

20th August 2017
Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell

11th Sunday of Matthew

Before the reform of the Law it used to be the case that one could imprisoned for debt in this country. Before one could claim to be bankrupt it was possible to end up behind prison bars. It might strike us as illogical: how can you repay your debts if you lack the freedom to earn money! But the Law at that time was fixed upon retribution as the sole purpose of punishment, rather than the other function. Lovers of the writings of Charles Dickens will be familiar, no doubt with the Marshalsea prison in *Little Dorrit* and with poor Mr Pickwick, sent to the Fleets prison, refusing to pay compensation in an unjust case of breach of promise.

It is debt that features in our gospel reading today. Our Lord's parable is told by an interesting literary device. There are here two parallel episodes, each following a similar pattern of events. And the second, reflecting the first, is however, its opposite, turning out to be its negative. It as if a beautiful face were to gaze into a mirror and discover an image of ugliness.

Firstly, we hear of a king's servant – the Greek calls him his slave but this was a term also used for those who served an oriental king – who for some reasons owes the king serious amounts of cash: ten thousand talents; more than any labourer at that time could possibly earn in a lifetime of toil. Why does he owe this money? Has the king lent it? Why? Surely, he knew, it could never be repaid. But the king is settling accounts: perhaps it was money entrusted to the slave, with which he was to trade and invest, like in the other parable of the talents. Who knows?

In such a situation the king has only one option, if he is to get anything back at all: the man and all his family will have to be sold. So the slave pleads for patience, claiming – I don't know how – that

he will repay in time. Then the king does something astonishing: he forgives the debt!

Placed alongside this episode is this servant meeting a fellow slave who, in turn owes him one hundred denarii: a trifling amount in comparison; a labourer could earn that in about one hundred days. But, remember, this man is also a slave. He could earn small amounts of money, here and there, perhaps, but it would take a long time. So the first servant has this man cast into prison. This raises all sorts of interesting matters. Is this second servant or slave also owned or employed by the king or does he belong to someone else. No matter! The point is, the first ignores, or perhaps forgets, how he has been treated by his master, the king and has his fellow servant thrown into prison, anxious to regain what the man owes him. In logical terms, this is correct. If eventually he can regain what he is owed, he will, at least be able to begin repaying his master, the king, those ten thousand talents.

But this is not the world we live in. This is no mere cautionary tale, illustrating that worldly wise and ever so mean-hearted old English proverb: *Never a lender or a borrower be*. Look at the start of this story, its introduction: *'The kingdom of heaven is like...'* This story is not about the world of high finance; it is not actually about the relationships between masters and slaves; it is not about how best to go about the recovery of debts. It is about the kingdom of heaven and how best to describe it.

It is, of course, the other servants who are appalled at the behaviour of the first who had his fellow servant thrown into prison. How could he, who had been shown such grace, be so unmerciful to one who was in debt to him? From the human perspective this offends against our sense of natural justice; it is plainly unfair, so they take their complaint to the king himself.

Without Law and the administration of justice there can be little by way of real civilization. Kings in the past and the governments of today are judged on how well they uphold justice or not. It is only the Law that can prevent the domination of the weak by the selfish and overbearingly powerful. As Our Lord says to Pilate in John's gospel, *he would have no power unless it were given from above*. And St Paul likewise, saw the civil authorities as ministering God's justice in the world of fallen mankind.

But here we have before us a parable; the story is set in the context of Christ's teaching about forgiveness in the Church. Indeed, we live in two societies at once, for not only are we within this realm of Britain but as baptized and redeemed, we stand on the threshold of the kingdom of God. The key to understanding the full importance and meaning of this parable is to realise *we are in the same position as that first servant, the one forgiven his debt of ten thousand talents*.

I have preached many times on the grace of God; that having lost the likeness of our Creator, it is only by the love of the man-befriending God that the distance between us is overcome. Indeed, during these days of the Dormition feast, we celebrate the first among the saints who, through the fullness of grace, became the New Eve, for whom the will of God became her entire will. That divine will, expressed in her words: *Let it be to me according to Thy word*, had brought into this world the One in whose image we are created in order to save us. So it was that, at Our Lady's passing, it was entirely fitting that her son should bring her, fully-redeemed, body and soul, into heaven.

If we stand in such grace, we who have died and risen again in Christ; we who are called in the Liturgy, *the holy, for whom are the holy things*; we who have freedom to partake of the Holy Gifts, of which there is nothing so sacred on earth and not because of any good deed that we have done – if we stand in such grace, we too are

bound to reflect that love of God to our brothers and sisters in Christ. And even beyond the household of faith, that those outside might know the love of God and yes, even to our enemies and those who mistreat us.

For the parable today is very clear: *'So my heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.'* We know this already from natural justice and pray so daily in the Lord's Prayer that we be forgiven as we forgive those indebted to us.

The keeping of accounts, of scores and the indictment of guilt may be the way our sins and offences are dealt with in the affairs of men. But the cure of souls from our Orthodox Christian understanding is best not thought of in terms of numbers, accounts, and columns of figures and of weighting in the balance. The parable is just that, a parable, a comparison, a way of illustrating the situation. Better, by far, to think of our forgiveness not just as a debt we once owed to God – for which of us could ever repay? But rather, this is our healing that re-establishes our relationship and communion with the Divine; a forgiveness that makes us able to pursue, in our ascetic struggle, the recovery of the likeness of God. But having been forgiven, we are told in no uncertain terms that we must reflect the same to those around us; that the light of God's gracious gift should reflect from our lives also, lest if we fail to forgive others, we in turn will find ourselves unworthy of the forgiveness we thought we had and our souls remain in our own debtors prison, darkening the likeness of the image we bear and cut off from the life of grace.