

St Matthew presents Jesus of Nazareth as the New lawgiver of the New Covenant. Hence modelling on the Old Testament tradition that Moses wrote the first five books of Old Testament, commonly called the Torah, St Matthew presents Jesus having five great discourses that he incorporates them into his Gospel.

Chapter 18 forms the 4th of Matthew's great collection of Jesus' sayings (5-7, 10, and 13); there is one more to go (23-25). As mentioned in the last sermon, this is Jesus' discourse on the 'Church'. How the Church should behave outwardly as well as inwardly. But above all, the Church must be shown in its true character. But what is it? The true character of the community of faith is willingness to forgive and to seek reconciliation with the forgiven.

Jesus' answer to Peter's question makes this perfectly plain. Often we hear people say, 'Forgive and forget.' That is what Peter had in mind. After seven times, you probably forget what to forgive. Or there is nothing to forgive. Whereas, in true forgiveness, one is seeking reconciliation at the same time. If there is no reconciliation, the forgiveness is not probably established.

Peter's question and Jesus' reply as well as His Parable of the Two Debtors are quite easy to understand on the surface. But let us try to understand what Jesus really had in mind in response to Peter's question.

First, the last verse implies a command. The Church has been given the command of freedom to forgive. That is to say, now we are doing things different to our old way of living. To forgive means we have been wronged. Being wronged, one suffers. The Church lives in society as a suffering Church. How should the Church treat those who wrong? Before the step of forgiveness, the Church takes on sympathy. Sympathy is to overcome the contempt which it would naturally feel for those who suffer, the unsuccessful in the world whose cause has been evidently disallowed by God. Sympathy sees those who suffer, within or without the Church, as God's servants, representing in their sufferings both the innocence of God whom mankind judges, and the guilt of mankind, whom God judges. Its sympathies are claimed, then, not only for the pure victims of injustice but

for the guilty perpetrators when they incur the recompense of their injustice. The Parable of the Two Debtors indicates any society cannot live without judgment – but it can qualify its judgment by taking the part also of those against whom it acts. Society must be marked by a mercy in judgment. It knows of its judgment to be under the judgment which God made upon the cross, a judgement that was at the same time a redemption. So it is forced to acknowledge the redemption that God has made in the very act of judgment that it performs.

Does that mean that, in the proclamation of the cross, all human judgment is suspended? We find this suggestion in Jesus' teachings of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7.1: 'Judge not, that you be not judged'). This is also the inner meaning of the Parable of the Two Debtors. In the striking story of John 7.53-8.11, the Woman Taken in Adultery, we have this most memorable saying: 'Let the one without sin cast the first stone.' It seems that Jesus advocates a complete abstention from judicial activity. Can a government be without judicial activity? Of course not. A commentator put it very well: 'The church or secular government cannot live without judicial activity. That would be to proclaim the cross without the resurrection. In the light of the resurrection, the cross is seen to be a judgment which is, at the same time and completely, an act of reconciliation: an act of judgment, because it effected a separation between right and wrong and made their opposition clear; an act of reconciliation, because by this judgment the way was opened for the condemned to be included in the vindication of the innocent. What appears to deprive us of all judgment actually restores our confidence. Where this merciful judgment has been shown us, we are bound to show it. We too, to the limited extent that we are able, must point to the redemptive unity of judgment and reconciliation.'

St. Paul says in Romans. 2.1, 'You have no defense, then, whoever you may be, when you sit in judgment – for in judging others you condemn yourself.' To judge, Paul argues, is to set oneself above one's fellow; it is to claim an innocence which one cannot claim, and so to ignore the truth of the universal judgment of God. Yet renouncing our own judgment is simply the respect we owe to God's judgment.

Listen to the word of Jesus, 'do not judge, and you will not be judged,' His shrewd advice is to reach a settlement with our opponent while we are still on the way to court. The prayer he gave to his disciples to be forgiven 'as we have forgiven those who have wronged us,' and his command, 'Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors': all these reinforce the inference that we are not to be the subjects, but the objects of judgment. We shall appear before the throne of God as offenders in need of mercy; and justice itself, as in the Parable of the Two Debtors, requires that those who ask for mercy shall show it.