

1] Abraham Lincoln was fond of telling stories, full of homespun wisdom gleaned from his upbringing in rural Indiana. He was so fond of telling them that his secretary of State, Stanton, would throw up his arms in exasperation at cabinet meetings, saying, 'No, not more stories!'

2] One of Lincoln's stories concerned two men who hated one another, each bearing a terrible grudge against the other. Eventually, one of them fell very ill and was reported to be dying. So the other then had a change of heart and went to visit his old enemy, wanting to put things right between them before the other died. He very graciously apologised to the dying man who, in turn, nodded his ascent as best he could. He then walked out of the room but stopped in the doorway and turning around said, "Mind you, if you recover, I take it all back!"

3] The use of parables and stories to teach ideas is a very ancient practice. Parables were certainly used by the teachers of Ancient Israel. Nathan, you will recall, brought the prophet king, David to repentance through a parable, when David fell through his adultery, and by arranging for the death of Uriah.

4] The word parable from the Greek, means, to throw alongside; the teacher creates, through the use of a story, a parallel situation, inviting the listener to make the connections with their own situation. As the apostles themselves reflected on their time in the presence of Our Lord, they called to mind the lessons He had taught them, remembered the incidents that they shared together with Him, and remembered the body of stories that he had put before the crowds. This great body of material the Jesus taught them, pressing the message, repeating it, insisting on it whilst he was with them, just as any great teacher does, became, before too long, the body of teachings found in the gospels in the New Testament.

5] Incidentally, living where he did in ancient Palestine, it is most likely that our Lord would have been trilingual, using Aramaic at home

with family and friends, Hebrew in worship at Synagogue and in the temple, and in public teaching, the common Greek of the Roman Empire. The words of Christ that we have in the original Greek of the New Testament, come directly, therefore, from that same body of teaching; His direct Word and not translated from other sources.

6] As we read and reflect on these parables we may allow them to work on us at various levels. Perhaps we have known them since childhood: that is good; we must teach them to our young ones, for hearing them, again and again as Christ's disciples did, will help fix the gospel, the good news, in our hearts and minds.

7] In coming to understand Our Lord's parables as fully as we can, it is always necessary to see them in context, not in isolation. Today we heard the story of the Unforgiving Servant. It was not told without reference to anything else. Rather, The parable was used in response to a question from Simon Peter. Jesus had been teaching about finding lost sheep; about how His people, His Church, should forgive the faults of those who repent, but not of those who will not listen; about the authority to bind and loose on earth; and that He will be in the midst of those who are gathered in His name, as we are this morning. And then Simon Peter asks Him, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?' [Matt.18:21]

8] Perhaps Peter imagines that he is being very gracious here, generous in spirit indeed, being prepared to go so far. Many Rabbis at the time, suggested three times was sufficient for the same offence, following, it is thought, the words of the prophet Amos 'For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment.' [Amos 1:3] But Peter has doubled the number and added one more forgiveness on top.

9] But how is that supposed to work? Do we write the offences down in a booklet alongside the names of our offenders? Yet St Paul tells us in Corinthians that, 'Love suffers long and is kind...is not provoked...bears all things, endures all things.' [1 Cor.13:4-7] And what does Christ say in reply? Not seven times but seventy times

seven! And he does not mean four hundred and ninety times! To illustrate, to reinforce the point, Our Lord then tells today's parable.

10] At first glance, however, we might be tempted to ask, what has this parable of the Unforgiving Servant to do with how often we must forgive? The answer is, of course, everything, because forgiveness is not about arithmetic and mathematical records: it is about what is in our hearts and whether we can reflect something of the unfathomable generosity to be found within the compassion and forgiveness of God.

11] We may certainly take the king in the story as representing God, and there are indeed numbers involved here: ten thousand talents, a figure beyond the dreams of avarice. And then there are one hundred denarii: a trifling amount in comparison. At the moral level the meaning of the story is obvious. Imagine if our contemporary media had got hold of this incident! It would be plastered across the newspapers and opinions would be broadcast, claiming, hypocrisy! A high-up royal official is let off an impossible debt, yet he then pursues one of his little minions, demanding his rights and the return of what is owed him.

12] Why is this heartless servant acting like this? It is a scandal, indeed. Has he lost the ten thousand talents? Does he really need the one hundred talents? We do not need to speculate over the inner details of a parable, we just hear it and take it at face value, seeking what it is teaching us.

13] And it is presenting us with an illustration, as Christ tells us Himself, of what the kingdom of God is like. It is blunt and to the point. If we wish to enter the kingdom of God, we, ourselves will need God's forgiveness for our sins, and we shall not receive that unless we can forgive others their sins against us, no matter how many times they offend, no matter how big or how small the offence: if we long for and expect absolution ourselves, we also must be ready to grant it to others.

14] Herein lies the great ascetic task before each one of us! We want salvation? We wish to enter eternal life? We wish to attain to

the communion of the saints and to know the life of Heaven? Then the only hearts that will fit in, the only souls that will feel at ease there, are those that are conformed with the heart of God. Imagine a bitter, unforgiving soul in the courts of heaven: it would be hell for that soul! Try to picture in your mind the self-satisfied, the self-assured, the arrogant, the debauched, the unmerciful, the impure, the belligerent, all imagining they have right to place in heaven. Now imagine the poor in spirit, those who mourn for this world, the meek, those thirsting for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and all who have striven to overcome the passions of the soul. Who do you think will be judged fit to enter into the joy of Our Lord when he come in judgement, or as the parable puts it, when he decides to settle accounts with His servants?

15] We must be aware, however, that throughout Christ's teaching on repentance and forgiveness there is the test of authenticity: Repentance must be from the heart, and not just a form of words; forgiveness, likewise, must be from the heart, and not bound by resentment or prone to hypocrisy. It is, in fact, clear from His teaching before He spoke this parable, that although we must be ready at all times to forgive, we cannot do so where there is no repentance. Our forgiveness cannot just be dispensed like the rain, falling on all, for there is good soil and bad soil. A heart that is closed and refuses to repent cannot realistically receive authentic forgiveness, whether from us or from God, for nothing can enter such a soul enwrapped in its own pride. And contrariwise, a heart that is shut up and refuses to forgive, cannot possibly receive authentic absolution, for the measure we give is the measure we shall receive.