



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

The Triumph of the Cross

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us

Readings: Numbers 21: 4-9, Ps 77, Philippians 2: 6-11, John 3: 13-17

‘Hell’, Jean Paul Sartre famously remarked, ‘is other people’. There may be moments, in even the most generous pastoral heart, when one may have a sneaking sympathy for the witty sentiments of the old existentialist.

However, that is not what Jesus says.

We see Dives, the rich man, condemned to the fires of the Hell for his unflinching lack of compassion for the beggar at his gate and his remorseless selfishness.

We listen to Jesus description of the Last Judgement in Matthew 25 and we witness the astonishment of the Hellbound condemned who would like to think that they would have done anything for Jesus but failed to recognise Him in the needs of their fellow man.

In today’s Gospel we meet a servant who is, if anything, marginally more unattractive than Dives.

He is a debtor to his king. But it is not a simple debt. It is a debt so colossal that it is unpayable. The servant has spent more than the Gross National Product of his country. So when his Lord summons him to give account of his indebtedness he is utterly ruined. His plea for mercy – ‘Give me time and I will pay’ – simply compounds his theft with a huge and implausible lie. His actual words mean – ‘Defer, turn away your anger from me...’

His sentence is to be sold into slavery and his goods and family to be auctioned until he can pay. He could not pay as a free man. He certainly can't pay as a slave. It is a life sentence.

But the King is moved by compassion and, contrary to all human expectation or mortal logic, he not only sets aside the sentence but forgives his dishonest and outrageously exploitative servant the colossal and unpayable debt. You might think that such amazing leniency would be a cause for celebration but far from it. The newly liberated servant's first priority is to punish a man who owes him a mere trifle. Forgiven much, he is unable to forgive even a little. The King, when he hears of this rank ingratitude, reacts with fury. The unforgiving servant is sentenced to be tortured until he pays the original debt. And Jesus adds, lest we should miss the point, ‘This is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.’

The torture chamber of the unforgiving is perhaps the most terrifying picture of the many images Jesus gives us of Hell.

All of this comes in response to Peter's perfectly reasonable question about how often he should forgive his brother. The traditional Rabbinic answer is

three or four. (So you will find, in the Prophets, mention of 'for three transgressions and for four'i.e. after four you have entered the region of unforgiveness.) Peter, very generously, offers Our Lord his generous suggestion of seven times. Jesus confounds spiritual arithmetic by turning addition into an exercise in multiplication. Seventy seven times or seventy times seven as some translations have it. (That's 490 for those who never did their tables.)

His point is that the forgiven never cease to keep open the channels of forgiveness. Those who have received mercy must be fountains of that same mercy. It is no accident that Jesus links forgiveness with forgivingness at the heart of His prayer teaching.

'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.'

Of course forgiveness is the hardest thing we have to do. When people hurt us, forgiveness has a high cost. But unforgivingness has a higher cost. I learnt early and painfully in my ministry that the only person wounded by my unforgivingness is not the rotter who did me down, not the man who cheated me or lied about me. No, the person most wounded by my failure to forgive was me. Its resentment made inroads into my soul. I had, for my own sake, to forgive. I had to pass on that generous and unreasonable forgiveness that Christ has given me by dying for my sins on the Cross.

Unforgiving, I am tortured. Resentful of those who owe me, I am Hell bound. Jesus language is extreme but it is not wrong.

If I am to walk the way of the Cross then I have to learn the pattern of healing forgiveness, of loving reconciliation until the day I die. Nothing else will be a reflection of my Lord and there is no other road to Heaven.

There is no weakness in being merciful and, hard as forgiving sometimes is, we must remember the appalling cost of the alternative and begin, one day at a time, by treating our brother as a forgiven debtor.

Forgiveness is both an act of spiritual will and daily practice.

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