

Sermon Notes for Trinity XXII

“so likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you” (gospel)

Bien sûr, il me pardonnera; c'est son métier. The quotation is perhaps doubtful; why should a German make a death-bed remark in French? But it *might* be perceptive in a convert from Judaism to notice both the need assumed and the promise offered in Christianity. Yet the promise comes with a price attached.

This parable is not a *general* analysis of how God behaves. It is for Peter, that is for serious believers. It only makes sense because the wicked servant knows from personal experience how his master behaves. That is why he has a duty to apply his knowledge in his own conduct – and still within the system. Both the question and the conclusion are about the “brother”. I doubt that was ever understood literally, but it is about the fellow-believer and *not* everybody. I simply do not know how God treats the many who have never known him. That is not in point here. Rather: “You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities”. (Amos 3.2) If this is the advantage (or disadvantage – see Romans 3) of the Jew, how much more of the Christian? But we cannot become ignorant or unbaptised – only apostate.

The moralist instinctively seeks a universal duty here, but probably wrongly. It is arguable that we have duties of justice to each other, as a part of natural law. Better philosophers than I have believed it. Practical systems of law have to take it for granted. I do not see how generosity is a *duty* in natural law, though it is a commendable attribute. Courts do not enforce it. But the wise believer does not look for get-out clauses. Whether all human beings are morally required *simply because they are human* to be generous to each other is a debatable thesis; but we are concerned with our own duties, both within and without the faith. Other passages make it clear that Christians are obliged to generosity. But here we have a *narrow* question asked and answered. Not about general generosity, but about the response to a (genuine) wrong committed against us by a fellow-believer. A situation which a Christian *might* never encounter, though I suppose that in some sense we have, or at least might think we have. Even Peter thinks that he must forgive seven wrongs – and the snap answer is (in effect) that it is wrong to count. (There is an Old Testament joke here – is it Cain's law or Lamech's that is to be *inverted*? (Gen. 4.15 and 4.24)) The parable which extends that answer does not offer any reward for so doing – only punishment for not doing. And that because while we count we are in some way appealing to a system of justice, that debts must be paid. If you insist on justice in human matters, you expose yourself to receiving it from God – and God's justice is hell. But that is not how God wishes to deal with us. We have to learn to be forgiven. The advantage of the Christian is (at least) to know just that.

We are believers trying to understand our duties and God's threats as well as his promises to us. In this case, the threat is very clear. Forgiveness once received is not a secure possession, as if thereafter justice can be resumed. We cannot trust in our baptism or conversion as if eternal salvation were secured thereby. The prayer book gets the balance right: “Seeing that *this child* is regenerate, let us make our prayers, that *this child* may lead the rest of *his* life according to this beginning.” (Publick baptism, summarised) Pray to hold what you have. All blessings are in that sense conditional, even when conferred in the sacraments. When they are received, we hope the best. But there are many backsliders. We must ever pray for ourselves and for others for the grace to continue. God's justice is hell, but God's purpose is *not* justice. Rather it is that mercy which enables us to be human. We have all offended God (either directly or by wrongs done to others) and so are exposed to justice. But God's purpose is mercy; forgiveness not punishment. He “wishes all men to be saved”. If possible; whether it is always possible we do not know and should not presume.

If we cannot face the narrow obligation here presented, in respect of the fellow-believer, how can we face the broader obligations? I know, of course, that the wounds received within the circle of friendship (even that of the church) are felt as worse because there is betrayal annexed. We had a right to expect better. But surely so did God, concerning our own wrongs done to him!

Jesus is not a teacher of soft options, but of the narrow way and the strait gate. “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us”. No better terms are available. If these are hard, the alternative is worse.