

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

The dominant thread in today's readings is forgiveness which is really a necessary response of human beings who value the importance of walking in another's shoes. Quite naturally, the intimate partner of forgiveness is compassion, as it is brought out in these texts. It is clear that there can be no authentic forgiveness without compassion.

Sirach 27:30 – 28:7 This first extract is from the book of Sirach, named after the author, Yeshua (Jesus) son of Eleazar, son of Sirach. The book is also called the wisdom or instruction of Ben Sira and in the Catholic tradition has been given the title *Ecclesiasticus*, that is, 'belonging to the church'.

The book contains the wisdom teachings of Ben Sira who combined the learning and insights of ancient Near Eastern and Israelite wisdom traditions with the teachings of Moses as found in the Hebrew Torah ('instruction'). Ben Sira was a teacher in Jerusalem in the period 200-180 BC and he wrote to endorse the integrity of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Jewish way of life. The astuteness and creativity of Ben Sira shine through the poetry of his writing.

Today's reading follows a section where Ben Sira points out the destructive nature of hypocrisy and uses the very familiar reference to hypocrites digging holes for themselves that they cannot get out of. He then deals with the two toxic problems of anger and vengeance; one quite possibly leading to the other when we consider the step, impulsive or planned, from anger to getting even.

The most common word for anger in Hebrew is *'af*, from the verb *'anaf* which actually means 'to snort,' and from this comes the word *'af* meaning 'nose,' based on the analogy of snorting with anger or nostrils flared in anger. When referring to the wrath of God Hebrew uses *khemah*, from the root verb 'to get hot'.

Am I big enough to avoid taking offence?

Ben Sira wisely asks the question, 'Does a person harbour (store up) anger against another and seek healing from the Lord?' How could we heap up the poison of resentment towards another person and then expect to be treated kindly with forgiveness? The author's advice is to overlook faults and be big enough to avoid taking offence, and he writes further on to say that the hot-tempered are a source of strife; they 'disrupt friendships and sow discord among those who are at peace.' (28:9).

There is a variety of verbs in Hebrew for forgiving and they all carry the notion of releasing, setting free, giving a lift, letting go. The English 'forgive' actually implies giving over, as in the verb 'forego' meaning to waive or set aside. We surrender something of ourselves when we set another person free through the act of forgiving. Possibly the best way to get even is to forget. As Benjamin Franklin wrote, 'It is more noble to forgive than to revenge an injury.'

Psalms 103 In this brilliant piece of Hebrew poetry the psalmist acknowledges the ache within his inmost being. He begins with a lament and then follows this with a cry of thanksgiving. He realises that healing comes with forgiveness and then he reaches a deep awareness of the compassion of the Almighty, who is always ready to forgive.

The poet is deeply respectful of the covenant relationship Israel has with God and realises the need to find healing and ultimate satisfaction in life by living out the requirements of the covenant commitment. There were times in ancient Israel when it was normal to leave the 'holy' things to the priests while ordinary folk got on with the business of their lives. However, it took the action of prophets like Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Micah to remind the people that each person had a duty to establish unity with God through the goodness of their living. The poetry of this psalm is a heartfelt expression of the writer's realisation of his personal duty to God.

Romans 14:7-9 Paul reminds the Roman Christians that nobody goes through life without having some impact on other human beings. We often don't know the extent of the influence we have on others. Jesus went as far as to say that if a person caused other people to stumble along the way or maliciously contributed to the ruin of another person's life and peace of mind, then it were better if they were thrown into the sea tied to a millstone to ensure that they were out of sight and drowned (Matthew 18:6). Strong language when you think of it.

On the other side of the coin, have you ever wondered if the positive and touching things that are spoken at funerals were ever communicated to the deceased while they were alive? Let us never pass up the opportunity to show our appreciation to others while they are around to hear it.

Matthew 18:21-35

The parable in today's gospel reading is generally titled the parable of the unforgiving servant. It is different from other parables of Jesus, which are usually set in Galilean surroundings, inasmuch as this one deals with a gentile court. This gives Jesus scope to use exaggeration and graphic confrontation along with extreme punishment for unfair treatment.

The whole scene begins with Jesus declaring that there is to be no limit to forgiveness. His parable highlights the enormity of the debts involved and the impossibility of payback. This drives home the role of forgiveness and its refusal. The first employee owes more money than was probably in circulation in the country of Jesus' day. Having all his possessions sold off and himself and his family sold into slavery he is never going to match the extent of the debt. And then the king remits the debt showing an unbelievable degree of compassion. This is clearly a fantasy of Jesus' storytelling since the servant was a complete fool getting into so much debt, and the king was a poor financial manager letting the debt rise so high without foreclosing. But these details are not relevant to the message of the parable.

However, the forgiven servant has not learned the lesson of graciousness. Jesus' audience would be reacting with protest that this man had not reached out in forgiveness down the line. In the culture of the day if a ruler or landlord remitted the debts of his servants or tenants because they could not pay on account of drought or unavoidable misfortune, it was understood that they in turn would remit their debtors.

Our behaviour betrays our abiding attitude

While the parable carries a powerful message about forgiveness it also says a lot about respect. The king shows a level of respect for his employee that the servant himself does not have for his fellows. This, of course, prompted the other servants to report to the king that the forgiven servant had been ruthless towards another. In fact, they were deeply distressed at the brutal lack of graciousness shown to one of their company. When the king summoned the bully, his question revealed how he could not understand how the servant did not feel motivated to cancel the debt owed him. He had been on the receiving end of extraordinary, and unlikely, respect and compassion, but did not have it in him to respond in like manner, by passing graciousness on down the line.

Here is a perfect example of how our behaviour betrays our abiding attitude. Roy T. Bennett, inspirational author, wrote in his book *The Light in the Heart*:

Attitude is a choice. Happiness is a choice. Optimism is a choice. Kindness is a choice. Giving is a choice. Respect is a choice. Whatever choice you make, makes you. Choose wisely.

The teachings of Jesus and, in fact, the whole Bible are about relationships – how we relate to God, fellow human beings, ourselves, the environment in which we live – and this parable showcases the key values of respect, compassion and forgiveness. And all of these are fed and nourished by our efforts to grow to wholeness and maturity. Engaging in growth means having a big heart and openness to change. It is worthwhile aspiring to acquire those gifts that money cannot buy.



I can have peace of mind only when I forgive rather than judge.

Gerald Jampolsky. Leading American psychiatrist and author.



Did you hear about the Buddhist monk who refused pain meds during a root canal?

His goal was to transcend dental medication.

Did you hear about the microphone checker who woke up with a hangover?

He had had one-two, one-two, one-two many.

Laurie Woods