

24th Sunday – Year A

The message of the readings for this Sunday's liturgy is one of the most important in the whole of the Bible. It concerns forgiveness. It says: we all need to receive forgiveness and we also need to be able to give it. None of us can go through life without getting hurt, being let down, being betrayed by others. It is how we cope with these hurts, how we react to them, that is important.

What normally happens is that when we get hurt we fill up with self pity. We see ourselves as innocent victims of a cruel and unjust fate. This produces bitterness, resentment, anger. These invade the cellar of our minds and our hearts and take up permanent lodgings. The memories creep inward into the depth of our soul. They fester and become malignant. They become a very heavy burden to carry. Some people have years of hurts and hatreds inside them. Some people are natural collectors. They make a hobby of collecting them as if they were precious objects: like valuable possessions, they will not let them go.

But every so often we need to clear out the cellar of our mind and heart. The cobwebs of self pity have to be swept aside. Hurt feelings have to be dug up, brought to the surface, looked at for what they are – and then let go. This can be helped by counselling, psychotherapy and / or spiritual direction, talking to a neutral other in a safe, confidential and non-judgmental atmosphere. This is where forgiveness comes in. We clear out the cellar by letting in the fresh air of forgiveness which allows wonderful benefits flow in. We rid ourselves of the burden of bitterness and resentment. We experience a great sense of relief and cleanliness. It frees us to live and to love again. It works wonders too for the person we forgive. It sets that person free. Free from the burden of guilt and remorse. There is joy in being forgiven.

But we must forgive with understanding and humility. To forgive in a high handed way, to make the other person crawl, to make them feel small, is not the Christian way to forgive. We have to be willing to admit that we may have been to blame as well; that our behaviour may have caused the other person to react as they did. Our ability to forgive those who have hurt us is a very good test and a measure of the depth of our Christianity. If we do not forgive we leave the other in chains and burdened with guilt. We leave them in darkness. When we forgive, we are setting them free. We bring them joy and peace.

Above all, forgiveness clears a path for the forgiveness of God to come to us. We need that. How can we ask forgiveness from God when we will not forgive those who have hurt us? Who is the person that – today – I need to reach out to and let them know that I forgive them the hurt done in the past. Name that person now, as you approach the God of all forgiveness in today's Scripture Readings.

The first reading from the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiasticus forcefully tells us what to do:

“Resentment and anger, these are foul things...forgive your neighbour the hurt he does you....nursing anger against another can you then demand compassion from the Lord? Live by the commandments, do not bear your neighbour ill-will....overlook the offence”.

A sentence in our Responsorial Psalm reminds us:

“It is he (God) who forgives all your guilt, who heals everyone of your ills”.

The Alleluia verse enforces the overall message:

“Love one another, just as I have loved you”

And the Gospel draws it all together telling us succinctly:

“This is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your sister and your brother from your heart”.