

Homily – 13-09-20 – Pentecost 15 - Bishop Cam Venables

Readings: Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114; Romans 14:1-14; Matthew 18:21-35

In the movie '28 Days' an alcoholic, drug-using journalist called Gwen Cummings is given the choice of spending twenty-eight days in jail, or twenty-eight days in a drug rehabilitation unit. She chooses rehab, and the film explores her difficult journey through that time. When the participants leave the program they are advised to not get involved in an intimate relationship with another person until they have kept a pot plant alive for one year! It is a great story with Sandra Bullock playing the main character and if you haven't seen the film I highly recommend it. But if looking after a pot plant can be a helpful primer for nourishing a relationship... what might be the possible benefits from looking after a garden?

I think there are at least two and both have implications for mental, emotional, and spiritual health. The first is that after mowing and pruning; weeding and raking; planting, mulching, and watering I can see what I've done for days and weeks afterwards. Do you know what I mean? You can see that you've done some-thing and it feels good! But, the second benefit is that these activities cannot generally be rushed and that as I do them a space becomes possible in which to reflect on things, wrestle with them and pray, and through this generally find peace. Probably Reinhold Niebuhr's prayer is implicit for me: 'God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen'

In gardening activity there is opportunity to think about how I am going as an individual? How I am going in my relationship with God, and in my relationships with others? What needs to be pruned, or weeded out? What needs to be fertilised, or watered? What needs nothing done other than to sit for a while and be thankful for the gift of it? On this day - and in this season of your life and mine - what needs to happen in the garden of our lives for things to better flourish?

I think today's Gospel is a good reading to consider in response to this question. For in the narrative Peter asked Jesus, 'If another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?' I often miss-remember this as Peter asking, 'If another person sins against me, how often should I forgive?', but the miss-remembering takes it out of the church community context. Peter specifically asked about the practice of forgiveness within the church: 'If another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?'

Within the Lord's Prayer there is an uncomfortable inference that God's forgiveness is proportional to our forgiveness of others because it says, 'forgive us our sins, as we forgive others'... or in the old language, 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.' Matthew's Gospel remembers Jesus saying, "... if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses..." (Matthew 6:14-15). So clearly, forgiveness is important but I think we'd all agree it is not easy.

When we've been hurt or wronged it can be hard to forgive, and in no way should this teaching about forgiveness be used to justify or minimise any form of abuse. But there is great psychological and spiritual wisdom in the teaching, because I think most of us would acknowledge that unaddressed resentment, and hurt, can, at the very least, diminish our capacity to flourish and love. At worst, unaddressed resentment and hurt can destroy us for we can see nothing else and its toxicity impacts every aspect of our lives.

In response to this you may be thinking that this teaching about forgiveness is too hard. The hurt is too deep... so, how can we possibly forgive? We may even be thinking, that the person who hurt us is long dead, so what difference would it make anyway?

In response Jesus offers a parable in which a slave owed his king an absurd amount of money. The monetary units then were denarii and talents, and because we are not familiar with this currency it's worth unpacking to better understand the scale of what's suggested. In those days, one talent was worth six thousand denarii, and one denarii was an average day's wage. So one talent was worth about sixteen and a half years of average pay.

With this background in mind let's revisit the parable in which Jesus tells us that a slave owed his king ten thousand talents, which was the equivalent of sixty million denarii - which was sixty million average days wage! It would have been an unimaginable debt, utterly impossible to repay... but, when the slave asked for mercy, the king forgave him the debt and he walked free.

But, when that forgiven slave subsequently met someone who owed him just one hundred denarii, just three months of pay, and a miniscule debt in comparison with to the sixty million denarii debt he had just been forgiven... the man seized him by the throat and threatened him! Then, he threw him into prison because he was unable repay the debt. Not surprisingly, it did not go well for the hard-hearted slave when the king heard about it!

The inference is that we are, as human beings, incredibly indebted to God for our existence. For each breath and heartbeat that makes our lives possible; for food, clean water, and a place to call home; for love, and health, and work; for simply... everything. We cannot possibly repay the debt we owe, but this teaching on forgiveness suggests that we can offer to others something of the life-giving, life-changing, generosity and grace we experience from God each day.

A wise priest once said in response to this Gospel six years ago that for a long time he had struggled to forgive someone who had deeply hurt him. He said that he had forgiven them but inside a resentment would grow until he'd have to forgive them again, but the resentment would return... until one day he was reminded that he should not only forgive that person but also pray for them God's blessing. Not being prescriptive about it but allowing the nature and shape of that blessing to be God's. That priest said that there was healing for him in this because after he prayed for blessing on the one who had hurt him, the resentment never came back. I think there is such wisdom and grace in this that we may each helpfully consider, particularly if we have an ongoing issue with resentment.

As we tend our gardens this week - both the literal garden of our home, and the metaphorical garden of our lives - may we recognise God with us in those places. And may we consider if there is need for us to forgive someone, and if there is a longstanding resentment that needs to be addressed. And if there are these things... may we have the courage to offer them to God in prayer, and in God's grace... may we find healing, and peace.

We pray in the name of the one who called himself the vine, and us the branches, Jesus Christ our Lord,
Amen