

Sermon 17th September 2017 – Third Sunday in Creation Time “Generosity and Forgiveness”

Gospel: Matthew 18: 21 – 35

I thought I'd start off this morning with a bit of listener participation – a bit of a guessing game in fact. Now this comes from a recent news report so if you've seen the report and know the answer let someone else have a guess – because it's the surprise quality of the answer that's important for my purposes.

It's the findings of the latest global report on giving from the Charities Aid Foundation. It ranks countries using data on the three main types of generous behaviour: giving to good causes, volunteering, and helping strangers.

So here's the chance to guess? Which country in the world comes top of the list - the most generous country in the world?

Anyone like to try and guess?

Take some answers

<Myanmar – Burma>

Second in the list is Indonesia, third is Kenya.

In terms of their religion: Myanmar's population is 90% Buddhist, Indonesia has the single largest Muslim population in the world with over 200 million -87% of its total population identifying as Muslim, and of Kenya's 47 million population, over 80% identify as Christians.

In this world league table of generosity the UK is now 11th out of 139 countries surveyed -still not bad really, but in the last 5 years we have dropped down – we used to be 8th. And overall, the total score for the world has decreased. The world it seems and the UK is no exception has become a little less generous, a meaner place now than it was in 2012. But there was good news too – which leads to one final guess - easier to guess this one since there are fewer possible answers.

Anyone have a guess which continent bucked the world trend and has increased its total generosity over the last 5 years?

<Africa>

Eight African countries including Kenya increased their generosity scores by at least 5% since 2012.

There are lots of conclusions that could be drawn from this information and lots of interesting dimensions when analysed in more detail I am sure. What struck me was the surprising range of countries with ostensibly very different cultural and religious backgrounds at the top of the list. It struck me that one lesson from this is that generosity is an attitude and a practice which is not restricted to any one group or type of people or society, to any one level of income or wealth - – it's open to every human being to be generous, to give to others, of money, time, skills, and kindness.

What about the perspective of Christian faith? How is it reflected in the gospel this morning? The topic here is forgiveness. Peter asks the Lord whether there is any measurable restriction on how many times he should forgive another member of the church who sins against him. Seven times maybe? Basically Jesus replies there is no limit – the high figure of 77, or 70 times 7 in some versions, is rhetoric meaning for as many times as necessary. And then there is this rather odd

parable, generally referred to as parable of the Unforgiving Servant, which I will look at in a moment.

First, let's explore briefly the link between forgiveness and generosity. After all the word "give" is embraced by the word "forgive." And that's true not only in the English language but also in other languages too, for example in German "vergeben" and in French "pardonner", they include as a root that language's word meaning "give". That link isn't accidental – it all goes back to a Latin word "perdonare" which means "to give completely", or thoroughly, without reservation. And so whilst forgive now usually means to pardon someone for an offense against you it is also about giving up the desire or the power to punish or penalise the offender. Forgiveness could be said to be giving up the right to hurt you for hurting me. It's a letting go. And importantly forgiveness is not given because of what a person deserves, but as an act of love and grace. So the act of forgiveness in itself is gift offered to another. In the light of the forgiveness we receive from God in Jesus Christ, we as Christians are called to forgive. We forgive because we have been forgiven by God. There's more - a lot more – to say about forgiveness - it doesn't mean we will put ourselves back into a harmful situation or that we suddenly accept or approve of the person's continued wrong behaviour, for example. However, it does mean a complete change of attitude in ourselves towards the person who has wronged us - we are released from the power their wrong has over us as we release them from the power that wrong has over them in relation to us.

