

In the name of the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit

This Sunday we continue our journey through the Lord's Prayer.

A prayer that Jesus taught us. Yet it can be prayer that we just say sometimes without even thinking about its meaning. It can become so familiar that it can be as if we almost go on automatic pilot.

Anyone who tries to live fully in God's presence will inevitably have to deal with his or her past. In fact through human fallibility we will always be in our father debt for forgiveness. As the theologian, John Stott once remarked, many churchgoers are quite prepared to describe themselves as "miserable offenders", but if someone addressed us personally as a "miserable offender", we would instinctively want to punch our accuser on the nose! The great danger is that it is perfectly possible to give lip service to being sinners, while conducting ourselves with an entirely misplaced air of spiritual superiority. Spiritual familiarity breeds complacency. We can become so accustomed to church activities that we cease to scrutinise ourselves by God's standards.

For this reason, the second gift for which we ask God in the Lord's Prayer, after that of Bread, is the gift of forgiveness. In doing so, we open our hearts to God's healing and recreating love. Enabling us to start all over again by removing from our shoulders the sometimes heavy burden of the past. But if we explore that burden – there are different ways of speaking about human wrong doing.

In parable of the Talents, Jesus uses the idea of a man who is going on a long journey. He has a large quantity of money, and decides to entrust the money to his servant. Now we all know the parable – two men use the money to earn more, but the third man, paralysed by fear, the fear of failure, digs a large hole and buries the money so as not to lose it. Upon his return from the long journey, the master praises the first two servants and blames the third. It is one who did nothing with the money who needs to be forgiven.

About four months ago, Radio 4 morning programme – did an interview with a Vicar in Kent, What he had decided to do was to give as each of parishioners left the Sunday service a £10 note. He even advertised that this is what he was going to do. Now I do not want any of you getting any ideas, bank was closed yesterdaybut the idea is that just like as in the parable, with the £10 you use it to fund something else, for example a coffee morning, a car wash for example so we take back more than the £10 we were given. It is if you like an ultimate act of trust – and for those that listen to John Humphrys he certainly gave the Vicar a hard time.

It is about using your talents wisely to help grow the Kingdom – as last week's petition says "Your Kingdom come, your will be done". If the talents which are a gift from God are not used wisely and properly we need to ask for help and forgiveness. Christian gathering -----

In other words, for Jesus – what is regrettable is that human beings do not develop the gifts that God gives them, who have no confidence in themselves because they have no confidence in God. We, each one of us are created in

the image of God, and called to transmit to others what we have received, we can hide this radiance out of fear.

In the parable of the unforgiving servant.

The story is of a king who cancels his servant's debt, but the servant refuses to forgive in his fellow servant who owes him money.

The servant owed the King a fortune, but the fellow servant only owed a small amount. You see there is no common measure between what God gives us and what we are asked to give in turn. The bottom line is that just as God forgave the servant, the servant should forgive the other servant. The amount of money involved is immaterial. It is also saying that we will never be able to settle accounts with God. We can't say – "I've done enough now and don't expect anything else" – we will always have to turn to God to receive his unlimited forgiveness, it is part of that ongoing relationship– this is our only hope.

The fact that God forgives, that our God is a merciful God, runs throughout history. Israel knew that God was kind and compassionate – God enters into human history to put things right, by Jesus giving of his life to the very end, it shows how far God's forgiveness goes – the cross reveals a mercy that has no limits.

In this petition of Our Father, the words "we", "us", or "our" feature. They make it clear that as we pray as a community - Church, not as isolated individuals but as the Church we ask for forgiveness. And we must continue to do it – in the wilderness there is the story of Manna, gifts from heaven. Spiritual gifts cannot be stored for a future date. Love can never become a

private possession – the only way to receive it, is to give it. We need to share generously with others the forgiveness God has shown to us, and we need to keep on asking God to shower on us this forgiveness.

To forgive those who hurt us, to forgive them deeply and truly, not with just our lips, often involves going on and accomplishing a long inner journey. About thirty miles from where we used to live in the early 90's the IRA struck killing a boy called Tim Parry, He was aged just 12 years. He was seriously injured and died when his life support machine was switched off days later. It was the day before Mothering Sunday. His father spoke of the horror, that nothing can prepare you for such an event, yet as Colin Parry journeyed along that road it must have been very difficult for them. How could he and his wife forgive those who perpetrated the act of detonating the bomb with so little warning. As time went on they started to campaign for peace, establishing a peace centre, and eventually went onto meet and invited Gerry Adams to a Foundation for Peace event. And he spoke of how he felt, how difficult it was, but that it was infinitely easier for Gerry Adams and I to talk than to fight."

Colin Parry showed the most extraordinary spirit of forgiveness. And in doing so have become an example to others. The spirit they represent has ultimately triumphed over hatred, discord and conflict. The act of forgiveness did not happen immediately, and indeed they will never forget, but through the long journey they went on, they not only came to a point of forgiveness, but also to give us hope for the future.

During the time, when we find it difficult to forgive, we must still pray the Lord's Prayer, because even the beginning of a desire to forgive is already a consequence of God's grace in us.

As it says in Ephesians "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, Just as in Christ God forgave you". If we forgive, we forgive because God's love is already in us. Through forgiveness we are brought into a deeper relationship with God – "a community that shows forgiveness, experiences God's forgiveness."

Amen

Steve Johnson