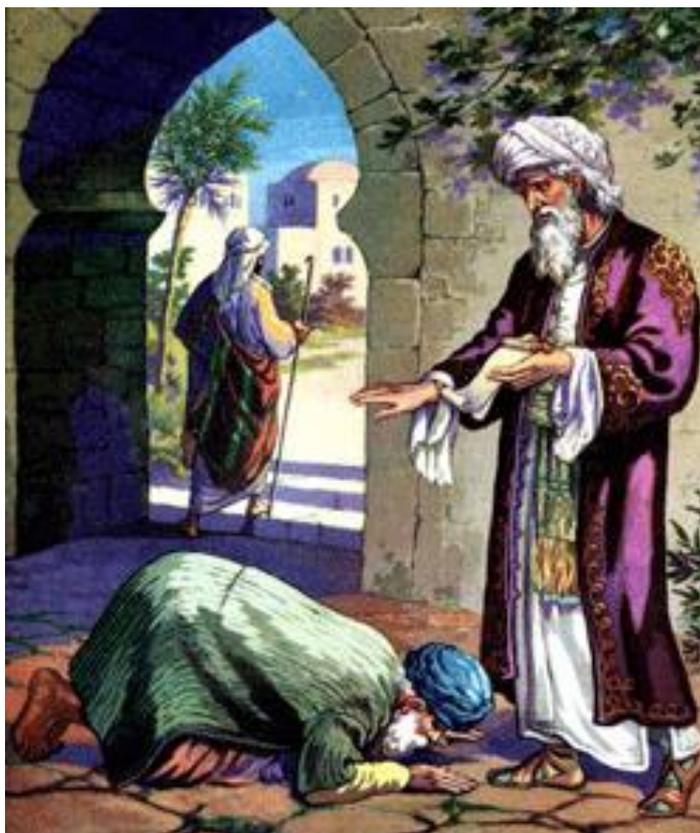


## Anglican Church of St George, Travancore



*The generous Master forgiving the servant's debt*

### **Sermon – the 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, September 13, 2020**

Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 103:8-13; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

In our Gospel reading today, we immerse ourselves, scripturally speaking, in forgiveness.

The American scholar, J. Randall O'Brien, sums up forgiveness in the New Testament this way:

*“The whole emphasis of the New Testament is on forgiveness of sins, reconciliation, and holy living manifested and made possible by the love of God through the Cross of Jesus Christ.”*

This has traditionally been linked to the deliverance of the people of Israel in the Exodus event, as heard in the first reading today, which is liturgically associated in Judaism, with the festival of the Passover. As we will see, Paul's words to the Romans, also set for today, are similarly bound up in this Gospel teaching on forgiveness.

In my pastoral letter on Thursday, I quoted Fr Brian McGowan writing some years ago in his excellent remarks called *Matthew in the margins*:

*We can only experience God's Rule as a Rule where forgiveness is the norm, when we ourselves give it & receive it. Where there is no forgiveness, there is only alienation from the Forgiving God. ... Pure Hell! But don't blame God for that. God didn't invent Hell! We do! And keep on re-inventing it. No-one need live in Hell any more than anyone needs to live in poverty today if only the rest of us would get serious about it!*

*if only the rest of us would get serious about it!* As Hamlet may have said had he been an Anglican priest quoting these words of Fr McGowan, '*Aye there's the rub*'. When it comes to forgiveness, we have to get serious about living our faith. That's what St Paul was telling the Romans and that is what Jesus is telling his disciples.

