

24th Sunday (A)'26

- As a priest, I have been privileged to witness the power of forgiveness working in the lives of many people.
- Just one that comes to mind is that of an elderly gentleman I'd come close to, visiting him in a nursing home for about two years; he was easy to spend time with, & I learnt a great deal from him about a whole range of topics.
- He was a wise, humble, intelligent & learned man – a widower, who was mentally very alert, but could no longer care for himself at home on his own.
- He often proudly spoke of a son who was a journalist, whom I'd come to meet, but who lived in a different city with his family.
- The elderly gentleman developed an aggressive cancer but was very unsettled & continued to linger in a painful dying – & just would not die.
- There seemed to be something on his mind & in his heart that disturbed him greatly.
- Though we spoke of many things, there was something I felt he held back.
- I learnt from his son that his father had another son, a brother who had fallen out with the family twenty years earlier & had left them, moving to northern Queensland, never to return.
- Before the days of the internet, with quite a deal of effort, I found him & asked if he'd like to see his father before he died. He was open to doing so.
- I informed the father that I had found his other son.
- He was angry with me, but also afraid of what this would mean.
- I met the son a few days later at the nursing home, introduced them to one another & left them for several hours; when I returned, they had reconciled.
- The younger son had let down his guard & suspicions & seemed relaxed, & the old gentleman died the next day – gently, in peace.
- I have often wondered what happened in those hours between them.
- I don't know what was said. Perhaps there were tears. Perhaps there were apologies. Perhaps there were things that could never be fully explained.
- But something had changed, & this is where today's Gospel speaks to us.
- Peter asks Jesus, *"Lord, how often must I forgive my brother or sister if they wrong me? As often as seven times?"* Jesus answers, *"Not 7, but 77 times."*
- To number something as seven is to describe it as being perfect.
- When we hear Jesus use this phrase, we recall the story in Genesis of the seven days of creation where, on the seventh day, God looks at the result of his creative love & sees that it is very good.
- Perhaps Jesus is saying that forgiveness belongs to the very character of God - just as God's creative love has no end, neither does God's willingness to forgive, but there is something important here; Jesus is not telling us that forgiveness is easy.
- Some wounds are enormous; some betrayals change the course of a person's life; some people have been abused, abandoned, deceived or profoundly hurt.

- There are wounds for which the words, "Just forgive them," can sound almost cruel. And sometimes forgiveness may seem humanly impossible.
- So what do we do then? Perhaps the first thing is to be honest before God.
- We can say, "God, I cannot forgive this person. I am not ready. I don't even want to forgive them. But I don't want this hatred to destroy me either, so begin the work in me that I cannot yet do." That too can be prayer.
- Forgiveness does not mean pretending that what happened did not matter.
- It does not mean excusing wrongdoing, abandoning justice, forgetting the wound, or allowing someone to hurt us again.
- Forgiveness does not always mean reconciliation - reconciliation requires truth, responsibility, repentance &, where necessary, changed behaviour.
- Sometimes the most we can do is to surrender our desire for revenge.
- Sometimes forgiveness begins by refusing to allow the person who hurt us to continue determining the shape of our lives.
- Sometimes we simply place the person into the hands of God & say, "I leave this with you." And sometimes, slowly, over many years, what seemed impossible begins to become possible.
- This is why the parable Jesus tells today is so confronting - the servant who has received extraordinary mercy from the master refuses to extend even a small measure of mercy to another.
- The Gospel is not sentimental about forgiveness.
- It is about breaking the cycle in which hurt produces resentment, resentment produces retaliation, & retaliation produces more hurt.
- God's mercy interrupts that cycle, & perhaps this is ultimately what Jesus is asking of us: not to become people who never experience anger or pain, but people who refuse to let those things have the final word.
- The elderly gentleman I mentioned died peacefully after being reconciled with his son. I would never claim that forgiveness magically removes suffering or that reconciliation always produces such an outcome, but I witnessed something profoundly human & profoundly Christian: two people who had been separated by twenty years of hurt found, somehow, a way to open the door to one another again.
- At the heart of our faith is the conviction that God has never stopped opening that door to us; God never gives up on us.
- Perhaps today, therefore, we should not ask simply, "Whom must I forgive?"
- Perhaps the deeper question is: "Where has hurt taken hold of my heart, & what small step can I take to stop it having the last word?"
- For some of us, that step may be reconciliation; for others, it may simply be letting go of revenge; for others still, it may be asking God for the grace to want to forgive when we cannot yet forgive.
- And that may be enough for today, because forgiveness is not weakness.
- It is the courageous work of allowing God's creative & merciful love to make something new out of what has been wounded.
- And, as Jesus reminds us, that work has no limit.