

XXIV Sunday of ordinary Time Year A

Sir 27:30-28:7; Rom 14:7-9; Mt 18:21-35

My dear brothers and sisters,

Our readings for this Twenty-Fourth Sunday concern forgiving those who wound us and being reconciled with them. All three readings today remind us of the path to forgiveness, mercy, and reconciliation and challenge us to walk this, the only Way to Life. We all know what it means to be hurt, disappointed, betrayed, or treated unfairly. Sometimes the wound is small; sometimes it stays with us for many years. The question Peter asks Jesus in today's Gospel is therefore also our question: "Lord, how often must I forgive my brother or sister?"

Peter probably thought he was being generous when he suggested, "Seven times?" Seven was considered several fullness. But Jesus goes much further: "Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times." Jesus is not asking us to keep a record seven times, ten times, seventy-seven times. He means that forgiveness should not have a limit.

Jesus then tells the parable of the servant who owed his master an enormous amount of money. The debt was impossible for him to repay. He begged for mercy, and the master did something extraordinary: he forgave the entire debt. But that same servant then met another servant who owed him a much smaller amount. Instead of showing the mercy he had received, he demanded payment and refused to forgive.

This is the heart of the Gospel. We are the first servant. Before God, we are people who have received enormous mercy. Every day we make mistakes; every day we need God's forgiveness. Yet sometimes we find it very difficult to forgive another person for a much smaller offence against us.

Jesus is asking us to look at the contrast. How can I ask God to forgive me if I refuse to forgive someone else? Every time we pray the Our Father, we say: *"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."* We are not simply asking God to forgive us; we are also promising that we will extend that forgiveness to others.

The first reading from Sirach says something very practical: "Forgive your neighbour's injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven." Sirach reminds us that life is short. Why spend our limited years carrying anger, resentment and old grudges? Sometimes we carry an offence for ten, twenty or thirty years, while the other person may not even remember what happened.

But forgiveness does not mean saying that what happened was acceptable. It does not mean pretending that we were not hurt. It does not mean allowing someone to continue abusing or harming us. We can forgive and still maintain appropriate boundaries. We can forgive while seeking justice. We can forgive while recognising that something was wrong.

Forgiveness means that we refuse to allow the wound to control our heart. We place the person and the situation into God's hands and say, "Lord, I cannot change what happened, but I choose not to live in hatred and resentment."

Sometimes we think, "I can never forget what that person did to me." Perhaps we cannot forget. But forgiveness does not always mean forgetting. A painful memory may remain, but gradually the anger can disappear. With God's grace, the memory no longer controls us. We become free from the prison of resentment.

There is also an important difference between forgiving someone and immediately restoring a relationship. Reconciliation may require time, repentance, honesty and a change of behaviour. Forgiveness can begin in our own heart even when the other person has not yet changed. We can pray for that person and ask God to heal both of us.

My dear brothers and sisters, perhaps today we should recall one person whom we find difficult to forgive. It may be a family member, a friend, a neighbour, a colleague, or even someone who hurt us many years ago. We do not have to solve everything today. But we can take the first step and say: "Lord, I want to forgive. I cannot do it by myself. Give me the grace to let go of my anger and place this person in your hands."

The greatest example is Jesus himself. On the Cross, after being rejected, humiliated and crucified, Jesus prayed: "Father, forgive them." Christian forgiveness is not based simply on our feelings. It is based on the mercy we ourselves have received from Christ.

So, the message we carry home today is very simple:

Do not keep a calculator for forgiveness. We calculate how many times someone has hurt us, how much they owe us, and how badly they have treated us. Jesus asks us to put the calculator away and remember how much God has forgiven us.

Perhaps there is someone we need to forgive. Perhaps there is someone with whom we need to begin the journey of reconciliation. Let us ask the Lord for the grace to take that first step.

When we forgive, we do not make the wrong right; we allow God to heal what is broken in us. We stop being prisoners of our past and begin to live in the freedom and peace of Christ.

Let us therefore pray today: "Lord, you have forgiven me so much. Give me the grace to forgive others from the heart, as you have forgiven me."

Amen.