

Sermon on Wednesday 19 November 2025

by Rev. Bill Church

Readings: Genesis 45. 1-8,14-15 & Luke 15. 11-32

Forgiveness

What links these two passages is forgiveness.

Forgiveness is important theologically but also in everyday life.

The usual way of thinking is that forgiveness is a boon to the person forgiven, but that is too narrow. As Shakespeare put it: "The quality of mercy is not strained... it is twice blessed; it blesseth him that gives and him that takes". The one who is forgiven is relieved of the burden of guilt but the one who forgives is relieved of the burden of grudge and resentment, which can be just as great.

The simplest form of forgiveness is – A wrongs B, A repents and asks for forgiveness, B forgives and the world is a better place.

It is not always as simple as that, as these passages show.

In the Prodigal Son, the son wrongs his father, comes to his senses, whether by conscience or circumstance, decides to ask forgiveness and sets off home. Before he can recite his rehearsed confession, his father rushes out and embraces him and only after this act of forgiveness does the son manage to use the words that the Book of Common Prayer sets out for the start of Morning Prayer: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you." The father forgives before he is asked for forgiveness.

What neither the father nor the son spot is that the prodigal has also wronged his brother. The prodigal does not seek forgiveness from him. The brother does not offer forgiveness and so bears a grudge which he takes out on the father.

We know the story in Genesis, if only from the famous musical. Jacob's disastrous favouritism for Joseph, the son of his favourite wife, provokes his brothers to do away with him, but their botched attempt leads to him being carried off and sold as a slave to Egypt where, after a spell in prison, he rises to be Prime Minister (well, sort of). When his brothers turn up looking for famine relief, he recognises them and gives them a hard time, framing them for theft and so on. They thereupon reflect upon their guilt in plotting against Joseph, but Joseph does not know this and they do not know who Joseph is. Joseph then forgives them without knowing of their repentance. Happy ending, at least for the time being.

Joseph's stated rationale for forgiving them is that it was all part of God's plan and it all turned out well in the end. And, hypothetical question: how would Joseph have reacted if his brothers had turned up when he was still a slave or in prison?

Forgiveness is not always neat and tidy.

What if A repents and asks forgiveness but B refuses? It may seem incomplete, but A can seek forgiveness from God and there are formal or informal routes to confession which can be followed.

In the opposite case, where B would be willing to forgive but A is not willing to seek forgiveness (or indeed where B does not know who A is), a spoken or unspoken resolution to forgive clears away the burden which would otherwise weigh them down. Survivors of terrorism or atrocities sometimes say: "I forgive the perpetrator" - or maybe, "I would forgive if they sought forgiveness"- which sheds their load of anger and might even prick the conscience of the evildoers.

Unforgiven sin produces guilt. Guilt is not a wine that improves with age. Jesus urges us to seek forgiveness, to settle differences before they fester. Better late than never but better never late.