

# FR JOCK'S HOMILY ON FORGIVENESS

(BROADCAST RECENTLY ON THE 'NEW EVERY SUNDAY' RADIO SCOTLAND PROGRAMME)

**Gospel: Matthew 18: 21-35** - Peter went up to Jesus and said, 'Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?' Jesus answered, 'Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times.'

I'd like to tell you about a friend of mine called Rosie. I met Rosie in Lourdes in 1976. We were on the same pilgrimage and I continued to meet her fairly regularly in the years that followed - on that same pilgrimage. The friendship even survived what was a potentially disastrous year in 1981, because I had brought with me another friend and introduced her to a companion of mine from schooldays, a policeman with whom she connected immediately, and whom a few years after that, my friend eventually married. I only discovered later that the policeman, until that pilgrimage, had actually been going out with Rosie ....

So, I probably wasn't very popular with Rosie: perhaps because of that but we lost touch in the decade that followed. I stopped going on the pilgrimage after I was ordained a priest in 1986 and only started again in 1991, to find Rosie there too. I hadn't seen her for seven years and meeting her I was immediately struck by how she was obviously not at all happy. Fairly early in the week we got talking, and she started telling me about how she'd had a four-year relationship with a doctor - she was a nurse - and the previous Christmas had expected to get engaged during the festive season. However, it hadn't happened and a week later, in early January, he had told her the relationship was over.

The following week he had moved in with someone else - and six months later, just before the pilgrimage, he'd got engaged to his new girlfriend. Not surprisingly, Rosie was heartbroken. I listened quietly. It wasn't the kind of situation where words can offer anything. Then, two days later, down near the Grotto, late at night, I saw her lighting a candle, tears streaming down her face. Rather awkwardly, I sidled up to her and said, rather stupidly, 'Are you okay?' since she obviously wasn't. She began to explain to me, through the tears, that she was lighting the candle for the happiness of her ex-boyfriend and his new fiancée. I was stunned by her generosity of spirit. And ever since then Rosie's been for me a kind of icon of forgiveness. So, I think of her whenever I hear the gospel about forgiveness from Matthew's gospel that we've just heard.

As with any gospel, it's worth knowing the context. Peter has been very prominent in Matthew's gospel in the chapters before this passage: he's failed to walk on water; he's recognised Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God; and then, he's been

unhappy at Jesus saying that he was going to suffer and die in Jerusalem prompting Jesus to say to him, 'Get behind me, Satan!' And Peter, perhaps trying to regain ground after this humiliation, having picked up that Jesus often speaks about forgiveness, that it's central to his message, and that he is keen that people try and forgive those who've hurt them, asks Jesus, 'Must I forgive seven times?' - in other words, forgiving far more often than would be expected. But Jesus responds, 'No, seventy times seven', and then tells the parable story, highlighting the divine desire that we imitate him in this area.

However, despite the obvious centrality of a willingness to forgive those who've hurt us being at the heart of the gospel, in more than three decades as a priest I've become very aware how many people feel great guilt because they've been so hurt that they feel unable to forgive somebody. So, I'm keen to make a few general observations about what's a very complex subject because it always needs nuancing and contexting - otherwise Jesus's teaching, intended to help people be free, is experienced as the opposite - something that imprisons them in more guilt and more misery.

So, seven observations, brief ones, you'll be glad to hear . .

First of all, God's forgiveness of us is unconditional but never forced on us, and it's given, not earned. In other words, in order to accept God's gift of forgiveness, we need to be willing to express our sorrow for what we've done wrong - or for what we've failed to do. So, for me, one key message is that forgiveness by God is just a request away and is a gift.

Moreover, Jesus is aware of our guilt and the need for us to be free of it if we're going to become the people he wants us to be.

Secondly; I always remember how, when I was studying at the University of Leuven in Belgium at the beginning of the 1990s, a Flemish priest called Roger Burggraeve who was one of the professors in one of his lectures said, 'No one has the right to tell another person that they must or should forgive somebody.' Okay, freedom might come through forgiving someone but you can never know what another person has suffered - and you can make a person who's already suffered greatly, suffer more still, by placing on them what can feel like the impossible burden of forgiving.

