words to us and show us their love by their actions. These hurts can imprison us; they can paralyze us; they can be a hindrance to life circulating within us and among us. The forgiveness we request and the forgiveness we offer is the only way to allow life to circulate anew within us and between us. The only way forward for us is to let go and forgive. Forgiveness is always a gift from God, a precious gift, one to be received and one to offer. To let go and forgive is the only way to be set free and to set others free.

Forgiveness enables us to break free from all that holds us back and pulls us down. Forgiveness is a long personal journey; it is a process never fully achieved. To let go and not to cling or hold on to the wrong committed against us is the way that leads to life; it is God's way. May we allow God's way to shine through our way of being! May we be merciful as He is merciful!

May the Lord grant us the grace of a forgiven and a forgiving heart!