

SERMON

Rev Canon David Warbrick

It was understandable that, as restrictions were lifted, a lot of people headed for the beach. How dreadful, though, that scattering 33 tons of rubbish there, some abused refuse collectors who came to clear up. After all the vigorous Thursday night applause for key workers, it was a hideous contradiction. We're embarrassed enough normally about people clearing away our rubbish and rarely look them in the eye. That embarrassment, though, seems heightened as we emerge from the powerlessness of lockdown and our frustration bursts out dreadfully in projected contempt. Perhaps feeling infantilised by the restriction on hugs and visits, and by alliterative government slogans, and spending energy holding our coiled fears inside, the release was always bound to be risky.

This is what Jesus captures brilliantly with a cartoonist's skill, a few strokes evoking such complexity. Imagine the coil of tension in a man so indebted, perhaps keeping it secret from his family. Imagine the shame that grew with the debt over the years, the childishness of pleading, then the peculiar powerlessness of being forgiven. Imagine the release of pent up worrying bursting out in violent abuse of someone owing him so little. He's really beating himself. Understandable and inexcusable, we witness a difficult transition akin to the one we as a nation are in now; one we can make well or badly.

It's striking how his dysfunction distresses the other servants. Forgiveness seems very personal, but it is a community matter. It can send ripples of grace to bless all around, but in his inability to accept grace gracefully, he sends ripples of distress through the community.

Jesus perceived that Peter needed to hear this parable because he was in a dangerous spiritual place. Peter was being tolerant. He was counting how often he should "forgive" because he wanted to be able to be aggressive on the eighth occasion with an easy conscience. Tolerance is delayed conflict. Tolerance is passive aggressive. It assumes moral high ground. This church labels itself inclusive. I hope it is, but that, too, risks being tolerant, superior, patronising. It can be hard being forgiven by someone tolerant, because you can't trust it's really forgiveness.

The subtle scriptures have shone a light on three difficulties we may have with being forgiven. Oddly, it takes a certain grace on our part to accept forgiveness well. But Jesus' hilarious overwhelming of Peter's studied tolerance gives us great hope. "Not seven times, but seventy times," he cries. He evokes the lavish Hebrew Jubilee forgiveness of debt, release from slavery, rest for the generous earth in that sevenfold multiplication.

Pastorally and politically radical, he shows every soul in need and in receipt of the gift of forgiveness. If we feel it's hard to trust, hard to accept, and we feel tired by our mundane repetition of sin and confession, God seems to accept that we need a repetitive rhythm in our life of confession and absolution.

His “seventy times seven” shows we need not despair, nor wallow in dangerous shame. In our different traditions we may express it in various ways, from emotive choruses to formal ritual, but the repetitive rhythm is a gift, as deep and essential as the weeks and their Sabbath. We live in a time of transition when embarrassment and shame could do untold harm. If we want to emerge well, we’d do well to attend to the litter. It is more than a metaphor for our sin. Our local street cleaner stores his trolley here at All Saints, so this is a thanksgiving prayer we have said for him:

Lord, we want forgiveness, but would like it painless, so we hardly notice it; for we are embarrassed that you have to clear up our mess. Then, feeling vaguely absolved we go out and about and, with casual arrogance, or brow-furrowed thoughtlessness, we litter our own streets.

But each morning, with bright purpose, ipod ready, brushes, trolley and bags, someone puts on a high-vis jacket, so becoming invisible. From Howard Road to the Railway Bridge, up and down, up and down, they collect fifty, sixty, seventy bags a day, offering a tireless absolution for the street.

Pausing to remember these street cleaners who set out from our Centre each day, we admit we would soon miss them if they stopped. We admit our averted gaze, embarrassed that someone, like you, deals with our debris.

As we thank you for them, prompt us to thank them for you.

Amen.