

24th Sunday of the Year

Do you remember the craze that began in the '80s for what were called 'executive toys'? Well, obviously some of you will and some of you won't, but no longer being a sapling, I remember them very well. They were little gadgets and gizmos, usually brass or steel that the high-powered executive had on his desk to amuse himself with, to 'play' with in times of stress. There are still many kinds of these toys being made. I managed to identify a brass lamé ellipsoid (whatever that is) a rotating model of the solar system, a nova plexus stainless steel puzzle sculpture and, somewhat more prosaic, a kinetic see-saw with tiny figures on either end.

I also remember one in particular called 'Newton's Cradle': this was a device that demonstrated conservation of energy and movement using six stainless steel balls strung on a frame; when one, two or three balls are lifted at one end and released, one, two or three other balls are struck up at the other end. This executive toy illustrates Isaac Newton's third law of motion, which says that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Obviously, it demonstrates a physical law – but what if we transfer it to the spiritual dimension of life? It would mean that for every moral act there is an equal and opposite reaction – or *consequence*. Everything we do has a consequence and this is true in every area of life. In today's

gospel, Jesus is teaching the same truth in a higher, nobler way when he says that if we do not forgive others, we ourselves will not be forgiven. He teaches the same principle elsewhere; in Luke 6:38 he says:

"Give, and it will be given to you: a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be poured into your lap. For the amount you measure out is the amount you will be given back."

In the Beatitudes he says: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall have mercy shown to them." (Matthew 5:7).

And in his letter to the Romans, St Paul says: "God will reward each one according to his deeds."

We shouldn't understand this as some kind of punishment – it isn't. God does not punish; to imagine that he does so has been one of the worst tragedies to afflict Christian spirituality. In what has been called the 'calamitous' 14th century – so full of war, disease and human suffering was it – Julian of Norwich in her *Revelations of Divine Love* wrote:

"It was astonishing to me and I considered it carefully in later years, that during these revelations I was continually shown that our Lord God, as far as he himself is concerned, does not have to forgive because he is unable to be angry. It would be impossible for him. This was the revelation: that the whole of life is grounded and rooted in love and that without love we cannot live. I saw with absolute certainty that, where our Lord is, peace is the rule and there is no

place for anger. I saw no anger of any kind in God, no matter how long I looked. Indeed, as I see it, if God were able to be angry for one second, we should have no life, abode or existence.” (*RDL* 14:49).

This revelation was amazingly ahead of its time and it affirms, even in an age when life was short and brutish, that moral law has nothing to do with divine anger or punishment.

The concept of a universal and exact moral law is known to almost every major religion; in Buddhism and Hinduism it is called ‘karma’ and is inextricably entwined with reincarnation: bad deeds in one life will attract bad circumstances in the next. It is the lesson of Newton’s Cradle symbolised by the great ever-turning wheel of life, upon which all creatures are born, live, die and are reborn, until enlightenment releases them. Even though Buddhism has an authentic grasp of universal moral law, it is fundamentally a pessimistic understanding of life in this world; pessimistic because it lacks what the monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – do not: the concept of mercy. For the far eastern faiths, this moral law is inexorable. There is no room for forgiveness, only living out the consequences of one’s thoughts, words and deeds. For Judeo-Christianity the law itself is subject to the higher power of mercy – and forgiveness, which is mercy’s instrument.

It is the supremacy of mercy and forgiveness as the embracing arms of love that Jesus came to teach. The

astonishing implication of this cannot be overestimated. Whatever debts we owe the moral law – however black our misdeeds – they can be wiped out at once if we truly ask for forgiveness. And when they are gone, it is as if they had never been. God's mercy and forgiveness are infinitely more powerful than the relentless working out of the universal moral law. Forgiveness is the golden key to a totally renewed world; it is one of the gateways into the kingdom of God; and because of the interconnectedness of all life, when we forgive others we are forgiving ourselves too. Forgiveness brings an abiding inner peace and the discovery of a joy that the ups and downs of our life cannot disturb at the deepest level. We must forgive in order that we may be forgiven. Today's gospel parable makes that quite clear. In fact, the grace and mercy of forgiveness is one of the most radical themes in all the gospels: from God to us and from ourselves to others.

Why, then, do we sometimes find it so hard to forgive? The answer is simple, really: we don't truly understand what forgiveness is. In all his parables about forgiveness – including the one in today's gospel reading – the metaphor Jesus uses is that of *cancelling a debt*. A debt to God, to our neighbour, to the moral law, to life, however we like to put it. The one who is forgiven has his debt cancelled. It's like the bank suddenly telling you that the £5,000 overdraft you can't afford to pay back is wiped out – although I should imagine the Sahara would freeze over before a bank ever said that. To

forgive is to say: 'I cancel your debt.' It is also to say to the Lord: 'Do not hold this debt against them.'

Another widespread misunderstanding is to think that forgiveness has to do with feelings – it doesn't. Forgiving someone and how we actually feel about them are two different things. Corrie Ten Boom, the courageous Dutch woman who hid and saved many Jews during the Nazi occupation of Holland, said this:

"Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart."

Having survived to horrors of Ravensbrück concentration camp to where she was sent – she ought to know what she's talking about.

A modern spiritual writer has said:

"Forgiveness is not a feeling; it is a commitment. It is a deliberate choice to show mercy, not to hold the offence against the offender. It is one of the deepest expressions of love."

Besides, the longer we stay angry with someone, the more unhappy we will be. Staying angry is a very miserable option.

So then, forgiving someone has nothing to do with how we feel about them. We do not have to smile and nod or try to look holy (an impossible task in my case, so I don't try); as Corrie Ten Boom indicated, we can cancel someone's debt even if our heart is cold as ice. Cancelling the debts of others can be a conscious spiritual practice, a way of living, of loving

God in others; because love, too, is an act of will: it is a willed decision to cherish another person as much as or more than we cherish ourselves. This willed act 'descends' through the whole of us as a person, affecting thoughts, feelings, sexuality, the physical body – but it doesn't begin with any of these. It is always, in the first instance, our will that decides to love. And, as the quotation above says, forgiveness is one of the deepest expressions of love.

Perhaps above all we need to learn to forgive ourselves. Jesus told us to love our brothers and sisters as we love ourselves, so the term 'self-love' used in all the old manuals of spirituality in an extremely negative way, is misbegotten. Otherwise Jesus would never have said what he did. He knew that if we do not have a healthy degree of self-love – a care and concern for ourselves and a deep sense of our innate dignity as human persons – we will never be able to love others in an authentic or meaningful way. This kind of self-love is essential to maturity and it a sign of psychological wellbeing. It has nothing at all to do with the 'I, me and mine' narcissism of our present society – that is self-adoration.

To forgive ourselves, even the worst in us, is an act of self-love in its most noble sense. The Buddha said that our sorrows and wounds are only healed when we touch them with love. A lack of self-love and self-forgiveness is a great enemy of the spiritual life, because it contradicts the divine voice that addresses us in our hearts as 'Beloved.' (Henri Nouwen). To forgive is to accept ourselves as we are – as we

truly and wholly are – because unless we do that, we can never change for the better.