

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

(Matthew 18: 23-35)

(*Poem*, Vol. 3, pp. 21-23, 61-2, Vol. 4, pp. 55-7;
Gospel Vol. 4, pp. 384-7, 433-4, Vol. 6, pp. 457-60;
Notebooks 1943, pp. 196-7)

(Continuing the conversation from last Sunday's Gospel - about the role of the apostles in the future Church - Jesus is talking with His apostles, at a distance from some of His disciples, in the town of Magdala...)

Peter is thoughtful. Jesus notices this, and asks him why. And Peter replies: 'I am thinking of the great duty to which we are destined. And I am afraid of it. I am afraid I cannot accomplish it properly.'

Jesus replies: 'It is a fact that Simon of Jonah (meaning Peter) or James of Alphaeus, or Philip, and so on, would not do it properly. But Peter the priest, James the priest, Philip the priest, or Thomas the priest - will do very well, because they will be acting with Divine Wisdom.'

Peter then says: 'And how many times will we have to forgive our brethren? How many times, if they sin against the priests; and how many if they sin against God? Because, if things will happen then - as they do now - they will certainly sin against us, since they sin against You so many times. Tell me whether I have to forgive always, or a number of times. For instance, seven times, or more?'

And Jesus says: 'I will not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. An endless number. Because the Father of Heaven will also forgive you many times, a great number of times, and you ought to be perfect. So do as He does with you, because you will represent God on the earth. Nay, listen. I will tell you a parable which will help everybody.'

And Jesus - Who was surrounded by the apostles only, in a box thicket - goes towards the disciples, who are respectfully gathered in a nearby open space. Jesus's smile is a like a sign that He is going to speak. And while He walks with long, slow steps - so that in a few moments He covers a good distance without rushing - they are all delighted, and press round Him as children gather round those who make them happy. It is a circle of keen faces, as Jesus leans against a tall tree and begins to speak.

'What I said before, to the people, is to be completed for you, who have been chosen from the people. The apostle, Simon of Jonah, asked Me: "How many times must I forgive? Whom? Why?" I replied to him privately, and I will now repeat My reply, as it is fair that you should know this as well.

Listen to how many times, how and why, you have to forgive. You must forgive as God forgives. He forgives a thousand times, if one sins a thousand times and repents. This is providing He sees that in man, there is no will to sin, no pursuit of what makes one sin, and that sin is only the result of man's weakness. In the case of voluntary persistence in sin, there can be no forgiveness for sins against the Law. But with regard to the grief such sins cause you individually, you are to forgive them. Always forgive those who harm you. Forgive, so that you may be forgiven, because you have also sinned against God and your brothers. Forgiveness opens the Kingdom of Heaven, both to him who is forgiven, and to him who forgives. It is like what happened to a king and his servants.

A king wanted to draw up the accounts with his servants. He called them, one by one, beginning with those who were in the highest positions. There was one who owed the king ten thousand talents. But the servant could not pay back the advance that the king had given him - to build his house, and purchase all kinds of goods - because in actual fact, for many (more or less) justified reasons, he had not made a very diligent use of the money lent to him, for that purpose. The king was angry at his sloth, and at the breaking of his word, and ordered the servant, his wife, children and all his possessions to be sold, until he settled his debt. But the servant threw himself at the king's feet, and weeping, implored the king: "Let me go. Have a little more patience, and I will give you back everything I owe you, to the last penny". The king was moved by so much distress - he was a good king - and not only agreed to his request,

but when he heard that diseases had been the cause of his lack of diligence and failure to pay, he also remitted his debt.

The servant went away happily. But on his way out, he ran into another servant: a poor fellow to whom he had lent one hundred denarii, taken from the ten thousand talents received from the king. As he felt sure of the king's protection, he thought everything was permissible to him, and he seized the unhappy fellow by the throat saying: "Give me what you owe me". In vain the man stooped, weeping, to kiss his feet - imploring: "Have mercy on me, as I have had much bad luck. Have a little patience, and I will pay everything back to you, to the last penny". But the cruel servant sent for militiamen, and had the poor wreck taken to prison, so that he would make up his mind and pay him, or lose his freedom - or his very life.

