

**Twenty-Fourth
Sunday
in Ordinary
Time**
Year A



FIRST READING
Sirach 27:30–28:7

PSALM
Psalm 103:1–4, 9–12

SECOND READING
Romans 14:7–9

GOSPEL
Matthew 18:21–35

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PRAYER

Psalm 103:1–4, 9–12

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.
Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and do not forget
all his benefits—
who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life
from the Pit,
who crowns you
with steadfast love and mercy,
He will not always accuse,
nor will he keep
his anger forever.
He does not deal with us
according to our sins,
nor repay us
according to our iniquities.
For as the heavens
are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love
toward those who fear him;
as far as the east
is from the west,
so far he removes
our transgressions from us.

**READING
THE WORD**

First Reading
Sirach 27:30–28:7

Anger and wrath, these also are
abominations,
yet a sinner holds on to them.
The vengeful will face the Lord's
vengeance,
for he keeps a strict account of
their sins.
Forgive your neighbor the wrong
he has done,
and then your sins will be par-
doned when you pray.
Does anyone harbor anger
against another,
and expect healing from the Lord?
If one has no mercy toward an-
other like himself,
can he then seek pardon for his
own sins?
If a mere mortal harbors wrath,
who will make an atoning sacri-
fice for his sins?
Remember the end of your life,
and set enmity aside;
remember corruption and
death, and be true to the com-
mandments.
Remember the commandments,
and do not be angry with your
neighbor;
remember the covenant of the
Most High, and overlook faults.

Second Reading
Romans 14:7–9

We do not live to ourselves, and
we do not die to ourselves. If we
live, we live to the Lord, and if we
die, we die to the Lord; so then,
whether we live or whether we
die, we are the Lord's. For to this
end Christ died and lived again,
so that he might be Lord of both
the dead and the living.

Gospel
Matthew 18:21–35

Then Peter came and said to Je-
sus, "Lord, if another member of
the church sins against me, how
often should I forgive? As many
as seven times?" Jesus said to
him, "Not seven times, but, I tell
you, seventy-seven times."
"For this reason the kingdom
of heaven may be compared to
a king who wished to settle ac-
counts with his slaves. When he
began the reckoning, one who
owed him ten thousand talents
was brought to him; and, as he
could not pay, his lord ordered
him to be sold, together with
his wife and children and all his
possessions, and payment to be
made. So the slave fell on his
knees before him, saying, 'Have
patience with me, and I will pay
you everything.' And out of pity

for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

HEARING THE WORD

"Paths to Forgiveness"

One of the characteristic features of Christianity is its insistence on the necessity of forgiveness. Jesus demands unrestricted forgiveness and goes as far as asking that love be extended even to enemies (cf. Matt 6:38-48). This significantly modifies the OT teaching which was based on the principle of strict reciprocity – not to say revenge – expressed through the famous axiom "eye for eye and tooth for tooth". Yet, forgiveness is one of

the most difficult human acts because we have a keen sense of justice, which requires that the harm that comes to us should be proportionately revenged. Today's readings offer some help to make Jesus' radical demand for forgiveness easier to fulfil.

The book of Sirach contains systematic and philosophical reflections on how to live a life pleasing to God. One of its key insights is that a happy and fulfilling life can be achieved through strict observance of God's commandments. The last two lines of today's reading contain a fourfold admonition to "remember". Remembering means living one's life with a particular virtue or perspective constantly in mind. The author skilfully intertwines a double admonition to remember God's commandments, and the covenant, with remembering the last things and death. In fact, the passage contains repeated reminders that human beings are mortals made of feeble flesh. Remembering mortality is a help to avoiding resentment, anger, vengeance and ill will, while, at the same time, a motivation to pardon the wrongdoings and to overlook the ignorance of others. Mortality, which all human beings share, makes us different from God. Since the authority to execute justice and to avenge wrongs is reserved to the creator of the mortals – the immortal God – no human being is entitled to do so. In Sirach's view, only God is entitled to carry out justice. However, forgiveness lies within

the human capacity. Sirach suggests that accepting our limits in understanding what causes others to behave in a wrong way, may help us to forgive wrongs and hurts. Overlooking the faults of others, and acceptance of one's own ignorance, will prevent hasty acts of vengeance.

The passage from St Paul's letter to the Romans appears to have nothing to do with forgiveness. Yet, its full meaning comes to light when it is considered in its context. There, Paul writes about the conflict between the "strong" and the "weak" in the community (Rom 14:1-6). The weak still held on to some Jewish religious and social practices such as dietary and purity laws. The strong, on the other hand, fully understood their new freedom in Christ which allowed them to dispense with the old laws and live guided by the Holy Spirit and faith. There was nothing morally wrong with either of these attitudes, both were acceptable. The problem was the relationship between the two groups which judged and condemned one another. In the context of this conflict Paul emphasises that tolerance and understanding are a must for all Christians, since they make choices according to their understanding of how to serve the Lord best (Rom 14:6). Paul forbids judging others because the fellow Christian is a servant of Jesus and is not subjected to the authority of another community member who holds different views (Rom 14:4).

In order to avoid judgemental and divisive attitudes and behaviours, Paul demands from the Roman Christians tolerance and understanding for alternative forms of expression of one's faith. The passage we read today shows that such open-mindedness and flexibility can be achieved when Christians remember that their allegiance is to the one and the same Lord, who made us his own by his death and resurrection. Therefore, the focus lies on serving the Lord in the best way we know, not in making divisions and distinctions among community members, especially those based on one's own preferences and perceptions.

