

## Homily for The Twenty Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) (13/09/20)

Peter comes to Jesus today with a question. He thinks that he has an idea about what the answer might be, and he thinks it is going to be something rather outrageous. 'How often must we forgive someone who hurts us?' Could the answer be as outrageously generous as to say not once, or twice, but seven times? It is hard not to smile and admire Peter for this. He has picked up that Jesus is outrageously generous in his mercy, so he has dreamed up and outrageous answer: but still he falls far short, because the mercy of God is far more shocking than even he thought: not seven times, but seventy-seven.

And to help Peter understand this answer, Jesus tells a parable about a master and his servants. The master lets one servant off a huge debt, a massive sum, but out of compassion the master simply lets it go. If that was where the story ended it would be interesting, challenging and even rather beautiful, but it is going to be taken to a new level. The forgiven servant refuses to forgive a colleague a tiny debt. All his own financial worries have disappeared, he cannot even say he needs this money to pay off his Master, because he no longer owes him anything. It is a very unedifying scene, but somehow we can believe there might be people who behave like this. We are appalled and scandalised, and so are his fellow servants, so his misdeeds come to light and the Master takes him to task. There is a pleasing sense that the wrongdoer has been found out, and put in a place where he will not be able to do this again.

So this is a story about mercy, about forgiveness, and about the importance of being givers of mercy, not just recipients. But it is more than that. It tells us something about the power of mercy to transform the well-disposed soul, and the way in which the ill-disposed soul can squander it and empty it of power. Mercy, like kindness, and love, and hope, and joy, and faith and so many other things that enliven and enrich the world, is not given to us for us to take and store away for ourselves: wonderful, excellent, that is so good, I am so pleased to have that, I will add it to my pile of possessions. NO! Mercy is given to us to change us, and for us then to pass on. Mercy is not given to us solely for our own benefit, something for us to receive and then guard jealously. If we do that, if we accept mercy, whether from God or from another person, and keep it for ourselves, we rob it of all its power, we render it fruitless and hidden away among our possessions it withers and lies dried up and useless.

The first servant in this parable is mean and cruel to his fellow servant, and that is bad enough. But the real disaster, the catastrophic failure on his part, is that he has received mercy and he has wasted it. He was given mercy by his master, and mercy is a gift given to be shared, to be received with awe and wonder and then passed on to someone else: that way it remains lively and powerful and life-enhancing. Mercy received and then shared, like love, hope, faith joy and so on, takes on a life and a power of its own. It certainly does enrich the person who receives it, but it enriches him so that he can pass it on, and then he is enriched again in sharing it. Receiving mercy brings him joy, but if his heart is open and

generous and in any way in tune with the heart of God, he is then enriched again when he shares the gift he has received, passes it on, and enriches another soul. Mercy received and shared takes on a life of its own and starts to spread far and wide. Gifts that are received and then hoarded, on the other hand, shrivel and perish. They bring no benefit to anyone.

We are all of us sinners, all of us prone to say and do things that cause damage to ourselves or to others, or prone to stay silent, or to stay inactive, when we should have spoken or should have done something. We are all of us recipients of God's mercy, and we know how being a recipient of that mercy swells our hearts; we receive this gift so that we can share it, and in sharing it we can make sure that it stays lively and fruitful. The first servant was relieved to be let off his debt, but he was not happy. His own heart remains locked up in greed and anger; the mercy he received has not changed him, and he has wasted the gift. There is something much more beautiful in God's mind for all of us, receivers of his mercy who are given the power to be givers of mercy too.