

Peter came and said to Jesus: "Lord, if another *member of the church* (In Greek: adelphos, which means my brother or sister) if *my brother or my sister* sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many times as seven times?". And Jesus said to him: "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times".

Well, I think the text of the Gospel we have heard this morning confronts us with our own defensiveness. Because most of the times, the first reaction we have when we hear these lines is not to think: "Wow, great idea, let's just do that, let's just forgive without counting". For most of us, most of the times, our first reaction when we hear these lines is, not unlike Peter, to raise our guard up. Because forgiveness is difficult.

Of course, we aren't bad people, and we are ready to forgive. Although sometimes we can get tired with some of our brothers and sisters, I am sure we're all okay to cut some slack to those who get on our nerves. Like Peter, we are ready to be kind and understanding. We can forgive seven times, if needed. Yet, when Jesus asks us to forgive *seventy-seven times*, most of us I guess feel the temptation to ask whether our forgiveness should not have some limits, and as Peter we may ask the question: *Surely, we cannot let this thing going on, at some point it has to stop, doesn't it?*

Should we forgive the abuser, the terrorist, the shooter, the white supremacist...? It's not only a question for individuals, but it's also a question for our society. Elie Wiesel shocked a lot of people when he wrote this prayer set like a modern psalm: *Lord of Mercy, have no mercy (on those who had no mercy on the Jewish children)*. Yet, we can all understand what Wiesel wanted to say. Even if we have trouble with the psalms and their calls to vengeance, we know it can be the way we react when we are confronted to evil. We want justice, and our call to justice or just reward can easily turn into a call for vengeance. We wish that the evil that has been done to us, to the innocents, turn back on the offender. We wish that those who have somehow destroyed us, in our bodies, in our hearts, with their swords or their words, may at their turn be destroyed, that they may hurt as much as they have hurt us.

Well, the good news is that this is exactly where Jesus meets us today. You see, Jesus does not only give to Peter pious advice: *Forgive seventy-seven times*, but he tells him a story to make his point. And if we just stop a minute to listen to the story, we will quickly realize that Jesus does not say, as we may worry about: *marry the abuser, congratulate the terrorist, release the shooter or make friends with the white supremacist*. Jesus, speaking of those who hurt us, who have "debts" towards us, simply advises us, literally, *to not choke them to death*. This is what happens in our Gospel: As an example of what we should not do, Jesus speaks of this man who sizes his debtor by the throat and puts him in prison to *make him pay*. And Jesus says: *Don't do that*. Don't choke your debtors to death, don't make them pay.

Well, if this is what forgiveness looks like, that seems much more doable, doesn't it? Of course in Matthew, killing somebody does not mean necessarily killing, it's often a metaphor for being angry (see chapter 5), like when one says: *I am going to kill him!* Jesus asks us to renounce to murder of course, but also to our destructive anger. Not all angers are evil: we can all think of the just anger of Jesus in the Temple. Put more simply in everyday life, anger is given to us to protect us, to help us be aware of dangers and injustices. And that is what happens when we are offended: we try to protect ourselves. But the anger Jesus condemns is the one that turns to hate: desire that something evil happens to those who hurt us, like when we say: *You're going to pay for that...* We have to acknowledge that it is often the way it works for individuals and in society. The man of the story throws his debtor in prison to make him pay (money) the same way we put people in prison to make them pay (for what they did). We know that most of the time, prison life is not worked out to bring reparation or rehabilitation. It's mostly a punishment. In the same way, we have to pay fines when we make an infraction.

But it turns out that Jesus is not very interested in making people pay. Jesus, as we know, was more interested in conversion and redemption, than in punishment. If we have a look at the original text of our Gospel, Jesus does not actively compares God to the King who settle accounts. Literally, Jesus says: "The Kingdom of God *has been compared* to a king". And isn't it the way we see God so very often? Writing in his book, counting all our wrong doings...

On the other way around, Jesus shows us a God who prefers not to abuse his own power. And this what, I think, Jesus is teaching Peter today, after having given him authority over the church: Jesus asks Peter to always forgive. To restrain his own power. To not make people pay. This is something we all have to do. We have a tendency to think of the powerful on one side and of the powerless on the other. But interestingly, in the story, the man is both powerless, in front of his master, but he is powerful in front of the poor. And we can all think about ourselves this way I think, both powerful and powerless. Some people are powerful at work, but powerless at home. Sometimes it's the other way around. Some marginals have no status whatsoever in society and yet have much influence over their friends. Power comes and goes, it is something that can shift easily. Power can be politic or economic of course, but it can also be intellectual, emotional, sexual, spiritual. It all depends on the situation we are in: We can become the powerful one in a heartbeat. Or we can lose our power in the blinking of an eye.

Jesus invites us to look at the situation we're in at a given moment and wonder who has the power and act in consequence. If you realize you are the one in power, don't abuse it. Joseph's brothers were afraid of him. "What if", they ask, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?". Joseph, the baby brother they thrown down into a well is now like the prime minister in Egypt and hold their lives in the palm of his hand. But Joseph realizes the shift of power and decides to forgive.

What is worth noticing is that Joseph forgives not from a place of fear and coercion, he forgives from a place of control, and mostly from a place of gratitude because he knows God has saved him. This is what we should remember when we are asked to forgive.

First thing is that like Joseph, we are often in a place of control when we forgive, although it does not feel like it. We see the offended as the victim, but strangely in Jesus's eyes, the offended is not the powerless. In the kingdom of God, the offended is the one somebody owes something to. When we are offended we feel very vulnerable, and it explains our defensiveness. We have to stop the attack. But Jesus in his parable puts literally the offended in the King's shoes, and in the place of God. The offended is given power: power to count and to

make pay, or power to release and to forgive. By putting the man in the place of the Master, I think that what Jesus wants to tell us is: When you're offended, even if you feel humiliated, actually you are the king, you are the queen. You are in charge and in control because you can decide what to do. Holding on to our hurt is always an option, but maybe, maybe it's okay to let go of our defensiveness. It's okay because our own Master does not make us pay, so we don't need to choke our debtors to death to get our money back. Nobody needs our money. How often do we accuse others just because we are afraid to be found guilty? But God does not need our excuses or our justifications, we're not forgiven by paying our debts, we're forgiven from the bottom of God's heart. There is nothing to be afraid of.

And so like Joseph, we also need to remember to be grateful. As the Epistle reminds us: "Each of us will be accountable to God". Jesus tells us that we may not want to start counting what people owe us because what we owe to God is so huge. It has been calculated that the man of the story owe to his Master something like 150.000 years of salary. I don't know what this count is all about. We say it's about sins, but when Jesus speaks about debts, it's generally all we owe to God, and so that's not so much our sins, but it's our own life that is like this crazy debt, something we can never pay for. Throughout the Gospel Jesus asks this type of questions: *What can you offer in ransom for your life?* The debt is about this tremendous gift of life. We are taught that our forgiveness should come from a place of unworthiness, we forgive sins to our brother and sisters because we are such terrible sinners to begin with. Well, for sure being aware of our own shortcomings is always helpful to be more indulgent to others (Try it when you're behind the wheel!). Yet, mostly, we could forgive from a place of gratitude for our own life, because we are so valuable to God and we know that people can take from us only what has been given to us by God's generosity in the first place. Nothing really belongs to us. Yes, forgiveness is hard but we can put back everything into God's hands where it all comes from. The money we lend to our brothers and sisters was the Master's money all along anyway. Amen.