The friends of the unhappy man came to know about it, and being very upset, they went and told the king and master, who, upon hearing the news, ordered the pitiless servant to be brought before him. And looking at him severely, the king said: "You wicked servant, I helped you the first time, that you might become merciful, that you might become a rich man. Then I helped you by remitting your debt, when you implored me to have patience. You did not have pity on your fellow servant, whilst I, a king, had so much pity on you. Why did you not treat your fellow servant as I treated you?". And in his anger, he handed him over to the jailors, to be kept by them until he paid everything back. And he said: "As he did not have pity on one who owed him very little, while he had so much pity from me who am a king, so I will no longer have pity on him".'

Then Jesus says: 'And that is how My Father will deal with you, if you are pitiless towards your brothers, or if you are more guilty than a believer, after receiving so much from God. Remember, that it is your duty to be more faultless than anybody else. Remember, that God gives you a great treasure in advance, but He wants you to render an account of it. Remember, that no one must be able to grant love and forgiveness like you.

Do not be servants exacting much for yourselves, and giving nothing to those who ask you for help. As you do to others, it will be done to you. And you will be asked to give an account of how other people behave, if they have been led to good or to evil, by your examples. Oh! If you have sanctified people, your glory in Heaven will be really great! But likewise, if you have been corrupters, or only sluggish in sanctifying, you will be severely punished.

I say to you once again: if any of you does not feel like being the victim of his own mission, let him go away. But let him not fail in it, and cause what is destructive to his own and to other people's perfection. And let him have God as his friend, always forgiving your weak brothers from your hearts. Then each of you, who will forgive in this way, will be forgiven by God the Father...'

(Soon afterwards, Jesus is travelling from Bethany to Jericho with four of His apostles, plus some other disciples. It is a mild, sunny day, and the apostles - in the absence of Judas Iscariot - are in a jovial mood. Simon Peter says:)

'It is so lovely, now that we are by ourselves without that... Curse my tongue! I have failed once again in my promise to the Master!... Master? Master?'

'What do you want, Simon?'

'I have spoken ill of Judas, and I had promised You that I would not do it any more. Forgive me.'

'Yes, I do. But try not to do it again.'

'I still have 489 times to be forgiven by You...'

'What are you talking about, brother?' asks Andrew who is obviously and utterly amazed.

And Peter, whose placid countenance is humorously bright... exclaims:

'Don't you remember that He said that we have to forgive seventy times seven. So I am still to be forgiven 489 times, and I must keep an accurate account...'

They all laugh; Jesus cannot help smiling either. But He replies: 'You had better keep count of all the times you are capable of being good, you big boy.'

Peter approaches Jesus, and puts his right arm around Jesus' waist, saying: 'My dear Master! How happy I am to be with You without... Come on, admit it! You are happy, too... And You know what I mean...'

(And in this light-hearted manner, the group continues its journey.)

(While traveling through the night, some time later - in a more serious moment - Peter has reverted to expressing anger with Judas' behaviour, and his brother Andrew, the peacemaker, begs him:)

'Oh! Don't let us think of evil things! The Master does not approve of that. And we have no proof that he did anything wrong.'

But Peter retorts: 'You're not going to tell me that he acts rightly in grieving the Master, in lacking in respect to Him, in causing ill feelings?...'

And Simon the Zealot says: 'Be good, Simon! I can assure you that he is somewhat mad...'

