

24<sup>th</sup> Sunday (A)

17<sup>th</sup> September 2023

'How often must I forgive?'

Sirach 27: *Remember the covenant of the Most High, and overlook the offence*

Ps 102: *The Lord, slow to anger and rich in mercy*

Rom 14: *The life and death of each of us has its influence upon others*

Mt 18:21–35: *not seven, I tell you, but seventy times seven*

We've heard a lot from St Peter, haven't we, in the recent Sundays' Gospels from St Matthew (chs. 16 & 18)? 3 weeks ago we heard him blurt out that extraordinarily insightful profession of faith, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*" The next Sunday he got too big for his boots, and started telling Jesus what He ought or ought not to do, vis-à-vis the Passion, "*Heaven preserve You, Lord, this must not happen to you!*" — and Peter got an immediate dressing-down from Jesus, "*The way you think is not God's way, but man's.*" Today, then, he seems to have learnt his lesson, and is not trying to *teach* the Son of God His job, but *learn* from Him, ask Him questions, and discover the truth. Even so, you might say, there's a bit of an edge to this question, isn't there? "*Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?*" — I mean, surely nothing like as many as seven times? Maybe once, twice at a push, yes? Our

Lord's reply to St Peter, with its illustrative parable, must have taken him by surprise. Not only seven times, but *way way more!* Forgiveness becomes, according to Jesus, a *touchstone* of the Catholic faith, of the Christian way of life. It's a hard lesson, but an essential one. Choosing not to forgive, holding on to grudges, gripped by unforgiving memories, can mire us in deeply negative spiritual troubles, and is a great barrier to the work of the spirit, and even can be an anchor-point for the evil one. But sometimes it is indeed very hard to overcome those feelings of revulsion and revenge.

I remember having to preach, 22 yrs ago, on that Tuesday evening, September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, after the Twin Towers atrocity in New York which took 3000 lives. (For some of you, I realise, this is pre-history!) It was hard to know what to say; but I remember saying that it was not the worst atrocity ever committed ... the worst atrocity ever committed was when mankind put to death the loving Son of God on the Cross ... and that despite that appalling action, God has forgiven us. And so, whilst it is hard to

preach forgiveness in the face of terrible crimes, yet it is the tough message at the heart of our faith:

*“Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me?” said Peter to Jesus, “As often as seven times?” Jesus answered, “Not seven, I tell you, but seventy times seven” — i.e. without end.*

And even before we heard that Gospel teaching of Jesus today, we had those powerful words of the 1<sup>st</sup> reading, from the wisdom-book, *Ecclesiasticus*:

*Remember the last things, and stop hating, remember dissolution and death, and live by the commandments. Remember the commandments, and do not bear your neighbour ill-will; remember the covenant of the Most High, and overlook the offence.*

This is the tough love which we have signed up to as Christians: to be forgiving without limit. It's one thing to defend yourself or your country from deliberate attack; it's another to seek revenge.

Sometimes we are given the most profound examples of forgiveness, and when I hear such words, which seem to fly in the face of a typical human reaction, I for one am moved intensely, and feel that this is the real courage that humanity should engage in. The one that

comes to mind, and which will always stand out for me is the statement made by Barry & Margaret Mizen after the unprovoked killing of their 16-yr-old son, Jimmy, in Lewisham, about 15yrs ago. A Catholic couple, very much driven by their faith, they movingly spoke, immediately after the tragic event of their son's murder at a local shop, not of revenge but of forgiveness and compassion for Jimmy's killer. Such brave words are the very stuff that makes for healing and reconciliation. In fact, the Mizens have now devoted much of their life since to promoting peace especially amongst young people, to tackling the scourge of knife crime, and helping youngsters to meaningful pastimes and avoiding gang-based crime.

It may be that some of you have had, at various points in your life, to make difficult decisions to be forgiving almost beyond the personal strength you thought you'd ever have. I know that I have ... It may be, on the other hand, that there are still grudges and pains in your heart that arise from hurts you've experienced from others ... The ability eventually to forgive them is a gift from

Christ crucified, and always one worth praying for, however hard, or even impossible, it may seem. We can only make brave and Christian acts of forgiveness with help from God, and maybe it will only be slow in coming ... but God will help you gradually along that path, for it is the path of Jesus, the way of the Cross, the way to true godliness. It's not about being a doormat, being walked over in silence; nor is about avoiding justice (yes, sometimes court cases have to take their rightful course); but it's about providing the climate in which true peace can be fostered.

High up the agenda of being a Christian is our commitment to forgiveness: the day-to-day forgiveness of little frustrations; sometimes the courage of forgiving a great offence. But the Lord Jesus by His example leaves us in no doubt, and when He teaches us to pray, in the Our Father: *forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us ...* He also repeats and emphasizes: *Yes, if you forgive others their failings, your heavenly Father will forgive you yours; but if you do not forgive*

*others, your Father will not forgive your failings either.*

The key to unlocking the parable today is also our great motivation to unlocking an attitude of forgiveness: it's the two quantities owed, which are incomparable. The 10,000 talents owed to the Master is a colossal sum, maybe of the order of £6bn; the sum owed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> servant to the 1<sup>st</sup> is 100d (100 days' wages), maybe around £10k. The Master in His mercy was willing to write off the vast debt, whilst the servant was unwilling even to consider letting go his fellow's debt. When we consider the vastness — and repeated — mercy of the Master, Jesus, forgiving our many sins, and the heavy weight of the sins of all the world, then how can we not, without hypocrisy, exercise with generosity a mercy towards others? We see manifestly displayed the hypocrisy of the parable servant; not a road we want to go down! Instead, if we expect the Lord's forgiveness of us — and we do! we rely on it! — then we just have to demonstrate forgiveness towards others, be they family, friends, or strangers. Longing for, and needing, Jesus's forgiveness, must motivate us to be

forgiving ourselves. Let's be the sort of people who are *known* for this generous attitude of forgiveness — like Barry & Margaret Mizen — Let's be seen to be Christians who live those words that we so often pray in the 'Our Father': *as we forgive those who trespass against us*.

Now that we're shortly beginning the academic year, and term-time will resume, it's worth making clear how you can access the Sacrament of Forgiveness here at Newman House. OK, quite simply, there are two scheduled times, which resume tomorrow: namely, Monday 6–7pm (Fr Ivano) after Monday 5.30pm Mass; and Sunday 6–7pm (me) during an Adoration time before Sunday evening Mass. At these times in term time Fr Ivano or I will be here, available in the sacristy for Confession. Additionally, I am willing to be asked, personally, or by e-mail, to be available for Confession at another time; I can't always fulfil that request on the spur of the moment (though I will if I can), but I will always prioritize and schedule Confession for you.

Something that's worth saying is that *struggling* to

forgive someone for something is always worth bringing up in Confession. I really think that being honest about one's *unforgiveness*, or one's not-yet-being-fully forgiving, is something that can gradually be healed in the Sacrament of Penance, just as much as any other kind of sin. When we are in the sacred forum of Confession, and we have prostrated ourselves at the Master's feet, for His mercy, then it's only right that we also seek His divine assistance, His spiritual gift, to be merciful. The more we seek to be freed of our sins, the more we will grow in being the sort of people able to forgive others; the two elements increase in synchrony. And the hardness of heart that we have which blocks us from truly forgiving and letting-go of hurts, can be melted by the Spirit's grace. Whether or not we have, in recent years, been regular participants in the Sacrament, why not decide now that this academic year will be one when we avail of God's forgiveness more regularly, and more openly and honestly. It will make a *huge* difference to your spiritual life, and help make you a model of generous forgiving. *Yes, if you forgive others ...*