



REFLECTION BY REVEREND ANNE BURDEN

Many of you are reading the Sunday gospels from the pew sheets week by week and so will have a sense of the continuity with the passage we heard last Sunday. Don't worry if you've missed out on this, you can always catch up! Last week's reading was about how to deal with disputes in the church, or perhaps it was wrong-doing because it started with the sentence "if another member of the church sins against you". It's not entirely clear what Jesus had in mind but his message seems to be "try to sort it out - by yourself, then with the help of others in the church, then as a last resort put a distance between you and the other person, like you already do with Gentiles and tax gatherers."

Most of us struggle with what seems like harsh teaching and perhaps we were heartened when Andrew pointed out that Jesus chose to spend a lot of his time with Gentiles and tax gatherers! I'm sure you also noticed the final sentence "for when two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them". I'm sure that Jesus didn't intend this to apply only to the church community. A conclusion of the reading might be "be clear about the rules of faith, but don't let arguments go on for ever. Stand back and let God sort it out".

This passage continues as our reading today. Part of the chapter is on what is called 'church order'. The reading, like last week, also begins with the words "if another member of the church sins against me ...". This time it is Peter who is speaking and he has realised the Christian truth that dealing with sin requires forgiveness. It sounds as if Peter might have been reluctant to forgive or is counting the cost because he asks Jesus how often he has to forgive 'will 7 times be enough?'. Jesus' reply, that he should forgive 70 times 7, shouldn't be taken literally. It's not that 490 instances of forgiveness is required but 491 is a step too far!! Jesus' teaching is that forgiveness should be continual. We should have a mind-set of forgiveness. We should not hold on to grudges, but have a forgiving heart.

The reading continues with a parable which has a particular point to make. The master forgives the slave a huge debt because he pleads with him and the debt is wiped out. This debt is so large that repayment would be impossible. King Herod's annual income would have been about 900 talents - so 10,000 talents is billions in our terms! I guess this is a Jewish literary device often used in stories, using wild exaggeration to attract the reader's attention and to make a point. We realise that the other slave mentioned owes a small debt, a debt which could be managed and dealt with to the satisfaction of both parties. But the slave who has been forgiven so much, refuses to forgive and the master is very angry.

I think that we are being told to think about the forgiveness God has granted us and in our turn, forgive. To live with a forgiving heart, realising that God is the one to deal with wrong-doing, and by his grace and love and forgiveness, he can bring about changes of hearts and lives even in situations which are too big for human beings to handle. God is the one with the power to love and forgive and he offers this to us if we simply turn to him. All we have to do is to accept his gracious gift for ourselves and then pass it on, letting it overflow to other people.

Our church communities must be places where the important things, the values of the kingdom, are upheld. But they must also be places where hearts are continually full of God's love and forgiveness, so full that they overflow even on to those who disagree with us and who sometimes cause us hurt and pain. This is quite a challenge and we can't achieve it alone. Only God can sustain us.