

Twenty Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Fr. Bob

An unknown woman in the Ravensbruck concentration camp wrote this little prayer and pinned it to the dead body of a little girl there. "Oh, Lord," she wrote, "remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering: our comradeship, our loyalty, our humanity, our courage, our generosity; the greatness of heart which has grown out of all of this: and when they come to judgment, let all the fruits which we have borne be their forgiveness."

Betsie Ten Boom, who died in the same concentration camp, steadfastly refused to hate the guards who beat her and eventually beat her to death. Her dying words are both simple and profound. Listen to what she said: "We must tell the people what we have learned here. We must tell them that there is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still." That is incredible: there is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still.

Our scripture today is about being able to forgive. Most of the time the action of forgiveness is much less profound than Betsie Ten Boom.

Some years ago, after a vigorous brotherly and sisterly disagreement, three children retired only to be aroused at two o'clock in the morning by a terrific thunderstorm. Hearing and unusual noise upstairs, their mother called to find out what was going on. A little voice answered, "We are all in the closet forgiving each other."

And then finally there was the grandmother celebrating her golden wedding anniversary who told the secret of her long and happy marriage. "On my wedding day, I decided to make a list of ten of my husband's faults which, for the sake of the marriage, I would overlook." A guest asked the woman what some of the faults she had chosen to overlook were. The grandmother replied, "To tell you the truth, I never did get around to making that list. But whenever my husband did something that made me hopping mad, I would say to myself, "Lucky for him that's one of the ten."

Our scripture for this Twenty-Fourth Sunday is about forgiveness – about reconciliation.

In our first reading from the Hebrew Scripture the wise Jesus ben Sira or Sirach reminds his listeners that if we don't heal and forgive and are merciful we can't expect to receive much of that in return. There is an Arabic proverb that says:

Write the wrongs that are done to you in sand, but write the good things that happen to you on a piece of marble. Let go of all emotions such as resentment and retaliation, which diminish you; hold onto the emotions such as gratitude and joy, which increase you."

The energy to forgive and be merciful may be extensive – but essential.

Paul in the second reading is speaking to a very diverse Roman Christian community. They are having difficulty being at peace to one another. He advises them to allow their belonging to be greater than their individual differences, preferences, and practices. He tells them to refrain from criticism of one another, to avoid scandal, to relinquish selfish preferences and forgo their own freedoms for the sake of not having stumbling blocks to others. Above all he tells them to love and act as if they love. This, he says will bring oneness and unity and peace.

Finally, in the Gospel, Jesus reminds us that our attempt and energy at forgiving one another is to be constant. No matter how difficult people may be for us, as Betsie Ten Boom would remind us, God is there and present and ready to heal.

In *Dead Men Walking*, Helen Prejean writes about a father's forgiveness toward a man who had murdered his son:

Lloyd LeBlanc has told me that he would have been content with imprisonment for Patrick Sonnier. He went to the execution, he says, not for revenge but hoping for an apology.... Before sitting in the electric chair Patrick Sonnier had said, "Mr. Le Blanc, I want to ask your forgiveness for what me and Eddie done," and Lloyd LeBlanc had nodded his head, signaling a forgiveness he had already given. He says that when he saw his boy dead in the cane field he prayed the Our Father... and said, "Whoever did this, I forgive them." But he acknowledges that it's a struggle to overcome the feelings of bitterness and revenge that well up, especially on David's birthday. Forgiveness is never going to be easy. Each day it must be prayed for and struggled for and won.

And so the Word today reminds us and challenges us to continue on the path to forgiveness and reconciliation.

