

Gospel text

Matthew 18: 21-35

21 When Peter came to Jesus, he said to him, "Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother who has wronged me? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus replied, "Not seven times, but seventy times seven times."

23 "That's why God's world is like a master of royal lineage who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 So he began to settle accounts with the first debtor, who owed him the equivalent of sixty million days' wages. 25 But as this debtor did not have what it took to repay this sum, the master ordered that he be sold with his wife, children and all his possessions, in order to be repaid. 27 This servant then went down on his knees in deep prostration with these words: "Be patient with me and I'll end up paying it all back". 27 Moved by compassion, the servant's master released him from his obligation and forgot his debt.

28 As soon as the servant came out of the meeting with his master, he found one of his companions in the service who owed him the equivalent of a hundred days' wages. So he grabbed him to the point of choking him and said, "Pay me back everything you owe me". 29 His companion then got down on his knees and urged him: "Be patient with me and I'll end up paying it all back". 30 But he refused to listen, instead he took steps to throw him in prison until his debt was repaid. 31 After seeing what had happened, the servant's companions were deeply saddened and went to inform their master of all these events. 32 The latter then summoned his servant and said to him: "You wicked servant, did I not forgive you all your debt, because you begged me? 33 Were you not obliged in return to have pity on your companion, as I had pity on you?" 34 Furious, the master handed him over to the torturers until he had repaid all his debt.

35 This is how my Father in heaven will treat you if each of you does not forgive his brother from the bottom of his heart."

Gospel commentary - Homily

Why forgive?

This is the story of a man who wanted to live the American dream¹. A Muslim from Bangladesh, he immigrated to the United States to study computer engineering. His name is Rais. After a short stay in New York, he settled in Dallas, where life was cheaper. One Friday lunchtime, ten days after the events of September 11, 2001, while working at a gas station, he was suddenly confronted by an armed customer. Rais hurriedly opened the cash drawer to give him the money. But the man isn't interested in money. He asks him: "Where are you from? Without waiting, he shoots Rais, who immediately collapses, along with two other employees. The man was a Texas white supremacist and self-proclaimed "Arab killer" who had decided to take revenge for the events of September 11.

Despite receiving 38 bullet fragments to the face, Rais survived, but the other two employees did not. He lost sight in one eye. The days, months and years following the crime were difficult. Alone in a foreign country. Without health insurance. Without workmen's compensation. No salary. Sometimes without a roof over his head. The gas station kicked him out. His fiancée, believing he was no longer "a good match", left him. His parents begged him to return home...

The murderer's name was Mark. He confessed to his crimes and was sentenced to death. Eight years after the events, on his return from a pilgrimage to Mecca, Rais felt like a new man. It was clear in his mind that the cycle of violence had to be broken. Hate and violence had to be countered with compassion and forgiveness. With the agreement of the families of the other two victims, he asked for the death sentence to be commuted to life imprisonment. With the help of a professor and human rights activist from Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Rais launched a campaign to save Mark's life. He alerted the media. He collected 12,000 signatures. He met with state officials to try to convince them not to kill the man on his behalf. Unfortunately, his request was rejected out of hand by the State of Texas. Before he was executed, Mark wrote a letter to Rais expressing his remorse. He explained how he had been raised, how he had come to commit this kind of crime. On the day of his execution, on death row, a friend of the condemned man put his cell phone on speaker mode. Rais was able to say to him: "I wanted to tell you that, from the bottom of my heart, I forgive you". Mark replied: "Thank you, Rais, for everything you've done. You're wonderful. Thank you so much. I love you, Bro". At these words, Rais began to cry. And the thought came to him: if only he'd been able to say "I love you" ten years ago, today he'd be a free man.

This story brings us to the heart of today's Gospel, as presented by Matthew. It's the end of the community discourse, in which the question of forgiveness towards one's brother in the community is addressed. Two questions are asked: how often to forgive, and why to forgive. The first question may come as a surprise, since some rabbis claimed that one could forgive up to three times. Like a good Jew, Matthew likes clear rules. And to support the rule he proposes, he features Peter, the leader of the apostles, who, like a good scribe, asks for a figure on the number of pardons. We know Jesus' answer: seventy times seven, i.e. infinity; there is no limit.

The answer to the question of why forgiveness is necessary is a little more complicated. Matthew offers us a parable with several elements that are difficult to understand today. First of all, how can the first slave or servant owe the astronomical and implausible sum equivalent to sixty million days' wages? That's what 165,000 people would earn together in a year, working every day. The image assumes a great Eastern potentate, of royal lineage, with numerous viceroys or satraps, who must account to him for the income received. The latter are called servants in the sense that, although they are high-ranking officials, they are the monarch's subordinates and dependents. Thus, huge sums of money pass through their hands. Matthew emphasizes that, at the servant's prayer for patience, the master of royal lineage is moved with compassion, and so is not only willing to be patient, but in a move of generosity, cancels the entire debt. It's a mad move, commanded by compassion. Clearly, Matthew identifies this master with the heavenly Father, and the servant with the human being. But what does this really mean? What is the human being's debt? Matthew doesn't specify, but for him debt is another term for sin. We can imagine that for him, the human being, in his march towards full humanity, regularly lost his way along the way: left to his own means, he would have lost himself completely, and the earth would have become a hell. We have little capacity to grasp the

gravity of our actions. The enormity of the sum in the parable is intended to highlight this fact. The forgiveness of the debt in the parable affirms that God has not left us to our own means but has intervened to transform our hearts and bring us back to our original vocation.

The second part of the parable is easier to understand: if we are forgiven beings, it's our turn to forgive those who go astray towards us and do us harm. All this emphasizes one fact: misguidance, mistakes, bad choices, offenses, wounds, stubbornness and blindness are part of life. How we wish they didn't exist. But accepting this fact, recognizing that in our own way we have contributed to it, enables us to discover the face of this mysterious Father of whom Jesus spoke and whom he wanted to incarnate through his whole life. Who has never suffered injustice, who has never been hurt by a word, who has never been badly advised, who has never given in to the impulse of the moment, who has never said something he didn't mean, who has never done something he regrets? Forgiveness is the only remedy. And forgiveness is the royal road into the mystery of God.

And the opposite is terrible. We can be shocked by the end of the story, where the master entrusts his servant to the hands of the torturers, and by Jesus' warning that Father in heaven will treat all those who do not forgive in this way. This is typical of Matthew's style. In fact, neither the master nor God has anything to do with it. Anyone who refuses to forgive enters into an implacable logic where nothing can be healed, where everything leads to suffering and death.

Yes, forgiveness is difficult. For you must first accept that you have been wounded. It took Rais eight years to get there. What's more, forgiveness requires a strength of love that goes beyond our usual experiences of love. It is this love that enables us to accept ourselves as we are, with our own mistakes, and to forgive ourselves. How can we forgive others if we haven't first forgiven ourselves? But whoever accepts to take this path takes giant steps forward in their humanity, while creating a more human earth, and entering further into the mystery at the source of this world.

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, June 2023

¹ The full story was originally published in La Presse (Montreal, Canada) by Rima Elkouri, May 21, 2013. Link to the story (French): [The man who wanted to save his killer](#) ▲