

First Reading: Sirach 27:30-28:7 (Forgive and you will be forgiven)

Responsorial Psalm 103 *"The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger and rich in compassion."*

Second Reading: Romans 14:7-9 (We do not live for ourselves alone but for the Lord)

Alleluia Verse: *"I give you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you"*

Gospel: Matthew 18:21-35 (I say to you, Forgive! Not seven times but as often as you are offended.)

♪ LOVING AND FORGIVING ARE YOU, O LORD, SLOW TO ANGER,
RICH IN KINDNESS, LOVING AND FORGIVING ARE YOU. ♪

God is loving and forgiving, and we are made in God's image.

That's what the Responsorial Psalm today teaches us about forgiveness.

The first reading from Sirach makes it personal:

I am called to forgive because I have been forgiven.

The reading also implies that I need to forgive because to hold grudges will only hurt me.

I remember reading a book called *Travelling Mercies*, by Anne Lamott. She writes in 1999 that holding a grudge is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.

Nelson Mandela has said the same thing in different words -

"Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies."



I am good friends with the Freedmans, a Jewish couple who once told me that I helped them see forgiveness as part of their own Scripture. Both the Responsorial Psalm and the reading from Sirach for today's Mass are a part of the Hebrew Scriptures.

But in the Gospel reading Jesus *commands* us to forgive as we have been forgiven. John Paul II saw that command as the only way to bring peace to the world, as well as to my heart. He summed it up when he said, *"No peace without justice, no justice without forgiveness."* But how is that possible, especially after the attacks on NY and Washington on September 11th, 2001? How can we even think of forgiveness when we hear of the most recent outbreak of racism or violence in our country or the last act of terrorism in our world?

How is it possible to pray,

"forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"?

St. Francis had to face the same impossible question in 1219. The 5th crusade was raging in an attempt to take back Jerusalem and the Holy Places. It was a time that had many things in common with the time in which we live. Francis had tried the way of violence and war, and had been inspired to reject that way by the Gospel of Jesus. He decided to go to the Holy Land and to visit the Sultan, the leader of the Muslim army.

He wanted to try the way of conversion and diplomacy. He fully expected to become a martyr, and that his death would advance the cause of peace.

But what actually happened was that Francis and the Sultan met and became friends. They talked with each other in French, since it was a language they both spoke and which the Sultan's attendants did not know, and Francis tried to convince Malik-el-Kamil to become a Christian.

It is said that the Sultan told him that he was attracted by the Gospel of Christ, but that he had not seen it lived by the crusaders and besides, if his attendants knew what they were talking about they would kill them both on the spot.

This meeting deeply affected both Francis and Malik. Francis, in his later writings, showed a deep respect for what is good and true about Islam and the Sultan, who saw in Francis someone who really lived what Jesus taught, gave him safe passage back to the crusader camp and gave his followers full access to the Holy Land. To this day, the sacred sites are cared for by Franciscans, and when I was on sabbatical in the Holy Land in 1993, I walked around in my Franciscan habit feeling very safe and respected by both Jews and Muslims.

The life and teaching of Jesus can show us the way of mercy and justice,
even as they showed the way of love and truth to St. Francis.

It seems that racism and fear of those who are different are not attitudes that began in our time. But the real question is: How can we live the Gospel of Jesus today? First of all, we need to learn, over and over again, that forgiving is NOT excusing. Jesus always forgave the person without excusing the sin. Francis did not condone the violence either of the Muslims or of the Crusaders. Jesus was pretty clear in today's reading about the sin of unforgiveness, but the parable he used needs a little reflection. Parables are stories that are meant to shock those who hear them and often turn expectations upside down.

The difference between the amounts of money owed is astronomical. The first servant [slave] owed a hundred million denarii. The 2nd only 100. It would be like the difference between \$100,000,000 and \$100. The offer of the slave to repay is clearly laughable, and the mercy of the king is unlimited, reflecting in this case the unconditional love of God.

However, "King" & "Lord" in this parable is not a metaphor for God in the rest of the story, as many of those listening would expect. It is an image of a society that is only able to go as far as Peter was, at first. [Remember, Peter thought that 7 times was a lot. Rabbinic teaching allowed for only 3.]

This king or lord represents a society that will forgive, to a degree - a society represented by the other servants who turn the first one in. They objected to the unfairness and illogic of the forgiven slave's treatment of one like them, but they are even more bloodthirsty than the 1st servant, behaving the same way he did when he threatened to imprison the one who owed him so little along with his family. The king and those servants delivered the 1st servant over to torture. They point to our society, a culture that needs to repent of use of any violence to heal injustice or to solve a problem, whether it is war, abortion on demand or capital punishment. Jesus is clearly teaching that God is forgiving, even more than the king or the community in the parable, and that we are commanded to do likewise.

The last sentence of the Gospel passage, which implies that the Father will withhold forgiveness if we refuse to forgive, needs to be understood in the light of the whole of the Scripture.

The gift of mercy is *always* offered; it is already given, but we need to accept it. God in Christ is *always* ready to forgive. As I learned from Brother David Steindl-Rast, Jesus never said in the Gospels, "I forgive you," what he did say, over and over, was, "Your sins are forgiven." What blocks our acceptance is a refusal to forgive [or a refusal to let Jesus forgive] myself or others. We can put up a wall from **our side** when we refuse to forgive.

That is what the 1st servant did.

Mercy and forgiveness is offered by God to everyone. But we can refuse to accept it. The way we block the gift is to refuse to forgive. The bread and wine of mercy is offered to us at every Mass through the body and lifeblood of Christ. It is a totally free gift, but we can refuse to eat and drink and so die from spiritual malnutrition.

Jesus is always ready to forgive any sin, but he clearly names the action as wrong. To forgive is not to excuse the wrong that has been done, it is to put the person or persons who have hurt me, or hurt someone I love, in God's hands, to let Jesus be their judge.

To really forgive from my heart - when I am faced with terror or abuse or great injustice - without excusing the wrong that was done I need to admit that it is God's power that forgives the person or persons, not mine. I believe that it is always God's work in me. The words, "To err is human, to forgive divine" strike me as literally true. When I am faced with something I cannot forgive, either in others or in myself, I pray in the spirit of the first three steps of AA and other 12 step programs.

I can't, you can, Lord, I think I'll let you.

Sometimes it takes quite a while, but nothing is impossible for God.

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