

September 17, 2017 - Matthew 18:21-35; - Exodus 14:19-end

AIM: To see forgiving others as a personal response to God's gift of grace.

"If I could I surely would, stand on the rock where Moses stood."

These are the opening lines to a song I first came across in a recording of a concert by Bruce Springsteen. He and his band reworked a selection of folk songs and recorded them at a concert in Dublin. The song continues, *"Pharaoh's army got drowned, Oh Mary don't you weep."* For a while, this CD became a favourite and I'd find myself humming this and other songs as I went about my day. Now, I'm quite a fan of Bruce Springsteen, but I like to understand what I am singing and this particular song made me a little uneasy. It appeared to be celebrating a dreadful event when an entire army was obliterated. And anyway, what had it got to do with Mary? So, when during my lay ministry training, I had the opportunity to explore an old testament story told in art or music, I chose to delve a bit deeper. This is an African American spiritual song. It is easy to see how this story of God's deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt could give hope and comfort to slaves thousands of years later suffering in a foreign land. This part of the story shows God's power over Pharaoh's army, who were ordered to pursue the Israelites, despite Pharaoh's previous agreement that they could leave. The catchy tune may have eased dreadful work in appalling conditions and I found numerous verses and versions, with witty or inspiring couplets to give some hope in despairing circumstances. In the refrain Mary does not, as I had thought, weep over the death of Jesus. This is a reference to Mary whose brother Lazarus Jesus raised from the dead. The two lines of the refrain bring to mind stories of God's power. First, over creation when he parted the Red Sea and then, over death in a situation where there seemed to be no hope. Both stories are key episodes in God's great plan to save the world he has created. The rescue of the Israelites from Egypt precedes the rescue of humanity through Jesus Christ. The raising of Lazarus shows that Jesus has power over death and is a foretaste of his own resurrection. The story in Exodus is about the formation of a nation, but I would like this morning to focus on its more personal nature. The songwriter yearns to be like Moses, standing on a rock and controlling the rise and fall of the sea waters by raising and lowering his outstretched hand. Of course, it is not Moses who controls the water, but God. God is able to do so because Moses has a personal relationship with God. At the burning bush Moses told God that he didn't think he was the right person to free the Israelites. Despite his misgivings, Moses trusted God and did what he was asked even when it sounded a little strange. Even when he couldn't see how something would fit into God's plan. Moses responded to God's call with loyalty and obedience and because of this God was able to use him to bring the Israelite people to the Promised Land.

When we see pain and suffering in the world today, it can be hard to accept that there is an overall plan for good. A picture so big that we do not see it. But maybe we don't need to always see it. Maybe, like Moses, we just need to respond to God honestly and openly on a personal level.

A friend has recently returned from a trip to Tanzania where she saw and was involved in a number of projects. One was a scheme in which local families could "borrow" a goat. They were not given the goat, because if they were, most families would immediately kill it for food. People who had little or nothing, found it hard to see beyond the next meal. They would enjoy a feast and then go back to living as they had before. Through this project, the people were shown how to breed their

goat so they could benefit from milk and start to build a flock. Once they had successfully bred two goats, they had to return the original. By this time, they had built a relationship with those delivering the project and had education and experience to see the long-term benefits of farming in this way. Like the people in the project, we need to learn a bit at a time trusting that God is in control and doing our bit when prompted. Not out of a sense of duty or by following rules or laws, but, like Moses, by wanting to know God in such a way that it truly changes our heart.

Jesus's teaching can help with this, especially parables like the one we have just heard, in which Jesus describes God's kingdom. God's kingdom is one where love prevails. One which is characterised by forgiveness and healed relationships. Peter is trying to understand this when he asks the question, "How many times should I forgive?" As so many of us do, he wants to be able to measure and quantify his response to the teaching. He wants to know where he stands, has he made the grade? Has he ticked the right boxes? Peter thinks he is being quite generous when he volunteers that he might forgive seven times. But he is missing the point. Forgiveness, like love, is not something that can be measured. Forgiveness, like love is more to do with who we are than what we do. It changes things, it changes who we are. Jesus suggests Peter should be prepared to forgive seventy-seven times. Seventy-seven, or in some version seventy times seven, either way it is a large number. Jesus clearly does not intend us to keep count. He illustrates his teaching with a parable.

A slave is let off an enormous debt by his master. One commentary I read suggested it was the equivalent to about 150 years of labour. The average wage in the UK today is £27,000 a year so this would be like releasing someone from a debt of over £4b. A denarius is about a day's wage. So, the second slave owed about 100 days of labour. In today's terms this might be about £7,500. Still a lot, and more than he can pay, but in comparison to the first slave a minor amount. The first slave is let off his debt, as we are every time we come to God to confess that we have failed to live in his way. Like us, the slave has received mercy far beyond his expectations and far beyond anything he has earned. Like us, he has been given a fresh start and an opportunity to move forward without being tied by things that have gone before. But, he doesn't move forward. This man's response is to continue just as he has before and to demand repayment of a much smaller debt from one of the other slaves. It is for this that he must face the consequences.

It is worth noting that both of today's passages end with a swift and violent judgement on those who do not obey God. Both passages must be taken in context. The Exodus was a particular event in the history of God's people. It occurred in turbulent times and you could argue that the Israelite nation could not have been founded had Pharaoh continued to pursue the fleeing slaves. The gospel reading is a parable, a device used many times by Jesus to illustrate his teaching. Parables often exaggerate to make a point. Think of the camel squeezing through the eye of a needle, or the man with a log in his eye. Even the amounts of the debts owed in this parable are excessively large.

I believe God to be a God of love and mercy who takes no pleasure in pain and hardship. I can't always understand how God works, but a literal reading of this parable seems inconsistent with my view of God. I do believe God has a plan and he has chosen to work it out through millions of individual people over thousands of years. It is up to each one of us to take responsibility for our part in that plan and do our bit to take it forward. I am also great believer in focussing on the

positive, on what we should be doing, rather than dwelling on the consequences of what we haven't, can't or won't do. Forgiving is hard, but it is something we have to do. Not because it is a duty or because we have been ordered to. No one can be made to forgive. We should forgive because it is the only response to God's amazing grace.

Sometimes we can find ourselves stuck or unable to find the heart to forgive. The hurt is too deep. Maybe someone we care about is involved. Maybe we need more time. God is not interested in results, he cares about the state of our hearts. Maybe we are only able to manage a small change of heart. To accept that at some time forgiveness might be possible. To want to do something about it even if at present we can't. Sometimes just talking or praying with another person and acknowledging our difficulty can start a process of change. We will shortly say together the Lord's Prayer, including the line,

"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

How will you respond to those words today? Is there someone you need to forgive? Do you need to take some steps towards a change of heart? If it seems impossible, remember Moses. He talked to God, he even argued with God when he thought he knew better, but he never forgot what God had done for him. He built a relationship of trust to become the person God used to lead his people out of Egypt. An inspiring leader of a new nation and a symbol of hope for other oppressed people 2000 years later.

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