Matthew 18.21-35

Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

‘For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, “Pay what you owe.” Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?” And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.’

Blessed are the hypocrites? The importance of sin in a risk averse age
I’d rather be a hypocrite than a cynic.

When I first heard the environmental campaigner and journalist George Monbiot express this, it struck a chord with me. He seemed to be expressing from his own standpoint something that touched on a distinctly Christian strand of teaching about the divine activity of forgiveness and the central place of forgiveness given by Jesus to his teaching such as in the parable we heard earlier, and his prayer which we have just prayed. The journalist was expressing frustration with the level of punitive criticism and comment that he attracted when he spoke out about matters environmental and that he believed that being afraid of being called a hypocrite acted as a brake on him and others expressing their desire for change because the day never comes when you can say you have done enough.

It seems to me that the language of sin and confession are everywhere in contemporary culture, not least in the hugely popular daytime TV shows that expose the complicated lives of the people on stage or in the schadenfreude, politely expressed by political commentators and vilely expressed by twitter trolls, when other people act in unapproved ways. But in pastoral ministry in central London, it seems to me almost every day that the gap has arguably never been wider between what Christian theology says about these things and the traction these ideas have in our society.

In giving this sermon a title that rather provocatively raises the question of the blessedness of hypocrites, I want to say quickly, just in case it isn’t assumed, that this is not a sermon that will praise intentional or sustained hypocrisy or one that will tell the holders of public office that accountability is not essential in the exercise of their power.

But the set of questions that I’ve been thinking about are those such as: In a secularised context, what can the Church say about the Christian understanding of sin, and requirement for repentance and mercy? Is the quest for purity as damaging as it is noble? Do our public conversations too often confuse sincerity with truth? And is there any such thing as innocence?

One public conversation that might neatly illustrate the issue was in a seminar I took part in involving priests and advertising executives. A priest said that he hated advertising because it made you feel bad about
something you didn’t know you had to feel bad about – and then it tried to sell you the solution. Advertising, he said, created the need, then made money out of the customer’s discomfort and desire to fulfil that need. Quick as a flash, the ad guy replied; don’t give us a hard time: that’s exactly what the church does; implants in your psyche the sin you didn’t think you were guilty of, and then tries to sell you the solution – salvation by Jesus.

That there is a disconnect between the theological language of confession, repentance, redemption and sin; that there is a disconnect between this and the usual use of these concepts in public conversations goes to the heart of the proclamation of Matthew’s gospel. The power of the parable that Jesus tells rests on the close link between our own understanding of our inadequacies, our shortcomings, our debts, and our capacity to hurt and condemn others when we are not sufficiently aware of those debts or of the overwhelming forgiveness of God.

For Christians, sin is the expression of the fractured nature of humanity’s connection with God, and the fractured nature of human relationships too. Sin is a way of talking about the separateness, the as-yet-unrepaired bond between the Creator and the created that humans recognise often in an unasked for yearning. This yearning comes unannounced, in the presence of great art, or on a clifftop, when we’re in love or even in church; that things should be better or we should be kinder or everything should be more peaceful somehow or the world could be better. This often inarticulate yearning, combined with the frustration of living with things as they are, is also what I want to talk about a little in the light of the parable from Matthew: living in the gap. In the parable, hypocrisy is expressed as the gap between the overwhelming generosity the lord shows to the slave and the inability of that slave to mirror this generosity to another. And the slave’s inability to accept the lord’s forgiveness leaves him too fearful to forgive his neighbour.

The reality is that it is part of the human condition to live, sometimes finding ourselves sinking in the gap between the person we know we are and the person we want to be. The person we know we are and the person everyone else tells us we are. The person we thought we would be by now and so on and so on.

This gap we know about, and live in, is called hypocrisy by a risk-averse version of secularism that has abandoned belief in a loving God and so
seizes on its inconsistencies and paradoxes that make public conversations shrill and tight, with no room for risk.

We become fearfully risk averse as people of faith because we are afraid of feeling ashamed of ourselves, because we don’t really know what to do with the gap between the compassion we might want to express and the reality of our lives. The link between hope and compassion on the one hand and shame on the other is close, because we will never do enough, never make it right; so it’s safer not to try.

This is not to say that Christians are any better either. This fear is rife within Christianity too; a functional atheism that acts either as if God is not here, or assumes God is either too far away or, conversely, too like us to be trusted with our deepest desires and bravest intentions. I want to suggest that our theology of God, either spoken about in Christian conversations or unspoken in public discourse, is at the heart of this. Because without a theology of God bracing enough, robust enough to deal with our fundamentally fractured lives, living in this gap is simply intolerable. And so we arrive at a hyperbolic, fearful scapegoating of those parts of ourselves or others we condemn.

