

When the rules of “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” first appeared it was not to promote revenge, but to limit it. “If someone is responsible for the loss of your sight in one eye, all that you are allowed to take from them is the same. Just an eye! No limbs, no heads, just and only an eye!”

We humans seem to delight in revenge. Politicians get elected on the promise of harsher punishments and the calls for the return of the death penalty never quite go away.

Jesus says that if someone does you wrong you should forgive them. Well, most of us could do that but not if they kept on wronging us. It is a stretch to think that we could forgive people 3 times. 5 would be saintly. 7 would be beyond reason. Jesus suggests 70 X 7 (= “more than you can keep track of”).

I personally am not good at 70 X 7. I am poor at 7.

Earlier in the Summer I was walking my dogs. They should have been on leash, but they have so much more fun off leash and get better exercise. Suddenly I was approached by a man I had never previously seen in the area who proceeded to give me a long lecture about why I should be keeping the laws, and the risks I was causing and on and on. I don't think I have been addressed like that since I was under 10. The trouble with this slimy, condescending, self-righteous prig was...well he was right! All his points were good, and I am now far more obedient.

But as I walk my dogs, in the intervening weeks, (on leash) I find myself rehearsing cutting replies I could have made. I find things I could have said that would have taken the wind out of his sails and I plot ways of humiliating him as he did me.

The man himself has now become completely unimportant, and I doubt that I could pick him out in a line-up. What is important is that I am carrying around my desire for revenge. My man has probably completely forgotten about this, but I am “nursing a grudge”. Like carrying a sickly child, I carry this sickly desire to get even, or better, ahead.

So on my walks I discuss with God why, precisely, I am being so unforgiving. Why I am choosing grumpiness? Why does this stay with me? Why won't I let it go?

Jesus has the story of the man whose debt is apparently worth around 100 years of wages. It sounds like a gambler's debt, or failed property developer. Anyway this debt is so big and so deep and so tall, there is no way around it. No way at all! His whole world, and that of his family is about to crash horribly.

Jesus says this is an impossible situation. But it is in the nature of God's grace that God will forgive us the big, deep, tall cumulative failure to be saintly in our lives. All the mean, cruel, careless, accidental and stupid things we have done that have left casualties and injuries among our families, friends and strangers, not to mention the starving poor of the Third World who pay for our wealth and comfort in Canada. All of this, God will simply lift from us, and allow us into the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Kingdom of Heaven is that place where the Peace of Christ is present and felt. It is where justice and truth are real and normal. It is where kindness and decency, equality and friendship are the patterns of relationship. It is where we are all at the same level, because we are only “up” there because we were lifted up there by God. No one has any “moral high ground” to look down on others. We do not even try to judge each other or ourselves. God's judgement of “Treated as Innocent because I love you.” is the only one that matters.

Imagine our man, "Buddy", with his 20 maxed-out credit cards, groaning bank loans, overdue personal loans, and so on just being cleared in a moment. Can you imagine what a freedom that would give him and his family? Can you begin to feel his relief and his joy and his utter gratitude to his boss for that gift?

That astonished Joy is a mark of being in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Not five minutes later Buddy meets Joe. Joe owed him a week's worth of wages. Joe has been trying to get out of this debt, he has been avoiding Buddy in the halls and on the sidewalks. He cannot pay it back! Seeing Joe, Buddy has a moment of choice. I think he has a moment of choice. Do you notice the moment?

The choice is to do what he was always planning to do or to do what he has just experienced done to him.

For some time he has been muttering. "Joe owes me. I am so deep in I need that money. But Joe, that slimebag, is avoiding me. When I see him I'm going to say," Well, what Buddy was rehearsing is not the point. All the nonsense I have been rehearsing to say to my dog-worrier is not the point.

The point is will Buddy chose to stay in the Kingdom of Heaven, the world of generosity, undeserved grace, peace, forgiveness given and forgiveness received, the presence of the God of Love all around?

Or will Buddy chose to step straight back into the Hell of anger, vengeance, punishment, judging and being judged, false self-righteousness and the utter absence of God?

Which way do I go when I am reminded of that dressing down I got over the dogs?

I go straight to Hell: He judged me and attacked. I judge him and retaliate, but harder! No love, no hope, no peace. I can feel the anger begin to swell.

I deeply regret how often you can find passages in the Bible that portray God as an angry, punishing judge. They have been a consoling back-up for people who find the teachings of Jesus too hard to follow. "Revenge is sweet" and addictive, like sweet wine, or crack cocaine and it leads you into Hell.

The sweetens of peace, joy and love are deeper, by far better, but lack the immediate "hit" that anger gives. They require the discipline of a disciple, the faith of the faithful, and the trust in God of the trusting heart. Forgiveness isn't about getting even, it is about getting out of Hell. Letting it go in forgiveness is letting go of the claws of the Enemy who is trying to pull you away from God.

So as I walk with my dogs I am praying for God's Grace to unpick the hooks of personal shame which make me angry, and to untie the knots of self-deception which make me judgemental, and to let me roll up my clever come-backs in their dirty, torn mental-packaging and dump them in the garbage along with the dog-poo bag.

I am praying to God to help me to live in the Kingdom of Heaven.

I am praying to Him to help me remember that I am a sinner; forgiven and redeemed.

I am praying to Him to help me remember that I have been bought by his Son at a cost. At a cost I could never pay back.

I have been given a passport and citizenship for a blessed life-style that I could find nowhere else.

I am praying to God to help me to live in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Seventy times seven, or more!....Make your choices wisely.