

**Forgiveness and love of our enemies: sermon preached by Rev Christopher Harrison
at St Peter's Church, Nottingham, 13th September 2020 (Trinity 14)**

This day, on which we return to regular worship in St Peter's church, is a day of celebration and thanksgiving; we praise God for having guided us through difficult times and having sustained our life as a worshipping community in spite of all the various constraints. We are still, of course, living in a time of uncertainty; it may be quite a while before we can fully relax and get back to whatever may be the new normal. There remain some, maybe many, within our church family who are taking things cautiously and not venturing out of their homes more than they have to. This is one reason why we are live streaming these services; although we are still learning how to do this most effectively and I ask for your patience and understanding if we encounter any difficulties as far as the streaming is concerned.

But it is a big moment for us to be back together in the House of God. Whilst we can of course worship God, and pray to God, wherever we are, there is something precious about being able to gather around God's holy table and share in the Eucharist, in a holy place in which people have brought to God their hopes and fears, their sadness and their joy, over many centuries. And it's splendid to be able to hear the choir live for the first time in almost six months, albeit reduced in size because of the restrictions. I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Peter, Mike and all the choir members who have been involved in the webcast services over recent weeks, as well as all those others who have contributed to the leading and preparation of these services; they have been a truly splendid and wonderfully creative expression of our worship, and I know they have been an absolute lifeline to many.

On this occasion of our return to St Peter's, it is good that our gospel reading takes us right back to the heart of our faith, and invites us to reflect upon one of its core elements, which is forgiveness. Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive his brother; Jesus said not just seven times, but seventy times seven times; in other words, forgiveness is to be without limit, we are to keep forgiving without any endpoint. Jesus goes on to tell a parable which reminds us that just as God forgives us, and keeps on forgiving us, we are also to forgive our neighbour again and again, whenever this is necessary. I'm sure we all know that if a forgiving, understanding, non-judgemental attitude becomes part of our nature, not only does

life tend to run more smoothly, but our relationships with others are better, those around us feel more accepted and loved, and we also thereby become blessed. Surely Jesus, in that discussion with Peter, was trying to get the disciples to understand that forgiveness should not just be something we bring out from time to time when we think we need to, but it should be a quality, nurtured within us by the Holy Spirit, which permeates all that we do. Now of course we are only human, and it's very human to fall short of this ideal, but it's nonetheless important to strive towards it.

There is, however, a more difficult aspect of forgiveness which we can't avoid. Jesus is clearly saying that we should forgive others without limit, and repeatedly. But what about when a person or persons have systematically and deliberately caused harm to others many times (or even, for that matter, just once)? In recent months there has arisen a heightened awareness of the historic oppression of large numbers of people through slavery, or through other social structures which deny people the right to be fully human on grounds of factors such as their race. The last century of course saw some particularly extreme examples of inhumanity such as the Holocaust, the Soviet work camps known as gulags; the Rwanda genocide, and arguably the Bengal famine. Can we really forgive those who were responsible for the deaths of millions? Or on a smaller scale, but no less abhorrent, what about when someone repeatedly and cold bloodedly abuses someone vulnerable, not just creating extreme suffering but scarring their life for years to come?

Now there have always been some people who have managed to forgive those who have caused horrendous pain or even death to someone they loved. There have been those in the Nazi concentration camps, or who survived the Rwanda genocide, who have been able to forgive their tormentors. But these are exceptional people. For most of us, it is far more difficult, and understandably so. Jesus was able to say, on the cross, about those who had crucified him, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'; this is a wonderful ideal for us to aim for, but all too often, and entirely understandably, we fall far short of it.

However, we can't avoid the fact that Jesus does clearly tell us to forgive, and to keep on forgiving. How might we go about this, even in the face of the most horrendous and barbaric

actions which we still see all too often in today's world? The key, I believe, is to keep in the forefront of our minds Jesus' command that we should love our enemies. Not just love those who love us; or love others when we feel like it; but to love those who are hostile to us (as the Greek word for enemy reminds us). Now loving our enemies doesn't necessarily mean that we have to like them; even less does it mean that we turn a blind eye to, or condone, things that they have done which are clearly wrong. But it does mean remembering that they too are children of God; there is, somewhere, something of God's image in them; and that God wants the best for them even if they are far away from going down the right path. So our love for our enemies means that we too should want the best for them; this may well mean wanting them to see the error of their ways, to turn their lives around, and cease causing harm to others. And this means that our love for our enemies also involves our praying for them; praying that God will show them his paths, the paths of repentance, of love and mercy, and that, just like the lost sheep, they will be brought back to God's fold.

If we can bring ourselves to love our enemies and pray for them, in this way, we will also find that, almost miraculously, the pain and suffering they have caused to us, to those who are close to us, or to people in wider society, starts to have less of a hold over us. Wrong actions are always wrong actions, and we need to stand firm against them; but by giving back love in the face of evil, we can play our part in building a world which is not dominated by an unremitting cycle of violence and revenge, hurt and more hurt, and ever deepening divisions between people. And as we join with others of goodwill who seek, peace, justice and reconciliation, we come to see that it's not for us to judge those whose actions have harmed humanity, but for God, which is actually a form of forgiveness on our part.

On that note, I think our Lord should have the last word: for surely he speaks to us all when he forgave a woman who had broken the ancient Jewish law, and said, to those who were about to kill her, 'Let whoever is without sin cast the first stone'. Amen.