



PARISH OF ASCOT VALE

ST MARY'S CHURCH, 123 ST LEONARDS ROAD, ASCOT VALE
ST MARGARET'S CHURCH, BARB STREET, MARIBYRNONG

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Mass

Public Masses are currently suspended in Melbourne. Livestreaming of our 10:30 Sunday Mass will continue, accessible from the parish website. Priests continue to offer Masses personally for the praise and worship of God, for the needs of the faithful and the world, especially the alleviation of the current crisis.

Reconciliation (Confession)

By appointment - no name required. Arrangement will be made for the confession to be anonymous, not face-to-face, with suitable distancing.

Baptisms at St Mary’s

Our normally scheduled Baptisms remain on hold. Baptism will be administered if there is urgent and grave need.

Baptism Information Sessions are also still on hold.

To discuss a future baptism, please ring the parish office during office hours.

Weddings at St Mary’s

6 months’ notice required. For information on weddings please ring the parish office during office hours.

Private prayer in our churches

Our churches are not currently open for private prayer.

Parish Bulletin

The Bulletin, containing the Sunday readings for your reflection, will be uploaded to the parish website the Saturday afternoon prior.

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time – 13 September 2020

Today’s Gospel of the parable of the unforgiving servant presents one of the most beautiful teachings of Jesus, yet also one of the most challenging – that there must be no end to our forgiveness of others, if we want God to grant the same unmeasured forgiveness to us. Every time we pray the ‘Our Father’, as Jesus taught us, we ask for God to apply the same standard to us as we have applied to others. Very daunting! Yet maybe we make things unnecessarily difficult for ourselves, by having exaggerated or wrong ideas of what forgiveness entails.

(1) Firstly, it’s helpful to distinguish *forgiving*, in the strict sense, from *excusing* – two related but different things. Someone has an *excuse* when there are factors in the situation such that what they did wasn’t even actually wrong at all; or, they weren’t really to blame because through no fault of their own, they lacked relevant knowledge or weren’t free in their choice. An excuse might *completely* free someone from blame, or only *partially*. But to that extent that someone genuinely has an excuse, they don’t need forgiveness in the strict sense of the term.

Now, language isn’t black-and-white, and sometimes the word ‘forgive’ might indeed legitimately be used in a broader sense that also includes excusing. Jesus, forgiving on the cross those who were putting him to death, expressed this in terms of partially excusing them: ‘Father, forgive them, *for they do not know what they are doing*.’

And certainly, we should *look out for where there might be genuine excuses* for the other person’s action that caused us harm; we should give benefit of the doubt. Often the awareness of the harm occupies all our attention, anger rises up before we even know all the circumstances, and we’re blinded to things that may in reality excuse the other person from responsibility.

Yet forgiveness, in a stricter sense of the term, is precisely for when *there is no excuse*. And it means that we’re still willing, not only to reject revenge, but to release the other person, in whole or part, from what would have been the just consequences of their blameworthy act.

So we see the error of someone saying, ‘I can’t forgive what they did. It was *inexcusable*.’ They think of forgiveness *only* in terms of finding an excuse for the other, and when this is found not to exist, forgiveness is considered literally impossible.

Here even people who might think of themselves as very tolerant can be quite unforgiving, and might not even understand what forgiveness really is. Consider on the one hand the account of Jesus forgiving the woman caught in adultery. Someone might say approvingly, ‘Of course he forgave her – how wonderful’, simply because they think adultery isn’t so very wrong in the first place. In other words, they largely *excuse* the sin, not understanding that Jesus is doing something different. (This kind of error can occur especially if we’re habituated to certain types of sin ourselves, and so lose the emotional feel of their wrongness.)

