

Sermon delivered by
The Reverend Nicky Latham
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May the Lord be in our hearts and on my lips, that I may proclaim the Gospel worthily and well, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

If you hold a small glass of water in your hand for thirty seconds, it feels light and easy. But if you hold it for an hour, your arm begins to ache. And if you hold it all day long, your arm goes completely numb and feels paralysed. The actual weight of the glass never changes – what changes is how long you choose to hold it. This is a great metaphor about how unresolved hurt and pain can accumulate in our bodies and the longer we hold it, the harder it becomes for us to carry this heavy burden.

Forgiveness, this is the theme of this week's Gospel reading. I remember talking to my mum on many occasions about how we actually go about forgiving someone. Her reply was to verbally ask God for help and the rest will follow. This is such a simple explanation but there is some wisdom in these words. Forgiveness is very much about making a choice. It can be a difficult choice as its about letting go of anger, hurt, unresolved conflict and resentment - feelings that are deeply imbedded within us. Letting go of these feelings, especially

when trauma is involved feels often humanly impossible to do, without the ongoing help from God, and Jesus recognises this.

In Matthew's Gospel, Peter asks Jesus how many times he must forgive someone. Is seven times enough? Peter may have considered this very generous, believing forgiveness must have a limit. But Jesus replies, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Jesus was turning the ancient story in Genesis 4 on its head. In that story, Lamech a relative of Cain, boasts that he will take revenge seventy-seven times on anyone who hurts him, thus perpetuating a vicious cycle of violence and retaliation. Jesus replaces this cycle of violence and vengeance with an endless cycle of God's beautiful grace and mercy.

To help us imagine what this new way of living looks like, Jesus tells a story about the "kingdom of heaven." This kingdom is not only about what happens after we die; it's also about how God's love invites us to live differently in the here and now. The parable centres on two servants and a king who wants to settle his debts.

When the king settles his accounts, he discovers that one servant owes an enormous amount—roughly equal to sixty million days of labour. Unable to repay it, the servant pleads for patience. Moved by compassion, the king forgives the entire debt. Yet as soon as the servant leaves, he meets a fellow servant who owes him a much smaller amount—about one hundred days of labour. Although the

fellow servant makes the same plea for mercy, the first servant refuses. He seizes him and has him thrown into prison.

When the king finds out, he is furious. The first servant had just been shown incredible mercy, yet he refuses to offer that same mercy to someone else. So, the king confronts him and hands him over to be tortured.

The thought of God wanting us tortured can cause us some tension, because how can a loving God want to have someone tortured. Perhaps the passage suggests however, something different to this. That refusing—or being unable - to forgive, creates an internal prison that tortures our minds, and our bodies. Maybe that's why Jesus says we need to forgive seventy-seven times. We might need to be able to forgive this countless number of times because this is what's really needed - with God's grace and mercy – to release the pain, suffering and hurt that's imprisoning us.

To forgive someone, does not mean we ignore abuse, suffering, or violence. Or that we ignore harm or justice. We can tell the truth about what has happened, we can seek accountability and we can protect ourselves with wise boundaries and refuse to pass the wound onto someone else.

If you are carrying hurt, and pain, you do not have to force forgiveness today, you do not have to pretend everything is fine. You do not have to restore trust before it has been rebuilt, and you do not need to return to a relationship that is unsafe. Making a decision to return to a

relationship whether its based on violence and abuse or not, is a totally separate issue to needing to forgive someone. Whatever the situation, healing takes time and God is patient with us.

Forgiveness is not always a single decision. Sometimes it is a practice we return to often, especially when the pain resurfaces. We may need to release the same anger more than once, we may need to grieve what we hoped the relationship could have been. We may even need to forgive ourselves – for what we did, and maybe what we failed to do.

Sometimes the first step towards forgiveness is not compassion for the person who hurt us, it might never be that. It might be feeling, for the very first time, compassion for ourselves.

God does not ask us to become less honest about our pain. God meets us there. Grace is not a command to move on before we are ready. It is the assurance that we do not have to face what happened alone.

So, this week, begin by naming one hurt honestly. Ask what boundary, support, or justice may be needed. Then ask God for one small step towards freedom. That step might be prayer, a conversation with someone you trust, or a decision to stop rehearsing revenge. It might mean seeking professional support, joining others who have experienced similar harm, or simply allowing yourself to rest.

We may not be able to forgive all at once. We may not even know what forgiveness looks like. But we can take one step towards release.

The servant receives mercy but remains trapped in the cycle of revenge. . He has been released, forgiven, but he has not learnt to live freely. Mathews Jesus invites us to receive grace not merely as the cancellation of our debt but as a transformation in how we see ourselves and one another.

We are more than our failures. Other people are more than the worst thing they have done. Yet recognising their humanity must never mean denying the harm they have caused. Compassion and accountability can stand together. Justice and mercy do not have to be enemies.

The question is not whether we will ever be hurt. We will. The question is whether that hurt will shape the whole of our lives.

So, Peter asks, “how many times”?

Jesus does not give him a manageable number. Instead, he points towards a life where grace is not measured in small portions, mercy is not reserved only for those who have earned it, and freedom remains possible even after deep harm.

That freedom may come slowly. It may look different from what we expect. It may include distance, silence, accountability or a relationship change for ever.

But let us start today, and as my mum used to say, let us ask God for help and the rest will follow.

So let us pray.

God of mercy, meet us in the places where we are hurt, angry and afraid. Give us courage to tell the truth, wisdom to set healthy boundaries, and strength to seek justice without being consumed by revenge.

Be with those who are not ready to forgive. Protect those who are vulnerable. Give patience to those whose healing is taking longer than they hoped. Help us to recognise that forgiveness cannot be forced and that reconciliation requires trust, responsibility and change.

In your time, lead us towards freedom – not by denying what has happened, but by helping us discover that it does not have to define our future.

Teach us to receive your grace and when we are ready, to let that grace shape the way we live.

Amen.