

WEEK 3: SATURDAY

There are at least three levels at which we should read this sharp and startling story. And at least three levels at which we should apply it to our lives, not least our lives in church.

Start, though, with Peter's question. It seems practical, almost common sense, but also a bit naive. Jesus has told us to forgive; very well, but supposing someone does the same bad thing again and again. Isn't there a limit? Wouldn't seven times be enough?

Some translations make out that Jesus said 'seventy-seven times'; but actually the word more likely means 'seventy times seven'. Four hundred and ninety! What's that about?

Jesus, of course, didn't mean that you should be counting up, through clenched teeth, so that on the four hundred and ninety-first time you could finally take revenge. If that was how you were thinking about it, it would show you'd never really forgiven once, let alone seven times or seventy times seven. So what was he meaning?

The story he tells takes us straight to the first level of meaning. If you yourself have been forgiven, then your gratitude for that ought to make you ready to forgive others. It's that straightforward. When someone annoys you — drives across in front of you when it was your right of way, takes your seat on the bus, or even, in church, sings loudly out of tune right behind you — then it's easy to allow it to fester. You may still be thinking about it a day or a week later. With larger annoyances it can go on for months or years. Your entire life can be blighted by these angry memories, by the sense of frustration and self-righteousness. How could they behave like that to me?

Jesus' first and best answer would be this. Just imagine what God and his angels think about what you did yesterday to the person you bumped into on the street when you weren't looking. Just think how many people may quite rightly be angry with you for your carelessness, your arrogance, your selfishness. And just think how the angels think about the way you sometimes sing in church. And yet you have been forgiven. When you say your prayers today, God isn't sitting there thinking crossly 'How dare you! I'm still angry with you after what you did last week!' He has forgiven you. Is it then too much to ask that you do the same?

Underneath that, there is a second level. My wife and I once had long conversations with a student who found herself incapable of feeling God's love. She believed in Jesus; she had prayed and read the Bible; but she couldn't feel a thing. She wanted to know God's love the way her friends said they did. But it wasn't happening. Eventually, as we talked about her life, it all came out. She hated her parents. She resented the sort of people they were, the way they'd treated her. So she had closed up her heart. Where there should have been an open readiness for God's love, there was a steel wall. It was as though you cut off the telephone line to stop certain people ringing you up and then grumbled because you couldn't phone your best friend. Forgiveness and love are a two-way street. The same part of you, spiritually, both gives and receives. If you shut down the part labelled 'forgiveness', you shut down the part labelled 'forgiveness' — in both directions. The ending of the story seems harsh. But at the level of psychological reality, it rings true.

The third level of meaning is altogether bigger, and goes back to the 'seventy times seven'. In the book of Daniel (9.24) the prophet is told, after praying that Jerusalem will be forgiven, that it will take 'seventy weeks of years' — in other words, seventy times seven years — before transgression, sin and iniquity are finally dealt with. This takes us back even further, to the ancient law of the Jubilee (Leviticus 25), which lays down that every forty-nine years (seven times seven) all debts must be remitted, with land returning to its original owners. Daniel is speaking of a Great Jubilee, a cosmic version of the Jubilee law. There will come a time when God will deal, once and for all, with all debts of every kind.

And Jesus? Well, Jesus announced that the moment had come. He was the Great Jubilee in person. His entire mission was about implementing God's age-old plan to deal with the evil that had infected the whole world. Forgiveness wasn't an incidental feature of his kingdom-movement. It was the name of the game. Those of us who find ourselves drawn into that movement must learn how to play that game, all the time. It's what we're about. It's what God is about.

TODAY

Loving Lord, teach us to forgive as we have been forgiven.