

24th Sunday of Year

The readings today speak to us powerfully of the need for forgiveness – how are we to understand these in the context of terrorism, or indeed any unjust act from which we suffer when there is no sign of repentance? We can think of the Manchester bombing or the attacks on London Bridge and elsewhere. As I am preparing this there is a report of a bomb on an underground train at Parson's Green.

When St Peter asks Jesus how many times he must forgive he implicitly raises this question. Seven times implies that any signs of sorrow on the part of the wrongdoer are insincere or at least pushing the victim too far. Yet Our Lord replies, "Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times." He goes on to explain this with a parable. Ten thousand talents comprised 100 million denarii – each denarius a day's wage! Who could repay such an astronomical debt? At the minimum wage level it would be equivalent to £5 billion! The fellow servant's debt could be repaid – it was just four months' wages – but he is wrong to demand his pound of flesh. What he genuinely has against his fellow servant pales into insignificance beside his own debt, now forgiven. God will forgive us anything provided we are truly sorry. He does not wait for us to earn forgiveness by repaying our debt. Justice is not ignored. The debt of justice is paid by Jesus on the cross. The bodily pain of hanging on the cross is the least part of his suffering. Those who die unrepentant must bear the consequences of what they have done through all eternity in the permanent separation from God the Bible calls Hell.

What about human forgiveness? Can we and should we forgive someone who shows no sign of repentance? What about justice? Is wrong-doing to have no consequences? St Luke does not give us the parable but reports Our Lord's words like this: "Take heed to yourselves; if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." Forgiveness means 'letting go' of the injury we have suffered. It does not absolve the wrong doer from the moral obligation to repent, and to make amends in so far as this is possible.

However, there is another aspect to forgiveness. Whether or not the other person is repentant, by hanging on to the injury we have suffered we extend and increase the harm already inflicted on us. It is as if we were to hold our hand in the fire when it is burned instead of pulling back and placing in cold water to reduce the temperature. The healing process cannot begin until we let go of what has happened. This does not happen instantly and wounds take time to heal. Even then there may be scars that last a life time. Those who suffer cannot and should not forget what happened, but they can try to leave things in God's hands for him to work out. Justice in human terms is not possible – how could the death of a terrorist compensate for so many others? Yet an unrequited desire for vengeance destroys the future and chains us to the past.

Whether or not the other person is genuinely sorry or asks forgiveness, we need to forgive in order to find healing and to move forward. Just as there can be a vicious circle of resentment and anger reinforced by our thoughts words and actions, increasingly locking us into hatred and self-destruction, so there can be a virtuous circle. By doing and saying the right things, we can change the way we see those who have hurt us, and allow the grace of God to begin the healing process.

- We can remain silent before an impulse of anger;
- We can speak in a friendly way to those who have offended us instead of returning an insult;
- We can seek justice without a spirit of vengefulness;
- We can take the initiative in seeking reconciliation even when the other person is at fault;
- We can pray for those who have behaved in a badly towards us;
- We can try to put the best interpretation on another's motives;
- We can overlook the minor pinpricks of life rather than make an issue of them.

By doing these things we may or may not heal the pain or hardness in the other person's heart that caused them to act in this way, but we will certainly open our own hearts to the healing power of the Lord, and find the peace that resentment and anger destroy.