

**Trinity 12
2011**

It's all about forgiveness

+ The 10th anniversary of the atrocities of September 11th 2001 throws today's readings into more than usually sharp focus. I would bet that everyone over the age of 15 here could remember what they were doing when they heard the news from New York and Washington that day. I had just got in from work and automatically switched the radio on. I remember feeling shock and a strange sort of excitement.

To be honest I don't recall feeling angry any more than I did when the IRA blew up chunks of London at regular intervals in the 80s and 90s. In an awful way it seems to be the price a nation pays for being knee deep in world affairs. Be they good or bad our actions on the world stage will attract attention.

Today our prayers will be for all the victims, their families and for the victims of all the wars and conflicts that have issued from that fateful day.

But where can the great Christian value of forgiveness fit into this picture?

First we must recognise that in this instance forgiveness is not our business. It isn't for us to forgive the planners and perpetrators of the 11th September attacks. As a grown up nation it is our business to try to recognise what it is that causes terrorist organizations to thrive and to play our part in creating a world where peace and justice are so commonplace that no terrorism or violent resistance to oppression will be necessary or be *thought* necessary.

What help is given or what light is shed by our readings this morning? What can we glimpse of God's approach to us as individuals and as nations. I'll tell you now; I think the answer to that question will not satisfy those whose

daily diet consists of a deadly mix of anger, revenge and self-righteousness.

I give that as a sort of health warning because there is no getting away from the fact that the Christian gospel gives no warrant or justification for violent action against anyone – and I say that in full knowledge that the Church has frequently compromised with the state by defining just wars and not only condoning the death penalty but actively using that ultimate act of violence to its own ends.

So to the servant in today's gospel. What of him? He was in a bad way and, to his astonishment finds that he has been forgiven by his master. We have no reason to suppose for one minute that he wasn't grateful for the master's mercy but his problem was that he failed utterly to put in into context.

All he seems to have grasped is that he is free of a terrible burden and its equally terrible consequences. Relieved of that burden he uses

his freedom to treat with brutality someone who is indebted to him. The master gets to hear of this and there is terrible punishment after all – not because the master decides not to forgive him his debts directly but because the servant has failed utterly to pass on the mercy and forgiveness he had received from the master.

It's easy enough to be in church this morning and understand what Jesus is saying. We have received forgiveness from God and it is our solemn Christian duty to pass on that forgiveness to others.

I will never forget the moment when I stopped reciting the Lord's Prayer by rote and realized that forgiving others because we ourselves have been forgiven lies at the heart of Our Lord's demands of us.

Now I can't make a window into your souls this morning. I don't know what is going on in your hearts and minds; what you are trying to deal with in your own lives. We do know that

the United States is today still trying to deal with what happened on this day ten years ago. All I ask of you and would like to ask of the USA which claims to be, in so many ways, a Christian nation is all I ask of myself.

To see that Jesus' demand that we forgive others is plain and unambiguous. To be honest and admit that it isn't always easy to forgive but that difficulty doesn't excuse us from trying.

And don't be overwhelmed by the seeming size of the problem and so be tempted to give up. Jesus addresses us as a Church and as individual members of his body. We start with ourselves, our own lives and those close to us at home, work or at school. As Gandhi said to his followers: *Be the change you want to see in the world.*

We can't demand that the US fosters a spirit of forgiveness rather than the spirit of fear and revenge if we don't address that deep human impulse in ourselves.

Remember a few weeks back we spoke of the need to recognise the truth about God and the truth about ourselves? An understanding of Christian forgiveness puts that truth seeking right at the top of the agenda. Being victims of another person's wrongdoing does not make us innocent of our own wrongdoing.

Let's be frank. Every powerful nation in history has done terrible things and stands in need of forgiveness from God and those against whom it has committed wrong. That rule is not somehow brushed aside by the events of September 11th 2001.

Today is certainly not a day for mud-slinging but the events we remember – like the events we will commemorate on Remembrance Day two months from now – cannot be used as a smokescreen for cynical stupidity such as we saw in Iraq nor can they be a cloak for our own self-righteousness.

God can see what we are doing like the master in today's gospel and our folly will bring tragedy or catastrophe in its wake.

Somehow this all has to start in our own hearts – yours and mine. Pray that God's grace will so fill our hearts that the start can be made; that as we know ourselves to have been forgiven much so that grace spreads outwards to embrace everyone in our own lives and on and on.

Maybe believing that we have indeed been forgiven is the hardest single step but there have been some wonderful examples of forgiveness in the news recently. Let us cling to those and be inspired by them. Make the Lord's Prayer be more than an aspiration. Make it a daily reality.

Amen.