

**Homily for September 11, 2005
Twenty-fourth Sunday in
Ordinary Time (A)**

By Father Charles Bowes

**Sir 27:30 28:7
Ps 103:1-4, 9-12
Rom 14:7-9
Mt 18:21-35**

We don't have to remain burdened by the chains of an unforgiving heart.

We all know how hard it is to say that we are sorry when we have offended another. But it may be even harder to forgive when we have been offended.

Saint Peter finds Jesus' teaching on community life to be very challenging. He knows that a follower of Jesus can never be a minimalist in matters of charity, justice and even forgiveness. But certainly there must be some limit or some boundary that separates true generosity from merely being taken for a fool. Peter is willing to be magnanimous when it comes to offering forgiveness. He suggests not a meager two or three times, but the wildly extravagant offer of seven times in Matthew chapter eighteen.

Imagine Peter's shock when Jesus corrects his offer of seven times to 77 times. He might as well have said a million times, or better yet, till the end of time. Now this is the scandal of Christian forgiveness.

This does not mean that we must "forgive and forget." No, we must not forget, but that is not in order to exact vengeance...just so that the offense is not repeated.

Jesus tells a story to emphasize his teaching on forgiveness. It insists that what God has forgiven us far outstrips what we are asked to forgive. We do not

easily forgive the human weaknesses of others. Yet that is precisely what we are called to do.

But how does one forgive a pedophile whose behavior robs children of their innocence and undermines their chances for healthy intimacy? How does one forgive a murderer who has snuffed out the life of a loved one? And will the world ever be able to forgive terrorists who blow up innocent people? On this fourth anniversary of the terrorist assault on the World Trade Center in New York and on the Pentagon in Virginia, where are we in the measure of limitless forgiveness Jesus puts forth? On occasion we do hear of heroic individuals who, by the grace of God, have been able to move beyond hatred and vengeance to embrace genuine forgiveness. But most of us cannot claim to be among their number.

Is the exhortation to forgive pointless, then, because it is impossible to achieve? Perhaps for most of us it is an ideal for which we know we need God's help to acquire. If we cannot yet forgive, at least in Holy Communion we can ask God's help to rid our hearts of vengeance, or it will do more harm to us than to those we hate.

We don't have to remain burdened by the chains of an unforgiving heart.

THE HOMILY FOR TODAY'S MASS

Reflections

July 14 & 15th
15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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