

Forgiveness and the climate emergency – fear or love?
Matthew 18: 23-35

Today is the second Sunday in creationtide, in which we are looking at the theme of Jubilee. I first came across this concept in the 1990s, when I got very involved with Jubilee 2000. This was a campaign that was seeking cancellation of the unpayable debts of poor countries by the year 2000. I have fond memories of travelling down to Cologne for a demonstration at a G8 meeting with a coach-load of people from the local churches, but less fond memories of Jeremy's travel sickness!

As Betty explained to us last week, Jubilee is about rest and restoration for the land and for people and animals. We read in the book of Leviticus that every 50th year God commanded the people not to till the soil but to harvest whatever the land produced on its own. It was also the time when slaves were freed – it was like resetting a clock, returning society to its baseline. At this time debts were also forgiven, bringing new life. Our readings for today return to this theme of forgiveness.

Our Old Testament reading looks at the relationship between Joseph, now in a powerful position at the Egyptian royal court, and the brothers who had sold him into slavery so many years previously. With the death of their father, the brothers were worried that Joseph would turn against them and their families, and so they fabricate a story about their father asking Joseph to forgive them. The brothers are still wracked with guilt and anxiety over what they did to Joseph, but Joseph sees things very differently. Yes, his brothers had committed a grievous sin against him, but God had taken the brothers' hatred and used it to bring Joseph to a position of power in Egypt, which allowed him to save thousands of lives during a famine. So how could Joseph then punish his brothers?

Joseph speaks such lovely, gentle words to them, 'Have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' This act of forgiveness is unsurpassed in the whole of the Old Testament, and is made possible because Joseph recognizes his place in God's bigger picture. This story foreshadows the crucifixion of Jesus: a horrific act against an innocent person, that God uses to achieve his greater purposes: and because of his great love Jesus also forgives, saying 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' Because he could see God's saving power at work, Joseph gained a new perspective on the events of his life, which freed him to forgive.

In our New Testament reading, Jesus addresses the question of forgiveness in the parable of the unforgiving servant. This familiar story tells of a slave who owed an enormous debt to the king, a debt so huge that he would have had to work for over 150,000 years to pay it back. The slave pleads for forgiveness, and the king graciously cancels the debt. The forgiven slave then seeks out someone who owes him money, in this case about 100 days worth of labour – a tiny fraction of what has just been forgiven him – and when the man cannot pay, the slave has him shut away in jail. Every time I read this I am bewildered by the slave's actions! Why wasn't he so full of joy and gratitude at being forgiven that he passed that on and forgave everyone who was in debt to him? Why did he respond to a demonstration of great love with such meanness? I think it must be to do with perspective. As we have just heard, Joseph understood that God was working through the events of his life to save very many other people, which freed him to forgive. In this story, however, the slave does not see the king as generous

and forgiving, but rather as threatening and punitive; yes he has been forgiven, but he is in fear of the king and afraid of what might happen to him if he gets into the same position again. Acting from this place of fear, he goes after the man who owes him money in an attempt to get it back, to help avoiding ending up in debt to the king once again. Ironically, the slave's understanding of the king is a self-fulfilling prophesy, when the king finds out what has happened, all the grace and mercy disappear and he hands the slave over to be tortured for the rest of his miserable life. This is a stark reminder that forgiveness is not an option, it is the very basis of our faith.

This parable presents us with a choice about how we live our lives, and this ultimately comes down to how we view God. Do we see God as gracious, generous, and forgiving? Are we free to live in the light of that truth, bringing grace and forgiveness to the people that we meet? Or is there at some level within us an unhealthy fear of God? If we are afraid of being punished, afraid that God doesn't really forgive us, and that his demands are too great for us, then we are going to be operating from a place of fear. It might be worth taking some time to consider our image of God, to see whether we are driven by love or by fear, and to bring that to God in prayer.

We can see these basic drivers of love and fear in operation in our response to news coverage of the latest environmental catastrophe, destruction of habitat or climate emergency. When we respond out of a place of fear then we are likely to either despair, deny or blame: despair, fearing it is too late for change and that we are all doomed; denial, saying that climate change is fake news and that there is nothing to worry about; or blame, putting the responsibility on governments and corporations while failing to acknowledge our own part in the problem. None of these fear-driven responses are particularly constructive. If we respond from a place of love, however, we will inevitably move into lament, a deep sadness over what we are doing to creation. We will mourn with God over the suffering of our world, but as Jesus said 'blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted'. Lament must then lead to something: firstly an admission of our sin, of our part in the problem, and secondly to repentance: not just saying we are sorry, but reflecting carefully on how our behavior impacts creation and then, as a result, changing how we live.

Just one more word about lament. I know from my own experience that we can easily become overwhelmed by distressing news from all over the world, so how do we engage without falling apart emotionally or becoming cold-hearted or fatalistic? Somewhere we need to draw a boundary, engaging enough to be motivated to act, but not so much that we become overwhelmed.

In this creationtide we are drawing on resources from the Season of Creation Ecumenical Advisory committee. They write:

It is therefore a time to reconcile ourselves with creation through concrete repentance and urgent action. The Season of Creation is a time to acknowledge that tipping points are being reached, threatening the lives of the most vulnerable and putting the lives of future generations in jeopardy. As people of faith, we are being called to stand up against climate injustice in prophetic ways.

This is a big challenge, and I suggest we engage with it one step at a time; there are lots

of ideas on the internet and there is great scope for creativity! One place that you might like to start is on the World Wildlife Fund's website where you will find a simple tool called 'How big is your environmental footprint' that allows you to estimate your impact on the planet and then gives you some tips on how to reduce it further.

<https://footprint.wwf.org.uk/#/>

As we start taking these steps, let us remember to keep acting from a place of love where there is grace for those of us who fail as well as encouragement to keep trying. Keep in mind the words of the writer of 1 John, 'There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear'. As our planet faces an uncertain future, may the love of God motivate us to act in ways that bring freedom and healing for the whole of creation.