

Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2023 9.00 am and 10.30 am

# **LIFE-LONG JOURNEY OF MERCY AND FORGIVENESS**

Sermon preached by The Revd Dr Tony Martin delivered at Cromwell  
Presbyterian Church

## **READINGS:**

**Hebrews 11:29-12:2**

**29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.**

**30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days.**

**31 By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.**

**32 And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. 35 Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. 36 Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— 38 the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.**

**39** These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, **40** since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

**12** Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, **2** fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

## **Matthew 18:21-35**

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

**21** Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or

**sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”**

**22 Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.**

**23 “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. 25 Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.**

**26 “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ 27 The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.**

**28 “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a**

**hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.**

**29 "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'**

**30 "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.**

**32 "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34 In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.**

**35 “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”**

## **SENTENCE FOR THE DAY**

**‘Is not my word like fire’ says the Lord, ‘and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?’  
Jeremiah 23:29**

## **INTRODUCTION**

As I started writing my sermon my daily reading from Scripture was Psalm 84, which begins by saying **“How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul has a desire and longing to enter the courts of the Lord”**

Well, yes. That is true. It is a joy to be here with you at Cromwell this morning.

So, Lord, what do you want to say to us this week?

Well, I eventually settled on the following sermon title “A life-long journey of mercy and forgiveness”

Oh oh, you might be thinking, not that gnarly subject of forgiveness ... because I am very comfortable with self-pity ... resentment ... anger ... and unforgiveness. I know them well ... and they know me ... so please don't ask me to change ... because you have no idea what I have gone through. Hmmm

I wonder if you know the first line of Scott Peck's book **The road less travelled**? “Life is difficult” And the second line affirms the first “This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths”.

Scott Peck is good author, and he has got it mostly right! **The greatest truth is: God loves us ... forgives us ... and helps us to love and forgive others.**

So, what is forgiveness?

There is so much to unpack on this subject.

And I find forgiveness one of the most challenging aspects of the faith.

As difficult as it may sound ... forgiveness should not depend on the other person saying sorry ... or on their repentance.

I can almost guarantee, you will never hear the words 'sorry' or 'I repent', sadly.

And if we wait for that to happen then we are holding our forgiveness ... and thus healing ... hostage to the other person ... and so they will hurt us for the second time.

I believe forgiveness does not mean ... accepting what the other person has done ... that it was OK

... or condoning it in anyway ... because the law of the land might have a different view.

The law of the land requires ... legal accountability ... and will dispense ... justice ... to the injury and to the rehabilitation ... of the offender.

This is a mark ... I believe ... of a civilised society ... and is God honouring ... moreover it takes account of our ... sinful nature ... and the prevalence of evil.

And with regard to the State's responsibility to uphold justice - if need be by the sword - allow me to remind you of the authority of Scripture on this matter:

**1 Peter 2 vs 13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. 15 For it is God's will that by**

**doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. 16 Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. 17 Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the emperor.**

Or ... and assuming, of course, the authority is acting justly, Paul writes in ...

**Romans 13 vs 1 Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. 2 Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. 4 For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear**

**the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. 5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.**

It is important, I believe, to realise that any consideration of forgiveness ... understands that criminal or evil actions are not outside justice ... in either the human or divine court ... because those courts operate independently from us ... especially on criminal matters.

So the State is authorised by God to punish criminals and evil doers. But as individuals, we are asked to forgive those who harm us.

And further, I don't believe forgiveness necessarily means ... we should trust ... or continue to associate ... with the person ... we are forgiving ...

that could actually be dangerous ... or even foolish.

So, forgiveness, I believe, is essentially about our reaction to something awful ... and how we can best move on ... in healing.

So, let's dig into the Scriptures today, especially the Gospel - Matthew 18:21-35 and see what it says about forgiveness.

## **FIRSTLY, JESUS TEACHES US TO SHOW UNLIMITED FORGIVENESS**

Now, you may recall this announcement from Air New Zealand ...

Please return to your seats and fasten your seatbelt. The captain has put on the seatbelt sign because we are going to experience some turbulence.

And may I say, this parable may cause spiritual turbulence for many of us.

The first part of the parable consists of a statement exhorting unlimited forgiveness. But it does more than this, however.

“Seventy-seven times” is probably an allusion to Genesis 4:24, where **Lamech** proudly boasts to his wives that he will avenge himself seventy-sevenfold ... on anyone who dares to attack him.

