

14th September, 2014.

**Readings: Genesis 50: 15 - 21
Matthew 18: 21 - 35**

Sermon: Forgiveness

A number of you in Church today will have shared your home with younger or older brothers and sisters when you were children. I'm sure there were occasions when all was not plain sailing. I'm sure there were times when you fell out with each other or got into a fight with each other and one of you would run to your mother and tell her that your big brother or sister or your wee brother or sister had hit you. Some of us will have had the same experience with friends.

Our mother's response to the argument could have varied from 'Well , go and hit her back' to 'What did you do to annoy her?' to 'Go and tell her I said she's to say sorry and then play nicely'.

That phrase, 'Mum says', had a ring of authority about it and very often it gave us the confidence we needed to

do or say what we had been told to do or say in the hope that we could then move on and play nicely.

Joseph's brothers in the story from Genesis used the same technique. Their relationship with their brother had been strained for years as their jealousy increased because of what they believed was favouritism on the part of their father. Their jealousy and their resentment got to such an extreme level that they tried to kill their brother. They left him in a pit and then thanks to Reuben, he was sold to passing traders.

At the point that we picked up the story today, their father is dead and they are scared of what Joseph's reaction to them might be. However, they are starving and their brother, Joseph, has food. They need to go to him but what if he now gets his own back on them? What if he retaliates in some way and punishes them for the way in which they have treated him? They are afraid and so they use a tried and tested method to try and ensure their safety and also to get Joseph to forgive them.

They send Joseph a message and in it they basically say: Dad said this is what you have to do. He says you have to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they have committed in treating you so badly, so please forgive us.

‘Dad says’ and that has a ring of authority about it. It is also a bit manipulative in that their father has just died. If Joseph hadn’t been prepared to forgive his brothers, that would have been like ignoring what was allegedly their father’s final wish but Joseph had already forgiven them.

The blessing he had received in his life after he had been sold, combined with the chance of rebuilding his relationship with his brothers, meant Joseph had had no hesitation in forgiving them. Yes, he put them to the test but he had still forgiven them. He just wanted to know if they had changed. In some ways it seems quite incredible that he would forgive them but it is what our faith advocates and it allows the healing process between the brothers to begin.

The thing is that the only way for broken relationships to be mended is for the two parties to speak to each other.

That is the reason for a number of Churches within the Church of Scotland holding a Service of Reconciliation next Sunday after the Referendum. The Church as a whole wants to encourage people to put their differences aside and to come together and to work together for the good of the people of Scotland, irrespective of how the vote goes.

As with all situations where strong feelings are voiced and where tensions exist, the only way that brokenness can begin healing is by people being brought together with one common purpose.

But healing can be a slow process as we all know and as we can see from the way Jesus replies to Peter's question. **'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?'**

Peter would have been expecting the kind of answer which would have been provided in the Books of the Law, for example in Deuteronomy. He would have been expecting Jesus to spell out for him what the law required and that would have been an end to it but that's not what Jesus did. Peter was looking for a formula for forgiveness.

Offer a sacrifice and a few prayers and hey presto but instead Jesus gives Peter something to think about. He tells him a story because stories stick in our minds and can be recalled when we find ourselves in a similar situation once again.

In the story one servant is forgiven a huge debt simply by asking his master to have mercy on him but then a moment later, he condemns the one who was in debt to him and the whole situation blows up in his face.

Why would the servant fail to forgive when he has just been forgiven? Why would he react in that way? Although he had been forgiven, it would appear that he had not actually received that forgiveness. He had not actually taken on board what an amazing gift he had been given. The forgiveness he had been offered had therefore made no impact on his heart and so he reacted from the place he had been in before. As a result, the outpouring of love and forgiveness which flowed towards him, was prevented from flowing out from him to another. He was still caught up in the story of his past instead of realising that he had

been offered the chance of a new beginning which he could also offer to others. It's like I said last week. There are times when it is easier to receive than to give.

The sad thing is that when we shut ourselves off from love and forgiveness, we don't feel good within ourselves or even about ourselves. Bitterness and negativity trap us and we feel as if we are imprisoned like the servant in the story.

In the story, the other servants could see that when forgiveness is received, it must continue its journey to others. That onward flow of forgiveness is seen in the Lord's prayer which we say week by week. Forgive us as we forgive others. Another occasion when it is seen is when Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on his disciples after his resurrection and tells them that forgiveness will flow through them.

However, Jesus knew that forgiveness was no easy road and that it would be a process and in some cases a long process. When Peter asked Jesus how often he should forgive someone, the answer came back, seventy-seven

times or as it says elsewhere, seventy times seven. That's not an exact figure. It's a sign that we have to keep trying because some will find it hard to accept forgiveness and will keep on sinning and so the onward flow of forgiveness will be blocked. However, if we keep trying to pass it on to others and keep forgiving others who have hurt us, then the flow of forgiveness won't be blocked by us.

On the Church of Scotland website, it was pointed out that there are many public examples of people offering forgiveness to the very people who have killed their relatives and very often their reaction is influenced by their faith.

We saw that reaction in Lockerbie where one parent in particular forgave the bombers. We saw it following some of the bombings in Ireland. We saw that same reaction following the murder of certain black teenagers in England.

In some ways, it doesn't seem rational and it's not but their statements demonstrate that life is not limited to rational understanding. Their public statements of

forgiveness demonstrate to the world that there are deeper values and principles nurtured through spiritual and religious traditions.

Perhaps the idea of forgiveness flowing from one to another helps us to understand their position. What is given to us through faith can be passed on by us in the strength of our faith.

A lack of forgiveness, on the other hand, prevents healing from taking place because it causes hatred and resentment and dis-ease to fester within us.

Jesus, as I said, knew it wouldn't be easy, that it would take time for a change of heart to be experienced. He knew that it would take time for us to become new creations but He started the ball rolling, if you like, when He reached out in love and forgiveness towards us. That ball is now firmly in our court and we have to find ways to keep rolling out forgiveness.

In healthcare chaplaincy, there are opportunities offered for individuals to talk through their problems as a

first step on that road to healing, but not all of us will end up in hospital.

So what do we do as a Church to aid that process of healing through the acceptance of forgiveness? As individuals, we don't like to appear vulnerable before others. As individuals, we don't open up easily to others to say what is in our hearts for fear of being judged or looking silly. As individuals, we don't find it easy to trust people when we have been hurt in the past and yet healing comes through trust, through vulnerability and through openness.

As was pointed out on the website, some Churches run house groups where the same people meet week after week and month after month. In time, many of the people in the groups come to trust each other and are willing to be vulnerable and to talk about themselves to the others, and in time to accept forgiveness and even to pass it on so that the healing process can begin in their lives.

Who do we talk to? Who do you turn to to help you straighten out your debts? God is a constant presence but God has surrounded us with people. Who do you trust? In

whose presence are you willing to be vulnerable? It's not easy but it is the road to a sense of well-being. It's not easy but it is the road to healing.

When we accept forgiveness for ourselves and when we realise what we have been forgiven, it is harder to be judgemental of others because we know in our hearts that we are no better or worse than others. We are all the same. We are all in need of forgiveness and that forgiveness flows out to us from Christ on the Cross. It flows out in love that we might receive it, accept it and pass it on to others. Father, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.