



GOSPEL GOSSIP

**Peter asked Jesus,
How often must I forgive?**

St Matthew 18. 2-35

Sunday 17 September

We don't know what prompted Peter to ask Jesus this question. It maybe because he had felt upset by one of the other disciples, or it may just be a question that he was mulling over in his mind? He knew that forgiveness was more than a one-off event, so he picks a number, 7, as a suggested forgiveness total. Not 7, replies Jesus, but 77 times. This is of just one individual, remember. In both Jewish and Christian traditions, the number 7 represented the 'totality of perfection'; it was on the seventh day God rested at creation, and on the seventh day Jesus rested in the tomb. Less scriptural is that if you call 'a' 1 and 'b' 2 and so on, then when you add the letters of 'Christ' together you get 77...

To illustrate Jesus' statement, he teaches a parable of a servant who owed his master the king a vast amount of money. So much was this, that the king gave orders for the slave – and his family – to be sold to offset the debt. When appealed to by the slave, the king had compassion and remitted the debt, only for the servant to go out and challenge a fellow servant about a minor debt to him, and refused to have pity, despite that shown to him. The unjust servant was reported to the king and had his comeuppance.

- What do you think was Peter's motive in asking Jesus this question?
- Did he need a precise answer?
- Does forgiveness also extend to those who wrong one outside the Church?
- Is forgiveness necessary in the Christian faith?
- Who does the forgiving?

We ask for forgiveness of God in the Lord's Prayer, in the General Confession, in sacramental confession – the ministry of reconciliation. We hear Jesus forgiving the paralysed, the adulterous woman, those who crucified him. Forgiveness is a biblical example and imperative but we sometimes confuse forgiveness with a single action rather than a process.

It's all very well to say 'sorry' and to hear the words, 'That's all right', but if sorrow goes no further than owning up or being caught out, then the depth of forgiveness can be equally shallow. Forgiveness begins with the acknowledgement of wrongdoing. Then knowing who to seek forgiveness from. Asking for forgiveness. Accepting forgiveness. The amendment of life so that that wrong isn't continually re-done. All these stages are involved in true forgiveness.

- Is it better to own up or to be found out?
- How easy is it for you to admit wrongdoing; do you attempt to justify it?
- What is that makes you seek forgiveness?
- If you are forgiven do you also forgive yourself?
- Where does God stand in this process?

We seem to be living in an age which appears to be characterised by the inability to accept responsibility, to blame others and to seek recompense. Can forgiveness be an antidote to this?