

Sunday 13th Sept 2020 Cathedral, Grahamstown Live-streamed on Facebook, 9.30 a.m.		15th Sunday after Pentecost Season of Creation Month of Prayer, Lament and Protest against Corruption
Genesis 50:15-21	Ps 103:8-13	Romans 14:1-12 Matthew 18:21-35
FORGIVENESS FROM THE HEART		

The month of September is observed as the Season of Creation. We celebrate and give thanks for the world in its beauty and wonder. September has also been declared by the South African Council of Churches as a Month of Prayer, Lament and Protest against Corruption.

How many times must I forgive my brother or sister? How many times, indeed? When a person insults me, or disrespects me, or attacks my integrity? When I am mugged or robbed? When I am oppressed and illtreated? When I am the victim of injustice and cruelty? Must I forgive the perpetrators? Does this mean that I must simply put up with the bad behaviour of others, or allow others to get away with it? Surely not...

This past week has had its moments. The Clicks hair advert and the EFF protests. The anniversary of the 9-11 terror attack on the USA in 2001. The court hearing for the ongoing case between Yolanda Dyantyi and Rhodes University, following the Reference List protests against rape and rape culture in 2016. Yesterday (Saturday) was the day when we remembered the life and witness of Stephen Bantu Biko, being the anniversary of his cruel

and untimely death at the hands of the Security Police in 1977.

Does forgiveness even have a place here? If we forgive, are we allowing injustice and wrong to flourish? What does it mean to forgive from the heart?

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Our scripture readings give us plenty to think about in this regard.

Our Old Testament reading from Genesis 50:15-21 is a remarkable account of forgiveness and reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers. He sets them free from the burden of shame and guilt and fear that they had been carrying all these years.

Last Sunday's Gospel reading (Matthew 18:15-20) gave us a way to restore relationships that have been broken, not by avoiding the issue or walking away from the problem, but by confronting the one who has done wrong, in a clear, structured process. It would seem that the early church, in the context of this gospel, was struggling – as we often do today – with divisions and conflicts which threatened its integrity. Matthew chapter 18, from which our gospel reading is taken, is the fourth major block of teaching in the gospel, and it is essentially about relations between Christians.

Today's reading Gospel reading continues where we left off last Sunday. Peter asks "How many times – how often – should I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? As many as seven times? Jesus responds, – "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy seven times" (Matt 18:21-22). And then comes the parable of the Unforgiving Servant. It is sobering and leaves us with a clear warning: that we also are to forgive our brother or sister from our heart. Unconditionally. Perhaps, like me, your response is "Seriously?"

This gospel teaching places the need to forgive at the heart of our relationships with one another. An attitude or ethic or spirit of mercy and forgiveness is to pervade our relationships. When we do so, we reflect the merciful nature of God (as we read in the psalm) - "The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great goodness...He has not dealt with us according to our sins: nor rewarded us according to our wickedness" (Ps 103:8, 10).

So we are called to forgive and be merciful as God has forgiven us, has been merciful to us. As we forgive, we are also set free from the prison of hatred and resentment and bitterness, the terrible cycle of revenge – the prison where we are tortured until we have paid the last penny, in the parable.

FORGIVENESS AND MERCY (1)

To forgive from the heart. This is one of the most difficult sections of the New Testament. We try to wriggle out of it, get around it, excuse ourselves from following it. Yet also one of the most important. In the Lord's Prayer, we pray "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." In the verses that follow the Lord's Prayer, Jesus says "for if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matt 6:14-15). Jesus prayed on the cross: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do..." The first Christian martyr, St Stephen, as he was dying, prayed, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60).

It seems that we are faced with the impossible. We only have to remember, perhaps, some family quarrels and fall-outs. Or look back over this past week. Or think of painful events in our own lives.

How do we balance and hold together justice and forgiveness, mercy and truth, in the context of our history of violence and conflict? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could somehow, with a few words, sort out and resolve all the issues that rage around us? That consume our energies and occupy our hearts and minds? It is even possible? Are we caught up – trapped - in a spiral of revenge, where our interactions are dominated by hatred and rage and violent protests?

FORGIVENESS AND MERCY (2)

Our journey to forgive and reconcile and understand is rooted in the following three universal truths:

- i) The nature of God - the Lord is full of compassion and mercy (Ps 103:8). That is our starting point and also our own experience.

- ii) Human nature – which in spite of popular opinion to the contrary, is broken and sinful and in need of restoration and healing. We are all sinners. Fallen humanity. You and I, as well as those we love and those we hate, are broken, we all need to be restored and healed. We have hurt others; we have been hurt. We are in need of compassion and mercy. We need forgiveness; we need to forgive.

- iii) We are in relationship with one another, in the life of the church, as brothers and sisters in Christ. We are family. We belong together. We therefore have the same gospel calling to follow, to carry one another's burdens, to share one another's pain. We are called to love one another – even when, and especially when, we are on opposite sides of an argument or a battle line. And it is in relationship with one another, face to face, that we work out how we restore and heal. Social media accusations and attacks, abusing and

humiliating others, are not the way forward.

I wonder if you were struck, as I was, by the translation of Romans 14 which was read to us, from *The Message*:

“Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don’t see things the way you do. And don’t jump all over them every time they do or say something you don’t agree with – even when it seems that they are strong on opinions but weak in the faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently” (Romans 14:1).

Reconciliation is not easy. Our history of racial conflict makes us all vulnerable to insults, particularly if prejudice and perceived racism are part of the mix. The outrage over the Clicks hair advert shows this.

We have not yet heard a clear explanation from Clicks as to how or why they thought to portray black hair as damaged, and blond (white) hair as healthy. However, the acts of vandalism and aggressive protests by the EFF in response to the advert are unacceptable. We won’t solve issues by abusing or humiliating someone who has done wrong, by vandalising stores and intimidating people. It seems that this is selective outrage to divert attention from other, bigger, issues. The whole country yet again boils with rage and hatred, and the cracks and divisions deepen. We all need to hear one another’s pain and stand in the shoes of those who are hurting.

CONCLUSION

Mercy and justice; forgiveness and truth; reconciliation and restitution. Healing our damaged natural environment. Acknowledging that we are inter-dependent, that our actions impact on one another. Lamenting, praying, protesting against those who have stolen from the public purse, the corrupt, the greedy, the power hungry. We all need mercy. We all need justice. We all need some measure of unmerited grace. We bring before God those who have hurt us; and we bring before God our own need of mercy.

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Dean of Grahamstown
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