

On Thursday, May 13th, 1981, on an unseasonably warm spring day in Rome, Pope John Paul II started his regular weekly audience late in the afternoon. At 5:17pm, the hundreds of faithful gathered in St. Peter's Square heard four gunshots, many screams, and then the popemobile dashed out of sight in a blur. The pope had been shot, in broad daylight, in the Vatican. The assailant was apprehended by a nearby nun, and was soon whisked away by police. For the many witnesses of the event, and the worldwide audiences who saw video and pictures on their televisions later that day, the question quickly turned to whether the pope would survive. Four days later, the following Sunday, the Pope delivered his weekly noonday *Regina Coeli* prayer by a recording made from his hospital bed, where he said with a weak voice: "I pray for the brother who struck me, whom I have sincerely forgiven. United to Christ, Priest and Victim, I offer my sufferings for the Church and for the world." For a man who had nearly been assassinated, his immediate offering of forgiveness was unusual. Even more poignant was two years later, when images were shared around the world of the Pope visiting and embracing the very man who had shot him in prison.

How does a man have the capacity to forgive somebody who has literally tried to kill them? How would you react if somebody you loved were targeted and hurt by somebody? Could you forgive them? The forgiveness displayed by the late Pope in this case is an example of forgiveness that many of us, probably most of us, would find hard to reconcile.

In the Lord's prayer, we pray that God "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us". Sure, but how many of us might stop and say, "well, this is a different situation – this sin is really, *really* bad". Jesus doesn't say anything about how bad our sins are, just that we are to forgive no matter what. When Peter asks Jesus whether he should forgive somebody seven times, he thought he was being pretty generous, considering that forgiving somebody three times was the established norm. Jesus blows this out of the water by saying that, really, you should forgive seventy *times* seven – an immense amount more than seven, and certainly lots more than three.

Jesus then tells his disciples a parable about a king and his servants to describe the mercy of God which knows no bounds. When taking account of his servants, the king came to one who had an unsurmountable debt – ten thousand talents. There was no way he was going to be able to pay this debt, so the king decided the only way to reconcile the debt was to sell him off, along with his wife and kids and all their possessions. This, of course, troubled the man, and he fell to the ground to plead for forgiveness of the king. The king was moved and obliged, but then the man went out and did not forgive another servant for a far smaller debt, but instead threw him into prison. When the king caught wind of this, he was furious, and sent him to the jailers until he could fully repay his debt to the king. Jesus says this is how God deals with us, if we do not change our hearts. Let's look at that a bit closer.

It's first helpful for us to get an understanding about the sums of money they are talking about with the debts. The study bible I was using to prepare for this homily described the sums as follows: "In New Testament times, [a talent] was a unit of monetary reckoning, valued at about 6,000 drachmas, the equivalent of about 20 years' wages for a laborer" (who, on average earned a single denarius per day). "If a laborer earns \$15 an hour, at 2,000 hours he would earn \$30,000 per year, and a talent would equal \$600,000." Thus, when this story says "ten thousand talents", it refers to a ridiculously high debt – in the neighbourhood of \$6 billion. Let that sink in. The servant owed the equivalent of \$6 billion dollars in debt, and likely only made \$30,000 per year. There was no way that the servant was *ever* going to be able to pay back this price. The king didn't think so either, but he had mercy on the servant and let him off the hook. What an incredible weight to have lifted off your shoulders. Could you imagine the crushing feeling of knowing you owed \$6 billion to the CRA?

In this parable, if we are to read that the king is God, this massive \$6 billion debt portrays to us an illustration of just how much we owe God because of our sins, and how we are utterly helpless to ever pay him back. Not only does he forgive our sins, but he pays the debt on our behalf through Jesus our Lord. But the parable goes on. The servant who had just had their \$6 billion debt forgiven then holds another servant accountable for 100 denarii, which would be about \$12,000. He punishes

him and sends him to jail instead of showing him mercy like the mercy he had just been shown. The king asks him, “shouldn’t you have shown compassion to your fellow servant just as I had pity on you?” If we are forgiven a debt of \$6 billion, that should feel like winning the jackpot! We should be happy and so thankful that nothing could upset us – at least according to all those TV ads we see.

This is what Jesus means when he says our hearts should be changed by forgiveness. The ability to forgive one another is not something that we find within ourselves. We are sinful by our very nature. We hold grudges, we lie, we steal, we cheat, we betray our family and friends, whether we try to or not. We are marked by Original Sin – that sin which rots in our souls from our first parents in the Garden of Eden. This original sin is like the rust on a car: it’s always there, and even though we can buff out the blemishes on the surface, it still eats away at us all the time. This sin is ever-present, but the debt it holds over us has been paid. Jesus was offered as a ransom for all of us that we might be forgiven. The awareness of this forgiveness should redefine us, and transcend us, and bleed into everything that we do, and our ability to forgive others for lesser sins. We are not capable of forgiving the sins of others, but it is the act of God whose movement through the Holy Spirit which does this. It is hard, and in the Gospel lesson from a few weeks ago, the 19th Sunday after Trinity, Jesus heals a man sick of the palsy and asks, which is easier, to say his sins or forgiven, or get up and walk. Forgiving sins was the harder task. The merciful king knows how much debt we owe but doesn’t hold it over us and wants us to be as generous to others as he has been to us.

Some years after his assassination attempt, Pope John Paul II wrote: *“Real peace is not just a matter of structures and mechanisms, It rests above all on the adoption of a style of human coexistence marked by mutual acceptance and a capacity to forgive from the heart. We all need to be forgiven by others, so we must all be ready to forgive. Asking and granting forgiveness is something profoundly worthy of every one of us.”* God acts. He granted us the perfect ransom for our sins on the Cross in Jesus, and it is this act of love which conquers our hearts to allow us to forgive those who trespass against us. True forgiveness comes from God, not through our own power, and only after we recognize the wonderful forgiveness that was offered for ourselves first.

So, as Jesus instructed his disciples, let us forgive in love, let us forgive from the heart, and let that forgiveness be a ray of God’s sunshine that we allow to flow through us. I will end with a few lines from Shakespeare’s *the Merchant of Venice*, in a famous speech delivered in Act IV, scene 1 by the character Portia:

“The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.”
Amen.