Tuesday of the Third Week of Lent

Gospel text (*Mt* 18:21-35): Peter approached Jesus and asked him, “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus answered, “I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times.

That is why the Kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the accounting, a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount. Since he had no way of paying it back, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, his children, and all his property, in payment of the debt. At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.’ Moved with compassion the master of that servant let him go and forgave him the loan.

When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount. He seized him and started to choke him, demanding, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ Falling to his knees, his fellow servant begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ But he refused. Instead, he had him put in prison until he paid back the debt. Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were deeply disturbed, and went to their master and reported the whole affair. His master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to. Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?’ Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt. So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart.”

“Moved with compassion the master of that servant let him go and forgave him the loan.”

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Today, the Gospel of Matthew invites us to reflect on the mystery of forgiveness, drawing a parallel between God's way and our own when it comes to forgiving.

Man dares to measure and keep count of his forgiving magnanimity: “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?” (Mt 18:21). Peter thinks seven times is already a lot, or perhaps the maximum we can bear. On closer inspection, Peter still seems splendid when compared to the man in the parable who, upon finding a fellow servant who owed him a hundred denarii, “seized him and started to choke him, demanding, ‘Pay back what you owe’” (Mt 18:28), refusing to listen to his plea and his promise of payment.

When all is said and done, man either refuses to forgive or strictly limits his forgiveness. Truly, no one would say that we have just received from God an infinitely reiterated and limitless forgiveness. The parable says: “Moved with compassion the master of that servant let him go and forgave him the loan” (Mt 18:27). And that was despite the fact that the debt was very large.

But the parable we are discussing emphasizes God's style when it comes to granting forgiveness. After calling his delinquent debtor to order and making him see the seriousness of the situation, he was suddenly moved by his contrite and humble plea: “the servant fell down, did him homage, and said, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.’ Moved with compassion…” (Mt 18:26-27). This episode brings to light what each of us knows from our own experience and with deep gratitude: that God forgives the repentant and converted without limits. The negative and sad ending of the parable, however, does justice and highlights the truth of that other saying of Jesus in Lk 6:38: “For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you.”

Thoughts on Today's Gospel

- “He who forgives and he who is forgiven encounter one another at an essential point, namely the dignity.” (Saint John Paul II)

- “Pardon is the instrument placed into our fragile hands to attain serenity of heart.” (Francis)

- “There is no offense, however serious, that the Church cannot forgive. There is no one, however wicked and guilty, who may not confidently hope for forgiveness, provided his repentance is honest. Christ who died for all men desires that in his Church the gates of forgiveness should always be open to anyone who turns away from sin (Cf. Mt 18:21-22).” (Catechism Of The Catholic Church, Nº 982)