

The fourteenth Sunday after Trinity - Proper 19 – 13 September

Collect

Merciful God, you Son came to save us and bore our sins on the cross: may we trust in your mercy and know your love, rejoicing in the righteousness that is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Genesis 50. 15-21

Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?' So they approached Joseph, saying, 'Your father gave this instruction before he died, "Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you." Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.' Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves.' But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

Romans 14. 1-12

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.'

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Matthew 18. 21-35

Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and

seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. 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. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

Reflection

Our readings for this Sunday are about forgiveness. We first hear how Joseph greets his brothers despite their earlier treatment of him. Then in the gospel reading Peter is keen to impress Jesus saying how he would forgive his brother seven times.- a generous act as the rabbis would have limited it to three. But Jesus' reply indicates that Christian forgiveness should be unlimited.

The key to the parable, that Jesus gives as explanation, lies in the words of the king, "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave , as I had mercy on you." We are called to see the sharp contrast between the way that God relates to us and the way we often relate to each other. If we truly understand how immeasurable a debt God has forgiven us, we will forgive others the comparably much smaller debts they have to us.

The opening words of the shorter collect for today are "Merciful God, your Son came to save us and bore our sins on the cross:....." This one act forgave each one of us and all of humanity its sins against each other and creation. Tomorrow, Monday 14th is Holy Cross Day when we come to remember this symbol of our redemption.

Around the world today the cross is seen as a universally recognised symbol of the Christian faith. It is carried at the front of liturgical processions –ranging from those made of precious metals and encrusted with jewels in the great cathedrals of the world or simply made in local wood in the villages. It is worn as jewellery. The sign of the cross is made to bless the faithful and to pronounce absolution. It is the shape of churches of all sizes and sits on the top of many steeples.

Whether it is made of stone or wood, marble or precious metal, the cross signifies to the world the central event in the story of Jesus Christ – an event that, for Christians, stands as the turning point in human history. It was the moment when a holy God of love made it possible for unholy people to be reunited with their creator. It was the moment when death's full stop was turned into a comma. It was the moment when a mighty God shared the full horror of the worst that human beings can do to each other.

It was not always the case that the sign of the cross was so universally used by the Christian church. It was an instrument of torture and death that the Roman empire had adopted as its particular means of public punishment, showing an example of humiliating agony that was designed to enforce its rule of law.

Although crucifixion is a most painful form of death, the writers of the new testament do not describe Jesus' physical suffering in great detail. They are more interested in the eternal meaning of Jesus' death and its consequences. The cross itself soon came to represent symbolically the rescue story that God accomplished in Christ.

However, probably because of its association with shameful death, the first Christian communities tended not to use the cross as a sign of their victorious new faith. Instead they preferred secret signs or images – such as the fish (ichthus the Greek for fish is in Greek a mnemonic for Jesus Christ Son of God Saviour) or the Chi-Ro again in Greek the first two letters of Christ or the shepherd and the lamb – a favourite image from the gospel.

It is thought that some of this tendency to secret symbols reflects the time of persecution. They would also like to hide the cross design in another symbol of faith such as the anchor cross found inscribed in the catacombs – Christian hope in Jesus is a sure anchor for life.

The emperor Constantine abolished crucifixion in the Roman Empire in AD315 and this led to the gradual acceptance of the cross by believers as the main symbol of their faith. In AD325 the Council of Nicaea made the cross the official symbol of Christianity.

I and many others have found it helpful to think of the cross as an 'I' crossed out. Also the upright can represent our relationship with God and the cross beam our relationship with the world – then if our relationship with others and the world becomes too great it reminds us that only a very strong relationship with God will be able to support it.

On the cross Christ stretched out his arms in a gesture of welcome and love for us all and calls us in turn to hold out our arms to all others.

The cross reminds us that for Jesus forgiveness and our participation in it are fundamental signs of the kingdom of God. By practising forgiveness we show that we fully comprehend how much God has loved and forgiven us and through it we can know the joy of working with him to pass on the grace we have experienced to others.