

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Ecclesiasticus 27:30-28:7 / Matthew 18:21-35)
13.09.2020

Despite the warnings of the Sacred Scriptures that we should not withhold forgiveness from anyone, how readily we ignore the Lord's instruction in this respect! Jesus tells us clearly to forgive so that we may be forgiven: *Forgive and you will be forgiven*. And yet we can sometimes dare to think (and maybe even to say) that we won't forgive those who have offended us.

Can any of us afford to say that? Is there any one of us who has nothing that does not need to be forgiven in his or her life?

Why do we withhold forgiveness? Often it is because of an innate inclination to punish others for their offences in our regard. We feel compelled *to make them pay the price*, as the saying goes. That's another way of saying that we want to exact revenge.

I hear ringing in my ears words of a responsory we sing here at the abbey in the context of the Divine Office – a responsory fashioned by the teaching of the Apostle Paul: *The Lord has forgiven you, now you must do the same*.

And yet, it strikes me, how readily we who have been acquitted by the Lord (often acquitted of very many offences) can be tempted to set ourselves up as crown prosecutor, judge and jury in cases for which we bring others to trial. If we are honest, we would have to admit that frequently the accused who stands before us (at least in our imagination) is given no chance of a fair hearing – which just might lead to a more balanced judgement. The accused is most often deprived of a merciful and compassionate audition which could result in a more lenient sentence. He or she is rarely accorded a totally gracious pardon! Then, as if to put the cherry on the cake, we dare to allot to ourselves the task of executioner – sometimes going as far as to mete out nothing short of capital punishment. There are many subtle ways by which we kill others off. We can put people to death by blanking them out; no longer speaking to them; refusing to have contact with them... dispensing punishments that amount to nothing less than their extermination/elimination!

One thing that contributes greatly to our readiness to adopt attitudes of harsh judgement is a lack of true self-knowledge. St Teresa of Avila was so right when she stated that *most of the ills we encounter in our spiritual lives can be traced back to a lack of self-awareness*.

I remember a simple line from a homily Pope Francis preached in 2017 at an early morning Eucharist at the Casa Santa Marta. On the 21st of March that year, he said simply: *If you are not aware of being forgiven you will never be able to forgive, never!*

What Pope Francis declared there ties in with and confirms the great St Teresa's statement.

Our big problem when it comes to a difficulty to forgive is to be unaware of just how much we ourselves have been forgiven... and we all have! None of us has managed to live a sinless life. We have all hurt and offended others. A lot of the time the offences by which we have injured others may have been committed unwittingly, but they will have nonetheless affected the injured parties – sometimes leaving them feeling deeply wounded.

When we ourselves have been hurt, frequently, rather unthinkingly, we simply reproduce what we have endured.

If only they realised it, *hurtful* people are quite literally that: they are people who are *full of hurt*. Their hurt bottled up inside has become contaminated – grown toxic. When it escapes them, spilling out of them, it affects others adversely.

The attitudes the Wisdom writer speaks of today in the first reading taken at this Eucharist can so easily arise in our hearts and poison our lives as a result. They can poison our own existence first and then our relationships with others. The sage names such things as seeds of resentment and anger, the desire to exact vengeance, obsession with other people's faults and failing. These are all pernicious ills which affect so many of our lives. They can eat away at us from inside. They can destroy our interior life like a virus, invading our system and flooding our blood-stream – to the point of putting our very life at risk. When these bitter sentiments become a deep-seated infection, they constitute both a self-destructive force and one which risks being perilous for those around us.

A word that we hear a lot these days comes to mind to explain what can happen to us when we harbour ill-feelings: it is the word *infection*. We can become spiritually infected people. Let's just look at the word *infection* a little more closely.

The word *infection* comes from the Latin word *infectus*, meaning to stain or to dye. It denotes a colouring. I think this etymology helps us grasp something which is important for us to understand. We could say that when we are infected we are coloured from inside. When we are infected what we carry inside ourselves colours/influences quite a bit the way we perceive others. Our thinking and our considerations in regard to others are coloured by the sort of people we are ourselves. We see people not as they are, but as we are! The lens through which we look at others can be strongly tinted; it can even be quite tainted. And so, for example, when we are eaten up inside by such things as anger, resentment, vengeance, or spite, the poison these ill-feelings create within us becomes a corrosive energy which can (and most often will) rub off on those around us – contaminating them.

We know from our present experience dealing with the coronavirus pandemic how its spread stems from infected people contaminating others. One infected person in a group can so easily infect the others around them. A whole group of people can become infected because of just one person in its midst carrying the vicious virus – even when it is lying dormant within them. I see something of a parable for us in this. We can be carrying ill-feelings deep within our hearts, without our even realising it and without our being fully aware of it, as a result, we can be infecting lots of other people.

