

The Kingdom of Heaven will start ...

... to take shape in front of our eyes

A sermon given on the Fifteenth Sunday of Trinity, 17th September 2023 – by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Matthew 18:21-35

This story of Jesus about a man facing overwhelming debt is uncomfortably close to home. The United Kingdom's gross national debt in March stood at two and a half trillion pounds; the national deficit for the first quarter of this year ran at 24 billion pounds (it actually makes the Minster's deficit seem quite manageable); the average UK student debt is now 45,000 pounds; many of us have a mortgage on our house; a hire-purchase agreement on the car; a credit card for the weekly shop; and maybe even a tab behind the bar at the local. My point is that debt is normal: we are used to owing large amounts of money, as a nation and perhaps for most of us as individuals - we couldn't manage without it. But indebtedness isn't just about money. Every time somebody does us a favour we say, 'I owe you one.' And we all of us owe somebody something. In the musical Chicago, there's a whole song (a rather sinister song) sung by the prison warder to the inmates on the theme of reciprocity. And it goes:

There's a lot of favors

I'm prepared to do

You do one for Mama

She'll do one for you

The folks atop the ladder

are the ones the world adores

so boost me up my ladder, kid

and I'll boost you up yours

So what's the one conclusion

I can bring this number to?

When you're good to Mama,

Mama's good to you

More positively, I'm sure there are some veterans here today who on active service have been in situations where you literally owed your life to one of your comrades. How does that make you feel? What obligation does it place you under?

And Jesus tells this story about a man in debt, and he tells it in response to a question from Peter about forgiveness. "Lord" says Peter, *"if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"* Jesus says, *"Not seven times, I tell you, but seven times seventy-seven."* And then he tells a story about this man who owes a fantastic amount to the bank. His credit rating has just been downgraded, so the bank decides to call in the loan and get its money back. And this man hasn't got it. So he puts on his best suit, goes to the bank and says, "Look, it's just a temporary embarrassment; I'm having a few cash flow issues; just give me a bit more time and I can repay you." But the banker says, "No, we want our money now. If you can't pay, we'll take everything you've got, we'll make you bankrupt and you'll be out on the street."

So far, so familiar, because this is the way the world works. If you borrow money, you have to pay it back. And if you don't, you're in big trouble - the loan sharks will send the boys round.

But in Jesus's story, there's a strange twist. When the borrower begs for mercy, the lender who in the story is depicted as a king. This lender, whom everyone expects will be a hard hearted realist, agrees to cancel the debt and write the whole thing off. And there's no explanation. It's just a random act of generosity. And at this point, we start to feel something isn't quite right. This king who lends money isn't behaving like a real money lender at all. He's just written off a debt that would have given Elon Musk sleepless nights. And then in the second half of the story, the relieved borrower comes across a colleague who owes him a comparatively trivial amount. But he refuses to show mercy. And of course, he's perfectly entitled to do that. It's legal and it's what normally happens - debts have to be repaid. But within the terms of the story, we are appalled by the first borrower's refusal to help the second. Because he's been let off such a huge sum, we expect him to let off the smaller sum. We expect his attitude to debt to have been changed by the experience of being released from his debt. And we're shocked and outraged when that isn't the case and he continues to behave as if all debts have to be paid for. I think Jesus is doing something very clever here. He's making us horrified and appalled at our own attitudes. We normally accept there is no such thing as a free lunch, and we know you can't expect to get something for nothing. But in this story, we see that such an attitude can be profoundly wrong.

Jesus is showing us through this parable that we live in two different kingdoms: the kingdom of this world, where everyone has to pay their dues; where we have to justify ourselves and prove ourselves; the world of reciprocity, where I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine. But then there's the kingdom of Heaven, this scandalous kingdom where enormous debts can be cancelled just like that; where sins can be forgiven not once, not seven times, not seventy-seven times, but seven times seventy-seven.

In other words, there's no point trying to keep a tally, you lose count. This kingdom where life is experienced not in terms of debt and obligation, but in terms of generosity and freedom; of mercy, grace and gift; where everything is underwritten by the love of God, which Jesus reveals as unbounded and unlimited and never-ending. Because Jesus himself has broken the ultimate boundary of death when he died on the cross and rose again. In the kingdom of Heaven the difficult question is not 'how can I pay?' so much as 'how can I receive?' How much will my pride, my sense of self-sufficiency, my sense of obligation allow me to accept?

In the story, the first slave was forgiven an enormous debt, but he couldn't take in the reality of that and so it didn't change him. But we, the readers of the story, can see that a different set of rules has come into play. Rules that change the nature of the game. It all gets turned upside down and back to front, and instead of debts being called in, they are forgiven; instead of having to earn your place and the respect of others, you are freely accepted and valued and loved in God's kingdom; and instead of sins being punished, they are forgiven.

The truth is, you and I have all received more than we can repay. We've received the amazing gift of life - how do you repay that? We've received the gift of this extraordinary world (that's what this Gaia installation is all about in the Minster this week), full of beauty, wonder and opportunity - how do we repay the gift of such a home? We've received the gift of human love from family, friends, partners - how do you repay the love, shelter, food and necessities of life we all received in our early years, the gift of education?

And how do you repay the gift of the gospel, the good news of God's love, the gift of his own son, the gift of his spirit, the gift of mercy and grace and new life - how can we repay any of that?

What Jesus is saying is that if we are truly aware of how much has been given to us free, gratis and for nothing, it should change us and make us more generous in our attitudes to one another, not placing us under an obligation, but setting us free.

There's a lovely verse from the Persian poet Hafiz of Shiraz, who says,

*"Even after all this time, the sun never says to the earth, 'You owe me.'
Look what happens with a love like that. It lights the whole sky."*

So as we reflect on God's grace this morning, come into the light; don't try to pay back the sun, just give thanks for it; don't try to pay back God's love and forgiveness, just give thanks for it and try and reflect it to others. Because if we do that, we can light up the whole sky and the kingdom of heaven will start to take shape here in front of our eyes.

Reading Text

Matthew 18:21-35

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' ²² Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. ²³ 'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." ²⁹ Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'