

TWENTY-FOURTH
SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME

YEAR A



Prayer

Psalms 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

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 pardoned
when you pray.

Does anyone harbor anger
against another, and expect
healing from the Lord?

If one has no mercy toward
another like himself, can he
then seek pardon for his own
sins?

If a mere mortal harbors
wrath, who will make an
atoning sacrifice for his sins?

Remember the end of your
life, and set enmity aside;
remember corruption and
death, and be true to the
commandments.

Remember the command-
ments, and do not be angry
with your neighbor; remem-
ber the covenant of the Most
High, and overlook faults.

Romans 14:7–9

We do not live to ourselves,
and we do not die to our-
selves. 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.

FIRST READING

Sirach 27:30–28:7

PSALM

Psalms 103:1–4, 9–12

SECOND READING

Romans 14:7–9

GOSPEL

Matthew 18:21–35

Matthew 18:21–35

Then Peter came and said
to Jesus, "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 accounts with his slaves.
When he began the reckon-
ing, 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.'

*Scripture quotations from
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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, which significantly modifies the OT teaching, which was based on the principle of strict reciprocity, expressed through the famous axiom "eye for eye and tooth for tooth". Today's readings offer some help to make Jesus' radical demand for forgiveness understandable, and thus easier to fulfil.

The book of Sirach contains systematic and philosophi-

cal reflections on a life that is acceptable and pleasing to God. One of the book's key insights is that a happy and fulfilling life can be achieved through strict observance of God's commandments. This view is evident particularly in the last two lines of today's reading which contain a four-fold admonition to "remember", which implies holding something constantly in the mind.

In his admonition Sirach intertwines a double admonition to remember God's commandments and the covenant, with a double reminder about the last things and death, as he points out that human beings are mortal beings made of feeble flesh. Remembering mortality is meant to help one to avoid resentment, anger, vengeance and ill will, while, at the same time, it is a motivation to pardon the wrongdoings and to overlook the ignorance of others.

Mortality in which all human beings share makes people different from God. Since the authority to execute justice and to avenge wrongs is reserved for the creator of the mortals – the immortal God – no human being is entitled to play that role. In Sirach's view, only God is entitled to carry out justice.

However, unlike the execution of justice, forgiveness lies within the human capacity. Sirach suggests that accepting limitations in understanding of what causes others to behave in a wrong way, may help in forgiving the wrongs and hurts perpetrated by

others. 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, where Paul writes about the conflict between the "strong" and the "weak" in the community (Rom 14:1-6). The "weak" believers continued to hold on to some Jewish religious and social practices, such as dietary and purity laws, despite being Christians. The "strong" believers fully understand their new freedom in Christ, which allowed them to dispense with the old laws, and to live guided solely 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 each make choices according to their understanding of how to serve the Lord best (Rom 14:6). Paul forbids judging others, because a 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. Such open-mindedness and flexibility can be achieved when Christians remember that their allegiance is to the one and the same Lord, who made them his own, by his death and resurrection. Therefore, the focus lies on serving the Lord in the best way possible, 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 required forgiveness but limited its scope to forgiving three times. Peter goes much further referring to seven times. Seven is a symbolic number which implies 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 Jesus' statement illustrates the reason why forgiveness is essential. 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 which is 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 an unimaginable debt 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, and Jesus demands that it be practiced without any reservations. The parable justifies this demand by appealing to God's example and to 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 a 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 this 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 many traditional cultures, people hold beliefs about the spirits or deceased 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 commanding power to exact it. 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.

In today's reading, Sirach 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 someone who has betrayed our trust. 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. 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 breath, and Jesus' parable illustrates this truth very 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

How do I respond to those who have hurt or wronged me?

Who are those whom I cannot, until now, forgive the wrongs of the past? What prevents me from doing so?

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

I will initiate contact with someone who has hurt or wronged me and attempt to find a way to forgive 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, then publicly declare that you have forgiven them, and pray for him or her.

Prayer

O Lord our God, I thank you, asking for your forgiveness and mercy to 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