

LOOKING AHEAD: SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 17th

Reading: Matthew 18: 21 – 35 [15th after Pentecost or “Ordinary Time”]

Matthew is unquestionably the hard-liner of the Gospels, the firebrand with an uncompromising message. It is therefore unsurprising that the “Parable of the Forgiven, yet Unforgiving Servant” (my title) belongs only to his gathering of ‘Jesus material’. Sometimes reading Matthew’s Gospel it can be difficult to discern whether we are dealing with the original words of Jesus or Matthew’s own (later) applications for the life of his community. None more so than the material in chapter 18 surrounding the governing of community life.

Straight up we could ask ‘Why a parable here?’, when Matthew has previously gathered a collection of them in chapter 13. And contrary to this page and its reflections then [see “Looking Ahead”, July 16], which described parables as being anything but allegory and ‘open’ and inviting in their meaning, here’s a parable which uses allegory and is direct and unequivocal. Whilst Jesus employs parables normally to illustrate the ‘Kingdom of God’ [*The Kingdom is like ...*], Matthew uses parables to serve his own particular theological ends. These include community behaviours (as we have seen) and also judgement [noting that parables about the final separation are yet to come in chapter 25].

Matthew has Peter ask a question to lead into this story. Peter even provides his own generous answer – forgive seven times, which is biblical in itself. It is to be noted that the requirement to forgive in this passage does not await ‘proper’ repentance from the one who has wronged. Jesus’ answer is not a matter of maths – seventy times seven as four hundred and ninety! This is unconditional and continuing forgiveness offered. Anything else, counted and kept stock, is not forgiveness at all.

The parable then mixes its detail a little. It begins in verse 23 with a ‘King’, who quickly becomes simply a ‘Master’. The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary notes the ‘*Gentile features of the story*’ or rather aspects that make it not possible to belong to a Jewish context [the King is ‘worshipped’, Jewish law prohibits selling of wife and children into slavery and torture of a Jew is never condoned – footnote, Commentary on Matthew, page 381].

The amount of the debt is preposterous and clearly not meant to be taken seriously. Such hyperbole in parables should hint to us that we are not dealing with any literal event or happening. A single talent represented a weight in silver, the equivalent of a day labourer’s wages for 15 years. Ten thousand is just an unimaginable number.

Other parties then get involved – fellow servants who are not treated the way they know this one has been by a gracious master. They are understandably outraged by this hypocrisy.

Matthew’s allegorical application of this parable then casts God as being like the angered master, withdrawing his own forgiveness and handing the servant over to torture. At this point Matthew has gone too far. This is an image of God that we must reject, although it a trace of such remains prevalent in some atonement/sacrifice theologies in which God seems to hold more tightly to justified transactions than to an all-giving love.

It is worthwhile to note that Matthew’s Gospel lacks Luke’s “Parable of the Unjust Steward” (16:1 – 13) or the story of the rich man and Lazarus at his gate (16:19 – 31), In some common themes, even images, we might ask, ‘Is this the Gospel of Matthew’s equivalent or substitute?’ Malina and Rohrburgh in their “Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels” describe that “*the slave acts in such a way as to proclaim to one and all that he is so ‘wise and clever’ as to be able to take advantage of the king with impunity. The king has no choice but to take ‘satisfaction’, by delivering that bureaucrat to the jailers*”

[page 120]. These are very similar behaviours to those we find in the omitted parables cited in Luke's account.

The verse at the conclusion of this long excursion is pretty clear: "*This is how my Heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart*" (verse 35). Is Matthew making himself clear? One suspects that this conclusion might well have been Matthew's starting point and some re-working of the other parables in Luke may have served his getting to this place! This is even a point that Matthew has previously made already in his telling of the story [see 6: 14 – 15)].

There is much here about the need to forgive. And to do so because of the nature of forgiveness. In my archives after September 11 in 2002 I stashed away a nationally-syndicated article by former Anglican Bishop of Edinburgh Richard Holloway. At that poignant time he wrote "*The trouble is that since we all live in a fog of ignorance about ourselves and others, it is impossible to calibrate revenge perfectly, so in responding to hurts we inflict new wounds and add momentum to the endless cycle of suffering.*" Then further on in the same article, "*Only unconditional, impossible forgiveness can switch off the engine of madness and invite us to move into the future*". Bill Loader in "First Thoughts on the Gospel Passage from the Lectionary" writes, "*Forgiving is a form of giving. We no longer hold something back in our relationship with someone.*

Mercy is at the heart of forgiveness and mercy is a feature of character. This parable as demonstration of the answer to Peter's question is therefore an appeal to show the same mercy as we have received from God. This is the notion captured in the popular movie 'Pay it Forward', now a common phrase to describe the on-going cycle of goodness extended.

However, sometimes the receipt of forgiveness can be difficult. It renders the receiver powerless, dependent upon the goodness and character of the one who offers forgiveness. As we sing in words attributed to Francis of Assisi, "for it is in pardoning that we are pardoned."

THEMES: Community living, forgiveness.