

Year A Proper 24 13<sup>th</sup> Sept 2020

Genesis 50: 15-21

Romans 14: 1-12

Matthew 18: 21-35

### Holding Up a Mirror

Human nature being what it is, we have the ability to deny to ourselves that some things that we do are not really all that bad; that what we do is Ok and isn't a problem for us or anyone else; to compartmentalise the things we might otherwise have a pang of conscience about and tidy it away in the far recesses of our mind.

It can take a good friend, someone who knows us well, and cares deeply about us, to actually come to us and tell us the truth; that our behaviour, our actions are not acceptable. That good friend, speaking in love, is holding us accountable. They are not threatening us, but holding up a mirror to us, so we cannot avoid seeing what really is in plain sight. Most of the time we know that what we are doing isn't exactly right, but until someone holds us accountable, we can go on kidding ourselves. Sometimes, when our conscious selves knows something is not right but we genuinely don't understand what isn't right, we seek out help; help from a trusted friend or perhaps a paid professional counsellor. They can help us work through the issues, help us see and think clearly, and help us reach a right relationship with ourselves and with others.

In our gospel reading we heard that the king decided to confront his slaves and ask them to 'settle accounts' with him. We can interpret 'settle accounts' in any number of ways. In this parable Jesus chose to use the easy-to-understand notion of a debt of money, an improbably large sum of money, ten thousand talents. The actual amount doesn't really matter, although various commentaries suggest it would be worth between 2 and 4 million pounds today. As it is a parable, we can take the amount to signify that it was a sum of money almost impossible to pay back, and indicated the life style and denial of reality of the debtor. No wonder that when the debtor had no way of paying the money back the king wanted to get something back so was threatening to

sell the debtor and his family and take possession of all the material goods of worth that they owned, in at least part payment of the debt.

In this parable the king responds to the debtors pleading. The king responds more generously than the debtor could ever have asked for. The debtor asked for time to pay back the debt. I suspect that the debtor was thoroughly floored when the king was even more generous than that. The king released the servant from the debt and forgave him; he wiped the debt away.

It is clear that the King in this parable is God. The gracious God who responds in love and mercy when the debtor confesses and repents. That is an astonishing act of grace.

However, the parable has a sting in the tale. The servant shows no mercy to another servant who owed him a paltry sum by comparison, 100 denarii would have been about 100 days wages. The servant who had just been shown such grace and mercy showed absolutely none, nada, zero compassion, grace or mercy to his debtor, and had him thrown in jail until the debt was paid back.

It should not be a surprise that this parable ends by the King throwing his debtor into jail, with orders for him to be tortured because the mercy show to his debtor had not been reflected in the debtor's own actions, for a much much smaller amount.

I hope what comes flitting across our minds at this moment are two well known bits of scripture:

Forgive us our debts and we forgive those who sin against us, and  
Do unto others as you wish done to you.

The parable connects us directly to what is required of us. We receive God's forgiveness, God's grace and mercy every day. The experience of God's forgiveness calls us to also forgive; there is a direct connection between the act of human forgiveness and our experiences of God's forgiveness. Martin Luther said in one of his sermons on this lectionary reading: "Faith in God naturally brings forth acts of love toward the neighbour".

How are we to respond to this parable, now?

Firstly, I think we are called to examine ourselves. We are called to be humble, to recognise we are not perfect, and to repent. Both Matthew and Luke report Jesus' teaching on this:

Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?

We all know that Jesus expects us to concern ourselves with our own imperfections before we start pointing our finger at others. We so often fail to see the log in our own eye; we fail to critically examine ourselves but like to spot failures in others.

Secondly, does it help us consider how we have treated God's creation on earth, and how we should respond to the climate emergency?

For many many years the UK has lent money to nations that used to be called 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries. Ironically, many of these countries were once part of the British Empire, which systematically stripped them of assets (minerals, food, plants, people as slaves, etc) and impoverished these countries. It is also many of these countries that were struggling to finance the debt from loans made by the western world and which are now struggling with the worst effects of climate change, and in recent months the effects of COVID-19. Struggling to finance the debts has left many of these countries unable to invest in their infrastructure, and to be more resilient to climate and economic challenges. As a nation, is it time to step up the call for all remaining debts to be cancelled?

If you think not, and you are entitled to your opinion, what should we make of the suffering people from those same nations, impoverished and struggling to live any semblance of a dignified life, who make herculean efforts to reach countries that have benefitted from stripping their countries of wealth, countries which historically have polluted God's creation with CO2 emissions, with hazardous chemical waste, with plastics, etc? Can we as a nation really seek to demonise people who are looking to live a life where there is not a daily battle to survive?

We live in a complex world, and as we have seen in recent months in the debate about slavery and the wealth from it which supported Victorian philanthropy, grandiose civic architecture and personal houses and country estates, the actions of people in years before us, with different values and attitudes, impact on us to this very day.

We also have to accept that given the time, context and place where we have been born and raised, our lives are full of contradictions about what we ideally want to do and our actual actions.

In fact, to not put too fine point on it, we are all hypocrites. I know I am. I try not to use my car too much, I have solar panels on my house and have invested in insulating it well. I have committed to not taking internal flights where at all possible. I have cut down my red meat consumption, and look to buy local in-season produce. And yet my greenhouse gas emissions are still around the UK average of 5.5 metric tons per annum before I offset the electricity generated by my solar panels. And my annual total of 5.5 metric tons doesn't include my worst hypocritical act. Over the last 5 year, most years I have flown across the Atlantic to the east-coast of the USA and was planning (pre-COVID-19 lockdown) to fly to Vancouver on Canada's west coast this week. Those flights alone can double my greenhouse gas emissions in a year!

I sit uncomfortably with this contradiction in my life, and the charge of hypocrisy that can be levelled at me.

As quite a few theologians have commented, I am lucky that I belong to a church community. For we are all, in one way or another, hypocrites. In church there is always room for more and we welcome them with open arms. I hope that all Christians are seeking in whatever way they can to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth. By that I mean that the kingdom of heaven is the way things ought to be when God's will is done. And yet...

I know that although I deeply desire God's kingdom to be something we all experience every day on earth, that when God's will is done we experience the kingdom of heaven, my actions do not always help bring that about.

If I was too overly worry about this, I would become useless, I would become stuck in a place of hopelessness and inaction. I would do absolutely nothing at all to work towards God's kingdom of heaven being experienced by our fellow humans. Instead, I know that I am not perfect, I am a messy set of personal motivations and internal conflicts, and I am a construct of my time and place, and I am hypocritical.

It is knowing this, being able to know that in love others help me hold that mirror up and support me as I identify my flaws and what small steps I can take to become a slightly more perfect version of myself. And the bottom line is

that I have a strong sense that God's love, grace and mercy are urging me ever forward on my journey through this life.

I don't want to damage God's creation, I want to walk lightly on this earth, and seek forgiveness from those whose lives have been damaged and continue to be damaged by my greenhouse gas emitting lifestyle. As we have heard from today's gospel, if we seek forgiveness, it is incumbent on us to repent and change our ways.

When you hold a mirror up, and critically assess your Christian life and your impact on God's creation and our neighbours across the world suffering as a result of how we live our lives, what do you need to seek forgiveness for the most, and what actions might you take, so that even to a small degree the charge of hypocrisy carries less weight?

In our church we must warmly welcome all hypocrites with open arms, for it is only once we have recognised our own true nature that we can, in love, support each other to change for the better, to change for a better world, honouring all of God's creation.