



September 13th

THE NEW SHOFAR

When we live, we live in the Lord.

When we die, then too we die in the Lord

It is all about the place of the Living, Risen Lord Christ in our lives

The teaching of Jesus here continues with his teaching about the importance of the internal life of the faith community. What are the essential conditions for the faithful work of Church ministry? For Jesus, the answer is clear: The community must be one, must be united. This is a unity outlined so beautifully by Paul when he explored with the Roman Church as to how this can become a reality and not simply an aspiration for a few... *If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.* For him, faithful Christian living grows out of the depth and intimacy of our unity with the **Risen** Christ (that is the meaning of the title "Lord"). It is not just about our striving to imitate the earthly Jesus, though that is clearly the Way we are to live. Paul talks about our day to day engagement with the **Risen** Christ, our collaboration in the ongoing ministry of Jesus in our own lives and in the world. Anything distracting from this collaboration, or limiting our collaborative activities is condemned.

At Judgment time, we will be measured by our generosity in forgiving

The Church community gathered around Christ has been given a powerful tool in its call to reach out to the world: we are, by vocation, a reconciling, forgiving community, one generous in mercy – as God Himself is forgiving and generous in mercy.

Peter helps us understand the significance of this vocation with the question he asks: *How many times must I forgive a fellow community member?* He knows the key part forgiveness plays within the faith community. He has also been made aware of the way Christ's disciples have been called to a higher level of righteousness than that shown by the Pharisees. The Rabbis generally taught the need for the Jews to forgive others just three times. Jesus now takes this covenant expectation to greater heights – not seventy times but seventy-seven times seven. This number is not meant to indicate a specific figure. They do not have to forgive only 490 and are then free to hold back forgiveness. The number seven represents a never-ending amount. Christians are to forgive every time they are asked, every time the opportunity arises.

We must forgive even those we think are unworthy of being forgiven

Jesus now goes on to explain this teaching with a parable. A king is used as the key figure and is meant to be a representative of God. There are two servants. They both stand for all disciples within the community of faith,. One servant comes with an impossibly high debt – a *myriad* of debt. This is clearly hyperbole, with the debt being so high that it could never be repaid, even over many life times. This man pleads with the king, even promising the impossible – *I will repay it! Give me a chance!* Instead of punishing him, the king forgives the debt.

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That forgiven servant then goes out and runs into a fellow servant who owes him an impossibly small amount of money. He is short of cash and asks for time, using the same phrase that the first servant had himself used...*His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.* Mercy, however, was not forthcoming. Unlike the king, he beat this man and threatened him with all kinds of evils if the money was not paid back.

The king, upon hearing what had happened changed his mind and instead of seeing the first servant as a vulnerable man in need, he now refers to him as *an evil servant*. His original decision is now reversed. The wicked servant is thrown into gaol for eternity, a punishment that will include torture and suffering. This, says Jesus in his summary, will be the way in which God deals with those who follow Jesus as disciples – with divine justice.

It is essential that we face the reality of sin in our lives

Jesus (and Matthew) shows a great level of insight into the ways of human communities in this parable. We see an individual acknowledging the great level of his own sins and failings. His levels of debt to God are so large that it would be impossible to repay. He is a sinner – this is the point. He is a sinner who faces his failings and humbly turns to God in a state of great vulnerability and need. God would be well within his rights to reject the plea for mercy because of the terrible nature of this man's sins. He is a man without hope. He is a man who is doomed. He is man whose future now rests on divine mercy alone.

His situation is meant to reflect every human person in the eyes of God. None of us is without sin and every sin is an horrendous sin. We cannot minimise the nature of sin by pretending to ourselves that we are not doing really bad things. All sins – that is, every time we fail to meet the mark expected of us from baptism (the biblical meaning of sin) – disturb our relationship with God and so disturb our relationship with each other.

WARNING: God forgives us to the extent we forgive (all) others

This man represents all believers, every man and woman of faith which is why the parable is so powerful and challenging. To our horror, this man, having only just been forgiven his own ***massive debt*** now turns on a fellow believer with whom he has a ***tiny dispute***. While the first man's debt is too large to count, this second debt is so small it is hardly worthy trying to measure. It is a pittance.

His reaction to this miniscule debt is shocking. He grabs the man; abuses him physically and has him thrown into prison. He refuses to offer forgiveness, mercy, patience or understanding. He has not loved this man. This is key here. Biblical love means forgiving even those we believe do not deserve forgiveness, who are not worthy of being forgiven; those who have harmed us to the point of being beyond forgiveness.

He has not looked upon the man who was in debt to him in the way God had looked on him, a man with an impossibly enormous debt. The expectation was that he would do to his fellow believers all that God had done to him. Nothing less! That is the level of behaviour that has been set for all disciples, for all who live in faith communities. As God forgives the sins we commit against Him, so too we must forgive all of those petty squabbles, misunderstandings and disagreements we have with our brothers and sisters in Christ. We must take that first step. Initiate forgiveness. The built-in warning is as clear as it is blunt: forgive others or run the risk of not being forgiven when we stand in judgment before God's throne.

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