

## **Sermon**

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**Sunday 13 September 2020**

One of the extraordinary privileges of priesthood is the authority one is granted to pronounce God's forgiveness of sins. In this service, after the confession, we heard the words of absolution – Almighty God, who forgives all who truly repent, have mercy upon you, pardon and deliver you from all your sins... to which at the end you responded, I hope, Amen, acknowledging your participation in that forgiveness which God through Jesus offers.

Like some colleagues, I also hear sacramental confessions – that particular unburdening of the soul that some people choose to make as part of their discipleship. Used with integrity, the encounter offers an opportunity to face up to that of which we are ashamed; commit to amendment of life including rectifying what we can; and then finally, to hear that we are forgiven. When I make my own confession, after the embarrassing process of admitting my sins, I hear the priest saying “by the authority committed to me, I absolve you of all your offences, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” – and without fail, I leave lighter than I arrived, resolved to try again.

Forgiveness is an extraordinary gift; God's forgiveness of us; and the forgiveness that we can extend to one another if we choose to, not just once, but seventy seven times, to quote the extravagance of Jesus. True forgiveness is not something we can offer glibly whilst anger lurks beneath. It can require much of us – as it can of the one who has wronged us to realise and acknowledge their culpability. But withholding our forgiveness can also be costly if we allow grudges to take hold of us.

The parable in today's Gospel about the slave who did not forgive acknowledges the power of forgiveness offered and withheld. It is expressed in terms of two debts, debt being correlated with sin in the Jewish Torah and rabbinic writings, according to Biblical scholars.<sup>1</sup> The king is merciful with the first slave and cancels his vast debt. The parallel here is God forgiving us our sins. But that same slave – us – then refuses to show such generosity to his fellow slave who owes much less. The force of the parable is the damning indictment that we who have been forgiven so much ourselves, then fail to show even a fraction of such mercy to others. And the king hands the first slave over to the torturer – extreme imagery to underline the importance of the message.

There are occasions, as I have said here before, when forgiveness is beyond our gift this side of eternity, when behaviour some of us have faced has been so extreme that a requirement to forgive may only add to the trauma. Those situations aside, let us pray to be a community which knows itself to be held in God's forgiveness, and nurtures – not grudges, but a desire to forgive. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Amy Jill Levine, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011) 34.