

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

William Blake, a writer and mystic who lived from 1757 to 1827, wrote a poem called “A Poison Tree.” In it he tells how he was angry with his friend, told him what the matter was all about, and cleared it up. His anger, or “wrath”, finished right there, with mutual reconciliation. He was also angry with his enemy, but said nothing and allowed his anger to grow. In fact he cherished and nursed his anger “and it grew both day and night” until, like a well-tended tree, it produced a fruit, a bright, shiny apple. His enemy crept into his garden at night to take this apple, but – the sting is in the last two lines of the last verse – “in the morning glad I see / My foe outstretched beneath the tree.” That’s it ! That’s what happens with anger, with resentment, with bitterness. It kills. It sets up a cycle of self-perpetuating violence. We see it everywhere, between countries and between factions within countries; between groups, in parishes and even within families. We see it in ourselves. We don’t need people to be “enemies” – just to have hurt us. In fact the closer we are to someone, the more likely we are to be hurt by them.

In today’s Gospel Matthew continues to deal with relations between Christians, focusing on the need for forgiveness between members of the community. Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive his brother, then answers his own question by suggesting seven times. The Jewish tradition taught that God forgives three times and punishes on the fourth occasion; it was not believed that injured people could be more gracious than God, so forgiveness was limited to three times. According to that tradition Peter’s suggestion is very generous; but according to Jesus it is radically insufficient. In his reply Jesus reverses the old law of vengeance which said “If Cain is to be avenged seven-fold, truly Lamech is to be avenged seventy and seven – fold.” (Gen. 4: 24) Just as in the days of the Old Testament there was no limit to hatred and vengeance, so among Christians there is to be no limit to mercy and forgiveness.

The parable of the unforgiving official is told in order to underline the need for forgiveness. When a king calls his court officials to audit the accounts, one shows a deficiency of ten thousand talents, a colossal sum of money. The sum mentioned is deliberately extravagant, the equivalent of millions of dollars, to heighten the contrast with the few dollars owed to the official. When the king orders the sale of the debtor and his family into slavery, the official pleads for time. The king feels sorry for him and decides to remit the whole of the vast debt. The official, however, learns nothing from his experience, for he refuses to give a colleague time to

pay a trifling debt. Instead he has him thrown into prison. When this heartless behaviour is reported to the king, the grant of full forgiveness is retracted and the unforgiving official is thrown to the torturers.

Apart from anything else, the unforgiving official is condemned for loss of memory. Forgetfulness of our own sins leads to lack of compassion; remembering how our sins have gone unpunished by God should lead us to forgive others. Through forgetfulness of God's compassion, we can end up becoming cruel to each other. That is why at the beginning of each eucharist we are invited to be mindful of our own sins. Church-goers are often accused of being hypocrites. That *is* a risk, but we can go a long way to avoiding that if, at the beginning of each Mass we seriously call to mind where we ourselves have failed and then humbly acknowledge our need for God's forgiveness. Only when we do that we can pray the "Our Father": "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

The purpose of calling our sins to mind is not to paralyse us or to suggest that we are intrinsically bad – how could that be ? As the old poster used to say, "God does not create junk." No, we remember our sins to remind us that we all live in the gracious forgiveness of God. To forget that is theological suicide. Whoever we are, we remember our sins because we need to remember always to forgive.