

Dear Friends,

Matthew 18: 28-35

He can't believe it. He is walking away from perhaps the most terrifying experience of his life. A few minutes ago, he was kneeling before the king begging for mercy. He owed money. He had a huge unpayable debt hanging around his neck. He listened to the king's decision. He, his family and all of his possessions were to be sold so that the king could get back at least a little of what he was owed. He had therefore been pleading with, appealing to the king. And the king had changed his mind and had forgiven him the whole amount. Now he was walking away, a free man. He could not believe it. The question is, will this experience change him? What will it do to who he is? What impact will it make on his heart? You will soon find out.

As he walked, he met one of the other slaves who served alongside him. That second slave owed him one hundred denarii. The usual pay for one day's work was one denarius. So, it's a lot of money, but it's nothing compared with the debt that he has just been forgiven. His debt would have taken him 150,000 years to pay.

He has just received mercy how should he therefore act towards this man who is in debt to him? What he does is he grabs him by the throat and demands his money. "Pay me what you owe me", he says. As he had earlier fallen to his knees before the king, so now his fellow slave falls before him. The words he said to the king are now repeated back to him almost word for word, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you". Here however, the similarity between the two encounters ends and we are given a contrast. Where he was forgiven the huge, unpayable amount, he refuses to forgive the smaller payable debt. He has the man thrown into prison, where he is to stay until he pays up.

There's a bit of me that understands. He has for so long been absorbed in his desperation to obtain money that he will try every means to get it. If he owed that much to the king, perhaps he also has other smaller debts that he owes which still need to be paid. The story however, does not invite us to explore his backstory or to make allowances for him.

The other slaves have seen everything and are distressed at what has taken place. The word used to describe how upset they are is the same word that is used to describe the grief of the friends of Jesus when he dies. They find what he has done devastating. They report what has happened to the king. The king calls the first slave back. He is furious with him. He says, "You wicked slave! I forgave you the whole debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" The king sentenced him to be tortured until he paid off the whole debt. He was never going to be able to pay it. He is therefore to spend the rest of his life in torment. He is condemned to hell. I said that Matthew's gospel could be harsh and this is certainly a harsh moment. Jesus uses the story to make a point. He says, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart".

It is often hard to forgive, especially from the heart. The story invites you to make a start by keeping in mind the kindness and love that God has given you. These are given, not just for decoration but to be put to use in your own life of kindness, love and forgiveness.

When it comes to how you live, you will not always be on top form. The prayer that Jesus gives puts your need for regular forgiveness side by side with your need for daily bread. The suggestion is that you need both as often as each other. Does God's offer of forgiveness in response to our request come to an end? Does the moment come when God gives up on you, and hands you over to be tortured? Or does God go on forgiving seventy times seven times, that is does God not count but go on forgiving?

I wonder what it is that will help to transform us, so that we may become kinder and more forgiving. I remember the film *Babette's Feast*. In it we meet a group of people whose Christianity is pious but can be a bit strict and severe. They are good, well-meaning people. But maybe over the years they have become a little cold and hard. They can sometimes be rather sharp with each other. The sadness and hurt they have experienced has left them with grievances which sometimes spill over into quarrels. They find themselves being invited to a glorious meal. The thought of it troubles them. Their religion leads them to frown on such earthly pleasures as extravagant food. They decide that they will eat, but they will not talk about the food and they will make sure that whatever happens they will not enjoy it. Not enjoying the food turns out to be impossible. It is irresistible and their senses delight in it. As they share the feast, they soften, they become warmer and by the end of the meal they are closer to each other than they have been for years. I would not swear to it, but I think that after the meal they join hands outside and sing a song.

The banquet that we are invited to share is the banquet of the grace and love of God. As we feast on that our hearts are transformed and we begin to catch something of God to share in our lives. One of the guests at Babette's feast knew about this. He was not in on the plan made by the others about not enjoying or talking about the food. He spent the whole evening celebrating it. At one point he says, "There comes a time when our eyes are opened and we come to realise that mercy is infinite. We need only to await it with confidence and receive it with gratitude". Maybe we could add a few words to his. We await God's infinite mercy with confidence, receive it with gratitude and live it in lives of kindness, love and forgiveness.

God bless you,

Tony