

## LENT BOOK 2023

### Sunday Talk 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent

#### WHAT DOES FORGIVENESS HAVE TO DO WITH PRAYER?

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Mt 6: <sup>14</sup>For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; <sup>15</sup>but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses

Mt 5:38 'You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." <sup>39</sup>But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer.

- But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;
- <sup>40</sup>and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;
- <sup>41</sup>and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

<sup>42</sup>Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

<sup>43</sup> 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." <sup>44</sup>But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup>so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

- <sup>46</sup>For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same?
- <sup>47</sup>And if you greet only your brothers and sisters,\* what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

<sup>48</sup>Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

1. There is no area of spiritual life in which we experience our powerlessness more humiliatingly than forgiveness. It is impossible to hear the Gospel without being filled by a sense of discouragement.
2. How many times do we not try to forgive, not to react to evil, not to give in to resentment and we find
  - 2.1. that we do not succeed
  - 2.2. or that we are able to overcome animosity or negative thoughts for a while, but then that our heart hardens again and that bitterness again takes over.
  - 2.3. or that we succeed outwardly, but in our heart we cannot help disliking the persons who hurt us, try to avoid them or slander them.
  - 2.4. We continue to be cold, distant, indifferent,
  - 2.5. or worse, we discover that we cannot help rejoicing when those who have done evil to us suffer, when something ugly happens to them. We are tempted to see it as a just

punishment.

3. Acknowledging this reality is crucial – we have to accept that forgiving, forgiving truly, forgiving evangelically is not easy
4. There are two possible reactions to the enormity of Jesus' teaching about forgiveness:
  - 4.1. we could be tempted to consider it as a hyperbole, a rhetorical exaggeration. Jesus is not really asking us to turn the other cheek, or to leave the mantle. These overstatements are typical of Semitic language, as when Jesus says: If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from thee.
  - 4.2. the other reaction would be taking Jesus' teaching about forgiveness as a mere moral injunction: Jesus says that I must forgive my enemies and love them, so I just have to do it, I just have to take the resolution to actually do it from now on onwards. If I have not succeeded so far, if I could not really forgive, it was because I did not really try.
5. Of course, both of these reactions, both of these ways of understanding the Gospel are wrong.
6. In the first case, we know that these words of the Gospel are not an overstatement for a very simple reason: the example of Jesus
  - 6.1. Jesus did not pluck his eye out, nor he ever asked anyone to do it - this really is a rhetorical exaggeration. But as for forgiveness, Jesus indeed did not oppose resistance to those who arrested, tortured and murdered him;
  - 6.2. he continued to love Judas and washed his feet at the last supper, he gave his life for him, he accepted his kiss of betrayal, he did not react, he offered his cheek to him and then went on to offer his cheek to those who slapped him.;
  - 6.3. to those who dragged him into court he gave no answer, he did not defend himself, knowing that they were not seeking the truth and that it was useless to talk;
  - 6.4. on the cross he prayed for all those who were murdering and obtained for them forgiveness from the Father: Father forgive them for they know not what they do.
  - 6.5. so Jesus' teaching about forgiveness contains no rhetorical exaggeration. The example of Jesus shows us that it must be taken literally.
7. But equally wrong would be a purely moralistic reading that made forgiveness only a matter of will:
  - 7.1. this interpretation is wrong because it is impossible to forgive;
  - 7.2. what would we be capable of is, at best, to "get over it", but this is not forgiving, because under the stone hostility, grudge, resentment remain intact and at the right time we will lift the stone and these old grudges, these old resentments come alive again perhaps even amplified.
  - 7.3. Jesus' teaching about forgiveness is much more than mere moral injunction.
8. If we really meditate on it, we understand that forgiveness is possible only in a context that we must build slowly, patiently, diligently - and this context has two main features.
  - 8.1. our hearts become able to forgive only when instead of withdrawing, instead of closing in on ourselves, we raise our eyes and meet the eyes of our Father who is in heaven;
  - 8.2. forgiveness unfolds and thrives only thanks to a supportive community context and if we consider it as a joint responsibility.
9. Let us examine these two aspects.

10. First of all, the refusal of forgiveness is the outcome of isolation, of a fatal closing in on ourselves.
  - 10.1. This is a particularly striking in the history of the first murder perpetrated by a human being, that of Abel by Cain. We read in the book of Genesis that the Lord said to Cain:
 

Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? <sup>7</sup>If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.
  - 10.2. Hatred, resentment, desire for revenge manifest themselves through a face that is dark, through a look averted from God, through the refusal to meet his eyes
  - 10.3. If we listen carefully to the monologue of resentment, bitterness, hatred and desire for retaliation that keeps our mind busy sometimes for days on end, we will always find sentences like this: "I cannot allow anyone to mess with me", "I cannot be treated in this way", "I must defend my reputation, "and so on....
11. The truth is that bitterness, animosity, resentment, desire for revenge are not natural feelings in us.
  - 11.1. These negative feelings are foreign to our body and our spirit: they can grow and start determining our behaviour only if we nurture them, we blow on them as we do with charcoals when we want to lit a fire:
  - 11.2. Scripture tells us so:
 

