

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A – 17th September 2023

Do you ever wish that there were some things that Christ had never said? Do you sometimes find that there are passages in the gospels which stick in your throat and make you wish that there was an alternative translation which made them easier to swallow? I do - increasingly as I stand here, week by week, I grow more and more uncomfortable as I try to preach about things which I know I find extremely difficult in my own life. Today we hear Jesus challenging us with the commandment to forgive our brothers and sisters from our hearts: To forgive and to forget.

Today is Home Mission Sunday - a day when we're reminded of our duty to spread the Good News about the loving mercy of God; to play our part in the evangelisation and conversion of our country.

The conversion of England will only come about when we have parish communities who are alive to the faith and are keen to share it with others. The key word in my last sentence is 'community.' Community is a word which it is far better to live than to talk about. After eleven years of living in a monastic community I still find it much easier to talk about it than do it!

As a parish we call ourselves a community - but many Parishes can call themselves communities without actually being so. Sadly parishes can all too often be divided into cliques, they can be places where resentments over past hurts can be nursed. Rather than being communities of forgiveness they can be storehouses of grievances and injured pride.

The Gospel is very clear - we must forgive. All of us fall into the trap of the man in the Gospel who was happy to be forgiven but incredibly hard-hearted when it comes to showing forgiveness - we forgive but we can't forget. Some people just can't cope with the notion of forgiveness. They see it as a weakness, or they believe it to be limited: that there are certain categories of people or offences which can never be forgiven.

Yet God's forgiveness is generous and free. The 1987 bomb blast at Enniskillen on Remembrance Day will long be remembered, not for its evil, but for Senator Gordon Wilson's heroism in forgiving the murderers of his daughter. His words were beautiful and showed us what Christian forgiveness can be; that it can work miracles of healing; that where there was once darkness and despair forgiveness can bring light and peace.

Forgiveness seems so illogical - Jesus says to us that we must forgive not seven times but seventy-seven times. It seems so unreasonable, especially when we have been deeply hurt by someone. We have to do what is unreasonable, because that is the only way out of the vicious circle of hurt, resentment, bitterness, of feuding and revenge. And Our Lord gives us a clue as to why this unreasonable forgiveness is the only way forward. When we hold a grudge, when we withhold mercy, when we cannot forgive, we are punishing ourselves. We are choosing death for ourselves, and not life. Today's Gospel parable of the unforgiving servant shows our own need to forgive.

But how can we forgive when it seems impossible? How do we cope with our bitterness and resentment? How can we be sincere, when we want to forgive, but also want to hold a grudge? We have to see forgiveness as it really is - act of justice. God has forgiven us - our response to that gift is to forgive others in our turn. Not because of fear of punishment, but out of a grateful heart. We have to remember that forgiveness not something we can do alone -we need one another - we need the Holy Spirit; we need to pray through our hurts and resentments; we need to make positive use of the Sacrament of Confession to give us the incentive to keep trying to forgive, but above all we also need patience - forgiveness takes time. Perhaps like community, forgiveness is a word we can only fully understand when we do it.

Yes, forgiveness goes against the grain. Yet so often in our complex world we fail to see the wood for the trees. And the wood is to be found in the Cross - for in the wood of the Cross is carved a message - the still, small voice of God saying, "Forgive one another, as I have forgiven you."