

**A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole**  
**The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Sunday, September 13, 2020**

Genesis 50:15-21  
Psalm 103  
Romans 14:1-12  
Matthew 18:21-35

I went once with a friend of mine to visit the school he had attended as a boy. It was a large imposing set of buildings set up on the North Yorkshire moors and had the advantage, from a parent's point of view I suppose, that it was at least four miles from the nearest pub and any opportunity of meeting anyone of the opposite sex! It was a Roman Catholic Benedictine Abbey school called Ampleforth and it was run by the brothers from the Abbey around which it was built. At Chapel one Sunday, one of the brothers got up to preach. School was on vacation, so it was largely just the mostly elderly brothers who had lived and worked and prayed together many many years who were there. The brother looked around him in silence for a few seconds and then said to them all. Brothers, "I am afraid have something to tell you. I have to tell that I am dying." There was a stunned silence which he waited to deepen looking around at his brothers with serious and sad eyes. After a while he began to speak about how he wanted to put his affairs in order, to forgive those who had wronged him and to seek the forgiveness of those whom he had wronged. He spoke of how grateful he was for his life and of his sure and certain hope of the mercy of God and of the life of the world to come. He spoke of how much he loved them and how privileged he felt to have lived this life with them for so long. At the end of the sermon he said, "Well, everything I have said is true. It's true of me and it is true of all of you. I don't know when I am going to die. That is in God's hands, but I know I am going to and you and I should live in that knowledge every day. Forgiving one another, being deeply thankful for this life however long or short if may be, and lifting our eyes to the wider horizon to look for the mercy of God and the coming of our dear Lord and his Kingdom."

He sat down, and only slowly did it dawn on his hearers that he was not talking about his imminent demise at all as they had first thought, but rather about the

condition of life in which all we human beings find ourselves every day, striding, as it were, across the sacred moors of life between the cradle and the dawning of Christ's greater day.

It was a trick perhaps, but one that drove home a genuine truth and that left his hearers feeling, not tricked but humbled. If anything it is we who trick ourselves into thinking and living as if what he was saying was not true, that we are not nothing and that we do not need to put our affairs in order, to forgive and seek forgiveness, or to live in deep gratitude for the strange quirky beautiful life that we have been given.

Mark Twain once said, "I've never wished a man dead, but I have read some obituaries with great pleasure."

Today's Gospel is perhaps one of the most challenging in all of Jesus' teaching. The story of the ungrateful servant hammers home the theme of sin and forgiveness that Jesus returns to many times in his preaching. The servant is forgiven an enormous debt. 10,000 talents; a talent was the equivalent of about \$ 350 so 10,000 talents is \$3,500,000. That is an incredible debt, especially when you find that it was more than the total budget of the ordinary province. The total revenue of, even a wealthy province like Galilee, was only 300 talents. Here was a debt which was greater than any king's ransom and yet it was written off and forgiven. The debt which the fellow-servant owed him was a trifling thing; it was 100 denarii; a denarius was worth a few cents in value; and therefore, the total debt was less than \$8. It was approximately one five-hundred-thousandth of his own debt.

'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt."

This is a stark and brutal statement by Jesus. We can be in no doubt about what he requires of us if we wish to gain entry into his Kingdom.

“So also, my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

I remember my dear mother, had a saying, (she had many!) which has stuck with me down the years. “Thank goodness the Lord only requires us to love people, not to like them”!

Some of you may have come across the remarkable story of Eric Lomax, a young man, and railway enthusiast, from my part of the world who was taken prisoner, along with 80,000 other soldiers, by the Japanese after the surrender of Singapore in WWII. Churchill called it the “the worst disaster in British Military history.” It was certainly not Britain’s finest hour and the shame of it will never be forgotten.

Lomax, and many thousands of others were taken and used a slave labor on the Burma railway, an impossible line, dug by hand through 258 miles of jungle and mountains to connect Thailand and Burma. About 16,000 prisoners died under the brutal conditions. Lomax was horribly beaten and tortured after it was discovered that he had built a radio receiver and drawn a map of the railway. The radio gave hope to the broken men as they heard how the war, despite everything was going the allies way. Lomax survived but he was mentally and psychologically broken. Consumed by hatred and haunted by nightmares for 30 years he relived the torture and suffering every day.