You will not nurture hate hatred against your brother. Do not bear a grudge.  
(Lev 19.18)
  - 11.3. The dynamics of revenge requires cold and blind deliberation entertained over time, it necessitates perseverance in evil:
    - i. withdrawal in myself
    - ii. keep telling to myself that I cannot afford being humiliated
    - iii. in this way, what might have been a relatively manageable feeling of hurt or resentment at the beginning grows, evolves into hatred and waits for the right opportunity to seek some satisfaction, to seek revenge.
12. It would be wrong to attribute animosity, resentment, revenge to our survival instinct, as if they were forms of self protection.
  - 12.1. When we feel threatened in our survival we need to defend ourselves.
  - 12.2. In extreme situations self-defence can justify the physical elimination of those who wish to harm us unjustly.
  - 12.3. This legitimizes the exercise of retributive justice in society, but to be a form of justice it must never be guided by resentment, hatred, or worse, by the desire for revenge.
  - 12.4. In order to remain "justice" it must be objective, should simply protect, rehabilitate, and repair the wrong - and help, if possible, those who have done evil.
  - 12.5. as Jesus himself did: warn against the sin but not give up the sinner. Or rather, warning against the sin so as to lead the sinner to repent.
  - 12.6. Never resentment, bitterness, not to speak of hatred and revenge can claim to be forms of the instinct of self-defence or self-protection.
  - 12.7. Never can these feelings be considered an expressions of justice.
13. On the contrary, they are the supreme form of pride, a pride well exemplified by the chilling threat of Lamech in the fourth chapter of the book of Genesis:

Lamech said to his wives Adah and Zillah: "Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; wives of Lamech, give ear to my saying: I have slain a man for wounding me, a boy bruising me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times".<sup>1</sup>

14. What greater form of pride there can be than this:
  - 14.1. boasting on hatred
  - 14.2. reducing the other person to the evil he did against me
  - 14.3. refusing to see that never in life wrongs and reasons are all on the same side.
15. The dynamics of resentment, bitterness, hatred are forms of insanity
  - 15.1. they gnaw us for the inside, imprison us in a form of paranoia
  - 15.2. It is no coincidence that in ordinary language we speak of "hatred that blinds".
16. For this reason it is impossible to have access to true forgiveness unless
  - 16.1. we are first led out of our blindness
  - 16.2. overcome are self-imposed isolation
  - 16.3. are freed from our pride.
17. We can say that we do not have access to forgiveness by an act of will, but through a patient and sometimes long process – and Scripture teaches us a lot about this- for example in the way God deals with Cain
  - 17.1. God does not tackle Cain by immediately enjoining him to forgive Abel
  - 17.2. the first thing God asks Cain is to restore the dialogue with the Father, with the Lord, to look at him:
 

‘Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen?’<sup>2</sup>
  - 17.3. we could interpret it as an invitation to pray, in a way parallel to what Jesus asks in the Gospel: Pray for your enemies.
  - 17.4. God calls Cain, Jesus invites each one of us to look up: "Why look down? Lift up your eyes, look into my eyes "
  - 17.5. Indeed, in Matthew’s Gospel, the process of forgiving starts by turning our gaze to the Father who raises His sun on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.
18. Only the Lord, only the Father - as the Psalm says – forgives us all our iniquities and heals us from all our diseases<sup>3</sup> - and what greater disease do we need to be healed from than the grip of pride, resentment and animosity on our heart?
  - 18.1. anyone who has ever received the grace to have access to true forgiveness has experienced this
  - 18.2. it 's like a knot that is suddenly undone, a huge rock removed from our heart
  - 18.3. it is no accident that freedom from bitterness and resentment often manifests itself through a flow of tears, not tears of sorrow but of liberation and joy.

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<sup>1</sup> Gn 4.23

<sup>2</sup> Gn 4.6

<sup>3</sup> Ps 103.2f

19. The first step in the process –because it is a process- of access to forgiveness is to be drawn out of our self-confinement, of our isolation, of our separation from God and from others.
20. But then there is another crucial step, which the Gospel suggests through a detail we should not let go unnoticed:
  - 20.1. when Jesus talks about the process of forgiveness, he alternates you (singular in Greek) with you (plural in Greek):
 

You (singular) turn to him the other also cheek.

