

## **16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost 2023 Matthew 18:21-35. The difficulty of forgiveness.**

Many of you would have heard of the Dutch WW2 heroine Corrie Ten Boom, or read her account of the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. As well as being a family of watchmakers, the Ten Booms were devout Christians and lived in a large house above their shop.

As the war progressed and the true nature of the Nazi's plans for the Jews started to become apparent, Corrie and her family started to hide Jewish families in the attic of their large home to save them from being transported to what later were revealed to be death camps.

Corrie was eventually denounced by an informer and their house was raided by the Germans. The Jewish family that was hidden there were behind a fake wall in the attic and not found. However Corrie and her sister were arrested and, without proof, sent to the German punishment camp, Ravensbruck.

They were starved, abused, and worked for between 12 and 15 hours a day. They did not have a bible, only a copy of Mark's gospel written on thin tissue paper, which eventually wore out. They had by then read it so often that they had memorised it.

Corrie's sister died in the camp and the Nazis eventually killed every single person incarcerated in Ravensbruck; one of the most infamous episodes in a war full of infamy.

Due to a clerical error, Corrie was accidentally released and returned to Holland only two weeks before the orders came to kill all the prisoners. She immediately returned to her work of trying to protect and shelter Jewish and Gypsy families. After the war Corrie was awarded the highest civilian honours by Holland for her work in the war and became known throughout the world.

One year after the war, in 1946, Corrie was at a function and was introduced to a German man. Corrie froze. He had been a guard at Ravensbruck and had somehow escaped prosecution for war crimes.

Corrie was not yet well known, and the guard did not identify this Dutch woman as one of the emaciated Jew-Lovers that he had guarded and beaten, and put his hand out for Corrie to shake.

In her book, *The Hiding Place*, Corrie writes her first thoughts were to God; "*What do I do Lord?*" She felt she heard God say, "*Forgive him Corrie!*" "*But I can't Lord, you know what he has done!*" God was silent.

Corrie slowly extended her hand and said, "*You were a guard over me at Ravensbruck, God has told me to forgive you, and so I forgive you.*" She writes that as soon as she said the

words "I forgive you," her forgiveness became real. She suddenly saw the German guard as much a victim of the Nazi party as herself.

The effect on the guard was equally dramatic. He suddenly broke down saying "I'm so sorry, I am so sorry." Forgiveness, she wrote, is an act of will that she could either choose or not choose.' There is nothing instinctive or automatic about forgiveness.

She chose to forgive. The word "resentment" literally means "to feel again." Without forgiveness, she would have remained in the vice of the concentration camp – always feeling again its degradation and desolation, never to leave it. We will return to Corrie's amazing life shortly.

This morning's gospel can be read as the concluding section of last week's gospel, and begins with Peter asking Jesus how many times he should forgive someone. As many as seven times?'

Jesus answers him, 'Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times. Jesus is not saying that on the seventh-eighth time we withhold our forgiveness! He is saying we are not to count the number of times. Whoever counts has not forgiven at all.

I remember being moved some years ago to read in *Sydney Anglicans* of the response of a lady called Lauren Briggs, whose husband Simon was murdered five years before in Sydney.

She said to the reporter, "It seems so easy to say I've forgiven them, but it's probably one of the hardest things in my life that I've had to do and yet having done it and repeatedly sought to do it for about 5 years, I've found I've now been healed.

I thought I was doing it wrong, but I wasn't, I kept forgiving them. But my mind and my heart were at war. No matter how I much I meant to forgive, I just couldn't. It was then I came to faith and asked the Holy Spirit to bring to pass what I wanted to do in my head.'

It might be that we need to forgive not just 77 times for 77 different sins, but 77 times for the same sin until we truly live in the forgiveness of the king, who is also our compassionate heavenly father.

Forgiveness is beyond calculation. Just like the sum owed to the King by the unforgiving servant in this morning's parable told by Jesus. This is the reason for the extraordinary, over-the-top amount owed by the slave to the King.

10,000 talents! 1 talent was worth, at that time, around about 15 years wages; it would take 150,000 years to pay! – Yet the King forgave the slave the debt.

Earlier in this gospel in the *Sermon on the Mount*, when teaching how to pray, Jesus uses the same analogy, equating debt and sin. In the Lord's Prayer as recorded in Matthew, Jesus prays "*Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*"

The analogy is sound because when we have been sinned against, we feel that we are owed. "*They owe me an apology!*" We want to be restored to the position we were in before we were sinned against – *they owe us!*

As we heard in the reading, after being so extravagantly forgiven by the King, the slave was still chasing what was owed *him*. Comparatively, such a small amount. Such a little thing. Jesus is teaching that we should show the same mercy to others as we have been shown by God ourselves.

Forgiveness is an act of pure grace. Knowing the incalculable measure of God's grace and forgiveness toward us, and then withholding forgiveness from another, is an exact parallel with the pride of the King's slave's unforgiveness toward his fellow slave.

The gospels are full of verses that show we are to show mercy as we have received mercy, to show grace as we have been showered with grace.

This particular passage encourages us to interpret all of Jesus teachings in the light of Grace. When we withhold forgiveness, perhaps we haven't properly understood the full measure of God's forgiveness of us, nor the Grace he has lavished upon us.

Forgiveness impacts both the forgiver and the forgiven, which brings us back to Corrie Ten Boom. Something happens in the heavenly realm when we forgive. Both parties are released from a sort of bondage that keeps them tied to the pain of the event.

In Holland after the war, Nazi collaborators and informers were not allowed to hold any form of employment, and, as you can imagine, there was very little money for Social Security, so they had no money for food or housing.

Corrie Ten Boom set up a rehabilitation centre in Bloemendaal for concentration camp survivors, not only that, but also for those who had assisted the Germans, who were now themselves being persecuted, the very people who had informed on the Ten Booms, causing the death of her sister and other family members, and were nearly the cause of her own death.

Last week's gospel said whatever we bind on earth is bound in heaven and whatever we loose on earth is loosed in heaven. The Grace of God is loosed in heaven, somehow, when we forgive. For Corrie Ten Boom it started when, as an act of will, she extended her hand... Let me pray.