

13 September 2020

Exodus 14:19-31

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

“When the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.” [Exodus 14:31]

Under the leadership of Moses, the Israelites have escaped slavery and hardship in Egypt. Pursued by Pharaoh, who has deployed a vast number of chariots and horsemen against them, the Israelites find themselves surrounded on the edge of the sea. It must have been terrifying!

But Moses reassures them, saying “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only be still.” [Exodus 14:13-14]

In a way two battles are in action. Beyond the obvious one (the conflict between Pharaoh’s forces and the Israelites) there lies a fight within the Israelites themselves: the fight to not be afraid and to believe that God will indeed fight for them.¹

When we come to the end of the story, in which the first battle has been won with God fighting for the Israelites and miraculously enabling them to triumph, we hear that the second battle has also been won: “the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him.”

God’s conflict with Pharaoh is not simply a conflict between two rulers. It is ultimately between the forces of creation and chaos.² Nothing less than the cosmic order, the state in which life can flourish and abound, is at stake. From the outset, Pharaoh’s policies of enslavement, domination, and violence have been anti-

¹ Chan.

² The following quotes freely from Chan, who references the work of Terence Fretheim, *Exodus*, Louisville: WJK, 1991.

creational, operating against God's promises of fruitfulness to Israel and his descendants. God's decision to confront Pharaoh represents a decision to give the forces of creation a chance again to flourish, bringing them out from underneath the suffocating chokehold of oppression.

In language that mirrors images of creation in Genesis 1, Exodus 14 describes how, by means of a strong east wind, God acts to separate the waters of the sea, exposing dry ground as an escape route. As the new day dawns, the Egyptians are defeated. A new creation has occurred, offering Israel a future that is free of the dominating reign of Pharaoh. The forces of chaos are defeated; creation can flourish once more in peace, in wholeness of the relationship with God, and relationships among the people, and between the people and the rest of creation.

“When the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.”

But we know, and we will see as we continue to follow the Exodus story in the weeks to come, that this fear of the Lord and trust in him was not rock-solid: events will occur in which this trust will be found wanting, and in which the Israelites will grumble that they'd rather be back under oppression in Egypt.

Israel is not a faithful covenant partner.

But God is.

God is the absolutely faithful covenant partner, who will forgive this people again and again and again.

On Friday the 22nd of March last year, I stood at the foot of the bell-tower at Christ Church in Whanganui and tried to toll the bell solemnly 50 times – once for each of the dead from the Christchurch mosque shootings. I'm not at all confident I was completely successful: I had great difficulty keeping count of the number of times I tolled the bell while simultaneously trying to maintain a sense of time to keep an even, dignified, pace. (I gather it was handled much better here at St Peter's, with one person ringing and another keeping count).

At that time, the bell tolling was simply to honour the dead. Tolling 50 rings to count them one by one. Counting them is one thing; the magnitude of the evil perpetrated and its wide-ranging and lasting hurts was however of another quality and another order of magnitude altogether. And then to forgive the offender all that, as many in the Muslim community have done, is of another quality and order again. The significance of the act of forgiveness is incalculable.

It is no problem to keep track of the number seven: I could toll that number easily.³ In Matthew 18 Peter comes to Jesus with a question about forgiveness; and the proposal he makes in his question – perhaps his wishful thinking – suggests that forgiveness might be as simple as taking a pill: once a day for a week and then you are good to go.

It is no problem to keep track of the number seven, as if that were all the effort required to forgive a brother or sister who “sins against me”.

However, Jesus’ response to Peter’s question takes forgiveness out of the easily countable category. Seventy-seven times – or seventy-times-seven times, depending on the translation – that’s a harder number to toll accurately.

And then Jesus tells a parable, which takes the whole matter into the realm of the incalculable. The numbers themselves are ultimately unimportant, because Jesus uses exaggeration to highlight the fact that the forgiveness of God – God who was to forgive Israel, for example, over and over and over again – is never-ending.

A servant of the king owes the monarch 10,000 talents. One talent is equal to about 6,000 denarii, with each denarius worth a day’s wage for a labourer. Thus, the first servant owes about 60 million days’ wages, an amount so large that it exceeds the national debt of a small country. No person could repay it, even if they were to sell themselves and their family into slavery for several lifetimes. In an outrageous act of generosity and mercy, the king graciously forgives this unforgivable debt.

³ The following quotes freely from West.

The second servant owes 100 denarii. It is a decent amount of money – a labourer would take about four months to earn it – but like the number seven in Peter's question, it is measurable – and it is miniscule by comparison to the debt that was forgiven by the king: just 0.00017 percent of it. When the forgiven servant refuses to extend compassion, it is no wonder the king becomes angry. He has granted his servant a level of forgiveness that exceeds imagination and yet that servant is unwilling to offer even the smallest mercy to another person.