You (singular) Let him have your cloak,
  - 20.2. but then Jesus says
 

You (plural) love your enemies and you (plural) pray for those who persecute you, so that (you plural) may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. That you (plural) may be perfect as your (plural) heavenly Father is perfect.
  - 20.3. this echoes the Old Testament,
 

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You (plural) shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.<sup>4</sup>
  - 20.4. This means that forgiveness is possible only within a community, with the help, the support of a community.
  - 20.5. Forgiveness depends not only nor primarily on an isolated “me”, but also on a ‘we’
  - 20.6. It is something that can exist, can grow only within a loving and forgiving community.
21. This confirms our previous observation: resentment, revenge, hatred are always expressions of refusal to acknowledge our solidarity with each other: I do not want to see the other any more as my brother, in himself, but I reduce him to the to the evil he did to me.
  - 21.1. Think about it: how strange is it not that a person for whom I feel only dislike and animosity is esteemed and loved by other people
  - 21.2. this is an outcome of the blindness induced by hostility: I only see the brother as a threat to me.
22. Hatred, resentment, revenge thrive in a society of competing individuals – this is why the most frequent ground for conflicts is sex and work, where competition dominates, where the advantage on someone always happens at the expenses of somebody else.
23. Instead forgiveness can flourish only
  - 23.1. in a community of brothers and sisters who strive to live in solidarity and shared responsibility,
  - 23.2. where relationships are not driven by sexual instinct, nor by competition,
  - 23.3. but where the good of the other becomes also my own good
  - 23.4. and can I find joy in the good and the profit of others.
24. Forgiveness can only bloom where there is dialogue, when there is mutual help.

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<sup>4</sup> Lv 19.1f

25. In every community, in every family, in every working group there inevitably arise misunderstandings, dislikes, jealousies, passions
- 25.1. but they do not arise in everyone at the same time,
  - 25.2. do not arise in everyone for the same persons,
  - 25.3. do not arise in everyone for the same reasons
  - 25.4. and this allows us to help each other.
26. It is in this context that we can practice the wonderful beatitude
- Blessed are the peacemakers (which could be translated: Blessed are the forgiveness-makers), they shall be called children of God.
- 26.1. We are all called to be peacemakers in this sense.
  - 26.2. We must all be committed to facilitate forgiveness so that as soon as we detect seeds of misunderstanding, of jealousy, or we hear grudges or murmuring
  - 26.3. we do not throw oil on the fire through gossip or other divisive forms of behaviour like taking side for one against the other.
27. On the contrary, with discretion, with patience, without ever patronizing anyone, we must all strive to heal the wounds, to reconcile the enemies, to justify those who seem to be in the wrong, to mediate.
28. It is not by accident i there is such a close relationship between the beatitude of the peacemakers and Jesus' teaching on forgiveness:
- Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.
- Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.
- 28.1. In both cases these attitudes express our being children of the Father.
29. This is why forgiveness is not and it cannot be first of all a mere matter of will,
- 29.1. But it requires a common strategy
  - 29.2. imagination, intelligence
  - 29.3. and always a lot of diplomacy
  - 29.4. forgiveness is possible only when we really feel in solidarity with each other, responsible for each other.
30. So, we should never be discouraged when we experience our inability to forgive.
- 30.1. The Lord did not tell us that it is a simple thing or that it is a process that happens overnight
  - 30.2. forgiveness must be strived for day after day
  - 30.3. and, paradoxically, we have access to it not by rushing into it
  - 30.4. but first of all by being peacemakers, "forgiveness-makers", operators of forgiveness in the communities of which we are part.
31. The more I help others to forgive, the more I can hope that when it will be my turn to need to forgive I will find in my community the peacemaker, the "forgiveness-maker" who will help me.
32. Just as resentment, bitterness, hatred lead to the pride that isolates us, which locks us in ourselves, which blinds us

- 33. so forgiveness is possible only through the humility
  - 33.1. that recognizes our need for help.
  - 33.2. welcomes advice and is ready to ask for it.
  - 33.3. the humility that brings peace
- 34. We need humility to pray for those who hurt us and continue hoping against hope.
- 35. Forgiveness then it is not impossible, but that does not mean that it is purely a matter of will.
- 36. Forgiveness is something that we have to build overtime,
  - 36.1. for which we must work patiently
  - 36.2. and for which the most we can do is trying to live as we can this wonderful beatitude:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.

Luke 11	Matthew 6
He said to them, "When you pray, say:	<u>9</u> "This, then, is how you should pray:
" 'Father,	'Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,	hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.	<u>10</u> your kingdom come,
	your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
<u>3</u> Give us each day our daily bread.	<u>11</u> Give us today our daily bread.
<u>4</u> Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.	<u>2</u> And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation."	<u>13</u> And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.
<p><u>5</u>Then Jesus said to them, "Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; <u>6</u>a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.' <u>7</u>And suppose the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' <u>8</u>I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity <sup>e</sup> he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.</p> <p><u>9</u>"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. <u>10</u>For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.</p> <p><u>11</u>"Which of you fathers, if your son asks for <sup>f</sup> a fish, will give him a snake instead? <u>12</u>Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? <u>13</u>If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"</p>	<p><u>14</u>For if you <b>forgive</b> other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. <u>15</u>But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.</p>