

Trinity XV– 24th in OT – Year A
‘Forgive your Brother or Sister from your Heart’

Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of the United States, was elected to office on an antislavery ticket, an election that hastened the Civil War. In 1863 Lincoln issued a proclamation freeing Southern Slaves, and two years later masterminded the 13th Amendment, prohibiting slavery anywhere in the United States. Lincoln was opposed to all forms of slavery, not least people becoming slaves because of their anger, resentment, and hatred.

Lincoln's secretary of war, Edwin Stanton, had some trouble with a major general who accused him, in abusive terms, of favouritism. Stanton complained to Lincoln, who suggested that he write the officer a sharp letter. Stanton did so and showed the strongly worded statement to the president, who applauded its powerful language. "What are you going to do with it?" he asked. Surprised at the question, Stanton said: "Send it of course." Lincoln shook his head. "You don't want to send that letter," he said. "Put it in the stove. That's what I do when I have written a letter when I am angry. It's a good letter and you had a good time writing it and feel better. Now, burn it and write another." - ‘Great counselling skills Mr. Lincoln’ – maybe we can practice it when we have typed an email or a text message when we are angry; first type it all out and express all you want to say and then delete it, then type another one when you have calmed down.

Lincoln could have read the advice given in the book of Sirach which we heard this morning: "If a man nurses anger against another, can he then demand compassion from the Lord? Showing no pity for a man like himself, can he then plead for his own sins?"

Nursing anger, resentment, or hatred is dangerous for our overall general health and indeed fatal for our emotional and spiritual well-being. Today, the Lord Jesus, the divine psychologist, invites each of us to focus on forgiveness; to remember that we are forgiven by him when we repent, and that we are indeed invited to forgive our brothers and sisters when they wrong us in one way or the other. Firstly let us look at what forgiveness is and is not, and some stages in the process of Forgiveness. Then I want to highlight two points emphasised by our scriptures this morning – Firstly, we are compelled and obliged to forgive, and Secondly, it is beneficial for us to forgive.

What's a good definition of forgiveness? – Forgiveness is a process where someone who has been wronged chooses to let go of their resentment and treat the wrongdoer with compassion.

Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation; which is the process of returning to a relationship, although if possible this would be the ideal. With God this is always possible but not with human beings. Sometimes, we can forgive but might not be able to restore a broken relationship to its initial state. Forgiveness is not forgetting the injustice and brushing it off, nor its condoning or excusing the offender's behaviour, that's a lack of assertiveness or courage. It's not 'letting go, but wishing for revenge' either.

You can forgive a person while in no way believing that their actions were acceptable or justified. At times, forgiveness can occur without ever speaking to the wrongdoer, it's an emotional change that occurs within a person who has been wronged. The first step of forgiveness is the decision to overcome the pain that was inflicted by the wrongdoer and the decision to forgive. Once you have decided, then start the process of letting go of anger, resentment, shame, and other negative emotions associated with the injustice, even though they are reasonable feelings. To do this we need to begin to understand the offender in a new way, with the merciful eyes of Jesus, thinking about what has allowed the wrongdoer to act in that way, and allow positive feelings to grow toward the offender and yourself. Treating the offender with compassion, even though they do not deserve it or are entitled to it. If we persevere with this process we will find meaning in the experience, and mature in our emotional and spiritual lives.

Jesus' parable today emphasises that forgiveness is not an option for a committed Christian – we do not have a choice when it comes to forgiving our sister or brother. A man was brought forward before a king who owed a sum of ten thousand talents. A Jewish talent was made of silver, weighing 43 620 grams. A Talent is about 6000 denarii, and a denarii was a day's wage. So a talent would be worth 20 years of daily wages for a six-day workweek. So, 10,000 talents are 200,000 years of labour! A rough calculation is \$ 5.4 Billion. So this first guy was forgiven \$5.4 billion. But the real point of this story is, that Jesus is saying each of us has been forgiven \$5.4 by God, and each of us has been forgiven something we could have never paid back, even if you were a billionaire who could afford about \$5.4 billion.

Now, 100 denarii is a significant sum. That was what the servant's servant owed him. It's four months wages. This is a real debt. In modern money, one calculation suggests it is

about \$9000. And the debtor rightfully should repay it. Thus, Jesus acknowledges that people will sin against us; and we will be hurt or let down, we would have the right to claim repayment. But the magnitude of God's forgiveness means that we must forgive even significant debts owed to us by others. After all, what is \$9000 when compared with \$5.4 Billion? So, the point is we are obliged to forgive, compelled to forgive since we are forgiven so very much by our forgiving God.

"You wicked servant", he said. "I cancelled all that debt of yours when you appealed to me. Were you not bound, then to have pity on your fellow servant just as I had pity on you?"

This is why Jesus is saying, "Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times" We will never forgive others as much as we are forgiven by God.

Secondly, it is beneficial for us to forgive and let go, as opposed to holding resentment, entertaining grudges, or harbouring hatred. In my counselling practice, I have a client, who harbours a deep hatred for his ex-bosses who got rid of him unfairly. It deeply hurt him and shattered his retirement plans and Christmas that year. He was so angry toward them and began to hate them with a passion. This hatred has biopsychosocial consequences for him.

He suffers from panic attacks, lack of sleep and nightmares, anxiety, depression, and other psychosomatic issues even after months since the incident. A great injustice has surely occurred to this man. But, the way he has decided to respond to this injustice is hatred, which is a very strong and deep negative emotion that robs him of his emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being. I have managed to convince him of the real source of his problems without any reference to faith or religion.

The happiest people I have met in my pastoral and professional work are those who harbour no resentments or hatred. They have deep peace and sleep well at night. Harbouring hatred can be compared to being tormented, as it says at the end of the gospel "And in his anger the master handed him to the torturers till he should pay all his debt" – another good quote about resentment which is attributed to few people including Nelson Mandela goes like this - "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies" – So, it is beneficial for us to forgive. Forgive others, not so much for the sake of the person who has hurt you, but for your own sake, for your own peace of mind and well-being. So, let's not lock ourselves in the prisons of anger, resentment, and hatred but free ourselves with mercy, forgiveness, and compassion, as Jesus has asked us.