

I remember once speaking with an Australian missionary priest who said that in the country he was working in, one of the things that the local people found hardest to understand about Christianity was the idea of forgiveness. He gave the example of the parable of the prodigal son, with the people declaring that the father in the parable was a bad father because he did not punish his son.

I think it is a similar thing in today's gospel about forgiveness. Peter puts the question to Jesus, "how often must I forgive my brother or sister who wrongs me?" We see that Peter has some idea of the importance of forgiveness because the question asks if it needs to be as much as seven times. When Peter speaks of seven, he is not thinking of counting from one to seven and after that you don't need to forgive. In his world, seven was the perfect number and signified completeness. So, to forgive seven times was to forgive always. This makes Jesus' response even more interesting when he says, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times". He is reinforcing that forgiveness should always be offered, without exception. I think the question is whether Peter was shocked by this response. Or are we shocked by this response?

The parable illustrates the point in a dramatic way. The thing to note in the parable is the difference between the two amounts that were owed. The amount owed to the king was enormous – so large in fact, that it would have been impossible to pay it back. On the other hand, the amount owed to the servant was much smaller – probably a few months wages. It would have taken time to pay it back, but it could be done.

The tension that goes on in the parable is between justice and mercy. In both cases something is owed, and justice would demand that the money be paid back in full to its rightful owner. This would have been even more the case if the money owed was due to mismanagement and wastefulness, which seems to be suggested in the case of the servant who owed the king such a huge amount. Yet, on the other hand, both servants plead for mercy. All they want is a bit of time to work off their debt. In the case of the king who released his servant from his debt, we saw an act of great mercy. But in the case of the servant who demanded that his fellow servant repay all his debt immediately, we saw the exacting of justice without mercy.

At the end of the parable, Jesus makes it clear which of the two actions was pleasing to God. Mercy prevails over justice. But we also need to recall how the parable began. Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven can be compared to the king. The point is that those who act like the king belong to God's kingdom. Those who are disciples of Jesus will act like the king and show mercy.

This all sounds good, but we know that living this way is not easy. For many people it can be very hard to forgive someone who has hurt them. They can be filled with feelings of anger, betrayal, disappointment and sometimes even failure or guilt. They sense that their relationship with the other person has changed, and perhaps that change will be permanent. The command to forgive is not a command to pretend that there is no hurt or that violence has not been done. It is not a command to carry on with life as though nothing has happened.

Jesus' teaching belongs to the wisdom tradition. We heard some of that tradition in the first reading where the wise man reminded his listeners that resentment and anger are foul things. They are foul things because they hold back the person who has been wronged. The person who has been wronged, of course, doesn't need forgiveness, but they do need to be healed of the hurt they have experienced. The first reading suggests that if they nurse anger against that person, they effectively close themselves to the compassion of God. There is one further thing we need to note about God. God is patient. It may take someone a long time to reach the point where they can forgive someone who has wronged them, especially if the hurt or betrayal has been very deep. The Christian life is a journey, a pilgrimage. We keep on the way, gradually getting closer to our destination; gradually becoming more and more part of the kingdom.

We can perhaps understand why those who have never heard the gospel find this teaching of Jesus hard. As we listen to it, let's allow the Holy Spirit to transform our hearts to become like the heart of Jesus.