

24TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, September 11th, 2011

a sermon preached by Fr. John-Francis Friendship SCP at S. Andrew's Church, Romford

Romans 14:1-12 and Matthew 18:21-35

INTRODUCTION

I have always been fascinated by tattoos. The way in which people decorate their bodies says so much about them: from declarations of love to the intricacies of oriental tigers, tattoos are a world-wide phenomenon going back thousands of years. Tattoos often declare to the world what we feel about ourselves or think of others. I was on a train yesterday and noticed a guy with Love and Hate on his knuckles. It's not an uncommon tattoo and I've often wondered what it's actually saying.

I have a sense that it may be that we know we are full of love which, given the right circumstances, we will express. Yet we know we are also capable of unleashing hate as well. It's a sort of ying/yang situation. Two powerful, contrary emotions operating within us that we live with and learn how control. Or they make use of us! The energy released by those forces is part of the creative urge of life and, without them, without realising we have the tremendous power of love and hate, we become lifeless and dull. Inside each of us there is a Casanova, a Romeo – a lover who could sweep the world off its feet. A Mother Teresa or a Dalai Lama. Someone whose compassion and mercy might know no bounds. But we also have a Hitler, a Stalin, an Osama Bin Laden: a murderer capable of unleashing terrible violence.

Today, of course, is the tenth anniversary of 9.11, a day when the world saw how hatred can produce violence of staggering and overwhelming proportions. A day which has imprinted itself in our psyche. A day that unleashed a terror which continues to haunt us.

How to make sense of the senseless murder of almost 3000 people? How to understand the mentality of the hijackers and their supporters? Ten years on there still seems an unbridgeable gulf between Islamic extremists and the West. And, as a background to today's anniversary, we have those words to ponder from the gospel: *"Master", said Peter to Jesus, "how often must I forgive my brother when he wrongs me. Seven times?" Jesus answered, "Not seven, I tell you, but seventy times seven."*

FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

That's an outrageous statement, and it's meant to be. For centuries the society in which Jesus lived had been debating the question that still challenges us: can we offer forgiveness to those who perpetrate terrible acts? And, if so, how often? Indeed, should we offer forgiveness or are there circumstances in which there can be no forgiveness? The question is as relevant now as it was then. Is our inevitable hatred for the perpetrators of appallingly violent acts the last word? The mentality of the lynch-mob is only too evident and, whilst we may understand their feelings, somehow we know society cannot function from that basis.

Nor, in a way, is the response: An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. That injunction, taken from the Book of Leviticus in the Old Testament, was meant to limit the punishment meted out by society: to control the natural forces of hatred which, unchecked, can overtake us and, at worst, have led to genocide.

By telling Peter that he must forgive seventy seven times, and then illustrating his point by telling the story of the unjust servant, Jesus is vividly calling his disciples to develop a generosity of heart that could overcome those destructive forces which can easily overwhelm us. The human heart is a strange place, sometimes akin to a jungle, full of savage beasts; sometimes like a perfumed garden with delights past our imaginings. And it's the heart – your heart and mine – which Jesus is so often concerned with. There's nothing wrong with hatred. It's an emotion that is natural and needed. Without hatred we would not be able to react to outrages against humanity. Sometimes we need to realise a hatred for the wrongs that have been done to us in the past. We need to own feelings of hate and anger. But we cannot afford to let them control our lives. Somehow we need to learn to let go of them. And that is where this matter of forgiveness comes in. Because, in a way, forgiveness also releases us from the potential domination of hatred.

THE SACRAMENT OF CONFESSION

Since I came here I have, from time to time, spoken of the place of the Sacrament of Confession in our lives and tried to encourage people to realise its value.

We all sin: no one gets it right all the time and some of us carry burdens of guilt which need to be released. The measure by which we are forgiven is the measure by which we forgive. Love and hate, like war and peace, are always with us. Yet, just as we cannot live in a constant state of war, neither can we live bearing a load of hatred. The Buddhist concept of 'ying and yang' – the constant interplay of opposites – is the reality of life. The teaching of Jesus, and thus Christian Faith, is about how to deal with conflicting the human feelings and emotions that lie in our hearts. We avoid them at our peril. Yet feelings and emotions can mislead us. We need to learn how to respond to some of those powerful emotions, which can destroy both others and ourselves, if given free rein.

CONCLUSION

That graphic story of the Unjust Servant is striking and rather shocking, just like a tattoo can be. It portrays the need to work on our hearts so that our conflicting emotions do not lead us to chaos but enable us to live creatively. The ability to forgive others comes from a true recognition of the anger and hatred that may lie deep within and the power those emotions can exert on our lives. Yet we cannot afford to allow ourselves to be dominated by those feelings. Rather, we need to find a way of letting go of them. And forgiveness, when sought, is a means of letting go. That story – or parable – shows there is anger in the heart of God. Anger at injustice and oppression, especially to the poor and weak. Yet even that anger in the heart of God is overcome, in the end, by mercy and love.

By forgiveness for those who seek that gift. God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. We cannot live with hatred. We can only live with love. That reconciliation which lies at the heart of Christian Faith should be realised in this place and in our lives. Thankfully, for every example of religious hatred around the world, there are also examples of where women and men of faith generously move out towards others with a desire to be reconciled.

When South Africa elected its first black President after years – centuries – of apartheid and oppression, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu created the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation. Throughout the country, men and women were invited to tell their stories of being the victims of injustice, to listen to each other's pain and hurt, to name the anger deep within them – and then to offer forgiveness to their enemies. To own the burden of hatred. The path to justice and peace goes by way of honesty. It also requires us to own our guilt and be prepared to

ask forgiveness just as we need to forgive others for the wrong we may have done them. Ask anyone in AA. Sobriety requires truth and honesty. And forgiveness.

Father, forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.

Amen.