

Sunday 17th September

Genesis 50:12-21

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

Today's readings all speak of the same thing. They all point in the same direction. They are all about forgiveness.

Not so much the forgiveness we receive from God – forgiveness that we receive as a free gift of grace, because of God's overwhelming love for us. Not the forgiveness we ask for at the start of every service here in church – just as we did this morning.

But rather how we forgive others.

Like the story of Joseph and his brothers from the Old Testament. Joseph's brothers had thought about killing him, but in the end sold him off as a slave, telling their father he was dead. True, Joseph's own behaviour may have added to their resentment of him, but the fact remains that they did a terrible thing. Here they beg for forgiveness, and Joseph, though not using the word forgiveness, sets them at ease. Have no fear – he reassured them that their relationship was secure.

The reading from Romans tells us not to judge others – and I guess such judging is at the root of the need for forgiveness. Paul stresses the fact that life is lived in community – and community means relationships, and relationships need working at; need us to be willing to forgive.

And the gospel reading tells the story of someone who was forgiven a huge debt, but couldn't bring himself to forgive someone else a small one. Forgiving others is a natural response to being forgiven.

I read this snippet about forgiveness this week which I found quite helpful:

Forgiveness isn't letting the one who hurt you "off the hook"; it is the decision to remove the hook from your own soul - the hook that continues to pull you back to the place of hurt, tearing angry new wounds with each tug on the line.

So forgiveness is not simply about the one who is forgiven – in some way giving them a free pass instead of making them pay for their wrongdoing. It's about an intentional decision to let go of resentment and anger. The act that hurt or offended you might always be with you – its effect may live on. But forgiving will lessen the act's grip on you. It will make your own life better!

So this morning, I want to read a true story and then invite us all to ponder the lessons that God wants to teach each one of us. This story is one of many inspirational stories that you can find on the forgiveness project website. Please have a word with me afterwards if you'd like to know more.

28-year-old trainee paramedic, James Hodgkinson, was killed in 2011 from a single punch to his head. He had been out in Nottingham with his father, brother and three friends after watching a cricket match. His attacker, Jacob Dunne, pleaded guilty and served 13 months in prison for manslaughter. Later James' mother, Joan Scourfield, met Jacob through restorative justice.

so this is Joan's story:

As soon as I got the call I rushed to Nottingham to be by James's side. He didn't look injured. He just had one small bruise on his chin. But there was a bleed to his brain and when surgery didn't work he was put on life support. When he couldn't breathe for himself there was no way forward and after nine days I asked for the machine to be turned off.

The moment I walked out of intensive care to tell the others that James had passed away the homicide team were waiting for me. From then on instead of being able to grieve and bury James our focus had to be on the investigation. I longed for my own space, and to be with my family but post-mortems followed which meant we couldn't have the funeral for another 11 weeks. It was a kind of torture. I had been divorced from James's father, David, for five years now but we were very united throughout this time.

19-year-old Jacob Dunne was arrested soon after. It helped me tremendously that he pleaded guilty because it meant we wouldn't have to face a long drawn out trial. Jacob was sentenced to four years for manslaughter but in the end because of his age and because he had pleaded guilty he only served 13 months. I felt incredibly angry and bitter about this. How could James's life be worth only 13 months! This was no deterrent to stop others. The short sentence just compounded the pain.

Victim Support visited me and David regularly throughout that time. They too were totally bemused as to how Jacob could have received such a short sentence. Then one day a volunteer told us about restorative justice and suggested it might be a way of relieving some of the bitterness we felt. I'd never heard of restorative justice

but they explained that if Jacob agreed we could make contact with him through a third party to get some of our questions answered.

A group called Remedi were able to establish that Jacob was willing to take part. I wanted to know whether he had achieved anything from going to prison. We soon learnt that prison had done nothing for him. He hadn't been offered any courses and he'd been released with nowhere to live, which was crazy!

The mediation went on for quite some time with volunteers from Remedi coming to speak to us and then speaking to Jacob. We also learnt that in prison, because his friends [who had been present at the scene of the crime] hadn't stood by him, Jacob felt like the victim himself which really shocked us. At the same time Jacob couldn't understand why we cared about his life and why we wanted to see him find a way forward. And with that he did start to change. He got a job packing in a warehouse and he started studying for GCSEs.

He passed his exams and after doing an access to university course a year later we felt ready to meet him. The meeting took place in Suffolk. It was very hard. You don't know what you're going to say or how you're going to react. We arrived at the building and were taken into a room while Jacob was in a different room. I think it must have been the hardest thing for him to walk through that door and see us. I remembered him from the police mugshot, but he looked so different in real life. He was a young man, not a monster.

We were introduced by the facilitator and began to talk about what had happened on the night and why he had hit James. When I told him what James was like as a person, I saw Jacob's eyes fill up. We all shed a few tears. I could see he was deeply remorseful and that gave me hope he could change. We agreed to build a future together by talking publicly about restorative justice and raising awareness of the catastrophic effects of a single punch.

I left the room that day feeling a little bit lighter, hopeful that Jacob would turn his life around.

I don't feel bitter anymore about the short sentence. I don't say it's right but I think we've done more for Jacob on the outside than the prison ever did on the inside. We helped to give him a different outlook. People say they could never meet the person who killed their child but I didn't set out to do any of this. What I set out to do was to get the questions that were keeping me awake at night answered.

It's taken a long time to feel comfortable with the word forgiveness. I used to feel that if I forgive Jacob it meant I'd forgotten James but now that Jacob has done so

well forgiving him feels really natural. Forgiveness for me means being at peace, letting go of the bitterness and letting Jacob into my life. I've grown fond of him.

Any story about forgiveness is by its nature very personal. But perhaps as I read Joan's story it made you think about yourself, about hurts you have had to face up to and maybe about resentment or anger that is holding you captive

Matthew is going to play some quiet music for a few moments now as we think about these things. Then I will bring our thoughts and prayers to God.