

St Paul's Cathedral, Sale

Ex 14:19-31, Ps 114, Rom 14: 1-14, Matt 18:21-35

“If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times — don’t put your finger near the power-point!”

Something like that was a refrain from my father when I was growing up. I didn’t really learn until I was helping him mix some cement with the petrol-engine concrete mixer. The way to stop the mixer was to strike the spark-plug lead from the spark plug with the spade used to shovel in the sand, stone and cement. I’d seen my father do it many times before. It looked simple enough. “Can I do it?” I asked.

So I grabbed the spade ready for action. The only problem was, the spade was big and I was not so big, so I had my hands on the metal sleeve of the spade head in order to lift it, strike the lead ... and ZAP. The shock made me jump back, tears in my eyes. And my father, hand ruffling my head, quietly said, “And when you play with power points, that’s what can happen and a thousand times worse!” Guess what? I never did play with power points again!

“If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times ...”

“That’s what can happen and a thousand times worse.”

Well, the bean-counters, the enumerators, the unimaginative in the family might have pointed out that in the span of my then 6 years or so, in fact my father had only told me 419 times, give or take a few, not the thousand times he claimed. The scientific calculators might have checked the conversions to make an intervention of fact — that the shock from a power point is only 20 or so times the impact from a spark plug on a petrol engine.

But we recognize the exaggeration don’t we? In the words of one of our conservative politicians recently on the ABC’s Radio National, it’s called “hyper-bowl”. Well we might not quite call it that — rather we’d say “hyperbole”. But I like the idea of “hyper-bowl”. It’s a bit like the American “Superbowl” — a gridiron final that has thousands upon thousands of spectators. “Hyper-bowl” would be even bigger — probably millions of spectators. Well ... there it is again — “hyperbole” — an exaggerated statement designed to reinforce a point. It is not meant to be taken literally. Who cares whether my father had told me a thousand times or not? Certainly if I had been a literalist and reminded him that in fact it was the 419<sup>th</sup> time that he had told me, I might have received some extra curry for my trouble.

And that’s what we have at least twice in our gospel reading this morning — “hyperbowl”, hyperbole. An exaggerated statement designed to reinforce a point, and which is not meant to be taken literally. Yes, you heard it correctly; you heard it here even in a cathedral: the Bible, at least this part of it, is not meant to be taken literally. Do you think that Peter really got the point if he’d said, “Right. I’ve only got 397 more acts of forgiveness to Paul before at least I’m free to really do to him what I’ve always wanted to ... I forgive you (396); I forgive you (395), I forgive you (394).”

Or maybe Peter became a more devious calculator, an ecclesiastical casuist (we have been known to have them in the history of the church). Maybe he decided that Paul

wasn't really a member of the church within his own definition (see Gal 2:11-14). After all, Paul wasn't observing the Jewish food laws and he wasn't requiring circumcision of those Gentile converts of his. How could he be a member of the true church? So, on this line of self-justification, he would be free from even the seven times of forgiveness, let alone the 77 times or 490 times (the Greek word can be translated either way). And as for Judas, well he definitely doesn't count as a member of the church does he? So, on such a line of rationalization, I'm exempted from having to forgive.

And so from the literalist to the casuist, such a respondent demonstrates that he or she has completely missed the point of what the Bible is about, of what Jesus is trying to get Peter — us — to understand. Or perhaps it's even *not* to understand, but rather to practice, to make part of our heart, our attitude, our relating, our mind-set.

If you thought that Jesus' words to Peter in that instance were an exaggeration, there's an even bigger example of hyperbole in the disturbing parable that follows. A king gives a slave 10,000 talents? You're kidding me. A slave owing such an amount? You've got to be joking. Impossible!

We sometimes lose out on these elements in the stories Jesus told because we don't understand what a talent is. It's actually a weight of silver or gold, and only once the weight is determined is the value in money terms of that weight then calculated. Different countries in the ancient world used talents, although the weights varied a lot. For the ancient Greeks, a talent weighed about 26 kilograms; for the Romans it was even more — about 32 kilos. Think about it — ONE talent of gold was roughly 30 kilograms of gold. Our biggest ever gold nugget, known as "The Welcome Stranger", weighed just over 97 kilograms — that is, about 3 to 3 ½ talents. It was so big it had to be cut into three pieces in order for it to be weighed.

Now you do the sums, or try to. There's no way a slave would be given such an amount or owe such an amount. Probably not even the legendary King Midas, let alone Herod, would command such an amount. There's no way a slave could repay such an amount, certainly no way that the sale of a slave, his family and his possessions would come within a bull's roar of such an amount; and no way that being thrown into a debtor's prison could extract that repayment.

Again, if we become literalists or casuists, we miss the point.

For all that Peter's exchange with Jesus is full of an accountant's bread and butter figures, that has nothing to do with it. Forgiveness, mercy cannot be calculated. Keeping an incoming and outgoing's statement of account has nothing to do with forgiveness, with mercy. Forgiveness belongs to another realm altogether. It is not literalist or casuist. As Peter's nemesis, Paul, wrote, "Love does not keep a record of wrongs (1 Cor 13:5).

It is the attitude of heart that Jesus is calling for, the attitude of heart that brought forgiveness and reconciliation to Peter in the face of the debilitating shame of denial and betrayal — an action that atrophied Peter's heart and threatened to turn him into a perpetual, unredeemed literalist and casuist, coldly calculating the figures, doing the

sums, counting up the profits and losses, the debts and repayments — and doing that with people. “Pay me that 100 denarii or to the authorities you go.”

This forgiveness is not blind, not weak, not of the character of a door-mat to be constantly walked over. And so Peter would be faced with his atrophied heart in Jesus’ deceptively simple question, “Simon bar Jona, do you love me?” And that question would probe Peter to a depth where a pulse still flickered, where love still existed in the coals of a passion of discipleship gone terminally cold. And Peter would recognise that it’s not the numbers, it’s the heart. It’s not the literal, it’s the life, the meaning.

And then, perhaps, Peter ... and even we ... would recognise that the whole parable is not meant to be taken literally, casuistically. The God of forgiveness, of love and mercy, is not a punitive tyrant, torturing those who have yet to understand the heart of mercy. The parable is a jolt, as sharp and confronting as a metal spade head on a spark-plug lead, to compel Peter, compel us, to see, feel and respond from the heart. This is what the forgiveness of Jesus did for Peter: it opened his heart to live again, to change, to enter into the warmth of relationship again; it gave him a future and a hope that enabled him to put behind him the cold, calculating literalist.

And so it is for us.