

Portia's speech when Shylock asks for his literal pound of flesh of Antonio who can't pay his business debt.

The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

Jesus often used stories from the commercial world, including those which likened God or himself to rather shady characters (eg. an unjust judge; a ruthless king). Not all elements of the stories fit neatly into the application, with the result that later on led to a plethora of attempts to accommodate them, but the point is usually at a very basic level of behaviour.

Jesus uses 'debts' in the Lord's prayer to mean sins

Clip from *The Mission*

Mendoza, played by Robert De Niro, was a slave trader and mercenary that the Indians did not trust. He moves along to the mission to the Guaraní to build a mission in their region, above the falls in the border area of Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay. He has enslaved Indians in the past and is bringing up his armour and sword.

Interestingly, about the timing of this passage is that the first time I spoke on it was on the 9th of Sept 2001. Two days before the 9/11 attacks. Watching a bio on George W Bush on SBS this week I discovered that his foreign affairs team was designed to augment his relative experience in military and foreign affairs. The team was made up of Donald Rumsfeld, Gen. Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice and Vice President Dick Cheney. All these people were to favour action over negotiation. This has led us down the seemingly unwinnable 'war against terror', the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Was it a case of retribution?

The 9/11 attacks were a monstrous and barbaric act. They were an attack on a civilian population and caused enormous loss of life and a searing scar of grief in the American psyche. They were also — being done in the name of God — a hideous blasphemy against the character of God. Unfortunately, much of what has been done in response to those attacks has been an equally hideous blasphemy. Many, many times more civilians have been killed in the vengeful response than were killed in the attacks themselves. And increasingly it appears that the response has aided the accomplishment of the terrorist's aims of bankrupting the American economy and spreading fear and distrust among its people. The whole thing is a large scale illustration of the kind of world we live in, a world of sacred debt and exchange where every attack must be repaid and is usually repaid with interest leading to further escalations. A world in which, if there is any concept of forgiveness at all, sees it as a strictly limited commodity which may be extended in a few circumstances, but which, when the limits are breached, is quickly replaced by the business-as-usual of exacting full repayment for every debt.

We are used to our justice system using retribution or payback. Locally that is only one of the purposes that our justice system could play, the others with mercy in mind and more effective at preventing crimes.

Retribution

Ripple effect

Restitution

Rehabilitation

Restoration

Retribution or punishment – other people, including those hurt by the crime, want to get back at the person and see them suffer likewise. This seems to be the purpose of the king’s actions in the parable. Or is Jesus reminding us that forgiveness is important and that being unforgiving is serious and almost a capital crime?

Ripple effect – people who may be tempted to commit similar crimes are deterred by the threat of punishment

Restitution – you’ll stay in gaol until you pay the money or, nowadays, we’ll take it out of your dole, pension or salary

Rehabilitation – changing the person who committed the crime. This could be by education, adopting a new moral code like becoming a Christian, finding secure housing, moving away from former associates.

Restoration – Paul spoke about this last week – where relationships are restored. Restorative justice has worked well in the juvenile justice system where the perpetrator is confronted by the effects of their actions by listening to those affected.

In 1980, the year after the Iranian Revolution, Bahram Dehqani-Tafti, the twenty-four year old son of Margaret and Hassan Dehqani-Tafti was murdered in Tehran. At the time Hassan was Anglican Bishop of Iran.

Years later Margaret was asked how she managed to forgive Bahram’s murderers. She said, “It is just by the grace of God that you can forgive; I have not forgiven them once – forgiveness does not happen once and for ever. I have been forgiving them every day for more than twenty years, as God has forgiven me”.

Most of us don’t have such a dramatic event that calls us to forgive but even small acts of forgiveness can be difficult. In worship and in our daily routines, how do we offer a place to “forgive those who sin against us”? how often do we remember the forgiveness that has been offered to us by those around us and by God through the sacrifice of his son, Jesus?

Another important issue is raised by Paul in Romans 14 and also relates to forgiveness and mercy. How do we regard the person whose skirt is a bit too short, jeans too shabby, they eat the wrong food, they do or don’t care for the environment, those who come in as gay and want a role in the church? Paul’s letter is about understanding and acceptance first rather than condemnation.

Peter’s question to Jesus was based on the assumption that there must be a limit to forgiveness. God’s answer is that there isn’t. Forgiveness and being forgiven is about letting go of control, accepting that debts can never really be squared. We can change the equation but in most circumstances we cannot resolve it quantitatively. Grace given and received is the basis for reconciliation.

How deep the Father’s love for us