An exploration of the gap – of the moment in the parable when the slave turns from being forgiven by the lord to grab his fellow slave by the throat – that moment on which the parable turns – reveals itself to be the bearer of profound reflections on fundamental questions related to our life in the world.

The first area I want to explore a little is our attitude towards time itself.

Christian theology has a distinctive contribution to make here, if we are able to find the words. Christianity is a religion orientated towards the future, despite our central liturgical act being one of remembrance. Christians know what it is to live in the gap between now and not yet. We live in the world as it is, with us as we are, and we know that the ministry of Jesus, reflected in the life of the church now, is to proclaim the kingdom, the hope that is to come, that is within us, upon us, the future we can hardly imagine, while living in the reality of the unmendedness of this life. And we collect the evidence for the person that we actually are, rather than
the person we’d like to be, from our life lived in time. How we deal with our past, is a huge question and one that often causes anxiety and strain. Daring to contemplate the past is obviously essential work in the cycle of confession, repentance, and restoration. We can’t change the past we have lived, or within that, the wrong we have done: we are powerless to change it and so we must deal with it another way. The slave in the parable was released from the debts he had accumulated in the past but had not sufficiently understood the freedom of this to offer this to others. Without this fundamental recognition of our powerlessness about the past, we are caught in a pattern, like the man at the pool at Bethesda, (John 5) of repetitive futile attempts to move ourselves while blaming everyone else for not releasing us. Like him, this can last for 38 years or, to coin a phrase, 30 times 38.

If there is a hysterical or overly punitive atmosphere around wrongdoing, it can be an indication that we have lost our perspective on the movement of time itself. Sound and fury, expressed in the present, can sometimes be an expression of powerlessness, the howl of rage that what’s done is done with no mechanism at our disposal to be set free. As a pastoral reality, this is something that most of us will experience at some time, when we are dealing with the hurts of our past, and is a necessary process, one towards which we should obviously show the greatest compassion, to ourselves and to others. The point I’m making is that if this is where we remain, it indicates something about our trapped-ness in a painful present, which has not reckoned properly with the wrongs of the past and we are much more likely to act like the slave unable to forgive his neighbour.

In his book on what he identifies as a “graceless age”, Miraslav Volf comments “We can only do new deeds not undo the old ones” (Miroslav Volf Free of Charge p 128).

Or more pithily put by the New York Times columnist and writer of spiritual best sellers Anne Lamott: there are three things I cannot change – the past, the truth and you. (Anne Lamott Help Thanks Wow: the Three Essential Prayers)

These are hard truths to accept and so how we deal with our past is fundamentally affected by our own picture of God, which is the second vein of reflection.
Very often, when attempting to confess in spiritual terms or more prosaically come to terms with the person we are, rather than the person we think we should be, we imagine that when we’re dealing with God, we’re dealing with someone essentially like us, only bigger. We know about wrath: anger, fury, violence, jealousy, the alarming feelings that we have. And we imagine therefore that God’s wrath is like that, only bigger - which makes it even more violent and more frightening.

But critically, one of the most important things Christian theology wants to say about God is that God emphatically isn’t like us only bigger. God is unlike: is other, free – disconcertingly so – utterly holy, completely undefended: the Creator completely surrendered to relationship with creation.

In the story of Jesus’s arrest, crucifixion and resurrection, the God we encounter is God so completely yielded up to the risks of relationship that we can hardly look, let alone understand. And you and I know, because we’re human, that this is not what I’m like. For us, in relationship, as with the slave in the parable, there’s always something held back, something competitive, something defended and suspicious and afraid, which comes between me and my maker, and me and my neighbour.

And in the light of what we know we’re like, to speak of God’s forgiveness of us as some kind of feeling that God entertains towards us is to mistake it completely. I want to suggest that our instinct for confession, absolution, forgiveness, our often buried understanding of ourselves as flawed and dependent on one another and on God, reveals our own creaturely acknowledgement of the unimaginably deep divine dis-content of our Creator with who or what we have made ourselves. The crucifixion of Christ expresses the salvation of the world in this dissonant acknowledgement of sin. Any attempts to describe a God who demands sacrifice for sin is an attempt at language to express divine disease, divine dissonance, agony, fury even, at the profligate waste and widening injustices of a violent, risk-averse and small minded humanity which either demands repayment from our neighbour like the slave in the parable, or buries our gifts in the sand to hide them and keep them safe.

