

Sunday 14th September 2014 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		14th Sunday after Pentecost 24th Sunday of the Year A Thanksgiving/Inxowa Dedication & Stewardship
Gen 50:15-21	Ps 103: (1-7), 8-13	Rom 14:1-12
		Matt 18:21-35
FORGIVENESS – A NEW START		

“That is how my heavenly Father will deal with you, unless you each forgive your brother or sister from your hearts.” (Matt 18:35)

Dedication & Stewardship

There is the story of a young girl who was thinking about what she should give to the church, and she had a brilliant idea. She went outside, with a handful of coins, and said to God – “Lord, here is all my money. I’ll throw it up into the air. You take what you want and I’ll keep the rest!”

Each year in the Cathedral, during the month of September, as we prepare for our Patronal Festival on 28th September, we focus on Dedication and Stewardship. Today is our Thanksgiving Sunday (Inxowa), and at the 9.30 a.m. service we shall have an opportunity to give thanks for God’s blessings on our lives, and to make a thank-offering. September is also the month when we are invited to renew our pledges, and to commit ourselves to financial support for the ministry and life of the church, for the next twelve months.

I want to say a very sincere thank you to all who pledge and give, faithfully, and who by your giving enable the work and life of the church to continue. The cathedral depends very heavily on our financial support, and our faithful pledgers. Thank you, very much indeed.

The Cathedral Parish Council has asked that all who do pledge and give, receive a letter of receipt and acknowledgement from the churchwardens. There are also pledge forms available, from today,

and we ask everyone to take a form, fill it in, and bring it to church at the Patronal Festival in two weeks' time, where together we shall renew our commitment to the life of the church.

I want to emphasise that we ask everyone to pledge, either weekly or monthly; to commit to giving on a regular basis to the life of the church; and to seriously consider a tithe, a tenth of our take-home income, as the amount to give. The bulk of the cathedral giving comes largely from a rather small group of people, many of them our senior members. It is time for our younger members to make tithing and sacrificial giving part of their lives and financial planning.

And please consider making a bequest to the cathedral, in your will. We have received some wonderful bequests and gifts in recent years, for which we are very grateful. If you wish to discuss this further, please speak to the churchwardens.

What has all this to do with forgiveness – the theme of our gospel reading – where we are called to forgive as we have been forgiven? You may well ask!

We are called to forgive because we have been forgiven. We are called to give because we have received. We have been blessed by God – so let us in turn bless others. Doors have been opened for us – so let us in turn open doors for others. We have been given the gospel, the good news of God's love, through the energy and commitment of others; we have received the inheritance of this beautiful cathedral from those who built and maintained it. Let us in turn make it possible for the ministry to continue, for the cathedral to be maintained, for the gospel to be preached.

Reflections on the readings...

I want to return to our scripture readings and the themes they present to us today, particularly as they deal with relationships within families and within the life of the Christian community.

Genesis 50:15-21 – Joseph forgives his brothers:

The brothers finally acknowledge what they did in capturing Joseph and in selling him as a slave into Egypt – and now, following the death of their father Jacob, they realise how vulnerable they are – and so they send a message to Joseph, pretending that it came from their late father, in which he asks Joseph: “ ‘forgive your brothers’ crime and wickedness; I know they did you harm.’ So now we beg you: forgive our crime...”

After all those years, living with the knowledge of what they did to Joseph, finally they are able to acknowledge it, and ask forgiveness. And Joseph has the grace to forgive, and says to them, “You meant to do me harm; but God meant to bring good out of it by preserving the lives of many people...”

How many of us live with resentment and hurt in our closest relationships – in our families? Can we remember a time when forgiveness made the difference and brought healing? Do we need to ask forgiveness, or to forgive? Are we able to look back like Joseph and see any good that perhaps came out of the hurt? Can good come out of evil?

Psalms 103: 8-13 - the nature of God:

“The Lord is full of compassion and mercy: slow to anger of great goodness... (v 8)

He has not dealt with us according to our sins: nor rewarded us according to our wickedness...” (v 10)

Romans 14:1-12 – Do not judge one another; do not look down on one another; each of us shall stand before God’s tribunal (v 10).

Matthew 18:21-35 – forgiveness within the Christian community:

Peter asks, “How many times should I forgive my brother if he goes on wronging me? As many as seven times?” – seven being the perfect number, surely going the extra mile, beyond the call of duty, bending over backwards – and we know Jesus’ answer: “I do not say seven times but seventy times seven.” Then comes the parable about the unforgiving servant, which ends “And so angry was the master that he condemned the man to be tortured until he should pay the debt in full.” Then Jesus gives a warning: “That is how my heavenly Father will deal with you, unless you each forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is part of our national discourse. It forms part of our dialogue and our memory as a nation. Yet we sit uneasily with the concept of forgiveness. Does it mean forgetting the hurt done? Does it mean overlooking or ignoring the injustice? Does forgiveness mean an easy acceptance of the status quo? Is forgiveness an escape from speaking about the cost and consequences of what has been done?

