

24th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR A 2020

Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 27:30-28:9 Romans 14:7-9 Matthew 18:21-35

Reflection

Fr Tao Pham

Dear sisters and brothers, last week the Gospel was about correction, something we love to do but don't care to receive. This weekend's Gospel is about something we love to receive, but find it very hard to do and that is forgiveness.

First, we should forgive. As we look at the second half of the Gospel parable, the servant doesn't look all the bad. Someone owns his money and didn't pay on time. So he has him punished. That was justice in those days. It was harsh justice, but justice. What makes the servant's behaviour so outrageous, even after 2000 years, is the first part of the story in the Gospel. He himself had a much bigger debt cancelled and he should have done the same.

The second point is that we need to forgive. Imagine a world or a life where nobody ever forgave anything. Such a world would be cruel, cold, callous, and frozen in place. To forgive is not to forget, it is not to excuse; it is not to condone. To forgive is to recognize the damage someone has done, to move away from revenge and retaliation but to refuse to be damaged further by what that person has done. The alternative is to be trapped in the past, furious for years over ancient offenses. The hatred, resentment and anger that go with that can become a spiritual melanoma on our life. To refuse to forgive is to allow a past hurt to stay radioactive in our heart and our life, gradually poisoning our life. Forgiveness frees us from an obsession with past hurts. It helps us move on with our life and to grow in grace. By refusing to forgive, we transform a past harm into a continuing hurt that can consume us.

One of the things that can motivate us to forgive is an appreciation of our own need of forgiveness. Jesus says that unless we forgive others God won't forgive us. The fault is not with God but with us. When we refuse to forgive we break down the bridge over which we ourselves must pass. Forgiveness, on the other hand, clears a path for God to forgive us, 'Forgive your neighbour the hurt he does you, and when you pray your sins will be forgiven' (First Reading). When we forgive, we ourselves are the main beneficiaries. But forgiveness also benefits the person who is forgiven. It sets the person free to walk in friendship with God and with the person he has offended. We constantly fall short of complete forgiveness. Perhaps

this is why Jesus tells us that we have to forgive seventy times seven. There is no moments when we are not in need of forgiveness nor any moment when we do not need to be forgiving. Forgiveness is nor of the highest and most beautiful forms of love. It is a holy task. Only God can help us to accomplish it fully.

Finally, we can forgive. In fact, we do forgive all the time. We all experience hurts from friends, family, people at work. Most of the time, we edit them out and move on. Like natural healing, forgiveness happens if we don't keep pulling off the scab.

“Forgive your neighbor's faults and when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven.”—these words from the First Reading this weekend remind us that forgiveness is a deep and necessary part of our spiritual tradition, handed down to us from our Jewish ancestors in faith. Jesus echoes this teaching when He gives us the “Our Father,” which tells us to pray, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

We have an obligation to forgive those who have offended us. But we also have an obligation to ask forgiveness of those we have offended, the former can be very hard. But the latter can be even harder. It can take great courage to ask for forgiveness.

Story: A man who was dying said on his death bed that he could not forgive his former wife for getting drunk and dropping their daughter on her head when she was a child, causing their daughter to have emotional and physical problems for the rest of her life. He did say, however, that despite his feelings, he prayed each day for his former wife. This was the only forgiveness he had to offer. God has forgiven our huge debt, but many must still admit that forgiveness is a constant struggle.

Forgiveness doesn't show weakness but strength and power. It enables us to stop reacting and to take control of ourselves. In fact, forgiveness does more good for us than for the one we forgive because it sets us free.

How can we begin to forgive another? The Lord says, “Pray for those who persecute you.” Prayer transforms us from being a victim into becoming an intercessor. We can start to see people who have done us wrong in a new light, as individuals themselves in need of healing. To start the process of forgiveness, prayer for the other is always a good place to begin.

A second step is to pray for ourselves. Christ's sacrifice on the Cross is the source of a great, huge river of forgiveness. At each Mass, we can ask the Lord to irrigate the hard desert of our soul with His water of forgiveness, to enable us to forgive and to be set free.

A third step is to look the future and not to dwell in the past. We all have hurts from the past. Forgiveness comes as we look forward to what can be in our life and not to what was. In other words, life is short. We all need to look to our future with the Lord.

Jesus asks us to forgive 'seventy times seven'. This means forgiveness must be unlimited. There is no point in pretending that forgiveness is easy. It is never easy. Without the grace of God it is sometimes impossible.

When we get hurt, we naturally grow resentful and bitter. Resentment and bitterness are very dangerous things, and we cannot be healed of them unless we forgive. We all need to forgive because at one time or another we all have been hurt. What can we do? We have to remember that forgiveness cannot be achieved overnight. Forgiveness is a process, and like all processes it takes time. There are steps we can take, which, with the grace of God, will lead to forgiveness and healing of the hurt.

1. We must recognise that a wrong has been done to us. There is no point in pretending it didn't happen.
2. We must recognise that we have feelings about this. We feel angry and hurt. These feelings are not sins. In fact, they are natural and healthy.
3. We should talk about these feelings. If we can't do this with the person who has hurt us, we should do it with someone we trust.
4. We should make a decision to forgive. Forgiveness is an act of the will, not of the feelings. But this doesn't mean that feelings of hurt and bitterness will suddenly disappear. The healing of these will take time.
5. Finally, we have to make a decision about our relationship with the person who has hurt us – whether to continue it or discontinue it. Reconciliation is not always possible, It takes two to be reconciled.

It's not a question of forgiving if and when the offender repents. We are expected to forgive even if the offender doesn't repent – that is what makes it so difficult, and why we need God's grace.

We need to pray for the gift of forgiveness. Unless we forgive, we will not be able to let go of bitterness and resentment, and so will not know peace or healing. And unless we forgive others God won't forgive us. The fault is not with God but with us. When we refuse to forgive we break down the bridge over which we ourselves must pass.

Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting the wrong done to us. It means remembering and letting go. Forgiveness is one of the highest and most beautiful forms of love, it is a holy task, Only God can help us to accomplish it fully.

This weekend's Gospel deals with a subject that touches us all – forgiveness. None of us can go through life without getting hurt. The memory of wrongs done to us seeps into our heart, producing a legacy of bitterness and resentment. Some people have years of stored hurts inside them.

The Gospel from Matthew this weekend is very strong. Jesus is so clear in His teaching to us: forgive everything from your heart! We are not allowed to hold on to anything against anybody. Rather, as Jesus teaches, we must go even further and help those who harm us and give to those who rob us. To follow Jesus is not easy and asks us to give ourselves completely to Him and to following Him. Christianity will never be a life of comfort, even though we may have comforts from time to time. We should forgive; we need to forgive; we can forgive because forgiveness releases our soul from spiritual paralysis and makes room for God's grace and will in our life. Forgiveness is the spiritual surgery that brings healing.

This weekend, we are invited to forgive and to follow Jesus once more in a way that gives witness to the glory of God. Let us walk the way of the Lord. Amen.

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