READINGS OF THE WEEK

Ecclesiasticus 27:33-28:9

Romans 14:7-9

Matthew 18:21-35

September 14, 2014

靈 修 生 活

七 十 個 七 次

蔡 惠 民 神 父

中世紀的時候，有一個修女報稱曾經目睹耶穌顯現，有關的消息在教會內廣泛地流傳。當地的主教為了解真相，在主教府約見了修女。「當時耶穌有沒有跟你談話？」主教問修女。「有啊！我與祂談了一會兒。」修女戰戰兢兢的回答主教。「若果你有機會再目睹耶穌顯現，請你代我問祂一個問題：我當主教以前，曾經犯下甚麼嚴重的罪過？」主教心裡想，除了他的告解神師外，就只有天主才會知道答案。修女是否真的看見耶穌？屆時便可分曉。幾個月後，修女主動約見主教。她進入主教的辦公室還未坐下，主教便問：「修女，你是否又目睹耶穌顯現？」「是啊！」修女答說。「那麼你有沒有問耶穌有關我犯過的罪！」「有啊！」「祂怎麼說呢？」只見修女面露笑容，語帶安慰的回答：「耶穌說，祂完全無法記起了！」

為說明寬恕之道，耶穌將天主比作一個國王。當國王要跟自己債戶算帳時，一個僕人因無力還錢而苦苦哀求，國王便無條件撤銷了他的欠債。不過，當同一個僕人沒有寬待拖欠自己金錢的同伴時，國王便大怒，並且說：「如果你不各自從心裡寬恕自己的弟兄，我的天父也要這樣對待你們。」(瑪十八 35) 為甚麼國王要這樣憤怒對待第一個僕人？如果只因一次過錯便落得如此下場，那麼，天主的容人之道，跟本連伯多祿所講的七次也不如，更遑論七十個七次了。

第一個僕人得到懲罰的原因，並不是因為次數的多寡，也不是出於天主的小氣。其實，當一個人拒絕寬恕他人時，本質上，他同時也不容許自己去經驗他人對自己的寬恕。愈是只不願意寬恕，愈是無法經驗寬恕；愈是無法經驗寬恕，愈是無能力寬恕，形成一個自困的惡性循環。

我們都知道天主是慈悲為懷、寬宏大方的，但多少人經驗過呢？為甚麼會這樣的呢？一般人認為，一而再，再而三的寬恕並不實際。太容易去寬恕，不獨無助他人覺悟前非，反會助長他人，特別是仇人，在我們身上佔便宜的危險。好像伯多祿一樣，我們往往會為寬恕的次數設底線，或為寬恕而定下條件。寬恕只能是有限度，有條件的，例如，除非對方首先認錯，又或對方承諾不再重蹈覆轍，甚至要看到對方有所改變，否則我們不會輕易寬恕。

這種實際的想法，表面上似乎很明智，但實際上也將天主對我們的寬恕，設定了底線和條件；將慈愛無量、寬宏大方的天主，矮化為一個斤斤計較、賞善罰惡的判官。縱使我們稱天主為慈父，但心底裡不敢相信，也不期望天主會像慈父對浪子般接納我們。歸根究底，我們始終認為，一個以牙還牙，以眼還眼的天主，較為容易相處和滿足我們的需要。所以，傳統所說的地獄並不是天主審判的後果，其實是人拒絕承認和接受天主無條件寬恕而自困的籠牢。

無論在教會中、家庭中，甚至我們自己的心中，我們都會輕易遇到不願寬恕所帶的桎梏。一個只有五歲的小朋友與他的同學爭執後，很自然的便會說：「我以後都不會再跟他們一起玩了。」這句說話有多堅決，說這句話的人內心亦有多冰冷。一句「我永遠不會寬恕你！」看似很豪氣，代價卻是決絕地將仇恨的心魔永遠關在自己的內心，付出不可謂不大。

聖詠的作者一再強調，天主是良善寬仁，緩於發怒，富於慈愛，人卻拒絕接受這事實，也不相信寬恕比報復更能徹底化解仇恨。不過，拒絕寬恕他人，也是拒絕被寬恕；只有寬恕他人，我們才會經驗被寬恕和接納。所以，當耶穌被問及有關寬恕的限度時，祂不對我們說直到七次，而是到七十個七次。耶穌的意思當然不是說四百九十次是寬恕的極限，祂是藉這數字上的對比指出寬恕與拒絕寬恕是兩個截然不同的極端世界。天主給予人自由，但人運用自由拒絕天主，頑硬的程度，有時甚至連天主的慈愛也不能軟化。面對人的執拗，我相信天主是難過而不是憤怒。
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