So in attempting to deal with this gap, in attempting to live in this gap, our image of God is vital and will determine how well we can do it.

A third question that arises moves us from the nature and activity of God
and what we think that is like, to our own identity – and who we think we are.

Every year, on the United Nations Day of Remembrance for Road Crash Victims, at St James’s we hold a service. It is London’s service for the charity Roadpeace. Borough Mayors attend, representatives of the emergency services, the police choir sings. Ministers of the Crown come and speak about policy and campaigners come to ensure that the language is right; not Road Traffic Accidents (some of them are not accidents) but Road Traffic Collisions. The service most importantly holds the congregation, all of whom have lost a family member or friend on the roads in the last year. It is a service where raw emotions of anger, grief, despair and fury are expressed at the futility of the crash that killed the one they loved, and the often complicated aftermath where blame is too often attributed to the one who is dead.

But I have also wondered about yet another circle of people who are not there but whose lives are intimately bound by the events brought before God that day. The drivers – the perpetrators – the ones whose inattention ruined the lives of so many in ending the life of one. The ones whose sometimes wilful speeding or culpable negligence meant that they too now live with a life sentence. In their case, it is of memories of the moment they moved from delivery driver making a living to the man who killed the cyclist on the Bow roundabout. Forever guilty. Forever condemned.

I have sometimes wondered, given that church is a natural place to bring our grief and greed and guilt, what a liturgy would look like for all the people who had killed someone on the road?

The ubiquitous and ordinary use of the roads is a useful metaphor for what I am trying to say about the multiple identities with which we live as hypocrites, cynics, purists, victims, perpetrators.

In our common use of the roads, a cyclist easily becomes a driver on a different day, and all drivers are at some time pedestrians. A police officer becomes a driver, a medic becomes a cyclist. At one point in time, we assume these identities and in the event of a catastrophe like a crash, our identities are fixed. Victim, perpetrator, helper, bystander. And we can get stuck there if the operation of truth-telling and forgiveness is not at work. But we move all the time between these roles – on the roads as in life.
Recognising this truth, that our identities are not fixed as perpetrators or victims might help us cultivate compassion towards ourselves and others and help us live with the gap between the person we are and the person we want to be. And also to recognise that the only gaze which falls on all of these identities, the only gaze that contemplates us wholly, is that of God.

And fourthly, some reflections on forgiveness.

Living with the gap from a Christian perspective is living in a state of constantly deepening trust in the God who inexplicably and outrageously deals with our consistent injustices both to ourselves, and to others in ways that are entirely mysterious to us but which feel close to liberty, and redemption, and, somehow being found.

In his book Healing Agony, (Healing Agony: reimagining forgiveness Stephen Cherry Continuum 2012), Stephen Cherry identifies forgiveness not as an overarching ethical imperative nor even as an act in itself, but as a long running story, a process. And that the spiritual task is not to pray for the ability to forgive as if it were somehow something we could win a prize for, but to pray for a shaping of our hearts to be themselves forgiving.

Ernest Hemingway began one of his short stories (The Capital of the World) with this story:

Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is diminutive of the name Francisco, and there is a Madrid joke about a father who came to Madrid and inserted an advertisement in the personal columns of El Liberal which said: PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA and how a squadron of Guardia Civil had to be called out to disperse the 800 young men who answered the advertisement. (Ernest Hemingway “The Capital of the World” The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway New York Charles Scribner’s Sons 1987 p 29).

The primary point of course is the joke about the number of boys named Paco – but the success of the joke depends on the common, even ubiquitous need for forgiveness, perhaps particularly within families, perhaps particularly, given our religious iconography, from Dad?

One place to start here is with the desert teaching of John the Dwarf who rather counter- intuitively said

*We have put aside the easy burden, which is self-accusation, and weighed ourselves down the heavy one, self-justification.*
Rowan Williams explains: *Self-justification is the heavy burden because there is no end to carrying it; there will always be some new situation where we need to establish our position, dig the trench for the ego to defend*. *(Silence and Honeycakes Rowan Williams p 48)*

The self-accusation burden is light because it is carried in the fundamental knowledge that all has already been known and held in the gaze of the infinite mercy of God. The light that shines into the darkest recesses of our psyches and hearts is not some kind of divine merciless searchlight, nor is it the Piccadilly Circus kind of light that draws attention only to itself, but is the kind of light that makes artists go the moors at dawn: a kind of Candlemas light that allows us to be presented as we are, a light that illuminates in compassion the failures we know and recognise and despair of when we are alone.

