

Proper 19 Year A 2020

‘For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves’.

For what reason? There is nothing in today’s Gospel reading which tells us what the reason is – we simply begin with Peter’s question about how many times he/we should forgive. So we need to look elsewhere for the reason – and I would suggest that we actually need to go back to the beginning of the 18th Chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, to understand what Matthew is talking about. It is widely believed amongst those who study these things that there is the heavy hand of an editor (? Matthew) on this text. Matthew has used everything that has survived in the oral tradition concerning the sayings of Jesus, he has Mark’s Gospel in front of him and borrows frequently from that and he also has the church in Antioch, with its many Jewish members, with all its problems – and there seems to be plenty of problems. So as he sits down to write, these problems weigh upon him. How do you deal with dissent, dissatisfaction and division within the Christian community? He looks at the tradition, he looks at Mark, he could conceivably look at Paul’s letters, and he draws together everything which seems relevant to his situation and to the situation within the Antioch church – and that situation appears to be one of internal dispute. We need to bear that in mind when reading Matthew 18 – so when those of you who are here go home I suggest you read the whole of the chapter, and if you are watching this at home, I suggest you

press the pause button and read it before listening to what more I have to say.

Matthew gathers together sayings from diverse origins and assembles them into an address given by Jesus to his disciples. These sayings deal with issues and problems that arise in the life of an organised Christian community, making the whole of Chapter 18 a discussion, or perhaps a reflection on church life and order.

Because we have been brought up to be ego-centric – so individualistic – we perhaps don’t realise that being part of a Christian community means we have obligations to that community – they are just the people we see at church, maybe have coffee with, perhaps do fund-raising events with – but we don’t recognise that we have commitments, the commitments of being part of a Christian family, and as we read Matthew we see that in this family there is no hierarchy, no pecking order, we are, as we are frequently told ‘all in this together’.

The first half of the chapter deals with how we should treat children and young people, and the second half addresses the care of the sinful brother or sister. Today’s reading follows directly from last Sunday’s, which was about sorting out disagreements, over layered with the reading from Romans, about ‘love being the fulfilment of the Law’. We had ‘if another member of the church sins against you, you must go and point out the fault’. You can’t go rushing to the Rector – or the Bishop – you must sort it out yourself, and as a last resort seek the help of other members of the church. And that is the problem with the parable which follows – today’s

reading. Instead of confronting the problem within the household of the king and sorting it out themselves, the people rush to the king to get him to sort it out. They accept no corporate responsibility. But for Matthew, confrontation – facing the problem squarely – is an essential part of forgiveness. It is no good passing the problem on to someone else, saying ‘It’s no longer my problem – someone else can sort this out’.

So when Peter asks how many times he should forgive, Jesus gives the answer which means ‘without end’. And it is ‘for this reason’ - the forgiving without end - that we get today’s parable, and its problem. It would be easy to identify with the first slave, who knows he cannot pay back what he has stolen, it is far too huge a sum; so he pleads for mercy – which he is given, a total breakdown in the normal order of things. But then he tries to restore normality by demanding immediate payment from the second slave – this is the way the world should be – with disastrous results. Now, if the household slaves had followed Jesus’ advice and gone and had a quiet word with the first slave, reasoned with him, reminded him of his good fortune, they might have been able to sort things out, but they don’t – they rush to the king, pardon is revoked, and prison and torture follow. So, who is responsible for his punishment? The king? Or the slaves who might have been able to save the day?

So this stares us in the face. Are we happy, indeed immensely grateful, to receive God’s gratuitous mercy, and yet also happy to retain the right to judge others? This is the problem with this parable – we can easily identify with those who rush to point the finger, but by doing so we show ourselves

unable to forgive the first slave for acting in accordance with the social norms of the time – and we encourage someone else to be unforgiving and merciless. So clearly the king, in this story, is not God – God help us if he was! Just listen to the psalm – ‘The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness’.

The reading turns on us. How could you possibly ask such a question as ‘How often should I forgive?’? As the church, we should know better. We should all know how much we have been forgiven, especially if what we have been forgiven is self-righteous pride, and recognise that the only thing that cannot be forgiven is the refusal to forgive, which does not mean we should ignore wrong doing, but that we are enjoined to sort things out when they go wrong, so that the community can be healed, for as Paul reminds us, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God and each of us will be accountable to God.