

## **Mercy vs Vengeance**

September 13, 2020, 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Gospel of Matthew 18.21-35  
Fr. John

The first reading today taken from the Old Testament Book of Sirach begins with the words; 'Anger and wrath, these are abominations - yet the sinner holds on to them'.

The original Greek, I am told, actually says it more forcefully. Rather than 'holds on', it says 'embraces them'.

When we embrace something or someone with that kind of passion, it can either give us life or suck the life right out of us. In the case of Jesus' parable about the unforgiving servant, it is unfortunately the latter. For whenever we carry grudges and wallow in vengefulness in order to justify our anger, who are we really hurting?

Yes, we may think that we are somehow punishing the person or the object of our wrath, but ultimately we are really administering a self inflicted wound. A wound which, if left untreated, can lead to a life-threatening situation - both in the physical and the spiritual sense.

The author of Sirach is really telling us that life is too short and too important to be wasted in such a state. And if our earthly life were to end with issues or relationships left unresolved, how would we approach our Creator with all of this 'unfinished business' still on our plate?

Our Catholic tradition has long dealt with that question. [ I would refer you to the article in our parish bulletin in our Spiritual Life and Education section on Purgatory]. It would seem that some kind of final cleansing or purification would be needed to 'tie up the loose ends' before we enter into eternal life in the Kingdom.

I would like to think of this encounter with God in terms of our earthly human experiences - like that of encountering someone we have harmed and coming 'hat in hand' to apologize and seek forgiveness. The purgatory experience is precisely that awkward moment when we don't know what the response will be. Acknowledging our faults and dispelling our egos is not an easy thing to do. It's that moment of uncertainty after which we have bared our soul and submitted to complete vulnerability that the mercy and forgiveness of God comes flooding in. The human embrace that restores a bruised or broken relationship then assures us that 'all's well that ends well.' [To quote the title of a Shakespearian play]

The point of the gospel parable is simply that if God, through Jesus, has already forgiven us, why is it that we cannot share that good news with one another. Why is it that we cannot practice it more with one another? Too many of us have perhaps grown up with the idea that God is out to scrutinize and judge our every fault. [And He would have every right to do so]. But fortunately He has chosen another tact. Rather He is determined to transform us so that we don't become our own worst enemy - because that's what bitterness and vengeance results in.

Yes the task of seeking another's forgiveness is not an easy thing for any of us to do. We all have our egos to overcome and we hate to admit we have been wrong and have been responsible for the hurt that we may have caused another. It's difficult to practice true humility. But being humble does not imply weakness or being a doormat for others to trample on. As someone once said 'a humble person does not think less of themselves, they just think of themselves - less'.

I think as we grow older, we sometime find it hard to accept God's generosity in forgiving others. Like the elder son in the story of the Prodigal Son, or the labourers in the vineyard who had toiled all day in the hot sun, we may feel more entitled to God's favour- [after all we've 'earned it!'] Really??

It's said that as we enter the latter stages of our earthly life we can take one of two paths. We can mellow in our attitudes and become more grateful for God's blessings and more forgiving and understanding of others. Or we can simply grow bitter, resentful and unforgiving - hugging onto past hurts.

May we not take that second path - it's not what God desires for us. For, as St. Paul says, 'Whether we live or whether we die - WE ARE THE LORD'S.'