But then on the other hand, they come to cases where evil is so obvious to everyone that no excuse is possible – for example, a brutal murder. And then non-Christians might be indignant at the Christian teaching of forgiveness, or of the possibility of divine forgiveness being offered to the culprit – perhaps because they think Christians are *excusing* the crime and saying it was not so very wrong in the first place; or perhaps because they think genuine forgiveness of what is inexcusable is actually wrong, or just impossible. (Maybe this gives us a deeper sense of how, when we say in the Creed that we believe in ‘the forgiveness of sins’, in a way we’re professing an amazing mystery beyond human comprehension, like the Trinity.)

So: forgiveness *doesn’t* mean pretending that what the other person did wasn’t wrong in the first place, or constructing totally fictitious excuses for them. Such pretence is not virtuous, since genuine virtue is always in harmony with truth and reality. (Further, it could even itself be considered wrongful, if it means actually justifying their evil actions.)

And we can also see here the possibility of an *opposite hazard* for Christians from this teaching of the forgiveness of sins. (There is nothing in this passing world, however good, that can't be turned to bad if we use it in a wrong or unbalanced way. For example, someone's great holiness could be a temptation for them to take illegitimate pride in that. Similarly, it's even possible for a genuine Christian teaching, misunderstood or misused, to lead someone astray.) So then: a Christian who confuses forgiving with excusing, but still rightly believes that forgiveness is always good and possible, might come to think of God's forgiveness, given so freely, as *excusing* evil – that is, saying it was not truly evil in the first place. As a result, they start to lose their *own* sense that anything much is actually evil at all.

At that point, they might lose their understanding of why Christ had to die for our sins in the first place – since, they now feel, humanity's 'sins' mostly weren't that bad anyway. Or, they might develop the feeling that punishment (human or divine) is always bad – a primitive, pre-Christian response – since no one much has really done anything blameworthy in the first place, so as to truly *deserve* punishment. (So the loving God himself, they think, could surely never justly punish anyone, since really, 'we're all just good people'.)

And their own 'repentance' might come to be corrupted, since they see God's forgiveness as actually excusing them – telling them they never really did anything wrong in the first place. His 'forgiveness' is thus conceived as him simply saying, 'It's OK, I understand what you did and why you did it, I still accept you' – rather than healing and removing actual evil. As a result they think they wouldn't need to actually *regret* their past actions: those actions are all supposedly OK (which means, they don't really *repent* at all).

But then, there is an opposite situation: where people can't 'forgive' *themselves*. They realise what they did *was* inexcusable; and they can't conceive and humbly accept, that God's infinite mercy and the Blood of Christ do have the power to cleanse away even inexcusable evils (as long as by God's grace, they open themselves: by true repentance, sorrow, and the determination to sin no more). Yes, a great price must be paid for evil; *but undeserved by us, Christ has freely paid that price.*

(2) Secondly, forgiveness isn't *primarily* a feeling.

We don't have full control over our emotions, and so aren't fully responsible for them. Rather, forgiveness is above all a *choice* of the free will – even in the face of contrary emotions. It is the choice to continue loving, to continue willing the good of the other person; the choice to release them (insofar as this is truly a good thing – see below) from the just consequences of their wrongful action. (And this free choice, persevered in, will also gradually guide and heal our emotions.)

Also, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us: 'It is not in our power not to feel or to forget an offense; but the heart that offers itself to the Holy Spirit turns injury into compassion and purifies the memory in transforming the hurt into intercession.' (n. 2843) Memory obviously can't be switched off at will. And feeling the injustice of what was done to us is natural. (Still – we can choose, somewhat, how much we're going to *concentrate* on that memory and feeling.)

Recalling as well, anger isn't wrong *in itself* – it's part of the emotional repertoire God has given us, a natural response to injustice, motivating us to resist the injustice. But as with any emotion, it must always be under the discernment and guidance of *reason*. Thus reason checks whether our anger is justified: is the injustice real or merely imaginary? Much of the anger in our world is unjustified. And even if the injustice is real, we mustn't let our legitimate anger *control us*, or *get out of control*. Reason must still guide our right and loving response, channeling our controlled and moderated anger so as to motivate us in remedying the injustice. But then, when its work is done, we must let the anger go. There's more to reality to think about. Prolonged anger tends to be dysfunctional, and makes us unhappy. (And often enough, the person we're brooding about knows or remembers little or nothing about it – so we're hurting ourselves, not them.)

