

2019 7th SUNDAY

One morning when I was teaching in Kiribati three girls were happily walking to school when a village dog sprang out at them and began to nip at their legs. I was angered by the dog. So when the girls were past I picked up a good-sized stone and from 50 metres hit the dog squarely on its shoulder. Trent Boulton couldn't have been more deadly in his aim. The dog ran away yelping piteously. The girls saw it all. They did not applaud me, laugh or look in any way grateful. They clearly totally disapproved of what I had done.

That night at prayer I thought about the dog incident with some shame. As I looked into my heart, I became aware that I have a propensity within me to violence and revenge. I acknowledged that night, for the first time in my life, that there is something deep within me which screams out for vengeance if someone either hurts me or injures someone I care about. I am not proud of this and wish I was different. I stand in awe of people who seem to be able to forgive as soon as an injury is done to them.

We are followers of Christ and forgiveness is at the very heart of Jesus' Gospel. Christ explicitly demands us to forgive others in a way which leaves people gasping with surprise. This is the whole sense of today's Readings.

Today our Readings challenge us to look deeply into our hearts to see if we harbour any hatreds, any desire for revenge, any delight in violence.

David is held up to us as a model of magnanimity.

David's action in sparing King Saul's life would have been totally incomprehensible to Abishai and to all of David's followers. And probably also to most readers of the Bible. To spare the life of someone who bitterly hates you and will never stop scheming your death would have seemed quite crazy to most people of David's time.

But God whispered into David's heart: "Do not do this thing. It was I Who chose Saul to be King. He is my anointed. Only I can judge Saul."

And so David left Saul untouched. And sure enough King Saul continued plotting to murder David.

Jesus' examples are outrageous. It doesn't make sense to allow someone to slap you for a second time without protecting yourself. It doesn't make sense to say to a thief who is running away with your golf clubs... 'Stop. Stop. You've forgotten to take my Sand Wedge. Here. Take it as well.'

But in spite of his exaggeration, Jesus makes the all-important point that our first priority must be to actively attack the anger and vengefulness which

springs up in our hearts when we are injured unjustly. This must come before our demand for personal justice. It is a huge ask and goes right against nature.

A Kiwi priest who was working as a missionary in Pakistan tells how he was invited to come to the microphone of the bus he was travelling on to tell a Christian story to his bored fellow travellers; all of whom were Muslim. He launched into the Story of the Prodigal Son. It was an absolute disaster. At its end everyone on the bus burst into derisive laughter. Under Muslim law the son deserved to have his throat cut for the insult he had payed to his father's honour. The father was seen as a wimpish coward for not taking vengeance. To put a ring on his evil son's finger and to throw a party to welcome him home was unthinkable. The story was seen by the priest's Muslim listeners as subversive and wicked.

Vengeance seems so reasonable; so correct; so moral.

But experience tells us that vengeance breeds vengeance; it adds darkness to darkness. It enslaves us and demeans us. It is of the devil.

Forgiveness brings light into darkness. It brings reconciliation and peace. It is of God.

We often think that a past hurt is forgotten. But for no reason at all, the memory, buried deep within our subconscious is triggered and we must face the truth that there is poison within us which needs to be dealt with. We can seek counselling. We can ask for prayer. But as Catholics, the best thing we can do is to approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Within this healing Sacrament, the priest in the Name of the Lord Jesus will pray that powerful graces will be given to us to bring healing to the memory which is dragging our spirit down. These graces will help us to finally forgive those who have sinned against us.

I will always be grateful to God for my three years in Kiribati. To live among such a forgiving and gentle people was like a huge searchlight shining into my soul.

Let us allow Jesus' teaching on forgiveness to shine into our souls. He told us to forgive- seventy times seven times. He exhorted us to be compassionate and always merciful.

Why should we? In forgiving as God forgives, we will become ever-more worthy to live for all eternity in the presence of our All-loving, wonderfully forgiving, God.