

Sermon – Matt 18:21-35 The Unmerciful Servant

I expect most of us, when we hear this morning's parable, feel that the unmerciful servant got what was coming to him, that he behaved in an appalling way. How could someone who'd just been let off such a huge debt, then be so mean spirited as to pursue his fellow servant for such a small sum. And I'm pretty sure that if we'd seen something like that happen in real life, we'd have reacted in the way the other servants do, filled with indignation at such ingratitude.

You might think that people wouldn't act like the first servant – and yet people do: and the reason that they do is that they don't make the connections. Instead they see things from their own point of view. The first servant can only see things from his viewpoint, and in his own eyes he is the pitiable victim in both cases. In relation to **his** master he is desperate, needy, and depending on his master's generosity. In relation to the other servant, he is the wronged benefactor, owed money that is rightfully his. He somehow cannot see that his own situation of being in desperate straits and unable to repay a loan, is in any way related to that of this other servant who has dared to borrow money off him that he cannot pay back.

Ridiculously blind and stupid!? Yet every week we recite together “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” How good are **we** at making the connections? How often are we guilty of the same mistake as the first servant in the story, unable to make the connection, however often we say the Lord's Prayer? We want God to forgive **us** for the many ways we let him down, for the times we do those things we ought not to have done, and fail to do the things we ought to have done, for our ingratitude for his world and for the gift of his Son, for his enduring love for us And I could go on and on using the words of different prayers of confession. Of course, we want God's forgiveness. But do we really listen to ourselves when we say that we want him to forgive us **as** we forgive others. Are we really ready to forgive others for the hurtful things they have said and done, for the times they have let us down, or seemed to mock or disregard our feelings, for the times when we may – very justifiably – have felt angry with them. The second servant owed the first money – there was no dispute over that – but the first was still expected to let him off, because he had experienced his master's generosity and that was supposed to have **changed** him, and enabled him to show the same generosity to others. If we cannot be generous in our forgiveness of others, then we cannot really have appreciated God's generosity and forgiveness to us, and repeating the Lord's Prayer becomes a bit hypocritical, I'm afraid.

But our story this morning was also drawing our attention specifically to financial debt – a more accurate translation is “Forgive us our debts as we forget our debtors”- and that is certainly a very live issue that we need to consider. Sometimes when I preach, I wonder if there's anything practical to tell you beyond: “Let's pray more to try and get closer to God” and “Let's be nice to people.” - which is probably the message of my sermon yet again this morning. It's all a bit vague and woolly! However, this morning I do also **actually** have some practical suggestions to make in relation to our reading, by which in simple ways you can make a real difference.

There's been a lot in the news about the exploitation of debtors by firms who charge an exorbitant amount of interest on relatively small sums, so the debt is jacked up

higher and higher, by mathematical calculations that most of those in debt have no hope of understanding. The Children's Society has done a lot of research about the effects of debt on families and children – and as you can imagine the effects are huge and disturbing. 10% of parents have taken out credit just to buy the food their children need. It's understandable that they do this, because they don't want children to go hungry, but the resultant pressure of the debts and the interest leads to enormous stress and damaging effects upon children's emotional and psychological stability, as well as their financial well-being. I know that the church is always wary of getting involved in politics, but some of the questions are those of common humanity. By donating to food banks, families who social services have checked and agreed are genuinely in need can be given food for their families to save the horrendous choice between hunger and the debt trap. By investing money in a Credit Union, you can have a current account with instant access to your money, full protection from the FSA, and a better rate of interest than many current accounts, **and** at the same time enable the Credit Union as an organisation to lending money to pay off people's exorbitant interest loans and instead pay back their debts at a normal interest rate. At a time when many are facing increasing financial hardship and uncertain futures because of Covid, these actions are even more vital.

It's all about making connections again. We may not see ourselves as being in the same situation as the rich master – able to loan out huge sums of money. But it all depends in what context we look at ourselves. By having a water supply in our homes, yet alone things like medicine, a car or heating, we are way up in the top few percent of the world. If we have any savings at all to invest, we are well off in relation to many in our own country. If we can buy the food we need to save ourselves and our family from actual physical hunger we are rich in comparison to many living in the Darlington Deanery. Only you know what you can personally afford – as I say, investing in a credit union could actually benefit you – but I would urge you to look at the connections in your life, particularly between yourself and God. How conscious are you of his generosity to you, how much does it mean to you, how much does it shape the way you treat others? The more real God and his merciful love are to you, the more that love will overflow in all areas of your life: in your generosity to the church and to those in need; in your use of your time and your money; in your ready forgiveness of wrongs done to you; and in the mercy and love you show to your neighbours, here and everywhere.