

**A sermon preached by the Reverend Marcus Walker at  
Pusey House on the twenty-second Sunday after  
Trinity 2024.**

Matthew 18:21-35

My object all sublime  
I shall achieve in time—  
To let the punishment fit the crime,  
The punishment fit the crime

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.  
Amen.

When I was a child, and I was still speaking as a child and, most pertinently, thinking as a child, I had, like KoKo in the Mikado, a little list. A list, in this case, made up of all the times my brother offended me – and not one of them would be missed.

Stole my lego: number 35  
Cheated at monopoly: number 36

Slowly, slowly, I edged towards that magic number of seventy seven when, I assured myself, revenge would be mine. Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me?

Imagine my horror when, on going to double-check the seventy-seven number in my mother's Authorized Version, I discovered that there – as here today – the translator had rendered it not seventy-seven but *seventy times seven*. It took me a little while to do the maths, but I realised, with a sinking feeling in my stomach, that, should we accept the Authorized Version as final – which we should – this meant he could rack up 490 offenses before I got the right to administer that well-earned thump I had been anticipating for so long.

And so I gave up. The horizon was just that bit too distant. And, possibly, there was also an appreciation of his considerably

greater athletic prowess which did not suggest that victory in any future battle would necessarily go to the just.

Seven times; seventy-seven times; seventy times seven times? I think the point is well-made. We are not, in fact, called to administer any thump to our brethren, no matter how well deserved.

This is one of Jesus' core teachings. He speaks about this more than any other moral precept in the Gospels. Judge not, lest as ye judge so shall ye be judged. The Pharisee and the Publican – which of the two went down justified? Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us.

As. One of the most important words in the Lord's Prayer. Forgive us *as* we forgive them. Our forgiveness is contingent upon our willingness to forgive. Which makes thumping our brother a lot more dangerous than it looks.

Portia gets this in the *Merchant of Venice*.

The quality of mercy is not strain'd.  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.  
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes  
The thronèd monarch better than his crown.  
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,  
The attribute to awe and majesty  
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;  
But mercy is above this scepter'd sway.  
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings;  
It is an attribute to God Himself.

That's what we're being called to today. To take upon us an attribute of God Himself. To err is human, to forgive divine, said Alexander Pope, and we are called to be divine.

But before we get caught up in a self-satisfied oration of how much we enjoy dispensing the quality of mercy, it is worth noting how hard this runs against human nature. Whether it's child *Me* knowing exactly how many offences my brother had committed against me, or our desire to see eyes taken for eyes and teeth taken for teeth, or the hope that those who have offended against the moral mores of the day shall be thrown out of polite society, we don't actually really like forgiveness. Let's move our minds from stolen lego to criminals and you'll see what I mean. Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, and we jolly well hope he will repay.

In truth we don't like forgiveness personally and we don't like it societally. That we know that we *should* is a tribute to fifteen hundred years of being soaked in Christian ethics. (We may come to see a passion for forgiveness to be the most counter-cultural thing we hold to in a post-Christian age.)

In part that is going to be because for all the warmth of the knowledge that to forgive is divine, and that in showing mercy we share an attribute with God... that actually isn't the point Christ is making today.

It's interesting that earlier I talked of tracking my brother's childhood sins. I could probably list a good few of them now, afterwards at drinks. I wonder, however, how many of mine he could list were he here today... I've never thought to ask if he was, perhaps, counting up to seventy-seven too.

When we want to administer a good thumping on someone who has no doubt earned it seven-fold, we are fierce in judgement of that speck in their eye, while... and you know the rest... ignoring the beam in our own. We are the pharisee in the Temple thanking God that we are not like unto that publican, that tax collector, over there. We are the servant who, having banked the ten thousand talents debt we have been forgiven by our king now turn to extract the hundredpence owed to us by our fellow servants.

As.

Forgive us our trespasses *as* we forgive them that trespass against us.

There's no way round this. Every day we pray for forgiveness contingent on our willingness to forgive. We don't get to pray "forgive us our trespasses regardless of whether we forgive them that trespass against us." We don't get to pray "Forgive us our trespasses except for that creature who did something unforgiveable to me." It's not in the deal.

And I'm not talking here about the easy things. Even the gentiles can do that. It's the really, really, tough things that need our forgiveness. And so do we... need our forgiveness of others.

*Need* it. At a deep and primal level. Not only because by it we have standing to beg for our own, but because without it we are consumed by that sin. By *their* sin. If mercy blesses twice, sin curses twice. It curses him who does it, but it digs deep into the soul of him upon whom it was done – unless washed in the grace, in the blessing, of mercy.

Which is easy to preach and hard to do. It's much easier – and much more enjoyable – to be like the Mikado and work out how to let the punishment fit the crime, the punishment fit the crime.

But what if the punishment has already been administered? What if the crime is not just that malefactor's over there, but mine over here? And that both have been washed away by a grace that is beyond our understanding; an attribute of God himself?

Here is truly an object all sublime. An object all *divine*, really. An object which calls us to an appreciation not of the other's

sins, not even of his humanity, but of that spark of the divine in him which we share by nature of being made in the image and likeness of God. And when we realise that what we do to our brother we are doing unto Christ, it becomes quite impossible to continue counting the offences to seventy times seven, or even to seven. Yes, even when he has stolen your lego.

Amen.