

24TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, A
FORGIVENESS HAS A PRICE

“And that is how My Heavenly Father will treat you unless each of you sincerely forgives his brother from his heart.” (Matt. 18: 35)

Debbie Morris is the author of a book titled: *Forgiving the Dead Man Walking* (2002). The book is an account of the true story of Debbie and her boyfriend, Mark Brewster, in the hands of their captors. At sixteen, Debbie and her boyfriend were captured by two men. For thirty-six hours the boyfriend was tortured, shot, and left to die from the gunshot. She was terrorised and raped repeatedly for even more hours. With unbelievable equanimity, she was able to talk her captors into letting her go. For Debbie, nothing would satisfy her desire for revenge and closure than revenge and justice. But she later realised that nothing was more urgent in her life than forgiveness. She expressed this feeling in words that capture the message of Jesus in the Gospel of today in very succinct expressions: The unforgiveness I was holding on to, the hate, the anger, was destroying my life. I was continuing to let these men have control over me. I was continuing to let myself be victimised because I was hanging on to the hate. I was unwilling to forgive. After the arrest, prosecution, conviction, and execution of one of the men, Debbie realised the much-needed justice did not bring her the needed closure, healing nor fulfillment. She tried the other option: the forgiveness option. Then she wrote: When I was able to forgive, not only did the hate, anger, and pain go away, but the shame did too. When I chose to forgive there was a prisoner that was set free, and I realised that that prisoner was myself. The story of Debbie is the story of every “unforgiving servant” on the one hand, and the story of freedom gained through forgiveness on the other. We live in a world where forgiveness continues to be a very hard and expensive currency to dispense with a “sincere heart” as taught and demanded by Jesus.

This is the challenge we are faced with as we celebrate this Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A. Jesus tells a very dramatic and intense Parable of the Unforgiving Servant in response to Peter’s question: “Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?” (Matt. 19: 21). This was Peter’s reaction to the teaching of Jesus on reconciliation, which we heard last Sunday. The Rabbis had taught that one should forgive a brother three times. So for Peter, raising the bar to seven was a very generous gesture having listened to Jesus’ teaching thus far on forgiveness, love and reconciliation. But Jesus’ answer was far beyond all expectations: “Not seven, I tell you, but seventy times seven times” (Matt. 19: 22). Jesus’ answer was not to set a limit to the number of times we must forgive a brother per day. Rather He was stating the boundless willingness with which each of us must be forgive one another. Our forgiveness of one another has no limits; it has to be inexhaustible, just like God’s.

The Boundless Forgiveness: Then Jesus, in His characteristic way, narrated this timeless parable to demonstrate the immutable fact that the key to the Kingdom of Heaven is forgiveness: “a king decided to settle his accounts with his servants”, Jesus began. One of the servants owed ten thousand talents. He was brought to him. The master knew he had no means of paying back, so he ordered that “he should be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, to meet the debt.” The servant threw himself at his master’s feet: “Give me time, and I will pay back the whole sum.” The Master forgave him, set him free, and canceled the entire debt. What a joy and relief this man must have felt. When God forgives us, He cancels our sins, our debts. He completely sets us free.

The Unforgiving One: Now this same servant went out, in the euphoria of that forgiveness, and met a fellow servant who owed him one hundred denarii. He seized him by the throat, throttled him, and asked him to pay back what he owed him. The servant fell at his feet and pleaded: “Give me time and I will pay you.” But this servant, who had just been forgiven refused to forgive a fellow servant. The forgiveness he received should have humbled him, but no. Rather he had a false sense of empowerment to dominate a fellow servant. He ordered that he be put in prison until he had paid

the last sum. How do we respond or react to God's forgiveness? Forgiveness is not a license to sin more; it is not a sign of weakness but certainly a sign of love and the motivation to sin no more. The Big Question: His fellow servants, who had known how much he had been forgiven were very distressed and disappointed, and went back to report the incident to their master. The master was furious. He handed him over to the torturers until he would pay the last penny. "You wicked servant!" he said, "I canceled all that debt of yours when you appealed to me. Were you not bound, then, to have pity on your fellow servant just as I had pity on you?" That is the big question! This is a question that we need to consider seriously as we reflect on how we should respond to this challenge: "Since God has forgiven us in such an irreparable way, are we not bound to forgive our fellowmen and women as much?"

The Incomparable Comparison: The force of this parable rests on the incomparability of the two sums. A talent at the time was considered the largest unit of currency. Ten thousand was the largest single-unit the Greek language of the time could express. A talent could be approximately equivalent to two hundred and fifty thousand Pounds. Therefore, ten thousand talents could be about two billion five million Pounds. That is approximately how much a servant owed the master. On the other hand, the other servant owed the forgiven servant one hundred denarii. A denarius was a day's wage for a typical labourer (Matt. 20: 2). It could be said to worth one hundred and fifty pounds (being approximately a day's wage for a typical labourer in the UK). One hundred denarii, therefore, can be said to have worth fifteen thousand Pounds. We can see the staggering difference between the two sums. Dear friends, this is even an inadequate comparison to the forgiveness God has offered to us. As Christians, we have received irreparable forgiveness from God, who sent His Only Begotten Son to die for us so that we may have our sins forgiven. All that the Lord asks of us is to be merciful to others as God has been merciful to us.

Forgiveness Has a Condition: The teachings of Jesus on forgiveness clearly lays down one condition, which He taught us in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall have mercy shown them" (Matt. 5: 7). In the Our Father, He taught us even more lucidly: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Matt. 6: 12). He expounds further: "Yes if you forgive others their failings, your Heavenly Father will forgive you yours: but if you do not forgive others, your Father will not forgive your failings either" (Matt. 6: 14). Forgiveness has a price, it is forgiveness. The First Reading alludes to this in no low voice: "He who exacts vengeance will experience the vengeance of the Lord, who keeps strict account of sins ... Showing no pity for a man like himself, can he then plead for his own sins?" It implies that if we do not forgive others, we have no right to ask God's forgiveness.

My dear friends, besides being a Christian tenet, forgiveness as Debbie Morris stated, releases us emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. It liberates us from our self-made prison and torture-rooms. Are you finding it hard to forgive someone? You need to release the love so that you can be free; so that you can experience the mercy of God and have your prayers answered by your Heavenly Father. May His mercy and grace rule our hearts.