

Forgiveness is how my bible entitles the first two verses of our gospel reading this morning, and they are followed by what it calls the parable of the unforgiving servant. Forgiveness is tough. People do things to hurt us, I would suspect, most days of our life. Hopefully most of the time those things are really small, but sometimes we have real issues to deal with and we are called to forgive. Is it really that hard?

Sorry.

There. Saying that wasn't too difficult was it. And that is surely what our gospel reading this morning is saying to us. If someone does something wrong towards me, what needs to happen is that they say "Sorry", and I say, "That's fine – don't worry about it." And we are all good.

And when that person does the same thing again a couple of weeks later, and they say "Sorry" again, and I say, "That's fine – don't worry about it." again. We are still all good.

And then, when a couple more weeks go past and the person does the same thing for a third time, and says, "Sorry", what needs to happen is that I say " , ha ha ha That's absolutely OK ish – yes, just let's move on," but actually things are not good. So is that me failing?

Let's look at what's going on in the first two verses of our reading? First we have Peter, being Peter. "Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Seven? Where did he get that from?

The Jewish rabbis in those days taught, "He who begs forgiveness from his neighbour must not do so more than three times – indeed on the fourth occasion they do not forgive him." And Peter, I suspect trying to be a bit clever, a bit holier than thou shall we say, decided to take those three times, and double it, recognising what Jesus had said to them about forgiveness – after all by this stage Jesus had taught them how to pray – "Forgive us our sins – as we forgive those who sin against us." and Peter then added another one to his three doubled, say, "Yes I've been listening to you Jesus, but do we go on forgiving forever? Isn't 7 times enough?"

And Jesus replied, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." To Jesus, and we are going to hear more about this later, the numbers are not important. He is not saying when you get to 78 you can stop forgiving – he is saying you cannot stop forgiving.

But this leads us to a really important question. "What do we mean by forgiveness?" As Christians, do we just have to go on taking it? And the answer is, I am sure you will be pleased to hear, "No".

There are many cases where we see people struggling with aspects of their lives, and we see that they are really trying to get things right, but keep on not quite managing it, and will keep on coming back and saying, "Sorry". And in those cases we very much recognise that, and it is our duty as followers of Jesus, to carry on helping them get their lives right.

But equally there are other people who simply are not trying to get things right – and I have even come across cases where people say to me, "You are a Christian – you have to forgive me." And do you know what my response is – "Yes, I forgive you, but you have no intention of trying to get things right. So I do forgive you, I will continue to pray for you, but until you really want to turn your life around, I don't think I can help you anymore." Does that sound a bit harsh? I hope not. To me it is how we bring together Jesus' call to forgive people, but also to be prepared to walk away from places where the people don't want to respond to the message we are delivering. As it says in Mark's gospel, 'If any place will not

welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them'. We cannot bring everyone to Jesus, and we need to recognise that.

So how does that fit into this quite remarkable story of the unforgiving servant that Jesus tells next. The story starts with the phrase, "Now, the kingdom of heaven is like . . ." – what that tells us is that this is not a true story but it is a parable, a story that Jesus has made up to make a point, so whilst some of the details are a bit hard to get our heads around, the principle is clear. That is why Jesus loved to teach in parables because he could tell an interesting story and make the principle clear.

We have a king who has a servant – this servant could be a pretty high-powered official – the King of that time would have called all his employees servants, or sometimes even slaves – and this servant owed him ten thousand bags of gold, or ten thousand talents in the original Greek.

So how much was that? A talent was worth about 20 years of a labourer's wages. To put this in UK terms today, the average manual worker in this country earns £24,720 per year. So over 20 years we are talking about roughly £500,000. That is a talent. The servant in this story owed his master ten thousand talents, so that is about five billion pounds in today's money. A vast amount of money. Can this be right? Well in those days ten thousand talents was more than the total budget of an entire province. In fact the total revenue of the three provinces of Idumaea, Judaea, and Samaria was only 600 talents, and the revenue of a wealthy single province like Galilee was 300 talents, so the point that Jesus is making is that this debt was ridiculously huge. Somehow I don't think the monetary amount matters – it is just a debt that is impossible for the servant to repay.

So, "Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children, and all that he had, be sold to repay the debt." The king clearly felt the only way he would recover any of his money was by selling everything, including the people – and selling people into slavery was not a nice thing to happen to them, as they would be treated appallingly in pretty much every way possible. So this is potentially a horrible ending for the servant and his family.

"At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'" Clearly he wasn't going to be able to do this, and the master would have had every right to turn round and say, "Yeah, how?" but he didn't.

'The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.'

To have owed such a ridiculously huge amount really must have meant that the servant was a perpetual fiddler of the books, or swindler, and the master lets him off.

So what is Jesus meaning by this part of the story? Well, quite often in this sort of parable, where we have a master type figure, that master is meant to represent God. And the servant is meant to represent us. Actually, each of us has an element of this servant in us. And the debt that we have to God is our sins – the things we do wrong, the things we mess up, and without us being crooks and swindlers the number of things that we do wrong in God's eyes does mount up. And the debt that we have to God, our sins, is impossible for us, by ourselves, to repay. That is what you call the bad news.

The Good news is that God has already, and continues to, cancel our debt.

But there is a "but" to this cancellation. And that but is what we talked about earlier: God expects us to forgive as we have been forgiven, unlike the servant in this story who will not cancel the comparatively small debt owed to him by another servant. Yes, God doesn't mean by this opening ourselves up to the same treatment over and over again, but it does mean we cannot hold grudges, it does mean we must help people to get things right when they ask to be helped, and it can be hard.

But you can't just cancel a debt can you? Yes in our parable the servant has had his debt cancelled but there must be a cost – someone has to pay.

The King has cancelled the debt, but he is now 10,000 talents worse off – he has had to pay 10,000 talents to cancel the debt.

When we forgive someone there can be a cost to us when we do that. And when God cancelled our debt of sin, the cost was enormous to him. We are told in the Book of Romans, "the wages of sin is death". So to repay the debt of our sin, someone had to die – and someone did die. The cost to God to cancel the debt of our sin, to forgive us for our sins, was the life of his one and only Son, Jesus, horribly on the cross. Jesus cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and the answer, although we don't hear it, would have been, "to clear the debt of sin for all my people." When Jesus said, "It is finished" this could be seen as the end of a financial transaction. I have repaid the debt. The people are forgiven.

We cannot thank God enough for that, and the best way we can thank him is by that line in the Lord's Prayer – Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.

Amen.