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant has a customary interpretation which I am now going to unpick if not subvert. The usual understanding of this parable is that it shows the great generosity of the king, standing for God, who shows mercy to a poor servant, who owes him an impossible amount, by forgiving him the debt, compared to the meanness of the wretched servant himself, who does not show similar mercy to a workmate who owed him much less. The message to the reader, generally interpreted, is that we must not be like the mean -spirited servant. In this understanding, the power of the story comes in the shocking disconnect between the king's generous attitude and the servant's meanness to others after he has been treated so well himself. Hopefully we are stung by this shocking contrast to realise that we must not be like this. So the parable is read as a moral tale – don't be like the ungracious servant.

But there are some problems with this interpretation. There is more to the story which is sometimes glossed over. The king hears of the servant's meanness and revokes his forgiveness of the debt. In fact, the servant is then condemned to torture until he can pay the debt. The parable ends not with the claim that the king stands for God but with the still difficult saying that God will do what the king did to those who do not forgive their brothers and sisters. So the parable doesn't seem to sit easily with the idea that forgiveness must be unlimited. What's the answer?

Better I think to read the parable not as a personal morality lesson, but as a warning to the community and each of its members of what happens ultimately when it fails to live generously in the spirit of forgiveness and mercy. The story of the king and the servant is a picture of worldly life at the human level which was all too familiar. The nature of power and elitism in the society meant that ordinary hard-working people were found in great debt – nothing new there ; it was in the interests of the king to show mercy, it legitimised his position if he appeared to be a nice chap really, but it would not ultimately dent his wealth or power significantly, indeed it would be a political ploy to maintain it. When the king discovers that his other servants are unhappy that the servant he forgave has as it were thrown that mercy back in his face he has to act, otherwise he'd appear weak and his face would be all over the daily papers the next day as a weak leader. So this parable need not and maybe should not be read as a personal morality tale.

I can imagine the early listeners not being shocked by the turn of events within the parable – so much was common. I can imagine them laughing and relishing the story as it unfolded and as it highlighted typical scenarios in communities where employers and landlords held such unmitigated power over the workers – delighting in this dramatic depiction and unmasking of the way the world is, exposing the self-interested motivations of all the actors, king, servant and other

servants too. But the real shock the powerful message of the parable is the warning at the end of it: the Christian community is called to be utterly different otherwise it will go the same way too – there is a seriousness about this call to generosity and mercy.

In a modern way of speaking you could say we make the future society and community we will inherit. A society or a community where there is a mean spirit and where there is no generosity and willingness to forgive will in the end be hell to live in. The generosity of God is freely offered to everyone whatever we have done in the past, the promise and gift of forgiveness and a new attitude to life is there for us to receive as a gift, to live into and to choose to share; but if we do not then consequences follow. We are called to forgive because God forgives us; we are called to be generous because God is generous to us.

As this is Creation Time let me offer a final thought which links to this. It has seemed hard to many I am sure this month to be thanking God for the creation when there are so many people across the world who have lost lives and homes because of storms, floods and earthquakes. If there is a beauty of the natural world there is also a terror and an awesome power which renders us vulnerable to harm and suffering. In earlier times the standard theological interpretation would be that if you were hit by a natural disaster then it must be God's punishment for something you'd done wrong. And you can find that understanding expressed in some parts of the Bible too, though Jesus rejected it. And we must reject those interpretations today. They came from a time when there was little scientific understanding of the earth and its systems. And yet, there is a growing awareness too that blame and indeed penalty may be apportioned for the effects of natural disasters – as for example when sub-standard building materials contributed to the death of 5000 children in schools in an earthquake in China. The extreme power of recent hurricanes may soon be shown to be related to human-induced climate change and lawsuits may be launched.

If we take seriously God's call to be giving and to be forgiving as God has given to us and forgiven us, then our attitude to God's great gift of the earth and our life in it also needs to be one of generosity and mercy. If we are an earth-caring community we will not only be interested in ensuring we can continue to get out of the earth what we need, like the self-interested king of the parable, but we will be generous to the natural world for its own sake and we will seek to forgive those who may come to be found guilty of the earth's denigration; and in this way may God's kingdom come on earth as in heaven.

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