One of the tragedies of handling this powerful and sometimes toxic dynamic of sin confessed and forgiven is articulated by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his contemplation of life in Christian community. His rather acerbic observation is that the church is pretty bad at this, despite all its protestations to the contrary:

*Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy*, *(Life Together SCM Press 1954 p 87)*.

With all its centuries of practice it turns out that church communities are equally lost, equally mired in risk-averse patterns of belief and behaviour. Sin confessed can be forgiven – but what Luther called sin “defended” can’t be forgiven. This distinction helps us understand that often I am not aware of my sin and my hypocrisy. Despite our best Puritan instincts to find it all and name it all, our own hypocrisy is often hidden from us. It can be seen by others, and can be seen by God. But how we live with this knowledge highlights the importance of our assumptions about who God is and what God is like. And that’s why although the hyperbole of the first century God of the parable who punishes the first slave for being unforgiving can sound like a narrow minded God, it sounds more to me like the revealed truth of what inevitably happens to our souls when we are trapped in such a cycle of unforgiving bullying – which can be as much towards parts of ourselves as towards others.
And so, without following a secularised schadenfreude or pack mentality that too easily suppresses the hopes of any of us who want the world to be a better place, what does a Christian interpretation of this gap called hypocrisy teach us to do? We can’t really be content with anything like learning to “love” the gap – or ultimately accepting its permanent presence in our lives – that would be complacent. And so we are asked to live at some level always restless, the yearning that I mentioned at the beginning. But the attempt to shape and cultivate a forgiving heart can help here.

In the next month, we are hosting a talk by Marian Partington, the sister of Lucy Partington who was one of the victims of Fred and Rosemary West. She has written much about this horrifying experience and what forgiveness might look like. She wrote I’m learning how to forgive myself, and I’m learning to believe that others can forgive me. In this process I’ve explored my own rotting pile of mistakes, but I also see that it’s my compost. It has meaning. It doesn’t have to remain repulsive, something I can’t acknowledge, something I want to edit out. It is actually part of who I am, and I have to develop another relationship with it.

(Marian Partington quoted in D Self Struggling with Forgiveness)

Somehow, Marian Partington has found a way to express the multiple identities we all hold together, including those of victim and perpetrator to such a deep extent that she can even begin to explore the possibility of forgiveness in relation to what happened to her sister Lucy.

Her reflections lead us to affirm again the very close relationship expressed in the Lord’s Prayer and in Matthew’s parable of the ability of ourselves to know our own hypocrisy seen by God and forgiven by God and our ability to learn to forgive the hypocrisy of others. One of the ways in which to live with the gap, is to inhabit it intentionally and fill it with prayers for mercy which in turn will make us merciful. Knowing about our own hypocrisy, acknowledging it, contemplating it, cultivates, in the right light, a deep sort of compassion that neither excuses settled hypocrisy nor flees in fear into cynicism, but persuades us that something like a hopeful self-accusation can begin the journey to freedom.

A Christian intervention in a brittle and hyperbolic public atmosphere, recognising the often merciless expressions of cultural confession with which we are surrounded, will speak about ancient themes such as self-accusation, repentance and restoration.
Next Sunday, we will burn palm crosses in order to make the ash for Lent’s beginning. And on Ash Wednesday at St James’s, we are going to try something different too. After ashing our own congregations through the day in our services, we will, in common with other churches’ take the ash outside the church and offer people passing by on Piccadilly the opportunity to receive ash and to talk to them about the beginning of Lent. We don’t have much idea about what might happen as it’s our first time, and are expecting anything from curiosity to hostility to vast indifference. But in this ancient symbol, we wonder if it might make more sense than we anticipate in a society that in many ways has become too afraid to hope for better.

Our hope is that realising more deeply our own need for seventy-seven times forgiveness might lead paradoxically to us being less afraid of sinning not more. We will recognise the close relationship between the expression of compassion and hope on the one hand and the risk of shame on the other, but because our trust in God is deepening, we will want to become less and less afraid of getting things wrong. This is a vision of reciprocal and lively forgiveness held out in contrast to the paralysing risk-averse fear of the slave in the parable. And it means accepting the irresistible invitation of a God who is scandalously forgiving, utterly and irreducibly strange, whose light we will hear described in the luminous anthem that follows. This light illuminates gently but inexorably the deep fractures of our hypocritical life, offering us for all eternity the healing of our past, the strengthening of our courage and the dissolving of our fear. In turn we are no longer afraid to hope for more, because despite much evidence to the contrary, it is never too late to begin again. Amen.