

24th Sunday (A)

17th September 2017

'How often must I forgive?'

Sirach 27: *Remember the covenant of the Most High, and overlook the offence*

Ps 102: *The Lord, slow to anger and rich in mercy*

Rom 14: *The life and death of each of us has its influence upon others*

Mt 18:21–35: *not seven, I tell you, but seventy times seven*

On Friday, as you probably know, we almost had yet another tragic loss of life on a bombed tube train in West London. It turns out that a friend of mine was on that train ... In fact, she was in the very carriage where the device was, that was detonated. So I have personal reasons to be very relieved that the device did not explode as intended. This is, sadly, the 5th terrorist incident that our country has had to endure in 2017. When we have so many attacks in quick succession, most of which wreak havoc and desolation in people's lives, it's hard not to want to act decisively, in retribution, in retaliation ...

Into the heart of these thoughts, this weekend, however, we hear the Scripture of today. The powerful words of the 1st reading:

Remember the last things, and stop hating, remember dissolution and death, and live by the commandments. Remember the commandments, and

do not bear your neighbour ill-will; remember the covenant of the Most High, and overlook the offence.

I remember having to preach, 16 yrs ago, on that Tuesday evening, September 11th 2001, after the Twin Towers atrocity in New York which took 3000 lives. It was hard to know what to say; but I remember saying that it was not the worst atrocity ever committed ... the worst atrocity ever committed was when mankind put to death the loving Son of God on the Cross ... and that despite that appalling action, God has forgiven us. And so, whilst it is hard to preach forgiveness in the face of terrible crimes, yet it is the tough message at the heart of our faith. "*Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me?*" said Peter to Jesus, "*As often as seven times?*" Jesus answered, "*Not seven, I tell you, but seventy times seven*" — i.e. without end. This is the tough love which we have signed up to as Christians: to be forgiving without limit. It is one thing to defend yourself or your country from deliberate attack; it is another to seek revenge.

Sometimes we are given the most profound examples

of forgiveness, and when I hear such words, which seem to fly in the face of a typical human reaction, I for one am moved intensely, and feel that this is the real courage that humanity should engage in. The one that comes to mind, and which always stands out for me is the statement made by Barry & Margaret Mizen after the unprovoked killing of their 16-yr-old son, Jimmy, in Lewisham, almost 10yrs ago. They movingly spoke, immediately, not of revenge but of forgiveness and compassion. Such brave words are the very stuff that makes for healing and reconciliation. In fact, the Mizens have now devoted the whole of the past decade to promoting peace especially amongst young people.

It may be that some of you have had, at various points in your life, to make difficult decisions to be forgiving almost beyond the personal strength you thought you'd ever have. I know that I have ... It may be, instead, that there are still grudges and pains in your heart that arise from hurts you have experienced from others ... The ability eventually to forgive them is a gift from Christ crucified, and always one worth praying for, however hard, or even

impossible, it may seem. We can only make brave and Christian acts of forgiveness with help from God, and maybe it will only be slow in coming ... but God will help you gradually along that path, for it is the path of Jesus, the way of the Cross, the way to true godliness. It's not about being a doormat, being walked over in silence; it's about providing the climate in which true peace can be fostered.

High up the agenda of being a Christian is our commitment to forgiveness: the day-to-day forgiveness of little frustrations; sometimes the courage of forgiving a great offence. But the Lord Jesus by His example leaves us in no doubt, and when He teaches us to pray: *forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us ...* He also repeats and emphasizes: *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.* Let's be the sort of people who are *known* for this forgiveness — let's be seen to be Christians who live those words that we so often pray in the 'Our Father': *we forgive those who trespass against us.*