Forgiveness is therefore presented by Jesus as the opposite of revenge.

Followers of Jesus must renounce ... the very human ... impulse or ...intention ... of getting even ... with someone ... who repeatedly injures them.

You see ... they are called to be Lamech’s polar opposite.

Did you notice ... in the second part of his response to Peter's question ... Jesus provides the theological grounding for unlimited forgiveness.

And it is important to note that this is not simply a "Go and do likewise" parable, like that concerning the Good Samaritan.

No, it is a kingdom parable: **"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to...."** says Jesus.

Peter's question addresses ... a very complex human problem ... from a human perspective.

And here is the point ... Jesus answers with a parable ... that grounds forgiveness ... in the nature of God.

**SECONDLY, USING THIS PARABLE, JESUS SAYS WE CAN BE FORGIVEN SINS, EVEN THOSE OF A MOST SERIOUS NATURE**

OK, the parable tells of an **Oriental sultan** who conducts an audit of the operations of his ministers of state and provincial governors – the word “servant” or “slave” was used apparently of all administrators, whether “free” or not.

According to the parable, it is discovered that one, perhaps the administrator of a wealthy province, has embezzled an immense amount of tax revenue ... (interestingly, scholars say the equivalent to a day’s wages for 100,000,000 labourers! – now that a lot of money!).

So, restitution is impossible.

Rather than simply executing the embezzler, the sultan determines to inflict a degrading and protracted punishment; the man, his wife and children will be put on public display and sold into slavery.

Not surprisingly, the man pleads for time to make restitution ... an impossibility and a delusion.

In response ... the king displays a remarkable and inexplicable change of mind: the king abruptly reverses his decision, and totally forgives the debt.

Can you believe that? How would you feel if you were the embezzler?

Here Jesus is making a reference to the generosity and magnificence of God's love ...

God is abounding and extravagant in forgiveness to those who seek it.

Now, in the second scene, the central figure changes his role. He is not now a debtor but a creditor.

So a “fellow slave”—that is, another member of the king's administration - has defaulted on a small

loan (apparently equivalent to a labourer's wage for one hundred days).

The debtor begs for an extension, using the same words as his counterpart in the first scene.

The difference, of course, is that in this instance the promise to repay is a credible possibility; repaying 100, not 100,000,000 days wages.

But the pardoned embezzler ... stands on his rights ... and tolerates no breach ... of the original contract.

He takes legal action ... to have the defaulter ... thrown into a debtors' prison.

Which one has to say ... was not a holiday with free board and accommodation ... or a rather miserable lockdown.

Oh dear ... he had hoped for a different outcome, I am sure.

Now, the third scene, is the same as the first.

Other administrative officials, appalled by the embezzler's harsh treatment of his debtor, have reported the incident ... and the king has summoned ... the pardoned embezzler to stand again at the bar.

Can you possibly imagine ... what the media today would make of this ... and how social media would explode ... with excitement ... on this developing court room drama?

The cruel pardoned embezzler is addressed as a "wicked slave." Meaning bad, unethical, envious, grudging, and miserly spirited.

One feels that Judge Judy, of television fame, has been completely upstaged by this scenario.

Now, in his anger, at the man's inhumane conduct, the king once again reverses his judgment ... and this time turns the man over to his torturers ... with instructions they continue to inflict physical pain ... until full restitution has been made ... that is ... for the rest of his natural life.

**WELL, LET US ASK THE QUESTION WHAT DOES JESUS WANT US TO TAKE AWAY FROM THIS PARABLE?**

I believe, in our understanding of this powerful story, we must be careful to distinguish the heart of the teaching of Jesus.

As in many rabbinic parables ... the figure of the king serves allegorically as a reference to God ... but this does not mean that ALL the details of the king's behaviour ... can be taken as statements ... about the nature of God.

Just as we do not regard God as an Oriental king, who would sell women and children into slavery as punishment for their husbands' sins ...

we need not take the concluding detail ... about unending physical torture ... to be the end state of those who struggle to forgive.

Although the story focuses on the heartless behaviour of the pardoned man ... the theological centre ... is the astounding generosity of the king.

So ... Jesus is teaching us ... that God loves us ... and that if we come humbly, honestly, and ask for forgiveness and mercy ... it will be given.