It is ironic that Peter is the one who suggests a low cap on the number of times he should forgive, since we know that he is also the one who will need great forgiveness from Jesus: we know that he will go on to deny Jesus three times after the arrest, and to be nowhere to be found during the crucifixion.

We who would, like Peter, look for a cap on how far we should extend forgiveness need to remember that we too will find ourselves in need of forgiveness from others at some point. We wouldn't want them to be operating under a cap.

The essential point, beyond the detail of the numbers and characters in Jesus' little story, is that we are to be forgiving of one another – little things and big things – *because God has first forgiven us*. God not only goes on forgiving again and again and again, but what God has forgiven us of is of a magnitude altogether different from and vastly greater than anything we might ever have to forgive – because God's work of forgiveness is to restore us from the final fatal consequences of the rebellion and idolatry in which we are opposed to all that God created us for. God's forgiveness, and God's ultimate judgement, are both needed because God is committed to putting the world to rights, bringing order and beauty and justice again out of chaos.

The work of forgiveness can feel like torture.⁴ Forgiveness does not always come easily, nor is it necessarily a quick or simple process. At times it is necessary to

⁴ The following quotes freely from West.

forgive from a distance. Some wounds are so deep, some “debts” so large, that human forgiveness seems beyond us. Peter’s question “How often should I forgive” and Jesus’ answer “Seventy-seven times” or “Seventy-times-seven times” suggests that forgiveness may well be a long a difficult process rather than a week-long project.

Even, and especially, when our own efforts fall short, God’s mercy is beyond imagining. This is a truth proclaimed by the parable as well as by the testimony of Jesus’ own life and ministry. On the night when Judas would betray him, and Peter and the other disciples abandon him, Jesus would announce to all, “This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins”.

[Matthew 26:28]

God’s willingness to forgive his people was to be tested over and over again in the years in the Sinai desert and in the years beyond, but God’s faithfulness never wavered.

For Israel, the experience of having been foreigners in Egypt provided a background to injunctions that they were to be a people who cared for foreigners among them: “Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner ...”, “The foreigner living among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself ...”, “for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.” [Exodus 22:21, and Deuteronomy 10:19; see also Leviticus 19:34]

As Paul came to realise, our first identity is that we are all human and we are all capable of responding to the gracious call of God. Writing to the young church in Rome, Paul explains that to be justified, to be right with God, is to be also given the obligation to welcome others in spite of their condition, background, nationality or race. [Romans 15:1-11]

The church in Rome was split by differences in its self-understanding⁵: was it simply to be a messianic sect within the cultural confines of traditional Judaism, or was it to

⁵ The following draws from Marshall, and the whole of his paper is well worth reading for insight into Paul’s teaching.

be a multi-cultural community that transcended narrow Jewish nationalism whilst continuing to draw deeply from its Jewish heritage? Paul first instructs believers to accept one another genuinely as brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul demands mutual tolerance.

But Paul demands also that both parties must be truly submitted to the lordship of Christ; both must have reached their conclusions in conscious dependence on the Lord; and both are to live out their different convictions, not for themselves, but in honour of the Lord and in thankfulness to God. It is in the end Christ's responsibility, not ours, to determine which of the convictions and conduct are right.

All this is couched in terms of commitment to the essential truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ:

For the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; the person who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by the people. [Romans 14:17-18]

I too find all this stuff about forgiveness and getting along with one another hard at times. But I get really distressed when I encounter attitudes that suggest that it is somehow an optional extra to faith.

When we don't forgive, and when we please ourselves without thought to the salvation of a brother or sister Christian, we are living as if we are still under the yoke of slavery. It is *Jesus* who is King – not Pharaoh or Caesar – and King Jesus has brought us out of the slavery of sin and guilt. If through unforgiveness we deny that liberty to someone else, keeping them in the bondage of guilt, then we align ourselves with the forces of chaos.

King Jesus died and rose again for all who would accept him. When we fail to accept one another when we hold different views on issues that are important to us, we forget that we have only been accepted through God's grace and not through our own merits.

As hard as forgiveness and living in tolerance can be, and even if we are unsuccessful for long periods of time, the call is to orientate ourselves *towards* forgiveness and peace. If that is our heartfelt intention, and if we continue to make steps – albeit faltering ones – towards it, then we are on the side of new creation and are joining the fight against the forces of chaos; it is then we have learned to fear the Lord and put our trust in him.

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