

**How much forgiveness do I have *in* me? Enough to forgive the same sin seven times over? I'm not sure...You misunderstand, he said - the forgiveness of God is not used *up* by sin it is *generated* by it. Yes, but I meant my forgiveness. He smiled. There is only God's forgiveness.**

In the name of the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...

**“So is the love of God unconditional or not?” That was the question I was asked by a member of the congregation the last time this passage came around in the Lectionary. Asked aggressively, angrily, as if by someone suddenly discovering they'd been sold a pig in a poke. And it is a fair question. We speak freely and frequently of the free gift of God's Grace, and the love that reached out to us while we were still far off to bring us home, we depend on it in fact, but are we in danger of behaving like the unscrupulous sellers of phone and broadband packages, or, I speak from bitter experience, the incautious purchasers of the same, and ignoring the terms and conditions, or at least scrambling over them as hastily uttered afterthoughts.**

**Because here in the Gospel text set for today, there seems to be a pretty clear case of the free gift of Grace coming with strings attached.**

**If you do not forgive, you will not be forgiven.**

**In fact, this can't really be described as small print because it is right there in the middle of one of the *précis* statements of our faith, which we say out loud together pretty much every time we gather.**

**“Our Father who art in Heaven...forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”**

**In the light of Jesus' story of the unmerciful servant, that sounds suspiciously like a conditional clause... Forgive us *in so far as* we forgive others...**

**“So is the love of God unconditional or not?” Well. Without wanting to sound like an unscrupulous salesman. Yes and No.**

**It is clear enough from the first half of this parable that God's forgiveness is undeserved, unmerited, gratuitous – an offer extended to us without us having to fulfil any conditions. The Master does not say to the servant *if* you do the following things *then* I will write off your debts. He simply wipes them out.**

**The problem is not that the grace of God is less gratuitous than we allowed for, but that it is *more* gratuitous than we sometimes can allow.**

**Because it is not just one servant's debts the master seeks to cancel, but *all* the debts, like a year of Jubilee. And that, as we would know from our own experience even if we had not read it in the parable, is fine where we are the debtors, but not so appealing when others are in our debt. In fact, it is we who**

**are guilty of seeking to impose terms and conditions on someone else's contract. We who, like Israel repeatedly in the Old Testament story, want the abundant outpouring of God's grace to be just enough to fill us up, but not so much as to spill over onto everybody else, especially not that person, or those people...**

**And this is where we encounter the condition of the Unconditional Love.**

**If we wish to limit the outpouring of God's Grace (so it only fills our cup and not that of our debtors, our rivals, or our enemies) the only way to achieve that is to switch it off. Or rather since we are not in a position to switch it off, the only way to prevent the love of God overflowing in us so that it blesses others just as abundantly, is to step out of its stream.**

**Every refusal to forgive on our behalf is actually a refusal to pass on the forgiveness – not that we *have* received, past tense – that was in part the servant's error – but that we are continuing to receive, present continuous, that we depend upon receiving; and as such we can only refuse to forgive by deliberately holding ourselves out of the uncontainable stream of forgiveness. Just as the only way to stop breathing out is to stop breathing, the only way to stop passing on the abundance of God's Grace is to stop receiving it.**

**And here is something that gets to the very core of our faith, and of why we do what we do ceremonially to express it.**

**If you were to observe from above, or map in simple diagrams, the actions that unfold at a Eucharist you would see a crowd of figures narrowing to a single elevated point - the altar - and a continual motion to and from that point, a constant ascending and descending, turning toward and away, focussing on and facing facing out from, and you would observe at the very centre of it all a crucial lifting up, and pouring out. If you were able make similar observations of a well in the desert and those dependant on it for water, or of the heart in a body and it's circulatory system, or for that matter of the rhythms of the church year, the self same pattern would emerge. And if you were to pay close attention to the language of these rites, and to the imagery of the scriptures that form them, the theme would be no less apparent. Like a river pouring out continually from the temple, like a living vine with its vital network of branches and its inevitable fruit, like the precious ointment upon the head, running down unto the beard and to the skirts of his clothing, like a spring of living water welling up in the inner places of one who believes, like the day spring streaming forth light into the darkness - this limitless source of grace that is established forever in the death resurrection and ascension of the man Christ Jesus, the last Adam, and the outpouring of His Spirit - which we celebrate and partake in our sacraments - is a living thing.**

**To use the terminology of those unscrupulous salesmen of broadband packages, it is a live feed. Not something we can download, not something subject to limits of availability or capacity, nor something we can own, not something we can or need to keep stored up for an emergency, nor something we whose transmission we control.**

**This abundant life of the new creation is always and only - a live feed streaming. To enter into it is to pass it on.**

**That is the condition of the unconditional love – it cannot be limited, or reserved.**

**The tricky part is recognising when we are trying to do just that, because all too easily we forget that, no man lives unto himself, we forget, or fail to see, like Joseph's brothers at first failed to see, that every human interaction is part of God's interaction with all of humanity, and we act as if there were no master, just our individual transactions, our own accounts to balance. It does not occur to me as I refuse to forgive a wrong, or insist on keeping score of the acts of kindness I've yet to have returned in kind, that I am trying to hoard God's Grace – it just feels like my private affair.**

**Just as when I confess my sins to God I can be like the servant thinking I can settle my account with him, without it having anything to do with my transactions with others.**

**But this condition of unconditional love – is that it can only be all embracing, it cannot be circumscribed, or compartmentalised.**

**The Mass – our celebration of the love of God poured out – is not just me receiving at the altar, but all of us receiving at the altar – I cannot receive the cup, and then say – don't give it to the person next to me, they owe me an apology. And what is more this life giving sacrament of immortality is not just us receiving it at the altar, the Mass is us sent out - to all those not at the altar steps - to all those not in the outer courts, not yet at the threshold - it is us sent out to pass on the overflowing grace of God.**

**No Ite Missa Est. No Mass. That is the Condition of the Sacrament of Unconditional Love.**

**Carrie Fisher wrote that bitterness – refusing to forgive – is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die. And she was not wrong. Receiving forgiveness, by the same token is not just *like* giving saving medicine to another, and being healed ourselves. Our forgiveness *consists* in giving saving medicine to another; our healing in abiding in the stream of a life poured out for the life of the world.**

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