This is the Kingdom of heaven. This is the good news. God is merciful and generous ... beyond measure ... and beyond our understanding.

But, and here is the rub ... those who wish to be part of that kingdom ... must seek to imitate the incalculable patience and generosity ... of its king.

This parable is not a detailed theological treatise on the character of God, but a story – a parable – on some important aspects of the divine nature.

In a nutshell, God takes seriously our forgiving of others ... because God takes seriously forgiving us.

And, if we do not forgive others, as we have been forgiven, there is a price to be paid.

You see, someone who does not forgive pays a double price. Firstly, they suffer the original injury.

And, secondly, unforgiveness can wreck a devastating impact on our life, causing misery, heart ache, unending sadness and crushing self-pity.

Supremely, and sadly ... by this course of action, that we have chosen ... we also exclude ourselves

from the healing and hope of God ... through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

That is what I believe the disturbing, and frightening words, of verse 34 are trying to communicate **“In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed”**

I believe unforgiveness ... is a jail for the soul.

The country cousins of anger, bitterness, hatred, and self-pity ... will torture us ... and they limit ... perhaps even exclude ... God's ability ... to heal and set us free.

**SO, THIRDLY AND FINALLY, YOU MIGHT ASK, 'WELL, TONY, HOW THEN SHALL I FORGIVE?'**

Allow me to suggest a pathway of six steps (briefly).

**STEP ONE:** You can't truly forgive unless you have grasped the extent of the violation that has been done against you. Maybe with the help of a minister, pastor, priest, a counsellor, or a wise caring listener, I encourage you to seek to understand ... what happened to you ... when you were hurt ... and why it hurts so much.

**STEP TWO:** Write down the name of the person you are choosing to forgive. Underneath that name, think of the many things you have done, in your life, for which you need forgiveness, and write them down.

When we realize how much we need to be forgiven ... for all the wrongs we have done ... it makes it easier ... to show mercy ... to those who have hurt us.

And that was one of the things ... Jesus was trying to teach us ... in the parable, I believe.

**STEP THREE:** Realize that forgiving others is a spiritual and supernatural exercise. In fact, I believe it is impossible to truly forgive others without God's help.

So, I believe God can help you to forgive because ... not only can he forgive you ... he also has the power to help you to forgive others.

You see, the Lord helps those ... who admit their helplessness.

Perhaps a simple prayer like this:

**Lord, I admit I can't easily forgive in my own power.**

**Please help me.**

**Help me to understand how much you have forgiven me ... so I can forgive ... the person who has hurt me.**

**STEP FOUR:** Now is time to make the big decision to surrender.

So ... I strongly suggest ... to let go of your deep desire to get even with the person who has violated you.

And come up with a prayer ... or statement ... announcing your decision ... consciously or unconsciously.

And here is an example:

By an act of my will, and seeking God's power, I give up my right to get even with you, and I forgive you in Jesus name.

I make a commitment ... that when feelings come over me again ... I will release them. I won't nurse them.

I will admit the feelings are real ... but I choose not to be controlled ... and to be defined by them ... any longer.

I will dwell ... on the good things ... of the Lord's love for me ... and I bless you.

**STEP FIVE:** Make a choice to show compassion on your violator.

Look at them first, as a tragedy.

In one sense they should be pitied.

The bottom line is ... because of their violation against you ... they have suffered ... are suffering ... and in the end will suffer far more in this life ... and perhaps in the one to come ... when justice finds them out.

And one way to show compassion ... is to pray for the person ... who has hurt you. Jesus said, "**Pray**

**for your enemies” and “Bless those who curse you”.**

So, ask for a blessing in their life. Pray that good things will come to them. And wish them well.

**STEP SIX:** Move on. It’s time to make a concerted effort to stop dwelling on what happened.

And forgiving ... I believe, takes time.

It just doesn’t happen once.

So I believe forgiveness is a journey.

And finally ... let the Lord ... take the pain from your life.

It is not your place ... to administer judgement ... or punishment.

And you certainly ... should not punish yourself ...  
any longer ... by holding onto unforgiveness ...

and its ugly red-necked cousins of hurt, anger,  
hatred, and self-pity.

Move on.

Let it go.

And travel the life-long journey of mercy and  
forgiveness.

**AMEN**