

St John's East Malvern & St Agnes' Glen Huntly. Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost. 13th September 2020

Exodus 14:19-31

Psalm 114

Matthew 18:21-35

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

“To err is human; to forgive – divine!” – so said Alexander Pope. How often, I wonder, do we think of it the other way around... looking at a broken world, at a people – indeed even ourselves – who share in that brokenness... how easy it is to think that God has erred, made a muck-up of Creation, and it's up to us to fix it – summoning all the strength we can muster – to put right what God has got wrong. When, in fact, it is the opposite – what God has wonderfully made is too often marred and distorted by all that threatens God's good creation – envy, selfishness, unfaithfulness, violence – and threatens God's purpose for us, which is life – lives lived in glory to God and in love with one another. And so, though we err – God forgives... God redeems. Born out of God's great love for us – it is God's great act: to forgive, to restore, to remake us and all Creation. And such a great act has a great cost – a cost that is born on the Cross – the self-giving, self-offering sacrifice of God for the world. And so, when we are called to forgive we can do so only because we have ourselves been forgiven – because our acts of forgiveness are really just an extension, a grabbing hold of and passing on, of that great act of God.

It is that which empowers us and enables us to live transformed lives and redeemed relationships – not by our own strength but falling back upon the Cross and finding ourselves there in its embrace.

“To forgive is divine” – in other words, it is to be caught up in the Divine work – the Divine life, the Divine act of redemption in this world. There is a mystical element to forgiveness – as we forgive, and participate in that Divine life, so we are changed glory into glory, nearer to Christ, which is our promised end.

And so when Peter asks Jesus, “how often should I forgive?” and the reply comes back, trenchantly, “not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven [or seven times seven] times!” – this is not just some practical instruction on how to resolve internal community disputes, but a greater truth about what God has done for us – and how we are charged with the responsibility to witness to it and to let it live through us in the world, in all our interactions and relationships. The number – seven, seventy-seven, seven times seven – is not so important... what is important is that Jesus here is taking Peter’s assumptions and expanding them exponentially! Divine forgiveness – true forgiveness – explodes the boundaries of our knowing – the limits of our calculating – and counts us as recipients of God’s innumerable grace.

The parable Jesus tells draws this out. But the numbers, in this case, are important. A slave who owes a King 10,000 talents – the footnotes helpfully describe a talent as equivalent to 15 years' wages... which if you translate to the average salary in Australia today equates in total to somewhere over \$12 billion! It is an impossible amount – how could such a debt even conceivably be run up? The extremity of the situation is for effect – and when the King forgives the debt and releases the slave – it gives some contrast to what happens next: the slave goes and calls in his own debtors... showing no mercy to one who owes him a much smaller amount, 100 denarii – or about three months' wages.

It's not hard to draw the parallel with the parable – we who have been forgiven so much, an impossible debt which no individual could burden, a debt which only God on the Cross, at great cost, can pay – we who have received such an immeasurable benefit are called in whatever way we can... whether it be great or small... to extend that grace and to proclaim the release and freedom which we ourselves have known. It's not one of Jesus' most subtle stories – in fact it's rather a blunt instrument with its violent end... but it makes the point unequivocally – forgive each other... from your heart.

It's easier said, though, than done.

And, it's easily distorted too – twisted to enable the perpetuation of abuse... when forgiveness is demanded without repentance, without reformed behaviour, without commitment to change... but rather imprisons the forgiver in a destructive cycle. This is not the redemption God calls us into – but a perversion of it... yes, forgiveness is costly – but it is also liberating and freely given.

Easier said than done – though it has been done, for us and for all... and when our own efforts fail us it is to that great act, on the Cross, where we might find some inspiration in contemplation. And it will mean different things to different people at different times – there will be times when perhaps we long to know our own forgiveness; times we're called to forgive others; times we cannot forgive; times we forgive without truly counting the cost... times when this exhortation of Jesus will be of comfort, of challenge, or just confusion!

Which is why we keep coming back, to sit at the foot of the Cross and contemplate its mysteries, to pray and to question, to shelter and to rest. To tremble, as the psalmist puts it, at the presence of the Lord – and to know God's great love for us.

Amen.