Peter, being Peter, wants to be sure he has this forgiveness stuff right, so he says, '*If my brother sins against me I have to forgive him seven times, right?*' You will note that I have departed from my usual practice of quoting from the NRSV which we read just a few moments ago and have used the word *brother* as did Paul when he wrote his letter - this is not because I don't want to be inclusive, I just don't think it is helpful to use the word *church* which appears to be anachronistic in this context, even allowing for the translation matter I mentioned last week,. So - "*If my brother sins against me I should forgive him seven times, right?*" Jesus says, "*Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.*" He then tells one of his stories, his *parable of the unforgiving servant* as we have come to know it although I think it could just as usefully be called *the parable of the extravagantly forgiving master*. That's what the parable is really about - the sting in the tail is not there to emphasise the fate of the unforgiving servant; it's there to emphasise that God's forgiveness puts an obligation on us to emulate it - to be serious about forgiveness. This is a parable told, as many of the parables are, with a great flair for exaggeration - forgive seventy-seven times, ten thousand talents set beside a hundred denarii, tortured until he would pay his entire debt (as if that would achieve anything!). This was the way parables were told in Jesus' time and Jesus was the master of the parable. The exaggeration tells us that we are dealing with truly important and powerful matters and that the forgiveness of God is truly staggering in its extravagance. But it is also our model, the pattern for our forgiveness. We are also called to be extravagant in forgiving, which does not mean being a soft touch for exploitation any more than do *turning the other cheek*, or *going the extra mile* or *giving the person who takes your coat the shirt off your back*, are intended to imply allowing ourselves to be taken advantage of.

I think the world has lost the connection there; these injunctions have become little more for many people than nice ideas - I would like to think there was some way to recapture our scriptural tradition in such matters. Rather than being a soft option or a *cop out*, the idea of extravagance in forgiveness is rather a description of the Christian *understanding* of forgiveness. It is living the belief that, when we acknowledge that we need forgiveness, we are generously, undeservingly, and extravagantly forgiven by

our God. We are then encouraged to try harder in future, making amends for our wrongs if we possibly can. I invite you to bring these thoughts to mind next time you pray the part of the Lord's Prayer which says, *forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.*

However, the question of forgiveness in the practical life of the Church is rather more complicated than I have so far suggested. Among my collection of articles about sin is an article from the *Church Times* from about six years ago, in which Christopher Cocksworth, who was then the Bishop of Coventry, had this to say:

*The Church cannot stop talking about forgiveness, however. Forgiveness is at the heart of the good news of Jesus Christ. That does not mean that forgiveness needs to be the first thing that the Church says in every situation. Moreover, it does not mean that forgiveness is an easy thing to talk about, or that its meaning is obvious and that doing it is straightforward. Forgiveness in Christian teaching is first and foremost God's gift, and the Church has a corresponding responsibility to weigh its words carefully when it wants to speak about this gift and, therefore, about the one who gives it. ... The two sides of forgiveness - receiving it and giving it - both begin with recognising that what has been done is sin, and that sin is a serious and deeply destructive thing.*

The bishop was writing (six years ago, though sadly it could have been just as relevant this year) about forgiveness in the context of the Church's response to abuse within the Church of England and he was careful to remind his readers of the seriousness of the issues involved in forgiveness in its totality saying, for example:

*The more catastrophic the damage wrought by sin, the greater the likely need for some basic repairs to be made to the fabric of people's lives before forgiveness can even begin to be imagined by those who have been hurt the most. Justice, healing, and repentance are all part of that.*

That's where we come back to taking it seriously. That is where Paul comes in with his words to the Romans. Much of what Paul has to say in this passage seems quite strange at first, but his writing is really quite uncompromisingly blunt:

*Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. So then, each of us will be accountable to God.*

Again, there is no sense of a soft approach; what Paul says is quite clear - *Each of us will be accountable to God.* This is what we say every time we pray those words in the Lord's Prayer - surely, we are praying to God to *make us accountable.* If we are serious about forgiveness, then we have to mean that too.

So the message today, I suggest, is that God is extravagant in forgiveness and God is truly generous to us as long as we are serious about our forgiveness, and our hospitality and care, for all whom God chooses to put in our way in this world.

As in many other things, such as in its ruthless pursuit of the blame culture so evident today, this not the way the world behaves, and it is not the way the world sees such matters. However, this is one of those cases in which the world's standards are simply not good enough for God. Let *us* take God seriously; let *us* get serious about forgiveness and, in the blessing that it brings, perhaps we will be able to see the possibility of a world in which there is a seriousness about God's will for the people who live in it.

The Lord be with you.

**Richard Murray**  
September 11, 2020