

St Mary's, Dorchester, Sunday 13th September 2026 i.e. 15th Sunday after Trinity.

Genesis 50:15-21

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

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

Last week's Bible readings were all about conflict: how conflict is normal, and how there are good ways of handling it. This week's theme is related. Our readings today are all about how we should leave judgement to God, and how the only alternative left to us is to forgive.

I'm conscious that all of us here will have experiences of being hurt. Sometimes we have felt able to forgive, and sometimes we haven't. All of this is deeply uncomfortable. I would like to make the message today more palatable for you, and there are one or two things I can do to help; but I suspect the main thing is to make it very clear how little room there is for compromise here.

This is one of the areas where being a Christian – or not – makes a big difference to our relationships. Our secular culture tells us explicitly, and also by example-after-example, that we are right to judge people when they harm us, or when they harm the people we love. We're encouraged to judge someone when they harm people we don't normally care about at all, people we may never have even heard of. We're even told to judge people when they're not harming anyone in any obvious way – judgements about a person's appearance, or the choices they make in public. Whenever we watch a film or we read the news we will be immersed in the belief that we are right to judge our fellow human beings. I'm not going to sugar-coat it for you: all of this is hostile to Christian teaching. We have a job cut out for us living faithfully in this culture.

Christian teaching is unambiguous: we have no right to judge other people, and by doing so we place ourselves in extreme spiritual danger. Judgement is for God; our place is to forgive. Jesus famously says that when one person judges another, it's like someone who has a log stuck in his eye trying to remove a speck from his neighbour's eye [Matthew 7:1-5]. In other words, it's a ridiculous situation, and no good will come of it. I could multiply examples of this teaching, but our readings today present the message pretty emphatically on their own.

So, for example, when Joseph's brothers are afraid of his vengeance he says to them:

“Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?” [Gen. 50:19]

Paul says the same thing in his letter to the Romans, where he asks his readers

Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall... [Romans 14:4]

And again:

Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God... So then, each of us will be accountable to God. [14:10, 12]

This resonates with a passage we read a few weeks ago [Romans 12:19-20], where Paul implies that, instead of taking vengeance we should do good to those who hurt us. And again, the reason is that if vengeance is ever ok, it's God's business. Our place is to overlook the hurt we receive, and to forgive.

I think here it's worth distinguishing between two meanings of the word “judgement”. Scripture says that one kind of judgement is forbidden to us; but the other is commendable. When each of those passages I've just quoted talk about “judgement” what they mean is “condemnation”. When I judge someone in this way, it's because I believe them to be in the wrong, and I see myself as qualified to determine their punishment. So I'm placing myself above this other person, making myself a judge over them, as we say. I'm putting myself in God's place. That's the first sense of the word “judgement”, the one that's forbidden to us.

But Scripture also talks about a different sort of judgement. This second kind is less about judging people – putting myself over others as a judge – and it's more about judging situations. This kind of judgement is roughly the same thing as “discernment” or “wisdom”. In order to navigate the world faithfully, to remain myself when I might be tempted to try being someone else, I need this kind of “judgement”, I need the virtue of wisdom. Jesus, for example, warns his followers that in the world they face trouble and persecution; so he tells them that they must be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” [Matthew 10:16]. In that spirit we're encouraged to see through people's attempts to deceive us [Matthew 24:23-27], and to discern when we are being called to place our relationship with God above our other relationships [Matthew 10:34-39]. There is judgement here, but no condemnation. It's not that I'm placing myself above these others; if anything, it's the opposite: the

fruit of my judgement may be that I need to follow Jesus on the path of absolute humility and suffering. Judging in this way is likely to make me more vulnerable, not less.

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That's what our Bible readings have to say about judgement. Our Gospel today is about the opposite, forgiveness. First, Simon Peter asks a question about how many times he needs to forgive. The translation of the Greek here is disputed: Jesus' reply might mean "seventy times seven", that is, four-hundred and ninety. Our translation has gone for a more modest number, "seventy-seven", but that still gives the impression of a pattern of forgiveness that goes beyond the ordinary.

Jesus follows this exchange with a parable about two servants and their lord. The teaching here resonates with the words of the Lord's Prayer, which in Matthew goes

“... forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.”

And Jesus continues:

For 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 6:12, 14-15]

The analogy of money – and so “debt” – is useful because it helps us distinguish forgiveness from other things that we might confuse with forgiveness. The most obvious example is friendship. At least part of my resistance to what Jesus commands me is the fear that I am being asked to *like* the person who has hurt me: to go from hating their guts to being their best friend. This isn't what Jesus is saying. Forgiveness is about learning to love the people who hurt us, yes: but I can love someone without liking them at all; I can even love someone without really knowing them. All that's necessary is that I stop wanting to extract from them what they owe me – in other words, their “debts”. The lord in the parable might have a real soft spot for the scumbag who has ten thousand talents of debt; but I doubt it. He doesn't give any indication that he likes him: all he does is say that he's not going to extract that debt anymore – that is, until the unforgiving slave punishes his fellow slave for his debts, and then all bets are off.

So forgiveness doesn't require us to like people who have hurt us. Neither does forgiveness mean allowing a person to carry on causing hurt. This is where I think the language of love is helpful. As I've said before, a part of love is wanting what's best for a person. There are some people out there who, left to their own devices, will carry on hurting others. Quite apart from the suffering they cause, that pattern of hurting person after person isn't in their best interests: it's in their best interests to be stopped. Me forgiving such a person – and so wanting what's best for them – means taking away their source of temptation. I think this is the only Christian rationale for a criminal justice system: not a system of controlled vengeance, but removing offenders from whatever tempts them, with a view to rehabilitation, if it's possible.

Forgiveness is not about liking a person who has hurt me; neither does forgiveness mean allowing others a power over us that isn't good for them. Forgiveness is a decision to withhold judgement, to renounce the right which the world tells me I have, to punish a person who has done me wrong. When I forgive I am allowing God to occupy that place of judgement. And I free myself to see this person who has done me wrong as a fellow slave, one who has his own duties to our Lord. And just as he will be called to account for his actions, so will I for mine.

And you, O Lord, have mercy upon us. Thanks be to God.