

## Trinity XIV

13 September 2020

**Readings: Genesis 50: 15-21, Psalm 103: 1-13, Romans 14: 1-12,  
Matthew 18: 21-35**

Forgiveness is something that is at the heart of our faith. It is something that is powerfully symbolized in the water of baptism, the water that washes away all that of which we are ashamed. God, of course, is behind it. It is God and God alone that can assure us that we are forgiven and, in the assuring, give us new life. Knowing that God has forgiven us is truly akin to gaining a new lease on life, for God's forgiveness tells us that, despite our sins and our many instances of falling short, God knows that there is good in us. God knows this because God has made us. And God has not just made us: God loves us. This is a fact that we rejoice in.

But we know that life as a follower of God's Son, Jesus, is not simply a matter of sitting to one side and rejoicing. As we know, God in Jesus calls us to love others as God loves us. But when those others whom Jesus calls us to love are people who have wronged us, most of us do not rejoice but groan, saying, 'How can I do this?' Yet every time we pray the Lord's Prayer we say, 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.' And in our gospel today Jesus tells Peter and us that we should forgive not just seven times, but an infinite number of times. In other words, as there is no limit to God's forgiving love, there should be no limit to ours. How can we possibly do this?

As we search for an answer to this question, let's look at our Old Testament lesson for today about Joseph and his brothers. Most of you will recall how Joseph, the favoured child of his father, Jacob, earned the resentment of his stepbrothers not just by being favoured, but by his dream in which he saw his stepbrothers bowing down to him. The resentment of these older brothers was such that they thought of killing him before they sold him into slavery. His owners then took Joseph to Egypt where they sold him to Potiphar, an official of Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt. Although Joseph was wrongfully thrown into prison because Potiphar's wife was angry that Joseph refused to have an affair with her, Joseph was eventually freed from prison and slavery on account of his God-given ability to interpret dreams, an ability that enabled him to find favour with Pharaoh. It also enabled Joseph to see that the Egyptians did not go hungry when a time of famine, predicted by Joseph, struck the land. It also enabled him to provide his family who were back in Canaan with food to survive the famine, for Jacob had sent his sons to Egypt to buy grain. This resulted in Joseph's being reunited with his family.

In the portion of the Joseph story given us today, we see his brothers coming before Joseph after the death of their father, Jacob. The brothers are fearful that

with their father dead, Joseph may now seek to exact revenge on them for the wrong they had done him. They figured that he had refrained from taking his revenge only out of respect for Jacob.

But Joseph does not seek revenge. Instead he is moved to tears. I think he tells them that he is not going to harm them because he sees the hand of God in all that has happened to him. Just as God gave him the power to interpret dreams, so God enabled Joseph to know that God was at work in him and in all things for good. The God who had been with Jacob's grandfather Abraham, the God who had been with his father, Jacob, was also with Joseph. In other words, as Joseph, perhaps on account of his ability to interpret dreams, knew the goodness and faithfulness of God even in the midst of his slavery and imprisonment, so he knew that God had intended him to promote this goodness by forgiving and providing for his brothers instead of seeking revenge.

I wonder, therefore, if Joseph does not give us a clue as to how we can go about the business of forgiving. God's Spirit had undoubtedly opened Joseph's heart to understand the goodness and faithfulness of God, even in the midst of great trouble. Joseph was convinced that nothing could defeat the good purposes of God. If Joseph could know this and forgive his brothers who had thought of killing him and then sold him into slavery, how much more should we, who know God's Son, be aware of the goodness and faithfulness and love of God. If Jesus from the cross can say, 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing,' is not that a proof of the immensity of God's love for us? If God can thus reach out to us in forgiveness, despite all the bad we do, can we not ask and allow God to help us to do the same?

Having said this, we must not forget last week's gospel, Matthew 18: 15-20, in which Jesus is instructing his disciples and us about the need for justice by talking about what to do when someone has wronged us. Forgiveness does not mean that justice is put on hold. What it does mean is that we are called to exercise justice that is leavened by mercy. It means that reconciliation must always be our first aim, as was shown in last week's gospel. It means that we are called, as Joseph was, to act in godly ways, not simply passively to leave everything to God to sort out. But as we seek to do God's will, we have to be careful not to think that we are God.

Yes, it is a sort of balancing act. Can we ever get it right? As imperfect creatures, we shall never get it exactly right. But if we consider how God worked through Joseph, despite all he suffered, and how, more radically, God worked through the horror of the cross of Jesus to bring about good, to bring about transformation, can God not work through us, imperfect as we are, to bring about forgiveness and reconciliation? Let us be comforted by these words from both the Old Testament and the New: 'The human mind may devise many

plans, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established' (Proverbs 19: 21); and 'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose' (Romans 8: 28). God's purpose is a wonderful amalgam of justice and love. It is nothing less than the transformation of us and the world. And God can and will use us in that transformation, despite all our fears and mistakes. Thanks be to God.

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