In today's first reading the Wisdom writer gives us insights we would be foolish to ignore when he speaks of how foolish we are when we harbour resentment and anger, for these are *foul things*. He further puts us on our guard against nursing (and thus nurturing) such sentiments by going over them again and again, as if doing our best to cultivate them by constantly attending to them. To ruminate on bitter memories is akin to tending to a plant in a bid to make it grow all the more and become increasingly stronger. The sage reminds us that to be continually thinking of the past, persistently living in the past, is not a good thing. It blocks and hinders the flow of life energy within us; it holds us back from advancing to the end to which we are called: an end that will see a *resolution* of all things. (God knows, in this land, we see the effects of forever living in and hankering after the past in unhealthy ways – ways that fuel mutual suspicion and ill-feelings today!)

I referred earlier to the etymology of the word *infection*, at this point I propose that we look very briefly at what is meant by that word *resolution* which I used a moment ago.

The word *resolution* comes from the Latin *solvere*: to loosen, to release, to explain. *Resolvere* held a diverse array of additional meanings as well: to unyoke, to undo, to relax, to set free, to make void, to dispel. These are all very positive notions. They counteract the negative acts or sentiments that today's Scripture readings put us on our guard against.

Finally, the author of Ecclesiasticus encourages us *to look to the last things, to stop hating, to remember dissolution and death*. He is basically saying to us there that as we remember these *last things* – the end towards which we are heading – we will find ourselves beginning to wise up.

Is it not true that when people find themselves on a hospital corridor outside an ICU, they can be led to see how foolish so many of the silly disputes that held them apart hitherto are led to pale into insignificance? So often what seemed so important comes to be seen as being nothing less than futile; sometimes nothing short of incredibly stupid! How many families or friends who reconcile after years of dispute and separation can hardly remember what the initial bone of contention between them was.

Just last week I heard a story of a doctor coming out on to a hospital corridor to basically chastise the father and the brother of a young woman who was battling in the ICU for her life. He upbraided them: *Would both of you stop arguing like squabbling children! Be men! Come together to be the men you are called to be for your daughter and your sister who at this time needs all the support you can offer her. Stop stupidly wasting your precious energy! Try to channel some of it to your loved one who needs your united presence by her side.*

So much of our resentment, so much of our anger, so many of our dissensions and squabbles, are rooted in childish emotions that we have not learned to deal with properly. If the Wisdom writer flags up our childishness to us, at the same time, he reminds us of our responsibility. He invites us to mature, to grow up.

Mere creature of flesh, he cherishes resentment; who will forgive him his sins? By these words the author of Ecclesiasticus warns of something the Gospel is very clear about today. This could be summed up in the saying: *The amount you measure out is the amount you will be paid back*. This saying implies that we can be responsible for holding ourselves bound by our own debts by failing to unburden others of their debt in our regard. The Wisdom writer says: *Forgive your neighbour the hurt he does you, and when you pray, your sins will be forgiven. If a man nurses anger against another, can he then demand compassion from the Lord? Showing no pity for a man like himself, can he then plead for his own sins?* The way we assess and judge others will affect the way we are assessed and judged. Our hardness of heart, our unwillingness to forgive will do us no favours in the end.

The 16th century monastic writer Blosius wisely counsels his readers in *The Spiritual Mirror* in this regard. Let me quote his words for you: *If anger and indignation should suddenly move or provoke you, or you feel bitterness toward anyone, take care not to give in to this wicked impulse, but reprove, soften and extinguish it as much as you can. Regret that your heart is still so bitter. Humble yourself and ask God's help. Once He has bountifully poured the sweetness of charity into you, you will no longer be bitter*. In the same context Louis de Blois insists that we should *avoid looking upon others with a stern countenance and allowing our minds to be bitter in their regard*. Doubtless, he was well aware of the *Golden Rule* with its principle that *we should treat others the way we want others to treat us*. Blosius reasoned that if want to obtain God's mercy and compassion for ourselves, then we should strive to display God's mercy and compassion to those who look to us in the hope of our being bountiful and forgiving in their regard.

In chapter 6 of Paul's Letter to the Galatians it is suggested that *we will reap what we sow*. The well-known proverb *you reap what you sow* is therefore rooted in the Sacred Scriptures. We could say that today's Gospel parable illustrates this truth for us.

What the unforgiving servant did in regard to his fellow servant who was in debt led him to incur the Master's wrath. The Master who had previously cancelled this unforgiving servant's

debt now exacted payment from him anew in light of his own manifest stinginess. If only the wicked servant had have had the grace to display to his fellow servant the bounty and forgiveness he had benefited from then he would have walked free. Instead, wanting to be recompensed by his lesser debtor he found his own greater debts attributed to him afresh. In failing to free his fellow, the wicked servant found himself robbed of his own liberty.

Fundamentally what the Gospel parable reproaches in the man who had his great debt cancelled is his dissemblance to the Master who had forgiven him. The call of the Gospel is always a call to imitate the Lord in the way we deal with others.

In Matthew 5 we read: *I say to you: Love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way you will be acting as true sons of your Father in heaven. For he gives His sunlight to both the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust too.* A little further on in the same chapter we read: *Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect.* That last line is paralleled with Gospel sayings found elsewhere in the Good News stories: *Be merciful as your Heavenly Father is merciful. Be compassionate as your Heavenly Father is compassionate.*

Here we have the message we are called to carry away from today's Eucharist and to put into practice in our daily lives.