

FORGIVENESS

Some very everyday situations are described in the three readings today.

1 Joseph's brothers fear being paid back in full for the way they treated him. They see that their only hope is to admit their wrongdoing and literally throw themselves on his mercy. But to appeal to his heart, they decide to make up a story about their father pleading for them to be forgiven.

2 Christians at Rome had different opinions about what the faith required. Some believed that they should follow a vegetarian diet (vegetarianism was a bit of a fashionable religious fad at the time), others believed they were free to eat anything. Some Jewish Christians, felt that they should keep the Jewish festivals, but this made no sense to gentile Christians.

3 A servant who is forgiven a huge debt by his master fails to show the same generosity towards a fellow-servant who owes him, by comparison, a trifling amount; instead of following his master's example, he treats his fellow-servant harshly and has him thrown into prison.

How do we feel about those who, like Joseph's brothers, knowingly do wrong, assuming that they will get away with it, and when later find themselves discovered, only then acknowledge

their fault, at the same time concocting a falsehood to improve the way they will be treated?

How do we feel towards those whose religious practice differs from ours, particularly if their attitude is less robust and more scrupulous?

How do we feel about those who insist on visiting on the less fortunate the full rigour of the law when they themselves have been spared it?

We might feel in the first case that Joseph's brothers were more concerned to save their skins than to repent of their behaviour – the story they concoct about their father's deathbed request shows that they have not really changed. They feel to me like a bunch of chancers, who find themselves in a tight spot, and use their native cunning to exculpate themselves. If they had not been family, I wonder if Joseph's response would have been different? As it is, he takes the view that beyond their wrongdoing was the beneficent action of God, and that is the deciding factor. 'Am I in the place of God?' Joseph asks rhetorically. If God has brought good out of evil, that decides it. It's not an easy outcome to accept, but before we reject it perhaps we should ask ourselves how we'd feel when we next hope for mercy.

Playing God came naturally to the confident Roman Christians who looked down on their more scrupulous bretheren. The problem is always going to be more acute for the scrupulous; they are much more likely to be offended by what they perceive as the laxity of others, than are the others by their scrupulosity. St Paul

was of like mind to the more confident – he says he is certain, as Jesus taught, that no food is unclean – but he is far less judgemental than them in his response. Like Joseph, Paul reminds the confident that judgement is for God; moreover, they must be guided by the imperative of love: ‘If your brother is being injured because you eat a certain food, then you are no longer living by the rule of love.’ The scrupulous brother is also, like them, someone for whom Christ died, and their conduct must not offend him. Paul then adds a vital point: ‘Your rights must not get a bad name.’ (*Romans 14.15 Moffat version*) Today we put rights on a pedestal; they act like trumps in a game of cards, transcending all other considerations. But in Christ that is not how it is: ‘We are not to please ourselves. Each of us must please his neighbour, doing him good by building up his faith.’ In the same way the scrupulous must not indulge themselves by constantly criticising those of more liberal opinions. If we want forgiveness, then we must forgive others and show them forbearance.

I would guess that the insistence on rights had a part in the attitude of the unmerciful servant in Jesus’ parable – that, and a signal failure to put himself in the position of his debtor. A failure of empathy is one of the characteristics of an unforgiving heart, and underlies the judgemental attitudes condemned by St Paul, along with the refusal to let God do the judging. Jesus told the parable to drive home the point that he made in answer to Peter who had asked him how many times he should forgive someone who had wronged him: ‘as many as seven times?’ Seven symbolised perfection or completeness (as in the seven-day creation), and to

Peter forgiving someone seven times was as much as could be expected – one’s complete duty. Jesus says that is not how it is with God; rather Peter must forgive seventy-seven times, in other words without limit.

Each of the stories illustrates the same point: forgiveness is a divine prerogative, and it is not for us to judge. Moreover, we should remember that forgiveness, even God’s forgiveness, is conditional upon two things: repentance and reciprocity, that is, upon a genuine change of heart and upon our willingness to forgive those who have wronged us – as we say in the Lord’s Prayer, ‘Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.’ The Christians in Rome needed to take to heart the need for reciprocity, and while Joseph may have refused to condemn his brothers, they needed to show genuine repentance if they were truly to be forgiven. And the unmerciful servant showed neither repentance nor reciprocity. But to those who do, God’s forgiveness is without limit.