

Sermon for the 22nd after Trinity 2020.

Genesis 50:15-21. Colossians 3:12-15a. Psalm 112:1-6.
Matthew 18:21-35.

The Collect: O merciful God, who gave thine only-begotten Son to die for us while we were yet sinners: deliver us from an unforgiving spirit that we may be free to love and serve one another, to thy honour and glory; through our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Genesis 50:16,17 ‘So they sent this message to Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this command before he died, Say to Joseph, Forgive, I beg you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.’

This week, a Bishop was asked by a pet league to resign because he felt a memorial service in Southwark Cathedral for a cat was inappropriate. This week, an Hollywood star apologised for having three long fingers on each hand as a Witch in a Disney movie, because it could upset disabled people. These are a signal that ‘the devil walketh about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.’ Attacks abound, but forgiveness is thin on the ground. This week I’m *not* going to speak about forgiveness! But, you object, isn’t that what our Gospel portion focuses on, and our reading from Genesis mentions, and our Collect implores God to deliver us from (i.e. unforgiveness)? Isn’t it what St Paul tells the Colossians in 3:13 ‘as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must forgive’?

By this point in the sermon you may have detected a cluster of half-truths, if not actual lies? First, Joseph’s brothers lied when they said that their father had commanded them to ask Joseph on Jacob’s behalf, to forgive his brothers the evil the his brothers had done to Joseph. Secondly, when I said I am *not* going to preach about forgiveness, I didn’t quite mean that. Rather, explanation of the nature of ‘forgiveness’ is not exactly what I want to treat. So, I have to ask your forgiveness for misleading you by sleight of hand and half-truths.

No, the real problem is ‘an unforgiving spirit.’ That’s what our Collect recognises to be part of our human condition. In fact, it’s not a ‘problem,’ it’s a culprit. If we are a spirit having an human experience, what sort of spirit are we? Perhaps, we are not alone in the sphere where a human spirit experiences life? Matthew 12:44 (Phillips Version): “When the evil spirit goes out of a man it wanders through waterless places looking for rest and never finding it. Then it says, ‘I will go back to my house from which I came.’ When it arrives it finds it unoccupied, but clean and all in order. Then it goes and collects seven other spirits more evil than itself to keep it company, and they all go in and make themselves at home. The last state of that man is worse than

the first—and that is just what will happen to this evil generation.” So, lack of forgiveness is the bad fruit of an unforgiving spirit inhabiting a space alongside humans. ‘But the fruit of the (Holy) Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith.’ There is a war going between the Holy Spirit, and our own lesser spirit, which, unlike God, tends to play along with other lesser spirits as accomplices. They mess about with each other, mucking up the house in which we live together. One of these spirits is ‘the liar’, another is ‘the unforgiver’, and so forth. It’s not a pleasant home is it?!

We are living in a world where the spirit of forgiveness, which comes ultimately from God, and which radiates to others from a receptive Christian heart, is pushed to the corner of the room. The media, whatever type, have become transmitters of the propaganda of the unforgiving spirit. They relish the poisonous fruit it produces, because it pays their bills, and it feels good to pretend to be more righteous than the victims it falls upon. The unforgiving spirit tries to exact its price from the vulnerable. It spends its efforts on the destruction of others, and resents them (Matthew 18:21,22) ‘How many times must I forgive?’ The unforgiving spirit is uncharitable, impatient, unconvinced by true repentance, harsh and so forth.

What can we do about the unforgiving spirit? First, recognise when it is pretending to be our conscience. St John Henry Newman writes of conscience as intuition that speaks with the voice of God. As such, conscience always follows the divine Law: ethical truth stemming from the Will of God. In short, we should be wary not to confuse our own tendency to condemn others with God’s charitable and ethical approach to his creatures. He is the author of mercy and truth: we aren’t.

Secondly, we can stop trying to be God’s avengers. It’s tempting to inveigh against others, but it’s not our right, nor our responsibility. We promote ourselves above our spiritual pay grade. The unforgiving spirit wants to use us, but we must resist. It doesn’t have the Grace of God. Further, we don’t have the wisdom and insight of God. So, an ignorant novice can make a terrible mess. We must recognise our own failings and tendencies, then we will be more forgiving to others. C.S. Lewis, in *The Screwtape Letters*: “A woman means by ‘Unselfishness’ chiefly taking trouble for others; a man means not giving trouble to others...thus, while the woman thinks of doing good offices and the man of respecting other people’s rights, each sex, without any obvious unreason, can and does regard the other as radically selfish.”

Thirdly, we can pray for more grace. 1 John 1:9 ‘If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.’ Recognising the sad truth about ourselves, namely, that we are fallen creatures, created spirits living in the human world, is a step in the direction of a forgiving heart. Without submitting the heart to God’s grace, we cannot begin to understand what real forgiveness is, let alone give, receive or withhold it.

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.