(3) Finally, genuine forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean releasing the other person from *all* the just consequences of their wrongdoing. Is this a limitation on the unmeasured forgiveness Jesus calls us to? The solution is, that *love* is supreme – and this means, to will and act for the *genuine good* of all people involved. This will always mean – and this without measure or end, and even before they ask forgiveness – hoping for any necessary *reform* of the wrongdoer, and for their *eternal* salvation. We pray and work for this. However, it doesn't *necessarily* mean releasing them from all consequences *in this world*.

Very often indeed, it might mean just that – especially if we're talking about so many of the less significant wrongs that happen in everyday life. We're called just to *let things go*, recognising also how we ourselves are far from perfect (and we can't see ourselves and our own faults as others do!)

But there are times (for example when a crime has been committed) when justice must be done and restored; that the innocent must be protected from further harm; and that the wrongdoer must be led to reform, indeed stopped from doing more spiritual harm to *themselves* by further sin. (Even so, any punishments must not be intended *vindictively*, vengefully relishing the suffering of the one punished – but rather, precisely as the restoration of justice, a protection and deterrent against further wrongs, and promotion of the offender's reform.) And short of crime, there are also other times when for the good of all, we need to stand up for ourselves and for others, and insist on our rights. (Forgiveness, however, might still mean *reducing* the negative consequences the other person actually deserves.)

So all this helps us to see that Christian forgiveness isn't something *impractical* or *impossible*. With God's grace, and acting as a living member of Christ's Body and instrument of his love, we can always choose to *keep loving*, to *keep willing the true good* of the person who has wronged us. We received mercy undeserved, and we give it undeserved. And when someone does wrong us, why not view that as a precious *opportunity* God sends, precisely so we can gain greater gifts of his mercy for ourselves, for our own many sins? Only thus can we claim to ourselves his promise, that as we forgive, forgiveness will likewise be shown to us.

Feast Days: 14 September: Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

15 September: Our Lady of Sorrows

16 September: Sts Cornelius & Cyprian 17 September: St Robert Bellarmine 19 September: St Januarius

Recently Deceased: Isabella Campo

Anniversaries: Kathleen Ward

Sirach? Ecclesiasticus? Ecclesiastes?

Our first reading today is from the *Book of Sirach*. Or is that *Ecclesiasticus*? Is that the same as *Ecclesiastes*? There can be confusion about the title of this book, which is part of the ‘wisdom literature’ in the Old Testament.

The Hebrew original was written about 200-175 BC by Jesus Ben Sirach, and so is often just called the *Book of Sirach* (pronounced ‘SY-rak’ – the first syllable rhyming with ‘sky’). ‘Ben’ means ‘son of’; and we’ve looked before at Our Lord’s name, ‘Jesus’, which is a derivative of ‘Joshua’, and unsurprisingly has been the name of other people in Jewish history, such as the author of *Sirach*.

Sirach was translated into Greek by the author’s grandson, who added a prologue; it is this Greek translation which the Church recognises as the canonical inspired text. It is quite lengthy (51 chapters), and gives religiously inspired maxims about living well.

But *Sirach* is also often called (for reasons we will see) the *Book of Ecclesiasticus*, meaning ‘the Church’s book’ (from the Latin *ecclesia* and Greek *ekklēsia*, meaning ‘Church’, the assembly of God’s People called together).

This is not to be confused with the *Book of Ecclesiastes* – another Old Testament book altogether. *Ecclesiastes*, also part of wisdom literature, is a musing on the apparent meaninglessness of human affairs, with its famous opening and closing: ‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity’. (*Ecc* 1:2; 12:8) In Hebrew, its author is named ‘Qoheleth’, apparently meaning ‘the Preacher’, one who is preaching before the assembly; and in Greek this was translated as *Ekklesiastes*, from the Greek *ekklēsia*, meaning ‘assembly’ (see above). (Other Old Testament books in the genre of wisdom literature are *Job*, *Proverbs*, *Song of Songs* and *Wisdom*.)

