

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

24th Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading:

(Ben Sira 27.30-28.7)

Vengeance and Quarrelling

It is some months since we had a reading from this wise old scribe. He was on the staff of the Temple at Jerusalem (or at any rate moved in these circles), and clearly has the greatest love and respect for the Temple and the Law of God. He gathered together and reflected on the wisdom of the ancients, aware all the time that the Lord God is the source of all true wisdom. Most of his proverbial wisdom accords with that elusive quality, common sense, but it is none the worse or less important for that!

Here he already looks forward to the message of today's gospel parable: the quality of God which we know best is the divine mercy and forgiveness. The very meaning of the divine name revealed to Moses on Sinai is 'God of mercy and compassion', and this echoes again and again down the scriptures.

We are made in the image of God, and our glory is to imitate in our own poor, human way, this divine forgiveness. Once we see love and forgiveness as our divine mode of living, our whole relationship with other people changes. The last few lines give us a good, common sense summary of the foolishness of quarrelling.

Question:

Why is it so hard to forgive?

Second reading:

(Romans 14.7-9)

Life as Christ's Community

The context of this wonderful statement of Paul is the moral exhortation to the Roman Christians towards the end of his letter. Paul has been insisting that no one should tamper with the conscience of another. He has been discussing a particular problem of the time, whether eating meat which had once been offered to idols implicated the eater in idol worship. He states his own opinion, but will not force it on anyone else.

For Paul to be living with Christ's life gives every Christian a dignity, a trustworthiness and a freedom ultimately to make his or her own decision. It is a delicate balance: Paul gives his opinion, which means that we must listen to the voice of the Church and its teachers. At the same time, he realizes the presence of the Spirit of Christ, guiding every individual Christian who is genuinely living for the Lord.

To a modern believer this raises a host of questions. Have I really listened? Am I being simply stubborn, deceiving myself into avoiding truths that I find inconvenient? What is the Voice of the Church? Whatever the answers, Paul's confidence in the guidance of the Spirit shows the dignity of the Christian and the respect with which the Christian must be honoured.

Question:

How do I form my conscience?

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Gospel:

(Matthew 18.21-35)

The Unforgiving Debtor

This is a favourite parable of Matthew, continuing and concluding his theme that forgiveness is the life's blood of any Christian community. We cannot live together without upsetting one another, unwittingly, or even deliberately. So forgiveness is the vital step. So important is it that two consecutive Sunday gospels are devoted to it. It expands and stresses our petition in the Lord's Prayer: 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others.' The importance of this petition was already underlined by Matthew; it is the only petition of the Lord's Prayer to which he adds at the end a confirmatory saying of Jesus.

Like so many of Matthew's parables, this one revolves round contrasting characters, the 'goodie' and the 'baddie' (wedding guests and guest without a wedding garment; the two who use their talents and the one who hides it; the girls with and without oil for their lamps; the sheep and the goats). The contrast between the two sums of money is deliberately fantastic: the first slave owes millions of dollars, a sum no private person could ever repay, let alone a slave; it is more than a year's tax for a whole Roman province. The second owes a couple of months' wages of a casual labourer.

Question:

'Forgive and forget'? Or can forgiveness become a bond of friendship?
