

**Preaching Christ....
...by the power of the Holy Spirit
...and the authority of the Word of God**

Date: 01 October 2023
Services: *Across the Diocese*
Series: Peace Forgiveness Contentment
Title: Forgiveness in an age of revenge
Passage: Matthew 18:21-35

INTRODUCTION

Failure to forgive – and a longing for revenge, destroys **relationships**, tears **families, communities, tribes** and **nations** apart!!

Murder trial – family unhappy with the sentence – declare with hate filled voices – ‘we’ll never forgive’.

One Anzac day - a former prisoner of war asked one of his mates whether he had forgiven his Japanese captors for the suffering they inflicted in the camp during the war. ‘No, and I never will!’ His mate said. ‘So they still have you in their clutches, don’t they!’

Health and para-health professionals recognise the debilitating effects of unresolved **anger**, harboured **bitterness**, prolonged **vengefulness**.

In the journal *Spirituality and Health* Rabbi Harold Kushner (1999, 34) tells the story of –

A woman in my congregation [who] comes to see me. She is a single mother, divorced, working to support herself and three young children. She says to me, “Since my husband walked out on us, every month is a struggle to pay our bills. I have to tell my kids we have no money to go to the movies, while he’s living it up with his new wife in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him?” I answer her, “I’m not asking you to forgive him because what he did was *acceptable*. It wasn’t; it was mean and selfish. I’m asking you to forgive him because he doesn’t deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter angry woman. I’d like to see him out of your life **emotionally** as completely as he is out of it **physically**, but you keep holding **on** to him. You’re not hurting **him** by holding on to that resentment, but you’re hurting **yourself!** ///

A few years ago, Archbishop Ben Kwashi visited Brisbane.

He told the story of how in 1987 in his area in Northern Nigeria, in one weekend, 116 out of the 119 Churches in one city were set on fire.

This was the work of Muslim extremists. Not content with firing the churches, they then went to the homes of prominent Christians, poured petrol over their pets and domestic animals and set fire to them and to their houses...

Immediately this arson had happened their bishop came ...and reminded them that revenge, though the normal human reaction to such treatment, was not the Christian way. They were to bear this suffering in their hearts and carry no ill will. These people unquestionably felt the pain and anguish of this experience for many months afterwards, but the quiet and courageous way in which they could speak of what had happened to them was remarkable evidence of the redeeming power of forgiveness ... (Adie, 1997, 38).

Or contemplate the stature of Nelson Mandela who after 27 years in prison on Robben Island, bore no malice

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towards his captors but stayed focused on the building of the new South Africa. The Palestinian leader, Hanan Ashrawi, (1995, 298) wrote to Mandela saying -

Teach us the secret of your calm, of your dignity and your power so that we too may share the glory of the moment ... The whole world has taken comfort and inspiration from your stature and guidance, and we in particular need you ... Your triumph is ours as well, but we still need to take on your patience and your wisdom.

His **secret** / was the power of **forgiveness**.

It was the motivating force behind the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which led to the **rebuilding** of the **nation**. //

Forgiveness changes **lives**. Forgiveness liberates from the cycle of **revenge**. It's **radical** and it's **powerful**. ///

But how do you **do** it? //

How can we find the way to forgive when we've been **hurt** or **damaged** – **scarred** – so **badly**?

When the crime or deed is so **heinous** as to be **unspeakable**?

And how do you keep on **forgiving** if continuing to be **hurt**? ///

One of Jesus' closest friends asked Jesus **just** this **question**.

We **read** it in our **passage**.

²¹ *"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"*

²² *Jesus answered, "I tell you, not **seven** times, but **seventy-seven** times.*

Now Peter here thought he was being generous – 7 times! – he thinks he's being big hearted. The rabbis of the time would have thought **three** times **max!** //

So when Jesus comes back and says – **77** times... he would have been taken **aback**.

... not that Jesus was actually putting a **numeric** figure on it – his point was that forgiveness of others is **unlimited**... forgiveness by nature doesn't **count** how many **times** – it is simply **overwhelmingly generous!** //

How **do** you – how **can** you forgive like this? //

So Jesus tells a story

It's a **powerful** story...

