

“To err is human; to forgive, divine.” So wrote Alexander Pope in his 1711 work, *An Essay in Criticism*, in which we also have the popular aphorism, “fools rush in where angels fear to tread,” and “a little learning is a dangerous thing.” All of which could be applicable to the themes of this morning’s readings. Forgiveness is the most obvious theme jumping out at us and dancing in front of us, although I’m sure most of us already started putting our guards up when we heard the readings. It’s such a central emphasis of the gospel that we almost absorb it by osmosis, forgiveness is essential, and perhaps we go no further than that; a little learning is indeed a dangerous thing. As so often with something so complex, Jesus gives us a picture, indeed this morning we have three pictures: Joseph and his brothers, the weak and the strong believers, and the unforgiving servant. Somewhere in the intersection of all three we learn what it means to forgive and be forgiven and how that shapes our life, both individually and corporately.

The Joseph saga is a well-rehearsed story cycle, not least thanks to Andrew Lloyd-Webber and Tim Rice. The story of the meteoric fall and rise of the spoiled brat favourite son with a colourful coat, the plotting of the brothers, the God who weaves the plan of salvation throughout and despite all human deceit. Here we are at the end of the story and still the brothers cannot see

beyond the immediate. Jacob is dead, who is there to stop Joseph, the most powerful man in the world next to Pharaoh, taking his swift and likely deadly revenge. After all the brothers know what they did, they know that really, they wanted him dead on that day long ago in the desert. They know the lies they span, the despair they brought on their father and the practical death they allowed him to spend so many years in. They know that the hardships Joseph endured were all down to them. But mostly they know what they would do to one who had done that to them.

So, what do they do? They revert to type and lie, “Daddy said don’t hurt us when he’s dead.” The adoring favourite son cannot ignore that! “But Joseph has seen the bigger picture. He has seen what God has done through the violent jealousy of the brothers, and he has seen that he was not the only one to benefit – all the Egyptian people who might have starved without Joseph’s foresight can, in a strange way, plead for forgiveness for the people who unwittingly brought Joseph to Egypt.”¹ Now, we need to be careful in interpreting Joseph here. He is **not** saying that God had the brothers sell him into slavery so that he could save the Egyptians and thereby the family who

¹ Jane Williams, *Lectionary Reflections Year A*, p.108

would become the people of God. That way leads to terrible theologies of

“God let this happen because ...” and a determinism that is not Christian.

Joseph says, “even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.” Out of the harm or evil that the brothers intend, God brings good.

Their petty jealousies and plotting fade into insignificance when one considers the plan of God to save the known world from starvation.

Paul is basically arguing the same thing in his letter to the Romans. Whilst he adds vegetarians and vegans to the list of people least likely to be in his fan club he is arguing for the bigger picture. The question, he says, really isn't about whether you can eat meat or not, or about which religious feasts or special days are actually important, the question is about accepting and welcoming each other. Notice that it is acceptance and welcome, not tolerance. I don't think Paul is arguing for tolerance here², he's not arguing that the meat eaters should tolerate the vegetarians or vice versa, he's arguing that they should welcome and accept each other, because we do not live or die to ourselves but to God. “The radicality of Paul's passion here is the radicality of grace, the radicality of a life lived beyond judgement, beyond justice – life that loves real

² David L Bartlett, *Feasting on the Word: year A Volume 4*, p.67

and enduring enemies. Our spirit for and toward those with whom we bitterly disagree is Paul's focus."³

Paul isn't living in a fantasy world where there are no disagreements, you only have to read his letters to see he knows only too well what disagreements there are. But he is "disarm[ing] the finality of all such judgements by reminding us that they are not ultimate, that first and last we stand not because we are in the right, but because by grace we are the Lord's, because in life and in death we belong to God."⁴ Paul is saying while you sit there, trying to force your own practices on other Christians, God is saving the world.⁵

And so once upon a time there was a slave who owed a fantastical amount of money to his Lord, so huge that Geoff Bezos, Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg and Bill Gates combined couldn't pay it off. Fed up of waiting the Lord orders that he, his family and all he owns is sold off, he's not going to get his money back but gosh he'll make an example and hopefully feel good about it. "Hang on," says the slave, "give me time and I'll pay it off." Suddenly the Lord, who