Many people observe today as Steve Biko Sunday, following the 37th anniversary of the death of Steve Biko on 12th September 1977 at the hands of the security police. It is also 9-11 Sunday, the 13th anniversary of the attacks in the USA on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. Last month was the Silent Protest and the Breaking of the Silence, here in the Cathedral. Over these past weeks, we have watched the Gaza-Israel conflict, as well as the suffering and deaths in Iraq of Christians and other minority groups at the hands of the ISIS fighters. And this past week we have heard the judgement in the Oscar Pistorius trial.

We acknowledge the immense hurt and pain and anger and loss, on so many levels, of these deaths, these events: the profound loss to our country of Steve Biko and others who died, on both sides of the struggle against apartheid; the immense cost in human life of the 9-11 attack and the war against Al-Qaeda that followed; the pain and

anguish and damage done in cases of rape or abuse; the devastation caused by the shooting of Reeva Steenkamp and all who die at the hands of intimate partners, boyfriends, husbands.

Where, in the midst of so much pain, is there room for forgiveness? What part does forgiveness play in any of these events? How do we deal with these national experiences of hurt and betrayal and cruelty?

What about our own personal experiences of hurt, of humiliation, of violence done to us? Can any of us say that we have never been unfairly treated, that we have never wanted revenge, to do to others what they have done to us? Can any of us say that we have never caused hurt to others? When damage has been done, when we know that we or others will live with the consequences of an action for the rest of our lives – how do we begin to think of forgiveness?

And in our daily lives at home or at school or at work, in relationships here at church – does forgiveness have any part to play?

Certainly for Joseph and his brothers it was the doorway to a new relationship; it was the chance for a new beginning. For Peter and his fellow disciples, as they lived together in community, it was a call they needed to hear. In the life of the church, forgiveness must form part of our relationships with one another. The call to forgive is the call to reflect the nature of God.

We pray in the Lord's Prayer: "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us" – "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us".

Jesus prayed on the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Forgiveness is part of the language of our country. We heard it movingly expressed at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It is being reflected in people's comments about the Oscar trial.

Forgiveness is part of our prayers and our daily life. Forgiveness is at the heart of our faith. Yet it is probably one of the hardest things we ever face; and the most important journey that we ever undertake – the journey of forgiveness.

It is not for you or me to tell another – you must forgive. But it is a step that each of us needs to take, a step and a decision and a choice that opens the door for a new start, that makes possible a new beginning. As part of our regular worship we have the act of confession. We confess our sins; we receive forgiveness and the promise of new life; we are set free; and we in turn are called to forgive and to set one another free.

We cannot solve the problems and the heartache of the whole world. But we are called to begin somewhere – to begin with ourselves, with you and me; to do what we can to make peace, to find a way forward, to be part of a community where we speak of hurt and forgiveness and reconciliation and restitution. Finding a way forward. Facing the past. Acknowledging our shared responsibility. And walking together into the future. That is what Jesus presents to us: the possibility of a new start.

In 1977, in the USA, a young man named David and his girlfriend Loretta were brutally murdered. He was 17, she was 18. Loretta was raped before she was killed. The killers were arrested and convicted and sentenced. One received the death penalty. We could say that justice was done.

But nothing will ever bring back that young man David, or the girl. Nothing will restore them to life. Their families continue to live with the loss, with the sadness, with the anguish, with the grief.

David's father, Lloyd, has chosen, somehow, to walk the road of forgiveness. But for him it is a journey, it is an ongoing process of finding the grace and strength from God to forgive, to let go, to set free, and to set himself free. He prays regularly for the killers and their

families. He prays for his son who was killed; for the girl and her family. He prays the Lord's Prayer, including the words, "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

"But he acknowledges that it's a struggle to overcome the feelings of bitterness and revenge that well up, especially as he remembers David's birthday year by year and loses him all over again: David at twenty, David at twenty-five, David getting married, David standing at the back door with his little ones clustered around his knees, grown-up David, a man like himself, whom he will never know. Forgiveness is never going to be easy. Each day it must be prayed for and struggled for and won."¹

CONCLUSION

May we be people who forgive and set free as we have been forgiven.

¹ Prejean, Helen. 1993. *Dead Man Walking*. Fount. 313