A servant owes a King a huge debt. Hard to imagine how he would have come to owe this amount... or how he could ever repay it!

Jesus is kind of going **over the top** to make the **point**...

The point is the slave can do **nothing** about his own **plight**. Even to **contemplate** the possibility is absurd.

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But **miraculously** and **inexplicably** the King **does** something about it. He **forgives** the whole debt.

How must the slave have felt?

Surely we think, he would have been absolutely **overcome** with **surprise** and **gratitude** and **joy**.

Overwhelmed that he could be so **fortunate!**

Blown **away** to such an extent that it couldn't help but overflow to those around him.

But **no**.

We're **shocked**. **Speechless**

Far from being a **changed, moved, gracious, forgiving** person because he has received such **amazing generosity**, he meets someone who owes him hardly **anything** and seizes him by the **throat** demanding he pay this **paltry sum back**. It's **unthinkable!** //

And **that** twist is exactly the **point!** /

Generous forgiveness – if **grasped**, if **understood**, if **appreciated**, if **embraced**.... **Will result** in **generous forgiveness!** //

NOW – and this is **really important** – this is not to say that what was done wrong didn't **matter**.

It plainly **did**. The context of this passage shows that if someone has sinned against you – go and **talk** to them... if they don't **listen**... take one or two **others**... if **THEY** don't listen tell it to the **church**... if the person **STILL** doesn't listen – **isolate** them.... //

Being sinned against **mattered**. And there were processes in place to help offenders come to **terms** with their **sin**.

Forgiveness **never** means what happened is **OK**

Forgiveness **never** means justice no longer needs to be **served**.

Forgiveness **never** means that an abused **woman** should return for more **abuse!**

Abusive behaviour ought never be **permitted** to go **unchecked!**

But - if God has forgiven **YOU** (through Jesus' death and resurrection), if you really get that,

...if you've **woken up** to God's embrace in **Christ**,

...if you have a sense of being **loved** and **accepted** at the most **fundamental level** of your **being**...

....not because of what you've **achieved** or **done** or **earned**, but **despite** your **shortcomings, failings, weaknesses, wilful rebellion**..... despite all that, if **know** you are **accepted** and **loved** – that is **indeed** a **rare** and **amazing thing**.

Very **few** people in the world know that they are loved without **condition** or **limit**.

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And when that reality **bites**, you can't **STOP** that **overflowing** to others!

Knowing you are **loved** and **forgiven**, ignites a **power within us** to do be able to do the same with others.

////

Now you may say to me – well compared to what has been done to **me**, I'm a **saint!**

I've never **abused** someone; I've not taken someone's **life**; I've not ripped any one **off...**

Yet you're expecting me to forgive someone who's **wrecked** my **life**; **broken** up my **family**, left me in untold **pain...** /////

And **we react like that** because we actually misunderstand the nature of our sin against God and our debt to him.

100% of us here... everyone, either **was** or **is** in debt to **God** to the value of that servant before the **King**. **Millions** – maybe a **billion dollars' worth**.

No, it may not be **murder** or **adultery** or **theft** or **lying...**

... but what about the very **first** command – "***no other gods before me***"?

Everyone here has either served **other** gods in the **past**, or is serving them **now**.

Usually that **great** god called '**me**'.

Often that great God called '**making a name for myself**' or '**status in the eyes of everyone else**'. And we've lived for with these gods as our **passion** and **priority**. **Everyone**.

And we've **NOT** loved God with **all** our **heart, soul, strength and mind**. We don't give ourselves **entirely** to **him!**

Each one of us here has kicked dirt in **God's face...** treated him with **contempt...** blown him **off...** and are proudly **proclaiming** – or at least **thinking it - 'I did it my way'**. I did it my way!

But here is the **amazing thing**.

Like that **king** in Jesus' story, many of us here this morning –**most of us** – HAVE been **forgiven**.

Your **impossible debt** has been **cancelled**.

All of us have been **forgiven** far **more** than we will ever **forgive!** – or be called upon to forgive.

That **debt** which you could never have saved up or worked for... has been **cancelled!**

Cancelled because Jesus paid it on the **cross**.

Cancelled because God **himself** – in the astonishing gift of his **Son** has **covered** it.

