

Today's gospel begins with a simple question addressed by Peter to Jesus about how often we should be willing to forgive someone who, as he puts it, has sinned against us, someone, for example, who has insulted or hurt us or has taken advantage of us in some underhanded way. In saying 77 times, Jesus is declaring that there should be no limit to our willingness to forgive.

The parable that follows has nothing to do with how often we should forgive others but rather with the human and moral significance of granting or withholding forgiveness. The examples Jesus gives represent two extremes; on the one hand, is a king's all but unbelievable generosity to one of his slaves and on the other, the equally unbelievable insensitivity, cruelty, and self-centeredness of that same slave in his treatment of a fellow slave.

The focus of the parable becomes explicit in the last verse of the reading. "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you," Jesus says, "if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

The reference to the Our Father is intentional. In it, we pray: "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." In order to underline the unique importance of forgiveness, Jesus, having taught the disciples the prayer, adds, "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive

you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you your trespasses.”

The emotion that moved the king to forgive his slave’s debt, we are told, was one of pity or mercy. The presence of mercy in the king’s heart disposed him to being touched by the man’s plea.

The parable says nothing about the slave’s response to the king, nothing about surprise, relief, delight or gratitude. We are left with the impression that he has more or less taken what has happened for granted. Incapable as he is of appreciating the gift given him, he is unable to feel any pity for others. That, more than anything, outrages the king. “You wicked slave,” he says to him, “I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?”

Most of us come to realize in the course of our lives that forgiveness does not always come easily. This is especially true in cases of violence or terror, or of irresponsible actions that lead to serious injury or death. It can be equally difficult in situations that are less dramatic. Things happen, for example, in families or among friends that, although relatively small in themselves can take on a huge significance for those involved.

There was a saying which was rather common when I was young: “to understand is to forgive.” It is something which, over the years, I have experienced on more than one occasion, both in my own life and in the lives of others. An area in which this is often the case is in our relationship with our parents. As children, we have very little sense about their experiences growing up and how those experiences might have inclined them to act in the way they do.

The nature of the hurt done to us can make forgiveness particularly difficult. In personal relationships it can be buried so deep in our hearts that we don't really understand it ourselves. It is only as our understanding of it and of the person responsible for it grows, that forgiveness becomes possible.

When we refuse to forgive or find ourselves incapable of doing so, it is we who tend to suffer the most. In extreme cases, we become consumed with animosity and anger, disappointment and self-pity. Forgiveness, on the other hand, builds bridges, makes the renewing of relationships possible, frees us from those negative feelings which undermine inner peace and joy. Forgiveness deepens our faith in the forgiving and merciful God revealed in the life and death of Jesus. The parable encourages us to pray not only for forgiveness, but also for the grace to forgive.