Thirdly; reconciliation and forgiveness are linked but they're not the same thing. I learned this from a wise Jesuit called Fr Gerry O'Mahony when I was struggling in that area. He said that a willingness to try to forgive is asked of us by the gospel, even if it's just beginning the first step on a long, long road, but we're not always required to be reconciled with somebody. Sometimes that's because it's not possible: the other person may be unwilling; the other person may be far away and

unreachable; the other person may be dead – although somebody challenged me recently saying, ‘Can we be reconciled with someone after they’ve died?’ Perhaps that’s for another homily and discussion. And sometimes it’s because seeking reconciliation is not wise: contact with the person who’s hurt us is going to harm us psychologically ; the person who’s hurt us is somebody we need distance from rather than contact with.

Fourthly, a more general point: about our feelings, and how often we can feel really bad about our negative feelings such as of anger or hate or lust or jealousy. It’s important to remember that although we don’t like having them, feel bad about them and wish we didn’t have them, these feelings are not morally culpable in themselves.

In some ways that’s the biggest gap in Christian teaching over the centuries, communicating that we cannot help our feelings and thoughts. We have to ‘beware’ them and be aware of them and of how these negative feelings can lead us to sinful intentions and sinful actions, but they’re not wrong or sinful in themselves. They’re the result of the fact that we are human beings and of what has happened to us in our life. It’s good to ask to be freed of them, good to ask help to cope with them, but it’s not accurate or fair to feel or to think that they’re sinful.

The fifth observation: when we approach the subject of forgiveness, there’s a need to distinguish between widely contrasting situations. No one situation is identical and there are different kinds of situation. We’ve got to distinguish between *many* different situations, *such as whether or not the situation is ongoing or in the past, and whether or not the person is sorry or not*. We’ve also got to take account of differing levels of hurt involved. If somebody’s been rude to you or shouted at you, that’s different than if they’ve done something that’s affected you harmfully for the rest of your life. So, see the big picture.

Sixth, (only two more to go . . .)

Sometimes, forgiveness is not the priority. Rather, the priority is fighting for justice. Too often Christians have been told or encouraged to forgive rather than actively to fight for justice. Similarly, we’ve probably often been told that anger’s a bad thing. And destructive anger IS a bad thing; uncontrolled anger is a bad thing; but anger itself is a positive human emotion when faced by injustice. Jesus often expressed anger. And sometimes we need to use the energy that anger gives us to fight for justice for ourselves or for somebody else. The need for forgiveness will come along in its own time – at some point we will have to try to begin that road, what can be a very long road, especially when the person who’s hurt us isn’t sorry. But often the priority is to fight for justice, and sometimes forcefully to challenge the person who has caused – or is causing – the hurt.

Seventh, finally . . .

When we don't forgive somebody or when we're not yet able to forgive them, in practice that often means that they retain a power over us. Forgiveness is very often not possible, yet, and that sometimes all that we can do is begin the journey, the first step of which might well be not wishing vengeance on somebody. If we manage that, we're underway. And sometimes we can't even manage that, yet. But, equally, it's important to try and begin to go down that long, long road, even if it's with very, very small steps, if we're ever to discover the freedom that Jesus wants for us. And we'll need the Holy Spirit's help. Sometimes we'll need the Holy Spirit's help to forgive ourselves, too. But that's, again, another homily.

I think I just want above all to highlight, in the light of the starkness of this gospel passage, if you've been really badly hurt and you don't feel able to forgive somebody, do not burden yourself with guilt. It's very understandable that you feel as you do. Perhaps just ask for help to want to want to forgive. Don't close the door completely.

Actually, there's one more point I'd like to mention here. Forgiveness is necessary for life in community. We'll always get on some people's nerves and some people will get on our nerves. And forgiveness is necessary for life in families. Something I've observed, too – us priests are often the worst at it! So often living by ourselves, we don't have the impetus towards forgiveness that people in families have in order to make everyday life livable. We can nourish and hold resentments, often against each other, so pray for us, we need it!]

I'll come back to Rosie . . .

Rosie eventually married happily and has two children. Recently, I got a telephone call from her. She was coming up to Edinburgh with her children and her husband. I hadn't seen her for ten years. We had a happy meal in a restaurant on the Promenade in Portobello. Life still has its struggles – life will always have its struggles for all of us – but she came across as a fulfilled and contented human being. For me, that's linked with how she had the tremendous generosity of spirit to wish her former partner and his new fiancée well, and to light that candle for them...

Let's pray together, because this is such a human condition, shared by us all . . . and let's pray specially for those who want to forgive, but can't yet, and for all of us who struggle to let go of different resentments and hurts in our life.