

Homily for the 24th Sunday

Bless me, Father, for I have sinned it is ... since my last confession, each of us invited to fill in the time. This was the formula many of us were taught when we first celebrated the sacrament of God's loving forgiveness. Those of us of a certain age would have been brought up to go to confession on a regular basis. Today, for the vast majority of people, individual, sacramental confession is almost non-existent. This is not a judgement statement but a fact. For whatever reason(s) this form of the Sacrament no longer touches people in a life-giving way and if this was a different homily we might want to ask why? As an aside a knowledge of the history of the sacrament would be very instructive. What the Sacrament did and continues to do especially when celebrated communally, is to remind us that when we do wrong it has repercussions which go beyond ourselves and even the one we have wronged, affecting the wider community and seeking the compassionate forgiveness of God.

In today's gospel Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive someone if they wrong him, as often as 7 times? Did Peter expect a pat on the back for being so magnanimous? Jesus' response will have shocked him, not 7 times but 77 times, which is not a finite number but another way of saying that we should always be ready to forgive. Really? Then he tells a story which is so extreme as to be almost unbelievable, namely enormous forgiveness, beyond human imagining on the one hand, and then, an equally unbelievable act of meanness in refusing to forgive a paltry amount by the servant who had benefited from the Master's generosity, putting him under judgement.

The parable speaks of the forgiveness of God, which we never earn, but which is gift, and it is only because we have been forgiven that we can find it within ourselves to forgive, even when we have been deeply hurt. We know from our own experience that it is not always easy to forgive and it can take time. We have carried a grudge, waited for an apology, laid down conditions, but then realised that we are hurting. Then when we find it within ourselves to forgive our own pain is relieved and we can move on. There is something therapeutic in this process. In forgiving in such an utterly generous way the parable asks the question of what we want to happen to the person who has hurt us, and what is behind that question? Do we want to feel that we are right? Are we appealing to some form of restorative justice, should the punishment fit the crime?

There are no easy answers, nor are there when it comes to forgiving ourselves, which can be extremely difficult. The last sentence of the gospel tells us to forgive from our hearts, the only time in all 4 gospels! To quote Geoffrey Bullock in *Practising God's Radical Forgiveness*: 'We forgive from the heart not as a one-off action but as the ever-beating heart of life itself. The magnanimity of God's forgiveness surprises us with its graceful compassion; we too should surprise others with our forgiveness.' Public figures like Nelson Mandela after imprisonment in South Africa, or Gordon Wilson after the murder of his daughter in the Enniskillen bombing in 1987, surprised huge numbers of people by their forgiveness, can we do the same and forgive from the heart?

Bidding Prayers for the 24th Sunday of the Year

Celebrant:

To the God who calls us to forgive others as we hope to be forgiven let us pray in our need.

Reader:

For the Church – that the Church may be a sign of hope and an instrument of reconciliation in every nation torn by war and in every land touched by tragedy.

Lord in your mercy

For rulers and Governments – that they may work for greater justice and peace for all people.

Lord in your mercy

For the refugees on the island of Lesbos whose camp was destroyed by fire last week – that they will receive the support they need in their desperation, physical, emotional and spiritual.

Lord in your mercy

For ourselves, especially when we are conscious of having caused hurt or been hurt – that we will open our hearts to both giving and receiving the forgiveness which will enable us to move on.

Lord in your mercy

For those who have died, all victim of violence, accident, natural disaster and Covid-19, for Fr Philip Fitzgerald and Fr Lawrence Lister, retired priests of the diocese who died recently and Pauline Katzebruch, Tom Hughes, Elizabeth Hynes, Lily Miller, Nora Delaney and John Delaney whose anniversaries occur this week – that they and all who have died may rest in peace and rise in glory

Lord in your mercy

Either aloud or in silence we pray for our own special intentions...pause...then

Lord in your mercy

We ask the prayers of Mary as we say, Hail Mary...

Celebrant:

Lord, make us an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred let us so love, where injury, pardon, and where discord, peace. For it is in giving that we receive, in forgiving that we are forgiven and in dying that we are born to eternal life. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen