A Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The thread that connects the letter from the Romans and the Gospel according to Matthew is how we should approach and interact with others, and that we should do so generously. So often our Scripture teaches us valuable lessons about the nature and meaning of community, and how Christian communities are to be shaped and operate.

The best part of the passage from the Letter to the Romans is at the end of the section we heard. Let us "resolve instead to never put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother or sister". We need to encourage others, just as we hope that they would encourage us, and I'll speak more about that later in this sermon.

The Gospel passage sees Peter ask Jesus a question about forgiveness. How often should we forgive someone? It's an important question. Forgiveness is something we are to take seriously, both in seeking it, and providing it. Given Peter's betrayal of Jesus during his arrest and condemnation, it is fitting that he is the one to ask about forgiveness, and to hear this lesson as to how deeply God is willing to forgive.

Jesus' response of seventy-seven times is not to be taken literally, but it does show us the lengths to which we are expected to go when someone seeks forgiveness. (And of course, it also lets us know how deeply we may be forgiven when we seek forgiveness).

But of course, the process forgiveness is not as simple as someone asking for forgiveness and being forgiven. Part of asking for forgiveness includes an honest recognition of the wrong that has been done, and a genuine desire that this not occur again. It indicates that change will take place, in order that the past may be the past.

It is not about forgetting what happened or pretending that the hurt never occurred, but learning from it in the most constructive and productive manner, and making sure the future is different.

And then Jesus shares a parable that reminds us that we need to be a forgiving to others as we wish people to be to us. Generous forgiveness cannot only go one way.

One of the tragedies in the parable is that the servant who is forgiven does not immediately learn from being forgiven, and is harsh and unforgiving to others. This leads to him being condemned for his lack of mercy. So let us remember to be merciful, and to be both aware of and grateful for the mercy shown to us.

There are some people in the story who only appear in a single sentence, but whose actions are worth considering. "When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place." They are distressed by the injustice of the situation, and seek to get help from

someone in authority. We should stand up for both our own rights and the rights of others.

Archbishop Oscar Romero said that “the ones who have a voice must speak for those who are voiceless.” That’s what the servants in this story did, even with their limited voices of the time and culture in which they lived. They spoke up. They called this act of injustice out, and they called out the hypocrisy. May we be so bold to do likewise.

We may find the passage from the letter to the Romans as equally inspiring. The text we heard today sees Paul in a rather diplomatic mood. He begins by reminding us that we welcome all within the Christian community, and not in order to make them conform to our point of view; we should not quarrel over opinions.

He then uses an example of diet. Some people eat meat, some are vegetarian. Both choices are valid. We should not pass judgement on the choices of others, because God welcomes all people.

It is an important reminder that all people are made in the image of God, and the choices we make reflect something of God within us. It’s not just about diet, it’s about honouring the integrity with which people make choices about their lives, and not judging others for those choices.

Ultimately, whatever we do, we do for God, and that should be celebrated and honoured.

The final words of the passage we heard today are, arguably, the most profound. “Let us therefore no longer pass judgement on one another, but resolve instead to never put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother or sister”.

Here Paul paints an image of a Christian community which is revolutionary in the way that it will engage with others. The judgement and criticism of the world are to be left behind, and we are called to be people who engage with each other on equal terms, with respect and grace, and with forgiveness and friendship. May we do our part in shaping it, bringing it to fruition, and sharing its blessings with those around us.

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