

**OT: Genesis 50:15-21**

**NT: Romans 14:1-12**

**Gp: Matthew 18:21-35**

I like to think that there is a quiet corner of heaven with two chairs laid out where St Paul is obliged to go for at least an hour every day. Here there will be a queue of people waiting for their turn to sit and demand an apology from him for the perceived offences that he wrote in some of his letters. The majority of the queue will be women. I could pick several passages but this is from the first letter to Timothy:

*Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.*

How much grief has that caused us over the centuries! However, probably to his amazement, there will be an increasing number of vegans in the line.

*while the weak eat only vegetables.*

His attitude to slavery and to marriage, sometimes the two seem to be almost the same thing, especially where wives are concerned, can also be deemed to be offensive. It is often argued that his views merely reflected the views of his day, and there is merit in that assertion. But let us all take a lesson from this, that in expressing strong views, we may inadvertently hurt others.

To be fair to Paul, he does say that we all judge from our own point of view and only God, who sees the whole picture and is without bias, can truly judge with fairness and mercy. Today's readings have examples where forgiveness has been shown, as in the case of Joseph, or has been shown to be wanting, as in the case of the first slave.

Joseph, who had been sold into slavery by his brothers, had every right to be bitter. His life could have ended in suffering and torment, far from his home with his father thinking him to be already dead. But God had other plans for him. He gained favour and authority in Egypt through the grace of God and subsequently found himself in a position of power over his brothers when they came into Egypt begging for food in a time of famine. But Joseph forgave them because he saw God's hand in what had happened:

*Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.*

And in this story of Joseph we can see a fleeting image of Jesus, of what is to come when the Messiah arrives. A good man betrayed by those closest to him according to the gospel story. But in truth sold into the slavery of our sins by our actions and inactions. Not just left for dead but cruelly tortured and murdered, suffering an ignominious death on the cross. And even in that moment of agony, Jesus is able to cry out 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do.'

He does not use his power as the Son of God to condemn us but he echoes the words of Joseph, trusting in the Father and the hope of the Resurrection.

*Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.*

As the Jewish people thrived in Egypt and eventually found freedom in the Promised Land so all humanity has been set free to make the journey to eternal life. We have these great examples of forgiveness and then we have the ungrateful servant. The one forgiven much who could not see that he should show the same mercy to one indebted to him.

This is where we might squirm a little in our seats. Yes it is obvious to us that the ungrateful servant was indeed a wretch who should have behaved better. He had literally just come away from being set free from an enormous debt, and yet here he is demanding with threats a pittance owed to him.

Each time we pray the Lord's Prayer we say:

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

And do we? Do we truly understand what we are praying for? It's not always easy. We bear grudges. We are convinced that we are in the right. We believe that some actions are just simply unforgivable. We can get caught up in notions of right and wrong and assume that we may judge. We take the moral high ground and don't see that it is made of sand slipping away under our feet.

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

We may try to forgive, want to forgive but without recourse to the grace of God, we will come up short. Showing true forgiveness can be the hardest thing, it is beyond our human strength, contrary to our human nature. We want our pound of flesh. But as in all aspects of our life, if we open ourselves to God's grace, to the power of the Holy Spirit, we will see his transforming might and be overwhelmed by his all encompassing love.

In our city in 2005, a young black man was viciously murdered simply for being black. His name was Anthony Walker. His mother, Gee Walker, could have raged against the horror inflicted on her by her precious son's death. She could have held onto a bitterness which would have further condemned and blighted her life. But she chose to forgive. She said at the time

*We're a forgiving family and it extended to outside, so it wasn't hard to forgive because we don't just preach it, we practise it.*

She went on to set up the Anthony Walker Foundation which works to tackle racism, hate crime and discrimination by providing educational opportunities, victim support services and by promoting equity and inclusion for all. Sadly, racism still exists but the Foundation has done and continues to do much to help people across our city and in the wider region. Gee Walker remains a powerful example of how God can turn seeming tragedy to something positive through forgiveness.

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**Revd Michelle Montrose**