

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	13 September 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Adrian Daffern, <i>Cathedral and Major Church Buildings Officer for the Church of England</i>

It was with a real sense of delight that I received the Dean's invitation to be your preacher this morning. And it was with a real sense of horror that I saw the Gospel reading on which I should preach. How on earth was I to use this Pythonesque parable of mercy and forgiveness – and the lack of it – in combination with 'the Promotion of Choristers, the Admission of a Lay Vicar and Welcome to an Organ Scholar'?

Well, it is a story that speaks a lot about talents, and in celebrating cathedral musicians old and new, perhaps that's worth a mention. Except that the talents of which the parable speaks are not the sort being celebrated here today. The talents in today's gospel are hard cash (a colossal amount) and a pittance – and getting an understanding of the sums involved can help us understand the amounts of mercy and forgiveness involved, and reveal some of the truths of which Jesus is speaking.

So – let's meet the king. He's an odd king, because he seems to lend an awful lot of money to his servants. And the first servant we meet in the story owes him the gigantic sum of ten thousand talents. It's a fool's game to start reckoning what that looks like in pounds, shilling, and pence, but we are talking about an absurd sum. A labourer in Roman-occupied Judea earned around a denarii a day. A talent, a single talent, is the equivalent of about 6000 denarii. In other words, it would take you about 20 years to earn a single

talent. In other words, ten thousand talents is roughly equivalent to 175,000 years of work. Hundreds of billions of quid. It's ridiculous. How could a king have so much spare cash, and what on earth would the circumstances be for a loan of such a sum to a slave?

Jesus is having a lot of fun, and we can only imagine the grin on Peter's face as listens to his master come up with yet another classic. But the grin gives way to Peter's jaw hitting the floor as Jesus tells them that the king lets the slave off the debt. The GDP of the Roman Empire just written off. And then the plot takes an extraordinary twist. It turns out this slave is owed some money himself by another slave – this time a hundred denarii. Three months' work. And the slave who has been forgiven his colossal debt is literally choking the life out of his colleague and, having done so, has him thrown into prison. When the king hears, he is livid, and consigns him to what will amount to a lifetime of suffering and pain.

There's great comedy here. And, remember, this is fiction, a story, it didn't happen. Jesus is telling this parable for a reason. And the reason is where the Gospel text begins, and where it ends. The whole story is told as a result of Peter wanting to know how often he should forgive a fellow-believer, 'another member of the church' in Matthew's perplexing phrase. Seven times? No, says Jesus, seventy-seven. It means infinite. It means always. And at the end of the story we hear what happens if we don't. 'So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart'.

That's not easy to hear. That is a very high bar. Is Jesus really telling me that I can harbour no grudges, desire no revenge, seek no recompense? No karma? Well, yes – that is precisely what he is saying. So what hope is there? Should we just resign ourselves to the same fate as the unforgiving slave?

If we are to take Christ's words at face value (and why not), I think what he is saying is: we can be forgiven anything except not being

forgiving. God is prepared to forgive all the cumulative sins of your entire life (the ten thousand talents): compared to this, whatever grudges you may hold against your fellow men are a pittance. If, receiving such overwhelming generosity from God, you are unable to show the scantest measure of it yourself, that (alone) would be unforgiveable. It's a paradox. But, as my friend the Dean of Southwark is wont to say, for all your theological headaches, take paradox.

But there is not only paradox. There is hope. The forgiveness and mercy that is represented by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is not on loan to us, but is given to us. The financial sums of the parable are absurd, but the cost of love is priceless – and it has been paid. But it should also give us hope of something that can sometimes feel even harder to believe: that we can be forgiven by those we have wronged, or hurt, here on earth; that we can overcome our own pain, and forgive others. (Perhaps even forgive ourselves?) Christ puts these earthly debts, which can feel so enormous, into their true perspective.

I think that our world displays a decided lack of mercy right now. Perhaps it always has in one way or another – after all, Jesus' words were as necessary then as they are now. But we need to hear them.

And, in Jesus' injunction to us, take them to heart. For it is forgiveness from the heart, says Jesus, that counts. Mercy that is not just spoken, but truly meant, and truly displayed. Too many voices are enjoining us to the harsh behaviours of the unforgiving slave. Too many would have us take others by the throat, and cast them out of sight, and mind. It must not be so. And amongst the people of God, it cannot be so.

This cathedral is a vehicle of mercy. Through mission, through music, through worship that brings heaven to earth, mercy is made manifest. This whole building speaks of grace, and peace: through saints old and new, through Piper, Chagall, and Sutherland, through

Duruflé and Howells - this place has a talent for mercy. The challenge set to us is to do likewise.

ADRIAN DAFFERN