

RISING ABOVE

Readings: Genesis 45:3-11,15; 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50; Luke 6:27-38

F S HS

Today's readings focus on the theme of reconciliation and forgiveness.

I remember back to my days as a Policeman working in Auckland Central Police Station, where some bright spark had written on a black board in the Station Charge Room, where prisoners are processed:

‘To err is human... to forgive is not part of company policy’.

An adulteration of the poet Alexanders Pope's (1688-1744), adage:

‘To err is human, to forgive is divine’.

In our first reading from Genesis 45: 3-11, we heard the last part of the Story of Joseph and his brothers. Most of us know the story well, thanks to Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd-Weber who created ‘Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat’.

In this incredible conclusion to that story, Joseph forgives his brothers for kidnapping him and selling him into slavery.

From the position of a slave, Joseph had risen to a position of power. But he didn't use that power to take revenge. He used his power to heal the relationship between him and his brothers.

He used his power to save his father and his extended family.

In our second lesson, **1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50**, St Paul writes about the power of the resurrection. Through his dying on the cross, Jesus has reconciled the world to God. He has overcome the breach caused by the first man, Adam. Jesus is the new spiritual Adam, and we (believers) are his descendants.

⁴⁷The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. ⁴⁸As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. ⁴⁹Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

One would think that these two things; reconciliation and forgiveness should come as second nature to religious people – especially Jews and Christians, like us.

But we know from experience that forgiving some people, who have become our enemies in the past, is the hardest thing we will ever have to do.

Today's readings are about rising above the ill-feelings we may have and breathing the fresh air of forgiveness. Offering the fresh air of forgiveness.

I can think of at least two people in my lifetime, who I still find hard to forgive. Not members of this parish I'm happy to say, but former colleagues who 'got up my nose' as they say. They were narcissistic and just plain mean, and dishonest, and I feel a sense of revulsion when I think of them (which thank God, is not often). Others who worked with them feel the same way.

Regardless of how I feel, I do my best, and have done my best, to forgive them and put my ill feelings behind me. But that has been very hard to do, no matter how many times I've prayed.

Maybe you have had a similar experience when it should be second nature to forgive. We find forgiveness one of the hardest things we ever have to do.

Then, we look at the converse side of things – and realize that we too need to be forgiven, and that our lives have been far from perfect. How many people have we hurt without realizing it?

We pray that difficult prayer which Jesus gave us: 'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive the sins of others'. We are asking to be forgiven with the same measure of forgiveness that we meter out to our enemies.

We don't have to look very far to see that forgiveness is the last thing on the minds of some people and some nations.

Gaza and Israel. The ongoing Arab Israeli conflicts. The conflict in Myanmar with the Rohingya people. Other conflicts in the African continent. Tensions in Asia between Korea and its neighbours. China and Taiwan. The list goes on...

Now potential problems have now arisen between the USA and Canada, the USA and Mexico. The USA and Greenland over names on a map and who owns what?

This week, as if the news could not get any worse, we are watching the people of the Ukraine being abandoned by the US President who has accused the Ukraine of starting the war with Russia.

In this season of Epiphany (revelation) we have followed the stories of Jesus from the cradle in Bethlehem – to the beginning of his public ministry.

The value of those gospel stories of Jesus is, that he slowly reveals God to us, through his life and teachings.

In today's gospel reading Jesus reveals God as a merciful and a forgiving God.

Not the harsh, punishing God of the Old Testament who demands an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. The God who gives rewards only to those who obey the Law.

'Be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.' Lk 6: 35-36

Jesus revealed a radical new understanding of God, whose goodness is all around us from the day we are born.

A God whose goodness is not only for the righteous, but whose goodness also goes out to the worst sinners.

We just have to have the eyes to see that goodness. Eyes that are given to us by the Holy Spirit.

That is not to say that the whole of the Old Testament was wrong about God.

Jesus' own understanding of God grew out of the Jewish Scriptures. As he grew up, he would've been immersed in the Old Testament.

Jesus' signature 'Law of Love' was actually a composite Law drawn from two different sources within the Jewish Scriptures. Deuteronomy 6:5 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength, and Leviticus 19:18: 'you shall love your neighbour as you love yourself.'

People who study religion as a 'phenomenon' - tell us that religions are not static. They are always in a state of development.

Jesus' understanding of 'who' and 'what' God is - was a radical new development growing out of an old understanding of Yahweh/God, who was essentially a Jewish Tribal God.

Now, God in Jesus' understanding, was a universal God.

Our neighbour is not just someone from our own tribe, or our own race, or our own country - our neighbour is a universal neighbour.

S/he is Ukrainian, American, Russian, African, European, Asian, Polynesian. Our neighbour is Hindu, Muslim and Atheist. All human beings are our neighbours.

When Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan, (Lk 10: 30 – 37) Jesus asked the lawyers and scribes, 'Who was the wounded man's neighbour?'

The lawyer rightly replied: 'The one who showed him mercy'. That is, a foreigner, a man of a different religion, who knew that the right thing to do was to show mercy to another human being.

I don't think it's too much of a stretch to say that each day we experience the mercy of God, in the goodness of life.

There will be times when it's hard to see God's goodness. I have a cousin and an old school friend suffering from cancer. I pray for them each day. One day, I will die of something, but each day we can still appreciate all the good that we have experienced in life.

I've got a coffee mug on my desk in the church office. A present from my daughter which reminds me of my last birthday. I look at the mug and I'm just grateful to have lived this long, when my parents' generation and grandparents lived much shorter lives.

In our Christian beliefs we believe that life goes on even after we die. Life goes on through our whakapapa (descendants). Life goes on as we live and die in the goodness of God. Children of the new Adam.

...be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

PRAYER:

Let us pray in silence that God makes us more Christ-like:
Grant, O God,
that with our hearts contemplating all that is good and true
we may please you by word and deed in the way we live;
through Jesus Christ
who is alive with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Amen.