

## Readings for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

17<sup>th</sup> September 2023

### First Reading: Exodus 14:19-31

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and turned the sea into dry land, and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the LORD, in the pillar of fire and cloud, looked down on the Egyptian army and threw the Egyptian army into a panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

### Second Reading: Romans 14:1-12

Welcome those who are weak in faith but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat, for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on slaves of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God, while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.

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.

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." So then, each one of us will be held accountable.

Gospel: St Matthew 18:21-35

Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if my brother or sister 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 reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him, and, as he could not pay, the 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."

**A Reflection for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

*From Rev'd David Higgon*

**Let justice roll on like a river.**

During my time as a prison chaplain, on a daily basis I was confronted with issues of justice and of punishment and retribution. Sometimes it was from a biblical or ethical standpoint but mostly it was from the reality of people who were on the receiving end of justice dished out to them by the criminal justice system.

Retribution is an interesting concept because in theory it can be seen as a form of revenge, a payback for an offence committed. It is revenge with the emotion taken out of it. Justice is administered by the state, by people who can judge and sentence impartially to ensure that the offender receives a punishment proportional to the offence, free from the emotion and the desire of those offended to seek revenge.

In theology we have the concept of 'divine retribution' which is the idea that God, being righteous, will payback those who will do wrong. A key biblical example of divine retribution is the great flood. We also have what is called the 'retribution principle', found in the Old Testament that the righteous prosper and the wicked will suffer. The opposite of retribution is forgiveness, and this brings us to today's Gospel reading.

Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive another member of the church who offends against him. Seven times? No says Jesus, 77 times, and from there he goes on to tell a parable, seemingly to explain what forgiveness is, but in fact it is more to do with the nature of divine justice.

I have always been uneasy with Jesus's answer to Peter's question. How much should I forgive – 77 times which practically means that your forgiveness should have no limitations.

As a priest, pastor and chaplain I would never tell anyone that they have to forgive someone who has offended against them. Forgiveness is very personal, and you can't demand that someone must forgive. We all know how difficult it can be to forgive. Some people have the ability to forgive without question or recourse to the offender. Some people can never find it in their hearts to forgive. For others, forgiveness is part of a process that involves both sides, victim and perpetrator, where there is a process of reconciliation that acknowledges the hurt done, where there is regret for that hurt, and not only a commitment to change an offending behaviour, but evidence that that change is taking place.

My experience is that forgiveness, if it is to come, is at the end of this process. This is tied into a concept known as 'Restorative justice', which contrary to retributive justice, is focused on allowing the victim to give voice to the hurt they have suffered, for that hurt to be acknowledged by the offender and for there to be some form of redress. It is focused on putting right a wrong that has been suffered, through reconciliation and redress, rather than being focused solely on punishment.

Jesus addresses the question of the nature of justice in the parable of the unforgiving slave.

The first slave is forgiven his debt by the master, but that slave fails to offer the same generosity to the second slave. Under the law, the first slave is legally entitled to punish the slave who owes him 100 denarii. But he incurs his master's wrath because he doesn't show the same generosity of heart that has been shown to him. Interestingly, the master doesn't forgive him a second time, yet alone 77 times, the story tells us he is handed over to be tortured until he can repay his debt.

The words of Jesus to his followers are, *'so my heavenly father will also do to every one of you who does not forgive your brother or sister from the heart'*.

God in Jesus shows us a model of how we should treat others, to do to others as we would have them do unto us; to show a generosity of heart to our brothers and sisters and the whole of God's creation.

People around the world are having to deal with the worsening effects of climate change. We as human beings have had to deal with changes in the climate in our past history; and one of the ways human beings have adapted to changes in the climate is through migration. When the ice sheets receded 10,000 years ago, humans moved into these lands where we live now. We are all migrants or descended from migrants whether directly or through our ancestors. The effects of climate change today, of fire, heat, flood and drought, is creating a belt of

uninhabitable land across the most populated regions of the world and the UN estimates that there could be as many as 1.5 billion environmental migrants in the next thirty years.

There is a population today of around 8 billion people who share our planet but where we live on the planet is by chance of birth. Some of us have the privilege of passports to explore our planet, while others are trapped by poverty or by the migration policies of nations who build walls to deter migrants, who turn them back at their borders and who demonise them. But walls and policies to keep migrants out do not prevent migration, people will continue to move because quite simply they have no choice. In this country we only see the tip of the iceberg in boats crossing the channel. In Africa and Asia, rural poverty and the effects of climate change, is already forcing millions of people into cities. The other week in Johannesburg, 73 people died in a fire in a building housing illegal migrants from Malawi Tanzania and Zimbabwe, and there are estimated to be tens of thousands of illegal migrants living in Johannesburg alone.

We know what the future holds for our planet, and we need to stop acting like innocent bystanders, reacting to every new shock, to each new drought, each typhoon, each blazing forest, each heaving boat of migrants with a knee jerk reaction and sticking plaster patch up.

We have an opportunity to take control of our future, to plan for migration, to decarbonise our economies so to reverse the destruction of eco systems and to restore biodiversity. But we can only do this by supporting poor countries in building climate resistance. We need to apply the principles of restorative justice to our planet. Those of us living in the rich privileged parts of the world need to recognise the hurt we are causing to other peoples and living things in our world, and to right the wrong and the harm we do to them.

Jesus tells us what the future holds for us In this story of the unforgiving slave, who having received the bountiful grace of his master, shows no mercy to someone who is poorer than him and who is in his debt. He tells us *so my heavenly father will also do to every one of you who does not forgive your brother or sister from the heart.*