

If we were paid a dollar every time we recited the Our Father, and we lived to a ripe old age, we'd end our lives with a great fortune to bequeath. So familiar and oft-recited are the words that they're always in danger of becoming no more than a soothing sound. Is it true to say that if any of us prayed this prayer just once with all our heart and mind and soul and strength and meant every word of it we'd be ready for heaven?

Today's word of God invites us to home in on just one petition: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us". What a dangerous prayer! We foolishly dare to ask for divine forgiveness only to the extent that we forgive others. The fact is that the more we resist letting go of resentment and anger from our hearts, the less room there is for us to welcome the gift of God's mercy.

Thank God for what Paul wrote in an earlier verse from his letter to the Romans: "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (5:8). Blessed be God for such grace!

A reading from the book of Ecclesiasticus 27:30 - 28:7

Resentment and anger, these are foul things, and both are found with the sinner. He who exacts vengeance will experience the vengeance of the Lord, who keeps strict account of sin. Forgive your neighbour the hurt he does you, and when you pray, your sins will be forgiven. If a man nurses anger against another, can he then demand compassion from the Lord? Showing no pity for a man like himself, can he then plead for his own sins? Mere creature of flesh, he cherishes resentment; who will forgive him his sins? Remember the last things, and stop hating, remember dissolution and death, and live by the commandments. Remember the commandments, and do not bear your neighbour ill-will; remember the covenant of the Most High, and overlook the offence.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 102:1-4, 9-12

R. The Lord is kind and merciful; slow to anger and rich in compassion.

My soul, give thanks to the Lord, all my being, bless his holy name. My soul, give thanks to the Lord and never forget all his blessings. R.

It is he who forgives all your guilt, who heals every one of your ills, who redeems your life from the grave, who crowns you with love and compassion. R.

His wrath will come to an end; he will not be angry for ever. He does not treat us according to our sins nor repay us according to our faults. R.

For as the heavens are high above the earth so strong is his love for those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west so far does he remove our sins. R.

First Reading

It's fair to say that the wisdom books of the Old Testament are not well known by contemporary parishioners. Most of these works do not have a vivid story line like the so-called historical books, nor the dramatic utterances that catch our attention in the books of the prophets. The bulk of the wisdom books is given over to collections of advisory sayings that guide rulers, parents and ordinary folk as they go about their daily business.

Today's excerpt from the book of Ecclesiasticus (also known as Sirach after its author) offers teaching about anger and forgiveness. The essence of this wisdom is that only those who offer forgiveness to others can expect mercy in return, whether from their neighbours or from the Lord. Anyone who takes time to read through this advice and ponder on it will be reminded of various sayings of Jesus along the same lines, not least in the Lord's Prayer.

This is not a text to be rushed through. Readers should take their time with each verse so that their hearers can absorb something of the wisdom preserved in it.

A moderate pace will also allow the congregation to make their own connections with the teaching of Jesus. As usual, the NRSV supplies the text in inclusive language.

Responsorial Psalm

The psalm verses for today are taken from Psalm 102/103, an attractive and unified prayer of praise and thanksgiving. The response - "The Lord is kind and merciful; slow to anger and rich in compassion" - is verse 8 of the psalm.

This assertion is found in several places in the Hebrew scriptures. It seems to be the first part of a very ancient confession of faith such as the one arising out of Moses' encounter with the Lord in Exodus 34. One could argue that this single saying sums up the entire Old Testament.

In the first verse the psalmist exhorts himself to thank and bless God. This serves as an overture for the praise offered in the remaining verses. The psalm should present no great difficulty for the reader. The sense lines and the verses are clear and manageable. They lend themselves to proclamation that conveys the psalmist's wonder at and thanksgiving for the goodness of the Lord.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Romans 14:7-9

The life and death of each of us has its influence on others; if we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord, so that alive or dead we belong to the Lord. This explains why Christ both died and came to life, it was so that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Second Reading

These few short verses form the last of the sixteen successive readings we have heard from Paul's magisterial letter to the Romans. Fittingly they are about the momentous issue of life and death. For obvious reasons this text is one of the options suggested for use at a funeral Mass.

The reading is brief but its message is deep. It poses the question as to what is the ultimate governing force in our lives. Is it the self or is it the Lord? Behind this question we might catch a glimpse of Paul's own radical conversion. As he put it in his affectionate letter to the Philippians, "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (3:8). And beyond this again lies Jesus' own clarion call, "Repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:14).

Since the text is so short, readers need to take extra care that they have the congregation's attention before they start the proclamation. Then they should deliver the message with the seriousness it deserves.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew 18:21-35

Peter went up to Jesus and said, 'Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?' Jesus answered, 'Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times.'

'And so the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who decided to settle his accounts with his servants. When the reckoning began, they brought him a man who owed ten thousand talents; but he had no means of paying, so his master gave orders that he should be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, to meet the debt. At this, the servant threw himself down at his master's feet. "Give me time," he said, "and I will pay the whole sum." And the servant's master felt so sorry for him that he let him go and cancelled the debt. Now as this servant went out, he happened to meet a fellow servant who owed him one hundred denarii; and he seized him by the throat and began to throttle him. "Pay what you owe me," he said. His fellow servant fell at his feet and implored him, saying, "Give me time and I will pay you." But the other would not agree; on the contrary, he had him thrown into prison till he should pay the debt. His fellow servants were deeply distressed when they saw what had happened, and they went to their master and reported the whole affair to him. Then the master sent for him. "You wicked servant," he said, "I cancelled all that debt of yours when you appealed to me. Were you not bound, then, to have pity on your fellow servant just as I had pity on you?" And in his anger the master handed him over to the torturers till he should pay all his debt. And that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother from your heart.'

Gospel

Today's text forms the conclusion to the fourth discourse in Matthew's gospel, Jesus' teaching on community. Peter's question about how often to forgive prompts Jesus to offer a brief reply and a lengthy parable.

The parable actually sheds more light on what we pray in the Lord's Prayer - "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" - than on the issue of how often we must forgive. The story, found in Matthew's gospel alone, may have originated elsewhere and been inserted here.

Nonetheless Jesus' reply and the parable reinforce his teaching that those who wish to call themselves his disciples must engage in continual and unlimited forgiveness. This suggests that the need to forgive must have been a live issue in the community for whom Matthew is writing.

The story is set in the fabulous world of an ancient oriental despot. The sums of money involved are extreme. Ten thousand talents would have been a vast fortune beyond imagining, while one hundred denarii represented a tiny fraction of this, about three months' wages for a labourer. The parable invites us to see that the forgiveness we are called to offer one another is on a minuscule scale compared with the boundless mercy we have received from God. It's not the only story Jesus tells that has a disconcertingly harsh ending.