The book ends with Lomax's experiences as a much older man, meeting one of his former tormentors face-to-face in Thailand, revisiting his old prison camp and then visiting Japan. This section of the book is the most powerful, as Lomax's utter hatred and loathing of the Japanese comes through the text vividly. He has no interest in forgiveness or reconciliation until he meets his former adversary. Only when he has his torturer in his power and prepares to make him pay like for like, does he realize that he does not want to. He can't torture and kill in the way he had fantasized about for all those years. Revenge suddenly did not seem sweet, and, in his enemy, he began to see, just a man. A man who had done terrible things, who knew it, and as far as could be seen, deeply regretted it. Amazingly, Lomax decides to forgive him and in the years that followed a sort of friendship grew between them based, I think,

on their shared experience of brokenness and their desire to escape the misery of the past that haunted them both. “I don’t want to keep reliving what you did to me every day” Lomax says.

“So also, my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

I don’t know about you, but I wonder how this can possibly be. How can we forgive “from the heart?”

Well, we have to understand something about the Hebrew mind-set in these words. You see, for Jesus and the Jews of his day, the heart was not the center of emotion. We say things like, it was “an affair of the heart”, lovers say “I give you my heart” and so on. For Jesus the heart was not the seat of emotion, it was the center of intellect, of the will. The bowels were the center of a person’s emotion in Jewish thought. If Jesus were teaching that forgiveness is an emotional choice, he would have said, “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your bowels.” It doesn’t quite have the same poetic ring to it, does it? But it’s not the same meaning, you see. Jesus is not talking about emotion. He’s talking about the mind and the will. He’s teaching that forgiveness is a choice we make. We decide to forgive. The translation here might better be “mind” or “soul” rather than what we mean by heart. I can’t emphasize this too strongly. Forgiveness is not denying that somebody has wronged you. It’s not rationalizing. It’s not sweeping under the rug and it is certainly not a warm emotional feeling towards those who have wronged you. It is a choice. Christian love is after all, not principally a feeling, it is an act of will expressed in what we do, and how we behave. As I often say to couples getting married and who are about to promise that they will love each other until death parts them, Jesus shows us what real love is when he hangs dying on that cross outside the city wall. “This is love, that I am prepared to do this for you.” Forgiveness is the same. It is a decision and an action, not a feeling.

My Mum was right. We are required to love, not like. Loving we can do. Liking we have no control over. We are required to forgive in our minds and souls, regardless of how grievously our feelings are hurt or broken.

As Lomax discovered, once he had decided to forgive, he did not suddenly like his torturer, but he was able to move on. His heart, in our sense of the word, began to heal and the raging turmoil of fear and misery and hate began to subside and leave him with a growing degree of peace.

Now Lomax's story, and indeed the account of Jesus on the cross are experiences beyond our knowledge, and may they always be so, but we know well enough what they mean, and the parts of our lives and relationships that they remind us of.

Forgiveness is no easy thing, just as love is no easy thing, but it is possible because it is a decision and not a feeling. We cannot help what we feel but we can help what we do.

The beginning of the Christian life is the acknowledgement of our own sin. We begin at baptism with the washing away of sin of the world, but we also know that the Christian journey will involve repentance, acknowledgement of our sins and the seeking of God's forgiveness every step of the way.

This is not very fashionable in our day, of course. More often it seems to me that the modern Church likes the idea of happy and untroubled Christians who speak only of love and how wonderful God has made us all. We might even imagine that we are all full of love while the rest of the world is full of hate. Well, God has made us wonderful indeed, but what a mess we make of that wonder every day, and what a danger to our souls if we do not see it!

How can we forgive? We can forgive because whatever foulness others may direct at us, we know that foulness in ourselves and, even in our torturer, we recognize the horror of a common sinful humanity.

Like the monks at Ampleforth, our eyes are opened to our real position. We are debtors forgiven of an enormous debt and we know that the sun is always setting on

this strange and sometimes wonderful life God has given us. And so, we choose. We choose to forgive the hurt and wrong that others have done to us. We choose to be grateful for the life we have been given, even if it is not the life we imagined or wanted as we sat day dreaming in the classrooms of our youth. We choose, like the old monk, to live our days like men and women who know we are dying, and only because of this, are able to forgive, to give thanks, to act in love and to lift up our eyes to the horizon where we know the new dawn will come in God's good time.