'Well. He may be. But he sins against the kindness of our Lord. If he spat in my face, if he boxed my ears, I would put up with that and offer it to God for his redemption. I have taken it into my head to make every sacrifice. And I bite my tongue, and I run my nails into the palms of my hands - when he plays the fool - in order to control myself. But I cannot forgive him for being bad to our Master. The sin he commits against Him: ...I can't forgive him... If it were only now and again! But he is always at it! I can't get over the anger boiling inside me about one of his quarrels. And then he makes a fresh scene! Once, twice, three times... There is a limit!' Peter is almost shouting, and is gesturing impetuously.

Jesus, Who is about ten metres ahead of them, a white shadow in the night, turns round, and He says:

'There is no limit to love and forgiveness. There is none. Neither in God, nor in the true children of God. As long as there is life, there is no limit.

The only obstacle to the bringing about of forgiveness and love is the impenitent resistance of the sinner. But if he repents, he is always to be forgiven, even if he sinned not once, twice or three times a day, but much more frequently.

You also sin, you want to be forgiven by God, and you go to Him, saying: "I have sinned! Forgive me". Forgiveness is pleasant to you, and it is pleasant to God to forgive. You are not gods. Consequently, the offence given to you by people like yourselves is less grave than that given to God, Who is not like anybody else. Do you not think so? And yet God forgives.

Do likewise, yourselves. Be careful! Watch that your intolerance does not become detrimental to you, by causing God to be intolerant towards you. I have already told you, but I will repeat it once again. Be merciful, in order to have mercy.

No one is so sinless as to be relentless towards a sinner. Look at your own burdens before considering those weighing on the hearts of other people. Remove yours from your souls, and then turn to those of other people to show them: not the severity that condemns, but the love that teaches, and helps us to be freed from evil.

In order to be able to say... "You have sinned against God and against your neighbour", it is necessary not to have sinned - or at least to have made amends for the sin. As servants of God Who forgives repentant souls: in order to be able to say to those who are dejected because they have sinned: "Have faith that God forgives those who repent", you must show so much mercy in forgiving... Why, then, do you not want to console the Father and Me and help us to improve the poor brother who, believe Me, is not happy to be a poor brother?...'

Jesus is anxiously imploring on behalf of the apostle who is so full of faults... And He concludes: 'I am the Great Beggar, and I ask you for the most valuable alms: I ask you to give Me souls. I go about looking for them, but you must help Me... Satisfy the hunger of My Heart, which seeks love, and only finds it in too few people. Because those who do not aim at perfection are like as many loaves of bread of which My spiritual hunger is deprived. Give souls to your Master Who is distressed at not being loved and understood...'

The apostles are moved... They would like to say so many things, but every word seems too mean... They press round the Master, each one wishing to caress Him, to make Him feel that they all love Him.

At last it is the meek Andrew who says: 'Yes, Lord. With patience, silence and sacrifice, the powerful means of conversion, we will give You souls. Also that one... if God helps us...'
And another apostle says: 'Yes, Lord. And You help us with Your prayer.'
Then Jesus replies: 'Yes, friends. And in the meantime let us pray together for your companion who has gone away. "Our Father Who art in Heaven...'
Jesus' perfect voice repeats the words of the Our Father, pronouncing them distinctly and slowly. The others join with Him in a subdued tone. And while praying they move away in the night.

(Jesus says to Maria Valtorta:)

'Whoever loves and forgives much will be forgiven much. Much?, even all, if your forgiveness is absolute.

Don't you think you need God's forgiveness? Yes. In truth I tell you that you all need to be forgiven seventy times seven, and that your God stands with forgiveness for you in his divine hands, waiting for you to deserve it by your mercy. For God wants your goodness.

I tell you that I am the Father's Voice, and I speak in his name. I tell you that I am the one to whom all judgment is submitted by the Father.

It is stated, 'There is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who is converted - than over ten just persons who remain in the Lord'. But I tell you: that there will be threefold, tenfold rejoicing in heaven over one of my children who is able to forgive as I was able; and that such forgiveness brings God's blessing upon the earth. And only I know how much blessing you need, to avert the impending punishments.'