

God's fore-giving love

Twenty-fourth Sunday of the Year – Cycle A – September 13, 2020

Readings: Sir 27:30–28:7; Rom 14:7-9; Mt 18:21-35

“Forgive your neighbour the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray” (Sirach 28:2)

Prologue: Today's readings may be summarized in a form of a syllogism — (a) God's *fore-giving* love is incredible and boundless, (b) and God *fore-gives* Divine Mercy and Pardon no matter how grievous our sins; (c) therefore, we, God's children, ought to forgive one another unconditionally.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The first reading is from the Book of Ecclesiasticus also called the 'Book of Sirach' since it was written by a pious Jew, Jesus ben Sirach, around 180 B.C. He made a thorough study of God's Law and the religious practices of his people, and drew up a collection of wise sayings and practical instructions to help his people live a life pleasing to God and their neighbours. Since his writing is so close in time to the drawing up of the books of the Second Testament, his trend of thought coincides with Jesus' sayings—especially about revenge, forgiveness and the Lord's prayer. Today's passage contains teachings against vengeance and about forgiveness like: “He that takes vengeance will suffer vengeance from the Lord” (28:1) and, “Forgive your neighbour the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray” (28:2). The origin and wellspring of mercy and forgiveness is always God, who becomes a model for each of us. Although Sirach, like his fellow Jews, had no clear idea of a future afterlife, he stresses the importance of having one's conscience clear at the end of one's lifespan: “Remember the end of your life, and cease from enmity, remember destruction and death, and be true to the commandments” (28:6). In sum, Sirach's thinking and ethics lies very much within the framework of the Decalogue (ten commandments) and traditional Jewish religion.
2. The gospel 'parable of the unforgiving servant' or the 'heartless servant' takes ben Sirach's thinking deeper with practical implications for the early church-community. This parable is found only in Matthew's gospel and forms the conclusion of his 'community discourse'. Though in last Sunday's reading Matthew does not rule out the possibility of an errant and unrepentant brother/sister being excluded or excommunicated from the faith-community (18:17), he wishes to ensure that community life be firmly founded upon mercy and forgiveness. Moreover, while evangelist Luke also gives a saying about forgiving someone who sins “seven times” and “turns back seven times” (17:4), Matthew attaches greater importance to this by putting the question of forgiveness in the mouth of Peter, the 'rock'-leader of the community, by increasing the number of times from 'seven'—already the perfect number signifying 'any number of times'—to “seven-seven times” or “seventy times seven” (v.22): countless times! Jesus impresses upon his hearers that there is no limit to forgiveness because God's love is a *fore-given* love. The disparity between the two sums mentioned in the parable and the attitudes of the king and the unforgiving servant is gigantic. It shows how unimaginably largehearted and forgiving the king is when compared to the hardheartedness and lack of forgiveness of the servant.

3. The circumstances of the parable are pagan, for, in Jewish law sale of an Israelite for debt was forbidden. The sums of money involved are meant not to be realistic but to stagger by their difference and by the size of the first. “Ten thousand talents” would be equal to what one would earn after working for 60,000,000 days—in cash, approximately 3.48 billion dollars; while “a hundred denarii” would work out to just four months casual labour. The plea for forgiveness by the second debtor is the same as the first; thus, couldn’t he have applied the same logic and limits of forgiveness that he received? Couldn’t he have thought in his mind and felt in his heart: “This fellow-servant is me before I was forgiven” or “I’ve been forgiven so much, let me also be equally generous in forgiving”? The unforgiving servant is truly ‘heart-less’. All he thinks about in his mind is his money—that makes him shamelessly ‘mercy-less’. Thus, Jesus ends the parable saying: “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister *from your heart*” (v.35). Notice that the heart—the spiritual centre of a person—is where the discernment and decision must flow from. With his heart closed, the dangerous phrase of the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ becomes self-condemnatory: “Forgive us our debts, *as* we also have forgiven our debtors” (Mt 6:12) and the principle: “the measure you give will be the measure you get” (Mt 7:2) becomes operative.

Linking the Psalm and the Second Reading to the Theme of God’s fore-given love:

Today’s responsorial refrain (Ps 103) summarizes God’s *fore-given* love: “The Lord is compassion and love, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” Moreover, “It is he who forgives *all* your guilt, who heals *every one* of your ills.”

In the second reading Paul writes: “The life and death of each of us has its’ influence on others.” Couldn’t we add: The vengeance wrought, or forgiveness given, of each of us has its’ influence on others? Indeed, we’re so closely knit in community that if one either refuses to forgive or one seeks vengeance, the ‘circuit of love’ breaks. Beware! We could condemn ourselves praying, “Forgive us our sins *as* we forgive those who sin against us.” God’s pardon is *fore-given*; so must ours be.

Pope Francis on Forgiveness: “God forgets the terrible stories of so many sinners, of our sins. He forgives us and keeps going. He asks only this, ‘Do the same: learn to forgive, do not carry this cross of hatred, rancor, of ‘you are going to pay for this’.” These words are neither Christian nor human.”

In Lighter Vein: A sinner once prayed, “Remember not my sins, O Lord!” God replied, “What sins? I forgot them ages ago!”

Perugini, an Italian painter of the Middle Ages, stopped going for confession because he felt that people stayed away from the sacrament hoping to confess just before they died as a kind of ticket to heaven. Perugini considered it sacrilegious to go to confession if, out of fear, he was seeking to save his skin and gain entry into heaven. Not knowing his inner disposition, his wife inquired whether he was not afraid of dying unconfessed. Perugini replied, “Darling, my job is to paint and I’ve excelled as a painter. God’s profession is to forgive and if God is good at his job as I’ve been at mine, I’ve no reason to be afraid!”
