



THOUGHTS FOR SUNDAY  
TRINITY 14  
13 SEPTEMBER 2020

*Gracious forgiveness*  
Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35

It is easy to get bogged down in the details of the parable that forms the heart of today's Gospel reading, but to do so is to miss the point. The point of the parable is that God is all about gracious forgiveness, and he wants his people – you and me – to be the same.

In reality, of course, we, you and me, are not like that, at least not all of the time. If we concentrate on the details of the story in the reading we can easily convince ourselves that we are nothing like as ungrateful as the slave who turns from his master's mercy-seat, having had his debt remitted, only to become, immediately, an implacable monster to his own debtor, from whom he demands repayment of every last farthing of the debt. We are not like that parody of a human being, but how do we fare if the test is the one Peter proposes, expecting us to forgive someone as many as seven times? Not easy, we might manage once or twice on a good day, but seven times? Yet Jesus asserts, in all seriousness, the standard is not seven, but 77 times, by which he really means an infinite number of times, because that is what God wants the basis of our relationships to be.

In today's epistle, from Paul's letter to the Romans, the same issue is addressed, but in a gentler way. How are we to get along with one-another? The answer Paul offers is, by mutual forbearance, recognising the value in the other person, even when they hold different views from ours.

How we get along with each other is important at any time, but particularly so in this plague-time. 'Lockdown' meant separation for many, and stiflingly close contact for others. We know that some people have been brought to despair by being shut up with abusive or controlling partners or relatives, whilst others have felt the deadly chill of isolation. Others, like Gareth and me, have, meanwhile, been having quite a nice time, enjoying each other's company, but even then missing seeing and doing things with other friends.

And then there is the sense of uncertainty over the future. The plague has shewn us already how much that we had thought settled and secure can be overturned, almost in the twinkling of an eye. And we are still far from certain what the future might hold. There is the desire for things to 'get back to normal', but, at the same time, the uneasy sense that what was 'normal' fell far short of the ideal of how things ought to be and that any desire to get back to it would be to sell ourselves, and the whole of creation, short.

It seems to me that we need to hold fast to this pledge of Jesus, that God is all about gracious forgiveness. If we feel that, and act in response to it, modelling all our dealings with others on that basis, we shall have the strength to face the future with confidence, and all the rest will follow.

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