³ William Greenway, *Feasting on the Word: Year A Volume 4*, p.64

⁴ *ibid*, p.66

⁵ Jane Williams, *op cit*, p.109

the minute before was about to sell him into perpetual slavery, now not only releases him but forgives him the whole debt. He now has no debt repaid and no satisfaction. As the slave is leaving, literally walking out the door, he trips over another slave who owes him a fiver. And in his newfound generosity and love of life ... he grabs him by the throat and demands payment, refusing to be patient and throwing the slave into jail until he could pay. So distressed are the fellow slaves that they grass the forgiven slave up to the Lord, and he is summoned back to a full reversal of his fortune. "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave as I had mercy on you?" Cue the clanging of a prison door and the screams of the torture chamber.

I bet Peter wished he'd never asked the question, thinking he had this one sussed with his use of the perfect number 7. I feel a bit sorry for him here, he's definitely Matthew's foil, Matthew has been making a point about how the Church should operate from the beginning of chapter 18. The problem for us is that we are suddenly in Peter's shoes, "so my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

This shouldn't surprise a reader of Matthew's gospel. When Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, he says, "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (6:12). Matthew adds his own commentary to that, "for if you forgive others their trespasses your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (6:14-15). It shouldn't surprise us either, we say it every time we say the Lord's prayer.

But it doesn't sit very well, does it? Are we back to the image or even the doctrine of a torturing God? One thing to remember is that Matthew has put a parable in Jesus' mouth, in the context of the Church, which of course Jesus wouldn't have spoken about because it didn't exist. So, we know that Matthew is using this to make a point to his current community. The other thing to notice is that the parable is full of hyperbole, it is deliberately designed to shock and offend, because forgiveness is shocking and offensive. The amounts of money are both ridiculously large and ridiculously small. As bad as the ancient laws were on women, for Jews wives couldn't be sold into slavery to pay a husband's debt, and certainly torture was forbidden. So, we are supposed to see a certain foreignness in this story, we wouldn't do this kind of thing. The real shock is the last verse, the splash of cold water on the face, "so my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your

brother or sister from your heart.” We are still in the area of exaggeration, Matthew is not simplistically identifying God as the torturer,⁶ but he is using hyperbole to shock us into the utter and real importance of grace for God and for us. There are consequences if we withhold forgiveness, even if it isn’t literal physical punishment.

To err is human; to forgive, divine. Well, not quite. What all three of our readings are asking us to see this morning is the bigger picture. Forgiveness is the radical welcome of grace that creates the new kingdom that Jesus ushers in and that you and I pray for daily and weekly. That is what each of us here this morning has already received from God, and if we haven’t then the sacrament reminds us that we can. That here in bread and wine, God’s judgement on the world has been pronounced and it is love, grace and forgiveness. As we taste and feed on that this morning, we are radically undone. Our “identity is no longer derived from political, economic, or moral standing or from identification with some people in opposition to others.”⁷ Our identity is now shaped by God’s mercy, grace and forgiveness. You and I are, or can be, recipients of that.

⁶ Charles Campbell, *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p.73

⁷ Greenway, *ibid*, p.66

That is why we don't tolerate each other but accept each other. That is why in our disagreements we look beyond to see the plan of salvation being worked through us. And we know that's not just theory. Tomorrow evening the PCC will meet, and let me tell you a secret, we won't agree on everything. We will discuss beginning to think about this building and how it helps or hinders our mission to make God's love visible, and how we might be being called to shape that. We will discuss how we wisely use our financial resources to assist one of our primary aims in communicating to our wider community who we are, what we do and that they are welcome. We will discuss our ongoing actions arising from our discernment process of who God is calling us to be. There will be as many different opinions as there are people around the table, as there are people sitting in here.

And beyond that in the wider Church there are disagreements on sexuality, gender, how to resource local parishes, how to worship and evangelise.

And beyond all that and despite all that and even through all that God is working out salvation in the world. And it starts here, it starts with you and it starts with me. "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."

Year A
Proper 19 / Fifteenth Sunday After Trinity
Genesis 50:15-21
Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35
