

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Matthew 18:21-35

Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, he was ordered to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

REFLECTION 1:

THE FORGIVEN

Clint Eastwood's 1992 movie 'The Unforgiven' tells the story of a former gunslinger who is trying to reform his life. He marries, quits drinking and begins to raise a family. But his wife dies, and he is not very good at farming. He feels unforgiven as the ghosts from his 'pistol-packing' past haunt him. Unable to resist the lure of a \$5,000 bounty, he returns to his former ways and rides off on a final mission. Today's Gospel story is about the forgiven. Even though we may have done bad things in the past, God forgives us. He gives us a new beginning and he expects us to be forgiving too when we say, 'forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us'.

In this Gospel (Matt 18:21-35) Jesus affirms that no limit can be placed on the number of times we should forgive another's wrongdoing and he also describes the quality of that forgiveness: we are to forgive one another 'from the heart'. Forgiveness from the heart is a deliberate decision on the part of the one who forgives. Unlike the Western mindset, that often associates the heart with emotions and feelings, people in the ancient Near East saw the heart as the seat of the intellect. Forgiveness is a rational act of the will, which may or may not have the added bonus of making us feel good about our decision. Forgiveness based solely on feeling will not endure; therefore, those who belong to Jesus are to forgive 'from the heart'.

To make his point more clearly, Jesus told the parable of a king settling his accounts with his servants. Based on the amount the first servant owed, it would seem that he was a high official, perhaps responsible for collecting revenue for the king from an entire province. This figure was meant to go far beyond one's mental grasp, like the billions we hear about today. The one who is forgiven the enormous debt meets another member of the royal household who owes him three month's wages. He grabs him by the throat and demands repayment. The other servant pleads for time. But there is no mercy. He has him imprisoned

until the money can be raised. This is too much for his fellow servants. They report the matter to the king who now demands full payment. The point of the parable is clear; forgiveness is a two way process, 'forgive us our debts, as we forgive those who are indebted to us' – the point that Matthew has been emphasising from the beginning of the Gospel. The first reading and the Gospel tell us why we should forgive. Sirach says it is because we too are 'but flesh', weak human beings who also seek God's forgiveness. Jesus gives the same reason, and then he tells a story to emphasise that what God has forgiven us far exceeds what we are asked to forgive.

Rather than do what we can to resolve petty differences, we sometimes take people to court. Traffic misunderstandings result in road rage. What is happening to us? We do not easily forgive the human weaknesses of others – yet this is precisely what we are called to do. If we refuse to forgive from the depths of our hearts and constantly, we leave the court with our suit dismissed only to find ourselves in the dock among the accused.