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And when you **get** that, when you get how **serious** your debt **was**... and how **generously** and **completely** it's been wiped **out**.... Then you **can't stop** that over **flowing** to **others**.

Knowing you are **loved** and **forgiven**, **ignites** a power **within**, to do the **same** to **others**. //

It doesn't **excuse** what others have done. It doesn't **condone** what they've done. It doesn't give them **permission** to continue doing what they were doing.

But it frees **YOU**. It **liberates** you. It **releases** you from their clutches. It **frees** you from their **power**.

The unthinkable twist in your case would be to have received such generous forgiveness from God and then **WITHHOLD** it from someone **else** /// - **as happened in Jesus' story**. That perhaps would show you've never really got your forgiveness.

A story is told of a middle-aged, African-American woman whose young adult son was brutally murdered. She found herself receiving care from a local church and eventually wanting to be baptised. She would have to get up in church and say that she turned to Christ and renounced the power of evil in her life. And at the baptism the congregation would have to pledge its support to her to live her life in that way. Getting ready for baptism involved exploring what all this meant for her.

The woman decided that to renounce the power of evil in her life meant that she had to forgive her son's murderer. She would need to get to the point of being able to do that. It wouldn't be easy. She decided that what she needed to do was to visit the killer in jail and keep on doing that until she could bring herself to forgive him. Speaking to her son's murderer face to face was the most difficult thing she had had to do in her whole life. The support she needed was for someone from the church to go with her on those visits until she felt able to go alone.

Every week for **two years** that mother visited the jail, accompanied for 18 months by another member of that congregation, until she felt able to go alone. She then felt she was ready to forgive him, to renounce the power of evil in her life, and to be baptized into the community that knew and lived by this reality.

Years later the convicted murder was released and incredible as it seems, the two of them now work together on education programs to prevent young people resorting to violence.

That's the **power** of **forgiveness**.

That's how you find forgiveness in an age of **revenge**. /////

....by understanding your forgiveness, from God, through Jesus and then being released to forgive others

Let me close:

There are two specific groups of people I want to address as I close.

The **first** is those to whom unspeakable, **terrible** things have been **done**.

It may be **sexual** or **physical** abuse. It might be a **family** member who has taken you for ride **financially**. It may be some person has taken your **child** from **you**. There may be some tragic family **secret** you're **carrying**. You may have been **mistreated** – **bullied** in the **work place**... whatever it may be...

If you feel you can **never** forgive.... It *may* be because you've not grasped the extent of how much **you've**

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been forgiven.

And if you feel you can **never** forgive – then the perpetrators still have you in their **clutches** – you are under their **power** – and the only person being hurt by your hanging on to this and wanting revenge – the only person being hurt is **YOU!**

Let **go** of that today... see the extent to which you have been forgiven in Christ – and without trivialising what has been done to you or excusing it or minimalizing its impact in any way – I urge you to **forgive**.

You have been forgiven a **massive debt** you could **never** pay!!

But the King has **cancelled** it. You will never have to **forgive** to the level of debt he has forgiven **you**. //

Can you forgive the **lesser** debt?

You can, if you understand how much **YOU** have been **forgiven!** //

Which brings me secondly to ask whether in fact you have been **forgiven?**

Some haven't been forgiven because they don't reckon they have anything to be forgiven from

Some haven't been forgiven because you think you've gone too far... you think you've walked too far away to ever be for

I have **good news** for **you**.

I'm going to invite you today to come and be forgiven.

For you all you need to do is **ask**.

There's **nothing** you've done which **cannot** be **forgiven**.

And if you think you've done nothing for which you need forgiveness then you need to go back and seek the understanding of God's will in the Bible. You need to back and realise that there have been plenty of other gods before GOD in your world

There's nothing you have done which will barr you from God's family or keep you from his love.

And he will say to you when you **come to him** – "sin no more", but you can come, **just** as you **are**.

And when you come and **ask** for that forgiveness, then God will consider that **Jesus'** death was **sufficient** for your **sin** and your **debt** - your file - will be stamped '**paid in full**'

Come, find the forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ, and then find the way to forgive others, even as you have been forgiven. Amen.