

When we are prepared to enter into the suffering of others and our world then things can begin to change
Matthew 18:21-35

I hope you were listening to the story of the Quarrelling Book a few minutes ago as it was really Part One of today's sermon, for Jesus' parable of the 'unforgiving servant' is really a story in two parts.

The first part of the story records the generosity of a master who forgives an enormous debt (my translation of the Jerusalem Bible bought some years ago in a footnote calculates the debt as equivalent to \$60mUS in today's terms) whilst in the second part a forgiven servant can't see beyond himself and even refuses to forgive a debt equivalent to only \$200US.

The Quarrelling Book and the second part of the parable reminds us of the consequences when we hold on to old hurts, resentment or self interest, and fail to listen or heed the needs of others, keeping the cycle of hurt, resentment or suffering going.

But now I wish to focus on the first part of Jesus' parable that helps us to understand how to break those cycles of resentment, hurt and self righteous revenge.

At the beginning of this morning's Gospel Peter asks Jesus "How many times must I forgive someone? As many as seven times?" "Not seven times," said Jesus, "but seventy-seven times."

Then Jesus tells a story about a servant who is forgiven an enormous debt by his own master but will not forgive another servant who owes him a small amount of money.

Seemingly it is a story about forgiveness but really the story turns on another key phrase midway through the story: "*And the servant's master was **so moved by compassion** that he let him go and cancelled the debt.*"

Three of Jesus' most well known and powerful stories, which all involve forgiveness, turn on the experience of compassion:

- the parable of the Good Samaritan
- the parable of the Prodigal Son (Father's love)
- the parable of the Unforgiving Servant

In all three stories the evangelists Luke & Matthew use the same Greek word to explain the extraordinary actions of the good Samaritan able to get beyond generations of racial hostility, the forgiving father who overlooks how his son had treated him, and the forgiving master of today's story.

In all three stories, the Samaritan, the father and the master are 'moved by compassion'.

All three stories –resulting in forgiveness – turn on the experience of compassion.

Compassion is about entering into the suffering of others.

But what is compassion? What do we mean when we say someone is 'moved by compassion'?

People are moved by compassion when they are able to enter into the secret chamber of the mysterious other; when they are able to feel the hurt, the anger, the pain, anxiety, loneliness or resentment that motivates the actions of the other.

A person visits a friend whose partner has died recently and suddenly experiences the utter emptiness of grief, and is moved by compassion.

A father attends the trial of the drunken driver who killed his daughter in a car accident, sees the man's remorse, his life shattered, and is moved by compassion.

The key to understanding this morning's story and Jesus' own life and ministry, is his capacity to enter into the life experience of others – the heart and soul of the other – in order to understand and ultimately forgive them their actions.

Through his parable Jesus is reminding us that the seeds of forgiveness are found in the ability to move beyond our own feelings of hurt, injustice or unfairness;
to empathise with those who have wronged us in order to understand what may have motivated their actions.

Last Thursday being the thirteenth anniversary of September 11, I went back through my files looking for an article from the SMH of the time,
and found the following words spoken by Jaqueline van Deinsen whose daughter died in the World Trade Center.

In a service at St Christopher's Cathedral, here in Canberra, shortly after September 11, Jaqueline called for an end to talk of war and revenge and said of her daughter: *"This caring and aware girl would be appalled at the thought that our beloved country with its unique freedoms would be put into jeopardy by the present political ambitions and machinations."*

(There is poignancy in these words given the invasion of Iraq in 2003 which sadly fed the cycle of hurt, resentment & revenge such that this very week, in 2014, eleven years later we are once more contemplating sending in young Australians to feed the cycle of hurt & resentment, most likely increasing the likelihood of a terrorist response rather than reducing it.)

In the context of this morning's Gospel, with its emphasis on forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-35), Jaqueline's words of compassion were a sign of hope amidst all the political posturing of those days.

Jaqueline, in compassion, understood pain will not be relieved or injustice resolved by inflicting further hurt or revenge on others,

but in accepting our shared humanity and seeking to understand the causes of resentment or hatred that can result in the terrible events of September 11,

or the continuing tragedy that Iraq has become.

(Sadly this week's events suggest we have not yet learnt the lesson)

Unforeseen actions which change the shape of things

If Jesus' stories about forgiveness and grace turn on the experience of compassion, what effect can it have?

We need to understand that compassion – the ability to enter into the hurt, resentment or suffering of others – is something that wells up from the deepest centre of our being. It suggests a response so powerful that it overflows into action.

And because it flows from that part of us touched by the divine, in tune with the Spirit of God, the action will be creative and effective.

Perhaps Fr John Shea best expresses this deeper truth when he suggests *"compassion is the experience of feeling the other's life as one's own, (and) is the dynamism of new and unforeseen actions which change the shape of things."*

I sense we will have found this to be true in our personal lives and relationships when, for whatever reason, we have been moved to try and understand the struggles of those who may have wronged us.

But what is true at the personal level can also be true at the national and international level.

If we look at some of the great people and movements of the twentieth century – such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela – who essentially achieved their goals through peaceful means, we will discover their ability to transform society grew out of their empathy with the sufferings and deepest longings of their fellow citizens.

Conclusion

How then do we stop the futile cycle of hurt, resentment, fear and revenge that threatens to spiral personal relationships or our world into even greater suffering and hurt?

By going deep within our selves to discover the common humanity we share with all people, including those who have wronged us.

When we discover our common humanity in all its complexity – all that is magnificent and all that diminishes us in our human frailty –

we will discover within ourselves the capacity to forgive...not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Forgiveness is an act of faith born in the divine forgiveness and grace of God;

it is the dynamism of new and unforeseen actions which change the shape of things and can halt the spiral of hurt or violence that threatens our personal relationships and peace in the world.

May we be compassionate just as God is compassionate, then maybe, just maybe, we will create a thing of beauty, a reconciled world.

To do otherwise would be to deny the common humanity we share with all people and that who we are has been forged through the forgiving, reconciling love and grace of God. Amen