

Pushing the limits - Pentecost 16, 2023

When I use the phrase, 'pushing the limits', I could be referring to several different things. And in this case, I am.

First, sitting down to write this sermon, I felt that I was pushing the limits of my physical ability, as I was just dog tired, and wanted nothing more than to go and crash out on my bed and go to sleep for a week.

But, shamed by the knowledge that Sheila was cutting the church grass, I knuckled down and set to it.

Then second, I felt that I was pushing the limits of what I believe are my social and religious tolerances, having read a publication from the diocese that has recently

promulgated a liturgy for 'Pastoral Liturgies for Gender Transition and Affirmation.'

I won't go into that that here and now; suffice it to say that I don't think it will be easy for any of us to assimilate - but I'm trying to understand it, and am reading the associated literature that comes with it, which is making the case for recognition of transgender persons, but within the church by use of a specially designed liturgy.

I am formulating a response to the bishop at present, as I don't think it is as simple or easy as is being made out. Watch this space.

Third, I am looking at the gospel for today and feeling the moral rage of injustice that the

king in the passage must have felt when he heard that his servant had treated his own debtor so shamefully. That also pushes my limits of tolerance.

Perhaps my limits of tolerance aren't set very high, and I find it easy to criticize and find fault with others. Indeed, I think that would be a reasonable observation of my character. I don't think I'm an easy man to get on with - ask Sheila - she'll probably be happy to tell you!

I rage at what I see as lies and injustice, and am incandescent with anger at cruelty of any kind, but especially towards animals, and I will cheer any dog who bites a brutal hand.

There aren't, however, any dogs in our gospel for today - more's the pity, we have so much to learn from them. What we do have, on the other hand, is a plethora of attitudes that it is easy to gloss over, without really noticing them.

Peter has this attitude that there should be a limit to how many times he is required to forgive 'his brother' - i.e. someone who offends him; at least, I think this is the implication. Say we have been slighted or insulted, or taken advantage of - this sort of offence. Jesus' response is that there should be no limits to forgiveness, and to emphasize his point, Jesus tells the story of the servant

who owes his master or king 10,000 bags of gold.

We obviously cannot say how much gold was in each bag, or how much the total would have been, but if you remember the parable of the talents that we talked about a few weeks ago, the worth of 5 talents was equivalent to 20 years wages, so I think we are safe in assuming that Jesus is also here making the sum of 10,000 bags of gold a massive sum that could not possibly be paid back in the servant's lifetime.

The cancelling of the debt is therefore almost beyond belief - and yet, the man goes out and finds the man who owes him 100 silver coins.

When the man can't pay, he has him thrown into the debtors' jail.

The attitudes demonstrated here are , initially, repentance from the servant before the king - we have no reason to doubt that it was sincere - after all, he stood to lose everything - not just of monetary value, but his wife and children would also be sold.

His repentance is met with mercy, 'The servant's master took pity on him...'

...and then grace, '...(he) cancelled the debt and let him go.'

Immediately after this, we witness anger and greed; the juxtaposition is important because

it highlights the huge difference between the 'king' (God), and the man he has relieved of his debt. I am going to come back to this in a moment.

And here is where we see that God - or the 'king', in this passage - has had His limits pushed to a point where He says, 'Enough!'

This is a key issue, because although the implication from Jesus, in response to Peter's question as to how many times he should forgive his brother, is, essentially, infinite, we see here that it is not.

Why is this so? Because if you recall the words of our Lord's Prayer that we will say together very shortly, there are two phrases

that give us the answer; 'Forgive us our debts - as we forgive our debtors'.

Thus, here, the king (God) says to the man, 'I forgave you your debt, but you did not forgive the man who owed you - so now neither do I forgive you.'

The rotten servant has demonstrated that he has broken both of the two main commandments - 'Love God and love your neighbour'; he has shown no love or respect for God because he did not follow his example; and he showed absolutely no love for his fellow-man by having him thrown into the debtors' jail.

So, finally, we see justice handed out to the servant who had no mercy or grace to offer his debtor.

Those of you who were at the Thursday Morning Prayer, you might remember it was Holy Cross Day, and we reflected on the hideous cruelty of crucifixion, and the ugliness of the cross as a sign of man's brutality. And yet this same cross has become for us, as Christians, a symbol of faith, hope, and love, when we consider what Jesus did for us upon it.

This juxtaposition of the wonder and beauty of Christ's sacrifice, over against the factual vileness and ignominy of it, should jar with our

senses - just as the mercy and grace of the 'king' in this gospel passage should shine out in contradistinction to the shabby anger and greed of the unforgiving servant.

It is not too far a leap, I would suggest, to see that the mercy and grace offered without cost to the repentant servant at the start of the passage, is parallel - even identical - to the forgiveness of our sins that we can experience in Christ on a daily basis - the 'truth that sets us free'.

What is being offered to the servant is the cancellation of a debt he cannot possibly hope to repay, despite his plea for time. It is just too much. In the same way, we cannot hope to

earn our way into God's kingdom by attempting to ingratiate ourselves by saying endless 'Hail Marys', or giving up gambling or wife-beating as some form of token atonement for our wrongs. They are just too many, and in some cases too awful.

The expression of the grace and mercy we receive from Christ's forgiveness, and the message we need to learn here is that we can never earn it, we can only accept it, with gratitude.

My mother-in-law had a huge problem with this; she was convinced that she would never get to heaven, as she simply wasn't good enough. And I know, for a fact, that there are

some in these pews who feel the same way. Some even deny themselves the privilege of the sacraments because they feel themselves 'not worthy'.

Let me reassure you - none of us is worthy. That is why we need God's grace and mercy. If we all got what we deserved, we'd all have gone to hell in a handcart long ago.

But for so many, the blockage to forgiveness and freedom and happiness doesn't lie with God - but with us, ourselves. As you can see from this story, and from the whole gospel message, God has forgiven you - He has cancelled your debt ENTIRELY, so who are you to say that you are better than God?

'Oh, I never said that!', you protest - and yet you have, by implication - because you won't forgive yourself. If God has forgiven you your debt, in full, then how can you deny what He has given you?

Let's put it another way; let's say you are on Death Row in some benighted state, south of the border, and your execution date is due tomorrow morning; a guard comes in and tells you that your sentence has been cancelled, and you have received a full pardon. Are you going to hang around on death row and say, 'Oh no, I have to die - that was the sentence. I'm off to Old Sparky tomorrow morning,'? That would be like not forgiving yourself. You would be

sending yourself to hell, when someone just handed you a 'Get out of jail FREE' card. I have to ask - how stupid can you be?

I suggest that there would be a smell of burning rubber and a screech of tyres, and we wouldn't see you for dust. Well, you sure as hell wouldn't see me!

But you might hang around just long enough to ask how that came about; and find that the governor tells you that another man came and said he would take the rap for you.

If that man was still alive and hadn't gone to Old Sparky yet, you might just feel like saying 'Thank you' to him, maybe?

That's what this table is all about.