

FAITH & GENEROSITY REFLECTION

FORGIVENESS

Year C - Trinity 6 - Luke 11: 1-13

“And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial” (NRSVA)

“Forgive us our sins for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation” (NIV)

Strange as it may seem...this prayer puts me in mind of a childhood game that I stumbled across a few years ago when clearing a chest of drawers. It was a game my parents played with my sister and me. When I tell you it was ‘Snakes and Ladders’ you would be forgiven for thinking that there is nothing at all remarkable about that. But this was no ordinary ‘Snakes and Ladders’ game, it was a version designed to teach children Christian values. I can’t give you more details, as I could not find it when I searched the other day – but no doubt you get the idea. So why did it spring to mind? I will come back to this ...

We all know that forgiveness is at the very heart of the Christian life. We know this because Jesus showed us that in the endless cycle of hurt, loss of trust and guilt, the desire for revenge can only be overcome, not by revenge, but by forgiveness.

Yet how hard it is to forgive! Sometimes it is so difficult we don’t even try. Yet Jesus, by his words and deeds, shows us that we must.

In chapter 5 of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says:

²⁰For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (...) “anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell” (...) ²³“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift”. (NIV)

And then there is the shocking parable Jesus told about the unforgiving servant whom a king releases from a huge debt of 10,000 talents, but who then goes on to refuse to cancel the debt of a paltry 100 denarii. The message here is clear, anything you and I have to forgive in each other is a paltry 100 denarii compared with what God, with unfathomable generosity, forgives in us.

Perhaps ‘generosity’ is a word that we may not readily put in the same sentence as ‘forgiveness’ but, when we think about it, we realise that generosity is what forgiveness is all about.

When someone is hurt by the sin of another, they may feel betrayed, abused, mistreated – *burdened by pain, anger and bitterness*. Ridding ourselves of that burden – shaking it off if you will, is hard work, because we have to transform the hurt with the grace to forgive. We have to have the *generosity of heart* to throw off the burden we carry and absolve the guilt of the one who has hurt us. And so we pray to our Father...

“Forgive us our sins for we also forgive everyone who sins against us”.

This challenges us every day. And it reminds us too that the unfathomable generosity that Christ shows us in bearing the burden of our guilt - entering our world to absolve us and heal us - demands our gratitude and commitment to overcome sin with love.

Something else we find difficult to understand is the petition ‘*And do not bring us to the time of trial*’, which we render as ‘*lead us not into temptation*’.

Surely God does not actively lead us into temptation?! No He does not! There is no question about that. As Paul wrote to the church in Corinth... *“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man”*. With this in view, alternatives to the literal translation may be more helpful to us For example *“do not let us fall into temptation”* or *“do not abandon us to temptation.”*

Crucially, we know, as St Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, *“God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it”* (1 Cor. 10:13).

So we see that when we pray *“lead us not into temptation”* we are asking God to protect us in situations where our human frailty might cause us to succumb to temptations that, without God’s protection, would lead us into sin.

Jesus was tested and we must expect this too. Pope Benedict XVI observed that The Book of Job helps us understand. He wrote:

“In order to mature, in order to make real progress on the path leading from superficial piety into profound oneness with God’s will, man needs to be tried” (Benedict XVI, ‘Jesus of Nazareth’).

Okay, we don’t believe that Satan *really* made a wager with God which allowed Satan to test Job so cruelly. What we can say is that the writer of the Book of Job recognised that God does permit us to be tested - but that He will not abandon us. He tests us to grow our faith.

So we see that overcoming temptation is part of our spiritual journey. We recognise our own sins and ask for forgiveness and by God’s infinite mercy we are forgiven. Accordingly, we are able to forgive others because God’s mercy lives in us.

And yes, we must continually ask for God’s protection and mercy because we know we are weak and can only overcome our weaknesses through His grace and mercy.

So why was I reminded of that childhood game of 'Snakes & Ladders'? Well, you may have guessed already. God tests us. We succumb to temptations, snakes if you will, because we are weak. But God does not abandon us; He shows us paths, ladders if you will permit, to lift us up and bring us closer to Him.

Just like Job in the Old Testament - who suffered dreadfully but stayed faithful - God tests us, not to break us, but to help us grow - grow in Grace.

When we pray, "Forgive us as we forgive..." we're asking God to change our hearts - to make us people who are not just forgiven, but forgiving, just like Him, because "To Err is Human; to Forgive, Divine". (Alexander Pope: *An essay on Criticism*)

We are not making a bargain with God; we don't earn God's forgiveness by forgiving others. It is rather that extending our forgiveness to others is a sign that God's grace is working within us.

'The quality of mercy is not strain'd.

It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven

Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:

It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.'

(Shakespeare: *Merchant of Venice*)

When we stumble God does not abandon us. For we are truly blessed both as the giver and receiver of mercy, for at the centre of our faith is the God of unfathomable generosity who suffered to forgive us now, and for all eternity.