

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Diocesan Sermon - 13th September 2026
The Rev. Dr Jane Lee-Barker – Priest-in-Charge, Parish of Barham NSW

This week we have Jesus' teachings on relationships from within the Christian community. Forgiveness is addressed in this reading. It is amazing how many of us find it difficult to forgive. The Rev. Jim Glennon, an Anglican priest who ran the Healing Service in St Andrew's Anglican Church in Sydney for many years, argued that many of our illnesses can be caused by our incapacity to forgive. When the issue of forgiveness is dealt with, the effect can be a reduction in the physical illness. The grace of Christ, known or otherwise, needs to be active for healing to occur.

For many years I was a member of the Healing Team at St Paul's Cathedral. In that weekly service, which was held on a weeknight and the people always told us what they wanted us to pray for, I noted that whenever the person giving the sermon talked about forgiveness there would be a rush of people wanting to ask for forgiveness for themselves or the capacity to forgive someone else. Sometimes a person might feel that they had not been forgiven by another person or by God. Still others found it very difficult to forgive themselves for something they had done or hadn't done.

Some scholars argue that the heart of the Christian Gospel is forgiveness. This is the forgiveness of God that Jesus taught us about. Here in this passage, therefore, it is interesting to see the way St. Matthew relates such a strong teaching of Jesus. Peter asks how many times he should forgive. The Jewish Law said three times but Peter, knowing Jesus would expect more, asks if it would be as many as seven but Jesus says not seven times but seventy-seven. He then tells them a parable about a man who had been given forgiveness for an enormous debt and the man had been saved from having his wife, children and all of his other possessions sold to pay off the debt - but the same man was completely unable to extend that same debt forgiveness to another and he threw him into prison.

Relating to this parable to the Lord's Prayer, St Matthew adverts to this need to forgive others. "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." With these words Jesus outlines the actions taken against the man who was unable to extend the mercy to others that had been

extended to him. The result was severe. His master handed him over to be tortured until he had paid the debts. So here we have a Justice teaching of the Lord. It is a teaching that goes beyond the mercy of God to the Judgement. It gives us a sense that mercy and forgiveness are very important to our God, yet God is also a God of Justice.

The meaning of the story shifts to us and to our inner lives. "... so my Heavenly Father will also do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." When we allow ourselves to become filled with resentment, anger or despising another, we put ourselves in a prison of our own making. We need the freedom of God to release us and set us free. When we withhold the compassion and mercy shown to us by God, we harm ourselves. Instead of growing in kindness, we nourish the seeds of hatred within us and crowd out the love of God until there is nothing else in our lives.

Forgiveness is not easy and we need to ask God to plant desire for it in our lives. God's strength is made perfect in our weakness and will help us to escape the prison we have constructed out of pain and lead us again into the fullness of life.

God's forgiveness is very important and not to be taken lightly. God's Justice also exists. God's mercy and forgiveness should not be taken for granted.

We can't do this on our own. The grace of Christ comes in here. We can put it all in the hands of Christ and ask for that help.

Let us come before the Lord knowing that we are less than perfect and want his help.

Let us pray,

Loving Lord Jesus, we ask for your help to open our hearts to you. We know that in Christ we are reconciled to you. Guide and help us as we seek to be reconciled to you and to others. Give us the desire and capacity to forgive others.

In Jesus name,
Amen