

Trinity 22, 2016

“Peter said unto Jesus, ‘Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times?’ Jesus saith unto him, ‘I say not unto thee, until seven times; but until seventy times seven.’” (St. Matthew 18.21)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Last Sunday’s Epistle presented us with the whole armour of God, including the shield of faith. St. Paul told the Ephesian Church, “Above all take the shield of faith, wherewith you shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the evil one.” The battle shields of the Roman soldiers, which St. Paul was referring to, were large, curved and wooden -- as big as a door; and, they were covered with animal hides. And, before going into battle water was poured onto the hides so that when the enemy archers shot their fiery arrows the wet hides would extinguish them.

It must have been quite a sight: a platoon of Roman soldiers advancing against the enemy with fiery darts whizzing overhead and burning all over the battlefield. The Romans were very tactical in their battle procedures: they used their large shields to form a house-like formation, also called a tortoise or testudo. The soldiers in the front line held their shields up to form a wall; those on the sides stood sideways and also made a wall; those in the rear lifted their shields above the heads of those in the front ranks, and balanced them on the helmets. St. Paul had seen this formation, and he used it to speak about our faith in Christ. The gift of faith is truly like a shield that can extinguish all the arrows of doubt, fear, greed and nastiness which the devil shoots at us. Today, we are called to think especially about the arrows of resentment, and how these, too, may be extinguished by faith.

In today’s Gospel, we hear Peter ask the Lord Jesus this question: “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times?” Sensing that the new law of grace which Jesus taught extended beyond the norm of three times laid down in the Book of the Prophet Amos (1.3), Peter suggested seven times. It was, after all, more than double the Old Testament number. BUT,

no, Peter quickly discovered that seven times was nowhere enough. Jesus told him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven". Then, to emphasize His point, Jesus told the parable of the king and his unmerciful servant. The king called in some of the debts owed him by his subjects, and demanded payment from a servant who owed him 10,000 talents. It is important to realize how big this debt was – it was astronomical. One talent was equal to approximately 35 kg of gold – just one talent. It would take the average labourer 16 years – 16 YEARS – to earn just one talent. And this servant owed 10 thousand talents!

Anyway, because the servant was not able to pay that amount, the king threatened to sell him and his wife and children as slaves in order to recover at least some of the debt. The servant fell down on his face before the king, and, (we can only begin to imagine with loud wailing and sobbing) began to beg for mercy. "Lord," he pleaded to the king "have patience with me, and I will pay you all". He was so convincing that the king not only agreed to give him more time, he decided to cancel the debt altogether!

However, no sooner had he left the king's house – a new man, free and clear, a huge weight off his shoulders – but that same servant went and found a fellow servant who owed him 100 pence – approximately 100 days of wages. Incredibly, he took the man by the throat and said, "Pay me what you owe!" The fellow servant begged for mercy and said, "Have patience with me and I will pay you all". But the unmerciful servant would not. He went and threw the man in prison. Word of this quickly got back to the king who, like the other servants, was appalled at the unmerciful servant's behaviour. The king, therefore, brought that servant in and said, "O you wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt, because you asked me: should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, even as I had pity on you?" The parable then ends badly for the unmerciful servant: he is delivered to the tormentors until he paid his debt – all 10,000 talents of it – in full.

The meaning of this parable is clear: the king is God and we are the subjects or servants. And, we are in debt to God because we have sinned against Him. It is a

massive debt – this debt of sin – and, if God were to call it in, there is no way we would be able to pay it. Incredibly, instead of holding this debt over our heads and tormenting us with it, God sent His only-begotten Son to be the propitiation – the Remedy – the Satisfaction – the Payment – for our debt. Christ Jesus came and willingly gave Himself to be falsely accused, humiliated, beaten and killed. He shed His precious Blood as the perfect Substitute for us. Through Him, and only because of His Sacrifice, we are forgiven our debt. This is the Good News we hear in the Comfortable Words at every celebration of the Holy Communion:

From the Lord through St. Paul: “This is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be received, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”

And, from God’s Word through St. John: “If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous; and He is the propitiation for our sins.”

But even with these words of promise given to us so clearly, we must have faith in order for them to really mean anything. If we do not believe them, it is as though we are standing exposed and defenceless on the battlefield with our shields lying on the ground.

Martin Luther emphasized this point heavily in his sermon on this Gospel. He said, “He who believes, to him not only the debt, but also the punishment shall be remitted (cancelled). To this no works are to be added; for whoever preaches that through his works one can atone for his debt and punishment, has already denied the Gospel. For the two cannot be tolerated together, (that is) that God should have mercy, and that you should have any merit. If forgiveness is by God’s grace, then it is not by our merit. ”

Faith is the key to receiving God’s forgiveness. The Psalmist tells us that “as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us”.(103.12). That is truly amazing grace. But we must believe this Good News and we must accept Jesus’ Sacrifice, trusting that His is the full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

If we receive God’s offer of forgiveness through Christ – instead of thinking that we can earn credits by our efforts – then we will be able to advance in the new

life. Then we will begin to see other people differently. Then we will be more willing to go the extra mile with mercy and forgiveness in our relationships. Freely, freely we have received; freely, freely we must give. But faith – taking the shield of faith – that is the key. Otherwise we live doubting God's mercy; and doubting the truth and effectiveness of Jesus' Sacrifice.

Week by week, day by day, we pray that God will forgive us our sins/debts. Let us make a special point today to ask God for His strength and courage to forgive others, and to ask for forgiveness, knowing that if we ask in faith, God will grant us grace to do both.

And now unto God Almighty: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit...