

15th Sunday after Trinity
Genesis 50: 15-21; Romans 14: 1-12; Matthew 18: 21-35
St Johns Tidbury Green Eucharist.
Sermon: Living well in community

Conflict

This week marked twenty-five years since the attacks of 11th September 2001. It remains one of the starkest reminders of what hatred, division and violence can do. Yet conflict is not found only in wars and acts of terror. We see it much closer to home.

Anyone who has spent time on social media will know how quickly disagreements can become arguments and arguments can become personal attacks. We see tensions in politics, in communities, sometimes even among neighbours. People seem increasingly quick to judge, quick to condemn, and slow to listen.

Of course, that is not the whole picture. There are also wonderful communities marked by kindness, patience, and generosity. There are places where people disagree respectfully and learn from one another. The Church itself contains examples of both.

Even within the Church of England, we are a broad family. We hold different views on various issues. We come from different traditions. We have different experiences of faith and life. That diversity can be a great gift. But it can also create tensions.

The question is not whether differences and disagreements will exist. They always will. The question is how we live together when they do.

And I think that is one of the questions sitting beneath all three of today's readings. Through Joseph, through St Paul and through Jesus, Scripture offers us a vision of what makes communities flourish rather than fall apart.

15th Sunday after Trinity
Genesis 50: 15-21; Romans 14: 1-12; Matthew 18: 21-35
St Johns Tidbury Green Eucharist.

Seventy times seven

Jesus' answer to Peter is perhaps the most famous part of our Gospel reading. Peter asks how often he should forgive someone who sins against him.

Seven times? Peter probably thinks he is being generous. But Jesus replies, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

The point, of course, is not arithmetic. Jesus is not asking us to keep a notebook and stop forgiving at 491. The number points us towards a different way of living.

And for those who know the book of Genesis well, there may be another echo here.

Earlier in Genesis we hear about a descendant of Cain called Lamech. Cain, you may remember, murdered his brother Abel. The cycle of violence had begun. Lamech boasts that if Cain was avenged sevenfold, then he would be avenged seventy-sevenfold.

In other words, Lamech's community was built on vengeance. Someone hurts me; I hurt them back. Someone injures me; I injure them more.

Resentment grows. Violence escalates and grievances are remembered and nurtured.

Lamech's seventy-sevenfold vengeance stands in contrast to Jesus' seventy-sevenfold forgiveness. The kingdom of God is built on entirely different values. And we see those values embodied in our reading from Genesis.

Jospeh

Joseph's brothers had every reason to fear him. Years earlier they had betrayed him, sold him into slavery and caused him immense

15th Sunday after Trinity

Genesis 50: 15-21; Romans 14: 1-12; Matthew 18: 21-35

St Johns Tidbury Green Eucharist.

suffering. Now Joseph held power and authority. If he wanted revenge, nobody could stop him.

Yet Joseph refuses to take that path. Instead, he reassures his brothers. He forgives them. He seeks reconciliation rather than revenge.

Joseph does not pretend that what happened was acceptable. He does not deny the wrong that was done to him. But nor does he allow that wrong to determine the future.

He refuses to let yesterday's wounds govern tomorrow's relationships.

Every community faces that choice. We can keep score, or we can seek reconciliation. We can nurture resentment, or we can choose forgiveness.

That brings us back to Jesus' parable.

Parable

The servant who owes the king an unimaginably large debt is forgiven everything. It is an astonishing act of mercy.

Yet no sooner has he been forgiven than he finds another servant who owes him a relatively small amount and demands payment immediately. He refuses mercy. He refuses compassion. He refuses to extend to another person the forgiveness he himself has just received.

The problem is not simply that he is harsh. The problem is hypocrisy. He wants forgiveness for himself but not for others. And if there is one thing Jesus hated amongst all else - it is hypocrisy - it is his chief insult to his opponents.

15th Sunday after Trinity

Genesis 50: 15-21; Romans 14: 1-12; Matthew 18: 21-35

St Johns Tidbury Green Eucharist.

And I think that is where this Gospel becomes uncomfortable. Because every one of us depends on God's mercy. Every one of us falls short. Every one of us says things we should not say, makes judgements we should not make, acts selfishly, or causes hurt whether intentionally or unintentionally.

Every week we come before God and ask for forgiveness. Indeed, every time we pray the Lord's Prayer we say:

"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." The two are linked. Those who know themselves to be forgiven are called to become forgiving people.

Now, that does not mean forgiveness is easy. Some hurts run deep. Some wounds take years to heal.

Forgiveness is often more of a journey than a single moment.

Nor does forgiveness mean pretending that nothing happened. It does not mean saying that injustice was acceptable. It does not mean trust is instantly restored.

But it does mean refusing to allow resentment and revenge to have the final word. There is an important distinction here between anger and vengeance. Anger can be a healthy response to wrongdoing. If we witness injustice or cruelty, anger may be entirely appropriate.

But vengeance is something different. Vengeance seeks not healing but harm.

Not justice but humiliation. Not restoration but destruction.

And the danger is that resentment can consume us. We replay old injuries again and again. We hold on to them until they begin to shape our entire perspective.

15th Sunday after Trinity

Genesis 50: 15-21; Romans 14: 1-12; Matthew 18: 21-35

St Johns Tidbury Green Eucharist.

Forgiveness, difficult though it may be, frees us from that prison.

It allows the possibility of a different future. And that connects with what St Paul is saying in Romans.

Romans

Paul is dealing with disagreements within the Christian community. Some believers ate certain foods; others would not. Some felt comfortable exercising their Christian freedom to eat whatever; others were still troubled in conscience.

Paul's concern is not really who wins the argument but how Christians treat one another while disagreeing.

Again and again he warns against passing judgement. "Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another?"

It is a powerful question. Because the truth is that we rarely know the whole story of another person's life. We do not know their experiences, their fears, their wounds or the struggles they carry.

Yet we are often remarkably quick to judge. Paul calls Christians to something better. To patience. To humility. To recognising that God is the judge, not us.

In a sense, Paul is describing another form of forgiveness. Not forgiveness for a specific offence, but the generosity that allows space for people who think differently, who are still learning, or who see things from another perspective.

And perhaps that is one of the great challenges of our age.

Culture

15th Sunday after Trinity

Genesis 50: 15-21; Romans 14: 1-12; Matthew 18: 21-35

St Johns Tidbury Green Eucharist.

In a culture that rewards outrage, encourages snap judgements and often nurtures resentment, Christians are called to embody a different way.

Joseph says: choose forgiveness rather than revenge. Paul says: choose understanding rather than judgement. Jesus says: remember how much you have been forgiven.

Healthy communities are not communities without conflict. Such communities do not exist. Healthy communities are communities where forgiveness is practised, judgement is restrained, and grace is allowed to flourish. That is true of families. It is true of churches. It is true of communities.

So this week, let us each ask ourselves: where in my life is God calling me to replace judgement with grace, resentment with forgiveness, and division with reconciliation and basically just cut some slack?

Because if enough of us live in that way, then perhaps our society, and even our world, would begin to look a little more like the kingdom of God. Amen.

Rev'd Richard Haynes 15th Sunday after Trinity 13 September 2026