

Sermon preached at St. Mary's Woodbridge on Sunday 13th September 2020

14th Sunday after Trinity

Readings: Genesis 50:15-21, Matthew 18:21-35

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer.*

Pay what you owe. Those four stark words are rather chilling, aren't they? We can imagine them printed in large red letters across the top of a demand from some agency, a debt recovery company. And if that debt is accepted by us as having been genuinely incurred, then the demand to pay it is incontrovertible. Pay what you owe. No deals, no room for negotiation. They have us by the throat.

Our experience of debt is mainly monetary and mostly negative. When I studied Economics for A level, I learnt that credit is an essential tool for a functioning economy and debt, of course, is just the flip side of the coin of credit. Yet the language we use shows clearly how we feel: we talk about the burden of debt and of gaining debt relief. Sadly, an increasingly common usage is the term 'debt despair', the sense that our indebtedness never ends.

Debt is a key theme in today's gospel reading, where Matthew give us another of his brilliantly colourful stories, the parable of the Unmerciful Servant. It is a story that the evangelist has Jesus unfold for us in three parts and each part ends with a great shock.

But before the parable begins, Peter asks a seemingly straightforward question about how often he was required to show forgiveness to those who had given him offence. Jewish tradition was that a person could be forgiven up to three times, but not a fourth. Against that expectation, Peter's suggestion of forgiving seven times must have felt thoroughly generous to him but he is immediately rebuked: not seven but seventy-seven. Other translations give this as 'seventy times seven' or 490; seventy-seven or seventy times seven, it seems an impossibly high demand on our human capacity to forgive. The parable is introduced as being a comparison of the kingdom of heaven, a phrase that Matthew often uses for his richly imagistic metaphors. A king

wishes to “settle his accounts”, which does have a rather fearful air of finality about it. Other versions use “bring his accounts up to date”. Either way, it is a serious day of reckoning.

The debt that is owed is significant but we notice that the lord says nothing. The slave literally throws himself on the king’s mercy, asking for patience to be shown; it is a fine, dramatic moment. And then the first shock. The king goes far beyond patience to pity and releases the slave from the entire debt. This outcome has gone way beyond the forbearance requested to absolute forgiveness; for that is how God works with his people.

Now, the concept of debt remission, or *shemmitah* in Hebrew, was well-known in Near Middle East cultures. It is found in the legal Code of Hammurabi of Babylon. It was part of Jewish law in *Torah*: Deuteronomy 15:1 “Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts”. But the shock of the king’s action is that the slave’s debt of ten thousand talents is so completely off the scale. A talent was probably a labourer’s wages for something between fifteen and twenty years. Let’s give this a modern equivalent: in the UK, a labourer’s average annual earnings are around £20,500. Multiply that by fifteen years and then by the ten thousand talents and the result is a staggering 3.1 billion pounds.

Another calculation has estimated the slave’s debt as greater than the annual income of the entire 192,000 population of Galilee at the time. Totally incredible but, of course, this exaggeration is precisely the point that Jesus wants to make. The talents are a metaphor for those spiritual goods that we have received in abundance. No matter how impossibly large the resulting debt to God, it will be forgiven in its entirety.

But the parable is not yet complete.

The slave runs into someone who owes him a small sum - just a hundred denarii, a tiny trifle, about five hundred thousand times less than the amount the king has just written off. This fellow-slave makes the same request of his creditor, returning to him his own words: “Have patience with me, and I will pay you”. The violent response he gets, seized by the throat and thrown into prison, is shocking. The wicked slave’s total lack of humanity, of any fellow-feeling, leaves us with the other slaves “greatly distressed”.

And so the story reaches its conclusion and its third shock. The king is now angry; rather than his silent pity, we hear his words as he speaks out in judgement. He does so in the form of a question so that the servant must reply, effectively condemning himself; and so too must those who hear the parable, including us. The unmerciful servant is handed over for torture and, since he will never be able to pay this enormous debt, his punishment will be for eternity. The violence he used on his fellow is repaid to him. God's anger is aroused not by our actions to him but by what we do to the women and men and children with whom we share this life.

So where does this leave us? The moral of the parable is, it seems, not about the greatness of the Lord's forgiveness and mercy. It is about how our relationship to others shapes our relationship with God and shapes his judgement on us. We ask him to forgive us as, or in the like manner that, we forgive others. In his ending comment, Jesus tells us bluntly that this forgiveness has to come from the heart, to be total and complete. He is repeating the stern warning that he gave earlier in this gospel: Matthew 6:15 "If you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." This requires of us a fresh attitude towards everyone and it will not be easy. Remember, seventy times seven.

And yet the story for us does not end there. Unlike the characters listening to Jesus in Matthew's gospel account, we know that this tale of debt and forgiveness ends *there*, on the cross. He has paid what he did not owe, and for that gift of love, our indebtedness never ends.