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*Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> September – The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity*

*Readings: Exodus 14:19-31 & Matthew 18:21-35*

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## **Exodus 14:19-31**

Then the angel of God, who had been travelling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other; so neither went near the other all night long.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. During the last watch of the night the Lord looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. He jammed the wheels of their chariots so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, 'Let's get away from the Israelites! The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt.'

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen.' Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing towards it, and the Lord swept them into the sea. The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen – the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.

But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. And when the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.

## Matthew 18:15-20

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?'

Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.'

'Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.'

'At this the servant fell on his knees before him. "Be patient with me," he begged, "and I will pay back everything." The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.'

'But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. "Pay back what you owe me!" he demanded.'

'His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, "Be patient with me, and I will pay it back."

'But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.'

'Then the master called the servant in. "You wicked servant," he said, "I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.'

'This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

## Reflection

Peter's question, "How many times shall I forgive my brother or sister?" is a good one. We may have asked this ourselves, especially when faced with forgiving someone again and again. At a human level it seems reasonable to say, "That's it! I've reached my limit!" And Peter wanted to know what the limit was: Matthew 18:21: "Lord, how many times? Up to seven?" Peter would have known the Rabbis' teaching; their limit was three times. After that, you were not required to forgive someone for wronging you. Peter rightly guessed Jesus' limit would go further.

Peter probably thought seven was a generous suggestion. But Jesus replied, “Not seven times – but seventy-seven times!!” Matthew 18:22. But Jesus does not want Peter, nor you, nor me, to begin counting!! In the Bible, seven symbolises “completeness.” (Hence Creation was completed on the seventh day). What Jesus is saying, is there is no limit! We need to forgive everyone, every time. The story of the unmerciful servant and the compassionate king illustrates this.

The servant owed the king 10,000 bags of gold. The man’s daily wage would have been one silver coin. This man owed the king the equivalent of millions of pounds! An impossible sum! The king ordered the servant, his wife, his children and all he owned, be sold. To Jesus’ listeners this would have been a completely reasonable judgment. The servant begged the king for mercy; Matthew 18:26: “Be patient with me and I will pay back everything.” This was a crazy request. There was no way the servant could find such a vast sum. All he could hope for, was for his punishment to be postponed.

The king’s response was unbelievable. Even outrageous! Moved to compassion, he set the servant completely free from his debt. Wouldn’t it have been great if the story had ended at this point, with the servant going off in a nice happy glow, full of love to everyone he met? Instead he went out and grabbed his fellow servant, who owed him one hundred silver coins. This was tiny in comparison to the debt he had just been released from! The second servant begged the first for mercy; Matthew 18:29: “Be patient with me and I will pay you back!” This was a reasonable request as this sum was well within reach. But the first servant showed no pity. He had the second servant thrown into prison until he could pay. This meant forever, as once in prison, the second servant would have no means of earning any money. Moreover, his family would also be left destitute. This punishment was totally out of proportion to the second man’s offence.

When the King heard of it, he called the first servant back; Matthew 18:33: “Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had on you?” This is the point of Jesus’ story. We have to learn to forgive as God forgives us. Genuinely. Compassionately. Totally. This time the first servant did not escape punishment. Jesus’ conclusion reminds us that our capacity to show forgiveness has serious eternal consequences; Matthew 16:35: “This is how my heavenly father will treat each of you, unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Ultimately the first servant was condemned because he behaved with contempt towards the king. If he had truly received the king’s forgiveness, he should have showed the same love. “Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” We must not make this into a formula; “Because I’ve forgiven X, you

must forgive me...” We would then become guilty of counting up wrongs! Rather, as we experience God’s love in our lives, we are healed and made whole. And as whole people, we should then reflect “God’s love in us” back to others.

This does not mean forgiveness is easy. Far from it. It is one of the hardest things we ever have to do. As the saying goes, it takes a strong person to say sorry, and an even stronger person to forgive. But if we do not forgive, the danger is, we are so consumed by our hurt and bitterness, we become even more separated from God’s healing and redeeming love. We are doubly damaged; first by the original offence, second by the destruction that is caused in us, and through us, because we cannot let go. When we deny God’s grace to others, we deny it to ourselves.

Forgiveness does not mean that we are denying the seriousness of the offence. Rather we are giving up our desire for revenge. Leaving our desire for justice in God’s hands can help us to move on and find peace. Forgiveness can result in unexpected blessings as old wounds are healed, and we are set free. Amen

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