

### **To Remember and To Forgive**

What divinely generous, encouraging and healing readings for this day, the tenth anniversary of the terrible event in the USA which triggered a decade of even more terrible events. I confess I come to this day with such mixed feelings – such grief and anger and despair over human nature - that I know I need the challenge and the hope of this morning's Scripture. For if I were to try and think my way through the horror story of world events, of the relationships between nation states divided along political and religious lines, of the divisions between different theological factions within the church, of the old broken lines of divisions that run through families and communities, I know that I find myself struggling to forgive once let alone the 77 x 7 that we are commanded to.

So as we try to come to this day of anniversary of hurt and fraught fear and hope let us take a little sidestep with a delightful story from "The Prayer of the Frog", sacred stories from many different religions and cultures collected by Anthony de Mello, a Jesuit priest.

*"An old woman in the village was said to be receiving divine apparitions. The local priest demanded proof of their authenticity. 'When God next appears to you', he said, 'ask Him to tell you my sins which are known to Him alone. That should be evidence enough.'*

*The woman returned a month later and the priest asked if God had appeared to her again. She said He had. 'Did you put the question to him?' 'I did.' 'And what did He say?' 'He said, "Tell your priest I have forgotten his sins."*

That story speaks into the parable we are told this morning. And had the servant who was forgiven much been able to forgive a little the story would have finished simply and quickly. But like the evening news, or the machinations of our own hearts, the servant in the parable, and us, seem to find it difficult to remember how much we have been forgiven let alone forgive the debt of others.

In this parable the first servant is forgiven a huge amount but cannot find it within himself to forgive another servant a very small amount. Now often this parable is read as though it were a case of: if you forgive you will go to heaven and if you don't then you will receive eternal damnation. Well the parable is a little more complex than that. For starters, both servants are in the kingdom of heaven. ***It is a story about what membership of the kingdom requires of us.*** In this respect then we must, at least in the first instance, see ourselves as the first servant, the one who is forgiven an impossibly huge debt. The caution of the tale is that this servant then forgets that they are a forgiven person and fails to exercise that same generosity with others, with one who owes them very little.

However forgiveness is not necessarily the same thing as forgetfulness, certainly not for us humans. We are not asked in Scripture to forget. Indeed in the Old Testament, such as in this morning's reading, the Israelites are constantly asked to remember that they are a

people who were oppressed and who were liberated by God. Remembering our failures and God's goodness is an important aspect of faithfulness.

May I share another story with you from Prayer of the Frog? *Abbot Anastasius had a book of very fine parchment which was worth twenty pence. It contained both the Old and New Testaments in full. Once a certain monk came to visit him, and seeing the book, made off with it. So that day when Anastasius went to his scripture reading he found that it had gone and knew at once that the monk had taken it. But he did not send after him for fear that he might add the sin of perjury to that of theft.*

*Now the monk went into the city to sell the book. He wanted eighteen pence for it. The buyer said, 'Give me the book so that I may find out if it is worth that much money.' With that, he took the book to the holy Anastasius and said, 'Father, take a look at this and tell me if you think it is worth as much as eighteen pence.' Anastasius said, 'Yes, it is a fine book. And at eighteen pence it is a bargain.'*

*So the buyer went back to the monk and said, 'Here is your money. I showed the book to Father Anastasius and he said it was worth eighteen pence.' The monk was stunned. 'Was that all he said? Did he say nothing else?' 'No, he did not say a word more than that.' 'Well, I have changed my mind and don't want to sell the book after all.'*

*Then he went back to Anastasius and begged him with many tears to take the book back but Anastasius said gently, 'No, brother, keep it. It is my present to you.' But the monk said, 'If you do not take it back I shall have no peace.' After that the monk dwelt with Anastasius for the rest of his life.*

And so we are asked to do something much harder and more realistic than to forgive and forget, ***we are asked to remember and forgive***. Remember that others have sinned against us and to forgive them. To remember that we have sinned and to ask for and receive forgiveness.

I, like the first servant, find it hard to remember that I am a forgiven person and one who will continue to need to ask for forgiveness, 77 x 7 times. If then I believe that God has, and will continue to forgive me; that I have been and can be forgiven by my fellow citizens of the kingdom; and that I have been commanded to and will be supported to find a way to forgive others – then I can live with hope and love even in the knowledge of my broken and imperfect nature and the broken and imperfect nature of others I share this life with.

And this is good news for us here in our own small lives and for a world unable, so often, to forget or to forgive.

Even so, come Lord Jesus Christ.