

From the Heart

After Pentecost [24] A 13th September 2026

St Leonard's Denmark, Alison Kershaw

Genesis 50.15-21, Psalm 103.1-13, Romans 14.1-14, Matthew 18.21-35

Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your Living Word, Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us

Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors

Forgive us our falseness, as we forgive those who are untrue to us¹

In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us²

Each form or interpretation of this line from the Lord's prayer shows us another aspect of forgiveness. Each admits we are as prone to error as we are prone to being erred against – as capable of hurting as of being hurt. And each ultimately speaks of release – directly so in this translation from the Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke and is still spoken today:

Loose the cords of mistakes binding us, as we release the strands we hold of another's guilt.³

There is sweet relief in forgiveness, the lifting of a burden, a forward movement, a letting go of pain, an unravelling of the terrible knots we are all too prone to get ourselves into.

This is movingly illustrated in the Genesis story of Joseph and his brothers. The passage we heard this morning is the culmination of a very long story, and goes to show that forgiveness comes in its own time, when the heart is ready, and often not without a struggle. Joseph was a younger and most favoured son of Jacob. His jealous brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt when a boy, and staining his striped coat with goat's blood, told his heartbroken father he had killed by a wild animal. Now, many years later, and after much suffering including being unjustly imprisoned, Joseph, with his gift of dream interpretation, has risen in Pharaoh's favour and holds a position of power in a prosperous and fertile land. The preceding chapters of today's reading, show him wrestling with his pain as his brothers, who have not recognised him, come to Egypt to ask for grain as there is famine in their land. He toys with taking revenge by framing his brothers as thieves and entrapping them into slavery. But the prospect of revenge does not give him any comfort and only increases his anguish. At one point:

... Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood before him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. (Gen. 45.1-2)

Joseph lets go of his justified anger and, with that, his pain, as he welcomes and saves his family with the gift of land. As the brothers are reconciled, Joseph *fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.* (Gen. 45: 14-15) In falling, in weeping, in kissing, and in talking – there is such a sense of release, and relief in no longer holding back – a surrender and giving over to the work of the heart. Tears flow, words flow, love flows.

And yet, when their father Jacob dies, the brothers worry that Joseph still *bears a grudge* and will pay them back for the wrong they did. But again, Joseph weeps with compassion and shows them care, kindness, and forgiveness. And again he refuses to enslave them, as they had caused him to be enslaved. As he had been freed, so he frees them.

How many of us have been hurt or betrayed or abandoned or just plain taken for granted at some stage by someone? How many of us have lost friends or experienced family rifts? All these things can run very deeply and cast a long shadow over our hearts.

On the other side, perhaps we carry the heavy burden of having been the cause of another's pain. Perhaps we want to seek forgiveness, or perhaps we feel so badly that we don't feel we have any right to seek it. Or perhaps it is hard to say who started it all - it is just one big knotty mess.

¹ *A Celtic Mass for Peace: Songs for the Earth*, composed by Sam Guarnaccia, with Lyrics by Philip Newell, 2009

² Service of Night Prayer, in *A New Zealand Prayer Book He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa*

³ *Prayers of the Cosmos* by Neil Douglas-Klotz, Harper, 1994

But we need to forgive because, as in the Aramaic prayer – we hold the strands of another's guilt, or in the words of the NZ Prayer Book, we absorb hurts from one another. Our hearts are interlocked and tied to one another, simply because that is how we humans are.

As this morning's gospel (Matthew 18.1-35) teaches, we also need to forgive, because we are forgiven, because it is the very nature of God our Maker, and Christ our Lover, in whose image we are made, to be self-giving and a source of blessing. Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive someone who sins against him – *As many as seven times?* - most likely thinking that an impressive and generous number. But Jesus says *Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times*. In other words, without limit, without stinting, without keeping count of the number of times. Seven-fold arithmetic in the Hebrew Bible often refers to vengeance, or punishment, reproach, chastisement, restitution. Seven and multiples of seven also describe manifold blessings, restoration, abundance, and the perfection of God who rested on the seventh day. It is this latter kind of arithmetic that Jesus embodies – limitless forgiveness and grace.

So we need to forgive to untangle our own hearts because we are made in the image of Love itself, and because we are receivers of grace - limitless and amazing grace. If we deny or betray this quality we will never know peace. In the parable the slave who is pardoned an immense sum of money then refuses to forgive a miniscule debt of another, is tortured until he repays the debt. And so we suffer when we cannot let go those strands of another's guilt that we hold, when we hold onto grievance and refuse to pass on the love and blessing we ourselves have received, if we but knew it.

Jesus says *forgive your brother or sister from your heart*, because Love is at the heart of God. Love outpoured is at the heart of all creation. This love is outpoured in the kisses, tears and words of Joseph and his brothers who fall into each other's arms. God does not require payment or exact punishment before mercy is granted. That would not be an act of forgiveness, which is a gift. That is the story of Joseph and his brothers and Jesus' parable. It is also the story of Jesus on the cross praying *Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing*. It is strange then, that parts of the Christian tradition should subscribe to the idea of substitutionary atonement – that God requires a ransom that Jesus intercedes to pay on our behalf.

But what of justice? What of those sins against us that are so enormous that we can't be expected to deal with the awful debt on our own? Is not judgment in some form also a part of reconciliation and putting things to rights? As Revd Nicky reflected last week, forgiveness is not about ignoring, forgetting or turning a blind eye. Truth must be spoken, and justice needs to be served on many levels in our community life. Without this the sin against the wounded party is only magnified – the hurt only made worse. To embrace forgiveness in our hearts when the time is ripe is not to endorse passivity or weakness, or to abandon the fight for justice, or ceasing to oppose discrimination, abuse, and exploitation. And when a wound is very great, perhaps the only form of forgiveness possible is to release our hearts by handing over to God, to whom ultimate forgiveness belongs.

This kind of judgment, however, is distinct from being judgmental in our everyday dealings with one another. Paul addresses the divided factions of the community in Rome (Romans 14.1-14) - some following strict clean and unclean food laws and others not. Who are we to judge one another he asks when judgment ultimately belongs to God – why do you despise your brother or sister? Why do you, with your judgments and distinctions put stumbling blocks on another's pathway to inclusion in the community of Christ?

An unforgiving heart could be seen as another such stumbling block – if we cannot forgive one another from our heart, how can we manifest the love of God to others? With less judgment and more forgiveness, we can clear the path and unblock the Christ way– we can release the pent up stream and let it flow through us from its source in the very heart of God.

May we be open channels of love, and generosity in all our encounters this week & always, Amen