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17. August 2023

The grace of forgiveness

Mt 18:21-35

Then came Peter unto Jesus and said: Lord, how often shall my brother offend against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times? Jesus saith to him: I say not to thee, till seven times; but till seventy times seven times. Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened to a king, who would take an account of his servants. And when he had begun to take the account, one was brought to him, that owed him ten thousand talents. And as he had not wherewith to pay it, his lord commanded that he should be sold, and his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. But that servant falling down, besought him, saying: Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And the lord of that servant being moved with pity, let him go and forgave him the debt. But when that servant was gone out, he found one of his fellow servants that owed him an hundred pence: and laying hold of him, throttled him, saying: Pay what thou owest. And his fellow servant falling down, besought him, saying: Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he paid the debt. Now his fellow servants seeing what was done, were very much grieved, and they came and told their lord all that was done. Then his lord called him; and said to him: Thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all the debt, because thou besoughtest me: Shouldst not thou then have had compassion also on thy fellow servant, even as I had compassion on thee? And his lord being angry, delivered him to the torturers until he paid all the debt. So also shall my heavenly Father do to you, if you forgive not every one his brother from your hearts.

The Lord can hardly show us more clearly how important forgiveness is to Him! We understand the answer for Peter: he should always be ready to forgive. Never should the heart become so closed that forgiveness can no longer be given!

This is often not easy for a deeply wounded heart. It may have withdrawn into itself and be plagued by the hurt emotions and great hatred may arise against the offender! Then when the message comes that one is invited to grant forgiveness, the inner self resists!

But let us hear the word of the Lord and if the Lord says it, then it must also be possible - at least that one sets out on the path to forgiveness and does not close the heart!

Let us look at the example of the Lord! He Himself suffered terrible injustice with an intensity that we can hardly imagine. He encountered the hatred of the devil, who incited people to torture Him in every possible way, even to the point of crucifixion. But it was not only physical suffering that Jesus suffered. Even worse for Him was the rejection of love and the insults that were inflicted on Him as the Son of God. These are spiritual and also mental sufferings of unimaginable depth, because these sufferings are also connected with the fact that people can reject the love of the Saviour and be eternally lost. What pain!

And yet our Saviour was able to forgive. *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34).* Here we encounter the greatness of the Christian faith, which, in following its Master, asks this readiness to forgive from us.

Through the following parable, Jesus showed Peter that there is a duty of love to forgive and that a great wrong is done if we do not act mercifully and do not forgive the other person's guilt when he or she asks us to.

How can we grow into this readiness to always grant forgiveness?

First of all, in order to understand the parable that the Lord sets before us, it is important that we ourselves live from God's forgiveness. We are the ones who do not have to pay our debt because the Lord is merciful to us. That is the starting point of everything, as it is also echoed in the Lord's Prayer: *"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."*

So we live in God's readiness to reconcile, which is always there for us. It even has its own sacramental form in which God's act of kind forgiveness is granted to us by the priest - when we repent and ask God for pardon.

The ability to forgive again and again is a grace we can ask for. When our heart is closed or in danger of being closed, we call on the Holy Spirit and ask Him to touch our heart. If we do not want to forgive, it can also be that our pride stands in our way and we want

to make the other person wait, so to speak, because we think we are in the position of the stronger.

But what about forgiveness if the other person does not ask for it? It is clear that reconciliation cannot take place, just as God's forgiveness does not happen if we do not ask for it and accept it as His gift! But here too the Lord is our example: He is always ready to forgive, His heart is always open to the sinner, His offer of forgiveness is there.

If, in following the Lord with His grace, we also try to bring our heart into that state which leaves it open to the other person, then we make it easier for the other person to ask for forgiveness. We then stand at the door like the father in the parable of the prodigal son and look out for the one who owes us something (cf. Lk 15:11-21). Perhaps we can even go out to meet him.

But, in order to reach into the whole reconciliation, it needs the request for forgiveness of the debt!