

24th Ordinary Sunday A

Sir 27:30-28:7; Rom 14:7-9; Mt 18:21-35

Graham Staines was an Australian missionary who worked nearly 25 years for the outcast lepers in the State of Orissa in India. He was burned alive one night along with two of his sons while they were sleeping in their Jeep by Hindu fundamentalists on January 23, 1999. What moved me to tears the next day, while watching this horrific news on TV, was the reaction of Graham Staine's wife. She said, "Today I am able to stand before you because I have forgiven the murderers of my husband and children."

God pardons those who pardon others. The mercy we show to others is the amount of mercy we receive from God. In the first reading we hear, "The vengeful will suffer vengeance, for the Lord remembers their sins. Forgive your neighbor's injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven." In the Old Testament, forgiveness needed to be shown only to a neighbor—which meant to a fellow Jew. But in the New Testament, Jesus perfected this command by extending it to every person and every offence. Peter wondered if Jesus' teaching was going too far, and so he asked Jesus how many times one should forgive another—seven times? Jesus said, "Not seven times but 70 times seven," which means forgiveness is unlimited.

We have heroic examples of forgiveness. Pope John Paul II was shot at in 1981. After he recovered, he went to the prison cell of his attempted murderer to tell him that he had forgiven him. In the prayer, "Our Father," Jesus taught us to pray: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Our forgiveness is the best way to attract God's mercy on us. Most of us have been hurt in small or big ways in our lives. It is amazingly true that we hold on to these hurts most of our lives. I have heard a number of persons telling about the hurts they have received 30, 40, 50 years ago. All those years they have been carrying this huge burden, the hurt. Forgiveness is the only way to healing and peace. We just recalled the anniversary of 9/11 a couple of days ago. Do you think the theme of forgiveness has a place? As a nation we need to forgive. Forgiveness, not as a weakness but as the strength of a nation that is deep rooted in Christian values and built on Christian principles. But this forgiveness will not be easy if we as a nation try to get rid of God from all public places because the feeling of a very small minority is hurt. They are the people who do not love the nation.

To forgive one from our heart, we need true faith. The deeper the faith, the easier the forgiveness. When our hearts are turned/directed toward God, forgiveness becomes easy. The other way also is true. When we are able to forgive, our hearts turn toward God. Sulpicius was an elder of the Christian Church in Antioch in the 2nd Century. He refused to offer sacrifice to the Godhead of the emperor, even under torture. So he was led away to be beheaded. Nicephorous was another Christian in the same community. They had quarreled bitterly and had not reconciled. When Sulpicius was on his way to be beheaded, Nicephorous ran up to him and asked his forgiveness. But he Sulpicius refused. When he was about to be beheaded, he denied Christ and accepted to offer sacrifice to the Godhead of the emperor. Seeing that, Nicephorous ran up and took his place and received a martyr's crown. The Christians believed that Sulpicius turned a coward because he refused to forgive.

St. Paul reminds the Christians of Thessalonica: "See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Bear with one another and forgive one another, as the Lord has forgiven you." Forgiveness can turn enemies into friends. One day Mother Teresa found a dying man on the street. He was all skin and bone, covered with sores and filth. She carried this man in her arms to the home for the dying. As she walked past a storefront carrying this man, who apparently looked dead, the shop owner came out and verbally abused her and spat upon her face. He did that because according to Hindu belief, carrying a dead body across a storefront was not good for business. The next day Mother Teresa came back to that shop owner to tell him that she had forgiven him. He was so moved by that that he went on to become the greatest local benefactor of Mother Teresa. Forgiveness can turn enemies into friends.

Let us forgive one another for the Lord has forgiven us in Christ.