So why do Catholic Bibles include books like Sirach, making them longer than Protestant Bibles?

Another confusing point is that *Sirach* (*Ecclesiasticus*) is found in Catholic (and Orthodox) Bibles, but not in Protestant Bibles. It is one of seven Old Testament books sometimes call ‘deuterocanonical’, that the Catholic Church infallibly teaches to be God’s inspired word, as much as any other part of Scripture; but that Protestants consider ‘apocrypha’ and not a legitimate part of the Bible at all. These books are *Wisdom*, *Sirach*, *Judith*, *Tobit*, *Baruch*, and *1 & 2 Maccabees*. (Catholic Old Testaments also have a few extra parts of *Daniel* and *Esther*.)

‘Deutero-canon’ means ‘second canon’; and ‘canon’ means the accepted list of genuine biblical books. These seven books were not in the original Hebrew scriptures (the ‘proto-canon’ – first canon), but when from the 3rd century BC onwards, Jewish scholars in Alexandria made the Greek translation called the Septuagint, those seven extra books (in Greek) became included. The Jews themselves at the time of Jesus seem not to have had a finalised canon – some Jews used the Greek Septuagint with the extra books, others the Hebrew with its shorter list of books. The final Jewish decision to reject the extra books was made after the formal split with Christianity. So for a Christian, there is no reason to take that post-Christian Jewish decision as authoritative, as we would not say it had any special guarantee of divine guidance.

There are, however, many indications in the New Testament that Jesus himself, and the Apostles, held the Septuagint canon as authoritative. And in the early Church from the 2nd century, the Septuagint was certainly the version more commonly quoted – including specifically from the seven extra books. So this seems the Apostolic Tradition on the matter. (This seems to be how *Sirach* came to also be called (from St Cyprian, d. 258) the *Book of Ecclesiasticus* – ‘the Church’s book’ – because it was the Church’s book but not the Synagogue’s, like indeed all the deuterocanonical books.) Around AD 400, some provincial Councils of Bishops, confirmed by the pope, affirmed the longer canon as we have it today.

Yet since there was no *infallible ruling* on the canon in these early times, St Jerome (d. 420, who translated the

Bible into Latin, and is still held by the Catholic Church to be the great example of scriptural scholarship among the saints) had a view against the weight of earlier Christian practice. Influenced by the Jewish decision, he accepted only the shorter canon. His position was a minority one, but partly owing to his great reputation in scriptural matters, the question didn’t entirely go away during the Middle Ages. Still, the general medieval consensus was for the longer canon.

But breaking away at the 16th-century Reformation, Protestants (following St Jerome and the Jews, and not liking some of the doctrines in the extra books) rejected the deuterocanon. In response, the Catholic Church at the Council of Trent (1545-63) infallibly defined the canon (1546), with the deuterocanonical books included – reaffirming and crystallising the consensus that had long existed, deriving from the Apostolic Tradition.

Indeed, it is only from the Tradition of God’s People and the infallible teaching of the Catholic Church that we can be certain, regarding *any* particular book – whether from the Old or New Testaments – that it should be accepted as divinely-inspired Scripture. For someone who rejects that Tradition and Church teaching are guided by the Holy Spirit, there is simply no other real way of knowing.

You can’t tell just from examining the books. And all the books, from different authors, times and places, weren’t originally gathered into one volume. Considering just the New Testament, on whose contents virtually all Christians agree – people today typically just accept the Bible as faith leaders or publishers give it to them. But in the first centuries, there was notable disagreement. And it was the Catholic Church that eventually confirmed that these specific books we now have, and not other contenders, were the genuine Scriptures inspired by God. So to reject the authority of the Church, yet trust the New Testament canon she gave us, as so many do, is not logical. Catholics, with logical coherence, accept both the authority of the Church, and therefore also the equal canonicity and divine inspiration of all the books of the Old and New Testaments that she infallibly guarantees.

24TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, YEAR A – READINGS

FIRST READING

Sir 27:30-28:7

A reading from the book of Ecclesiasticus

Resentment and anger, these are foul things, and both are found with the sinner. He who exacts vengeance will experience the vengeance of the Lord, who keeps strict account of sin. Forgive your neighbor the hurt he does you, and when you pray, your sins will be forgiven. If a man nurses anger against another, can he then demand compassion from the Lord? Showing no pity for a man like himself, can he then plead for his own sins? Mere creature of flesh, he cherishes resentment; who will forgive him his sins? Remember the last things, and stop hating, remember dissolution and death, and live by the commandments. Remember the commandments, and do not bear your neighbour ill-will; remember the covenant of the Most High, and overlook the offence.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Ps 102

R. The Lord is kind and merciful;
slow to anger and rich in compassion.

1. My soul, give thanks to the Lord,
all my being, bless his holy name.
My soul, give thanks to the Lord
and never forget all his blessings. (R.)

2. It is he who forgives all your guilt,
who heals every one of your ills,
who redeems your life from the grave,
who crowns you with love and compassion. (R.)

3. His wrath will come to an end;
he will not be angry for ever.
He does not treat us according to our sins
nor repay us according to our faults. (R.)

4. For as the heavens are high above the earth
so strong is his love for those who fear him.
As far as the east is from the west
so far does he remove our sins. (R.)

SECOND READING

Rom 14:7-9

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Romans

The life and death of each of us has its influence on others, if we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord, so that alive or dead we belong to the Lord. This explains why Christ both died and came to

life, it was so that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Jn 13:34

Alleluia, alleluia!

I give you a new commandment:
love one another as I have loved you.
Alleluia!

GOSPEL

Mt 18:21-35

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

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.

'And so the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who decided to settle his accounts with his servants. When the reckoning began, they brought him a man who owed ten thousand talents; but he had no means of paying, so his master gave orders that he should be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, to meet the debt. At this, the servant threw himself down at his master's feet, "Give me time," he said, "and I will pay the whole sum." And the servant's master felt so sorry for him that he let him go and cancelled the debt. Now as this servant went out, he happened to meet a fellow servant who owed him one hundred denarii; and he seized him by the throat and began to throttle him. "Pay what you owe me," he said. His fellow servant fell at his feet and implored him, saying, "Give me time and I will pay you." But the other would not agree; on the contrary, he had him thrown into prison till he should pay his debt. His fellow servants were deeply distressed when they saw what had happened, and they went to their master and reported the whole affair to him. Then the master sent for him. "You wicked servant," he said, "I cancelled all that debt of yours when you appealed to me. Were you not bound, then, to have pity on your fellow servant just as I had pity on you?" And in his anger the master handed him over to the torturers till he should pay all his debt. And that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother from your heart.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Memorial Acclamation: Save us, Saviour of the world, for by your Cross and Resurrection you have set us free.

Spiritual Communion

My Jesus, I believe that you are present in the Most Holy Sacrament. I love you above all things, and I desire to receive you into my soul. Since I cannot at this moment receive you sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace you as if you were already there and unite myself wholly to you. Never permit me to be separated from you. Amen.

<u>Hymns:</u>	Entrance	—	CWB 504	Holy God, we praise thy name
	Offertory	—	CWB 120	Forgive our sins as we forgive
	Communion	—	CWB 555	Make me a channel of your peace
	Recessional	—	CWB 520	In faith and hope and love

Readings Next Week: 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Is 55:6-9; Phil 1:20-24, 27; Mt 20:1-16

***Remember to pray a decade of the Rosary every day for the parishioners of
St Patrick's, Bega, who are especially praying for our parish at this time of lockdown***