

Reflections on the Gospel

FORGIVENESS BEYOND CALCULATION

In the parable of the Unforgiving Debtor that Jesus tells in response to Peter's question about forgiveness, the debt of 'ten thousand talents' is an utterly fantastic sum: in today's terms, 'billions of dollars'—something that the servant, despite his plea for time, could never hope to repay. He stands to lose absolutely everything—freedom, family, possessions—for his whole life long. The master's generosity in cancelling the debt in effect restores his life.

In comparison, the debt that the servant himself is owed by a fellow servant and which he is violently unwilling to remit, is paltry. The equivalent of a few hundred days' wages. Given time, it could easily be paid off. Hence the wickedness of the servant in not passing on to his fellow even a tiny portion of the immense generosity he had himself received.

The Lord would have Peter and all members of the community understand that they live as people who, through Christ's costly love, have received remission of a debt (the debt of sin) that they could never repay. How inappropriate then an unwillingness to forgive fellow members of the community the 'debts' set up by injury on a much smaller scale.

That said, we know that forgiveness is not something to speak of lightly. For people who have been deeply wronged finding the capacity to forgive may be the task of a lifetime. It cannot simply be willed—still less prescribed, urged or imposed by others who have not shared the loss. It is a grace, an entrance into the mystery of God's own generosity.

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