

Homily: 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2020

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He gave us the words of the Our Father. It's sometimes said that this prayer is a kind of compendium of the Gospel: it contains all the key messages of Our Lord's preaching and the good news of salvation. We can see this when we think of the many parables our Lord uses to teach us. In our prayer, we call God our Father – a relationship expressed in several parables, perhaps most beautifully in the story of the Prodigal Son. We pray that God's Kingdom may come – the Kingdom which is the subject of so many of the parables of Jesus. And in today's Gospel the Lord gives us a parable which is a kind of image of the line, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." The Lord reminds us how great is the mercy we have received, and teaches us not to withhold forgiveness from others.

Forgiveness is hard. Everyone who's lived long enough will have been hurt in ways that make it hard to forgive. We remember what someone has done to us or our loved ones. We may replay over and over again in our minds the harsh words that have been spoken or relive in our memories the pain of someone else's actions. This remembering is really a form of self-defence. We remember so that we can protect ourselves from future hurt. But, like almost everything in our fallen world, our remembering has a downside: it can deepen our suffering by making us live with anger or resentment. And no one who is angry or resentful is happy; no person who cannot forgive is truly at peace.

Remembering our sufferings makes it hard to forgive, sometimes even after many decades. But today's first reading teaches us to remember other things – things which can free us. "Remember the last things, and stop hating," we are taught. "Remember dissolution and death, and live by the commandments. Remember the commandments, and do not bear ill-will; remember the covenant of the Most High, and overlook the offence." By turning our attention to the things of God, by remembering Him and relying on His grace, our hearts can be freed to forgive.

"Remember the last things, and stop hating." In a way, this is a simple reminder that life on earth is not for ever. Sometimes in the face of death people see things for what they really are, and let go of things that have seemed so important throughout their lives. By remembering now the limits of this life we are able to put everything into perspective. Remembering the last things also means remembering that we will be judged by God, as the Lord implies today. I'm always encouraged by some words the Lord speaks in the Gospel: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged yourself"; or the words of the letter of St James: "The merciful need have no fear of judgement". One day we will account for our lives before God. If we can stand before Him, faults and all, but in the knowledge that we have tried to be merciful to others, to forgive others, we have nothing to fear. And when forgiveness is hard, or even seems impossible, let's at least never let go of the desire to forgive. In the end, to forgive others – to really forgive – is a grace, a work of God. We can't do it on our own. But we must be open to trying, with the help of God.

Remembering the last things also helps us in another way to forgive those who have hurt us. Often forgiveness is difficult, even impossible, because we still live with the pain caused by another's actions. When we remember the last things – and specifically, when we think of heaven, we should think of some beautiful words of St Thomas More: "There is no hurt that heaven cannot heal." If we can live with this knowledge in the depths of our hearts, it can take some of the sting out of life's pain, and enable us to find grace to forgive.

Perhaps it seems that Jesus is asking too much of us, or that in teaching us to forgive He somehow trivialises our sufferings. If that's the case, think about how much forgiveness cost Him: look at the Cross. Jesus chose this hardest of paths in order to bring us forgiveness, the mercy of God. He teaches us to take up our cross behind Him, to follow the path of mercy He has trod. It is a path that leads to resurrection. Forgiveness brings new life, in eternity, but also here on earth. A heart that forgives is a heart that lives in a new way, for love. When Jesus took up the Cross, He showed us that He understands that forgiveness comes at a cost. He does not trivialise the pain of our wounds. But He does show us the way forward. Remember Him. Remember the last things. Remember the Resurrection, which follows the Cross and brings us new life. Remember that there is no hurt that heaven cannot heal.

Fr Andrew