The Gospel reading contains Jesus' essential teaching on forgiveness. It begins with Peter's question about the scope of forgiveness. The Jewish teachers of the day also required forgiveness, but limited its scope to three times. Peter goes much farther referring to seven times. Seven is a symbolic number which conveys the sense of completeness and perfection. Thus, Peter asks whether he should forgive always and completely. Jesus' reply aims to shock Peter and all the other listeners. Stating that forgiveness needs to be done "seventy-seven times" he means that one should not even think about the scope and frequency of forgiveness because it is as essential and indispensable as the air human beings breathe.

The parable that follows illustrates the reason why forgiveness is so signifi-

cant. The shocking story of a servant who is forgiven his debts, and then refuses to forgive, teaches an important lesson about God. In the story, the master, who represents God, forgives a debt of ten thousand talents which, by modern calculation, amounts to about thirty tons of gold! This enormous debt is freely forgiven, yet, the forgiven debtor refuses to forgive a relatively minor sum of one hundred denarii, equivalent to one hundred days' worth of daily wages. This incredible difference between two debts serves to emphasise how generous and forgiving God is - even the greatest debts can be forgiven. The lesson of the parable is unmistakable - God deals with human beings in a merciful and forgiving fashion. The characteristic Matthean principle - "be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48) - can be applied here. Since God forgives in an unrestricted and generous fashion, so must all who are his children. Thus, forgiveness is not an option but a necessity for Christians. Jesus demands that it be practiced without any reservation. The parable justifies this demand by appealing to God's character, and the reciprocity that exists in the Christian community. This demand for reciprocity in the relationship between God and the faithful, and then between individual community members of a community, is perhaps the best motivation to forgive - forgiving brings forgiveness, while withholding it brings God's wrath.

Forgiveness comes neither

easily nor readily. As with many special Christian virtues, forgiveness is acquired rather than inherited, and it has to be cultivated. Today's liturgy contains some suggestions on how to train oneself in the art of forgiveness. Sirach suggests that, since the mortal human beings lack complete knowledge and absolute authority, they cannot legitimately pursue vengeance and justice on their own terms. Paul places emphasis on tolerance and open-mindedness achieved through recognition that there are different ways of serving the one and the same Lord. Finally, the Gospel presents a non-negotiable demand for unrestricted forgiveness as the very essential attitude that differentiates Christians from others. Through such practice Christians, not only assure forgiveness of their own faults, but, above all, they imitate God and act in a God-like manner in the world. And ours is the God who, in the words of the Psalmist, "does not treat us as our sins deserve, nor repay us as befits our offences."

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

Forgiveness lies at the very core of Christian faith. However, it is such a difficult practice, because, as humans, we have in us the desire for justice, which is often seen as a matter of repaying the evil which has been done to us. As Christians though, we ought to keep in mind that we are limited, fragile and imperfect beings, in need of God's

love, mercy and protection. We must keep this in mind in order to understand that we are really different from God. Since God is the author of all that is, we must remember that he has the sole authority to carry out justice and avenge the wrongs done to us.

In most of our African cultures, we speak about the ancestors taking vengeance for wrongs done to individuals or communities. Some people even offer sacrifices to the ancestors, asking for vengeance, because they know that, as humans, they are incapable of vengeance. Now if those whom we call traditional worshippers know this much, then we, Christians, should know and apply this thinking to our situation as well. Sirach in today's reading reminds us of our limitedness and fragility, as a way to excuse others for the wrongs or hurts that they do to us. If we do, it becomes much easier to forgive a friend who has betrayed our trust, stolen from us or left us when we really needed help. This is an attitude that we ought to adopt so that it can diminish our desire for revenge. Paul proposes two more attitudes that we need to take into consideration. For him, we need to have tolerance and understanding for others rather than condemning them straightforwardly. This is also a way of expressing our belief in Christ Jesus whom we are called to follow. These two attitudes, if they are well integrated in us, help us to avoid tribalism, which causes a lot of damage to us in

Africa. This can also help us to be authentic Christians in choosing leaders during elections, and so avoiding tribal clashes.

In the Gospel, Peter asked Jesus if he should forgive often. Jesus' answer was truly amazing as he indicated that forgiveness is something we cannot live without. We need it as much as we need air to live, and Jesus' parable illustrates this truth so well. It shows us how God's generosity and forgiveness are without limit. The servant in the parable did not remember that he was forgiven and so ought to do the same. As the saying goes; "Those whose palm kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit, should not forget to be humble." The servant in the parable failed to remember his own fragility. Thus, forgiveness becomes a necessity for us. It demands that we learn and cultivate the art of forgiveness. Let it become part of us, so that we live in a continual reconciliation with ourselves, others and, of course, God.

PROVERB

"Those whose palm kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble."

ACTION

Self-examination:

Have I stopped communicating with those who have

hurt or wronged me, by not picking up or answering their calls or responding to their emails?

Am I still holding a grudge against my friend who has hurt or betrayed me in the recent past?

Response to God:

In my prayers today, I will examine myself and forgive myself, and then, with the same attitude, forgive others who have caused me pain in one way or another.

Response to your World:

Write to, or call, your parents or friends who have hurt or wronged you, and who you had made up your mind not to forgive, and tell them you have forgiven them.

As a group, let each person take a paper and pen and write down the names of those whom they are holding a grudge against, and tell them you have forgiven them, and pray for each one of them, calling out their names.

PRAYER

O Lord our God, I thank you, asking for your forgiveness and mercy on me.

Now I ask you for the grace to be able

to reach out to others with the same forgiveness and mercy that you show to me each and every day.

Help me to forgive all those who have caused me pain in my life.

I ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.