

7th Sunday (C)

20th February 2022

'Breaking the cycle'

1Sam 26: *'I would not raise my hand'*

Ps 102: *He does not treat us according to our sins*

1Cor 15: *we will be modelled on the heavenly man*

Lk 6: 27–38: *Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you*

I remember reading some time ago a statistic that 1 in 4 people in this country can't name a single Shakespeare play. And they're always arguing about just how much Shakespeare we should all study in the school curriculum. Well, I don't have an answer for that, but all I know is that when I go to see Shakespeare in London, it's always packed, and with plenty of young people. I went to see 'The Merchant of Venice' last night, and it was a sell-out. Whatever Shakespeare is, it's certainly very popular still.

The *denouement* of 'The Merchant of Venice' concerns the complex question of forgiveness of faults, and involves an extended reflection on mercy. Perhaps the most famous lines in the play go thus —

The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
'T is mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown:
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,

The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;

When Bp John Arnold, a few years ago, wrote a book about our Christian belief in God's mercy and the Sacrament of Reconciliation, he entitled it *The Quality of Mercy*, taking his title from the opening words of that speech in 'The Merchant of Venice.'

It's not the only Shakespeare play that deals in depth with radical forgiveness: 'The Tempest,' for example. It's about an enormous family feud in which one brother has been exiled by another brother who has taken over his dukedom. But it has a startling ending when the wronged brother, the exiled duke, rather than carrying out some full and bloody vengeance on his brother, suddenly and unexpectedly pardons him. Against all expectations he just forgives his enemy, the brother who sent him away to die. It's an incredible ending to Shakespeare's last play — total and unconditional forgiveness to restore the peace.

The experience of human history is that people *can* turn away from hatred and make a difference, but someone has to make a start. We saw it with the ending of apartheid in the early 1990s in South Africa; in the collapse in 1989 of the communist system across the former Soviet bloc; and in Northern Ireland in the ‘Good Friday agreement’ of 1998: at some point, some leader or other had to have the guts to say ‘enough is enough’ and call a halt to the aggression. Somewhere along the line, someone had to break the cycle of violence and recrimination and argument, and make a unilateral move for peace. Retaliation and counter-retaliation only escalates a war. Eventually someone (perhaps just one person) has to stop tit-for-tat first, someone has to opt for peace first.

On a more local level, I will never forget the words of the parents of the stabbed teenager, Jimmy Mizen, back in 2008 in Lewisham, S. London, who used their very first press statement after Jimmy died to express forgiveness of his killer — and have since gone on to campaign widely for peace and reconciliation. People like this have found it

in themselves to summon up from within their long experience of a Christian faith the courage to preach peace and not anger; reconciliation and not revenge.

It’s the message of today’s readings. In the Old Testament, David is exemplary in this matter of peace-making, as we heard in the 1st reading. King Saul is so jealous of David’s popularity and is pursuing him to kill him. But even when David has this opportunity to kill Saul, he doesn’t take it: he doesn’t want vengeance, he wants peace with Saul alive, and he knows that peace is better achieved by compassion than by further violence.

And then there are Jesus’s powerful words in the Gospel passage this morning (evening). I was thinking that to have given us real focus we might just have heard those opening words from Lk 6: *I say this to you who are listening: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly.* (x 2) It’s incredibly direct, practical, and relevant advice for our human relationships, to counter our regular failures in treating one another well. Jesus urges us

to love and forgive our enemies — just as He loved and forgave His enemies, the ones who had Him crucified: *Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.* Jesus can do it, but can we? Can we seriously be expected to love those who are always difficult to us, those who make our life a misery? Well, Jesus obviously thinks we can, otherwise He wouldn't suggest it.

In the arguments and family quarrels we might find ourselves in from time to time we must take Our Lord's example: someone has got to go for peace first; someone has got to begin the forgiving, and that someone should be me, even if we're not convinced that the other person in the argument will respond kindly. But that is not our problem; our concern is to forgive. If you set an example of forgiveness, then maybe the other will imitate you. Maybe they won't, maybe they'll continue trying to hurt you, but at least they won't just be feeding off your retaliation. Our duty before God is to try; to try and break the cycle of argument. We can't answer for the actions of another, but we can answer for ours, and Jesus asks of us a difficult but

not impossible thing: to love those who are not always nice to us. He doesn't ask anything of us which He hasn't done Himself.

To take up Jesus's challenge to be forgiving strikes at the heart of hatred, and even if you're still hated back for taking the trouble, at least you know that there's less hate around when you don't hate too. To be forgiving is to be a person of strength, not a person of weakness. It's why our hearts are filled with deep respect for those, moved by the Spirit, who utter brave words of forgiveness, not anger. We, too, should take Jesus at His word. We, too, can be forgiving, even when it is hard. Let's ask our Blessed Lord in this Mass today to help melt any unforgiveness that still festers in our hearts today. Who comes to mind when we think of the need to forgive? ... With whom am I not yet in right relationship? ... With whom do I need to utter a word of forgiveness, and accept forgiveness from, to achieve reconciliation and peace? ... Let's allow those words of Jesus to echo in our heart and teach us His wisdom: *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless ... etc.*