

FORGIVING WHAT YOU CAN'T FORGET

Whenever I think of the true meaning and import of forgiveness, one story comes to the fore and sends shivers down my spine each time I recall it.

On the 16th of September 2018, the US Policewoman – Amber Guyger, committed an offence that was beyond all logical explanation. After finishing a 14-hour work shift, she went home, mistakenly got into an apartment which was directly above hers, got into another man's house mistaking it for her own. She saw a guy who was sitting on a couch, watching football, and eating ice cream. Thinking that the guy inside the house must be an intruder, she brought out her official gun, aimed it at the guy and shot him dead. It was only after firing the shot and killing Botham Jean, that Amber Guyger realised, she had entered an innocent man's house and killed him. The case went to court and **on the 3rd of October 2019, Brandt Jean who is the junior brother of the deceased**, shocked the entire world by his moving act of forgiveness to Amber Guyger. Brandt Jean used his **victim-impact statement** to tell the court that even though Ms Guyger killed his brother in cold blood thereby throwing his family in perpetual misery, that if she was truly sorry for what she did, he forgave her and wanted the best for her. After fighting back tears, Brandt Jean told Amber Guyger who had been sentenced to 10 years imprisonment that his main desire was not even for her to go to jail but to give her life to Christ. Brandt proceeded to tell Ms Guyger that he loved her as a person and would not wish anything bad on her. He then asked the judge if he would be permitted to give Ms Guyger a hug; with the judge's permission, Brandt Jean walked over to Ms Guyger and gave her lots of hugs while the court broke down in lots of tears and sobbing. When Brandt Jean was asked why he forgave and gave Ms Guyger a hug, he said he realised his words of forgiveness to her would not be enough, that he needed a concrete gesture to convey that. Hence, hugging her was his personal way of getting that message across to her. Wow!!! A teenager in simple words and gesture taught an aggressor that he would not stoop to her wicked level and forgave her wholeheartedly. This is exactly what the readings of this Sunday is asking us to do.

In today's Gospel, when Peter asked Christ how often he ought to forgive those who hurt him, Christ replied – *Hebdomekontatis Hepta*. While some biblical scholars take it to mean 77 times, others take it to be 70 x 7. Whatever school of thought you go with, there is one pertinent thing to bear in mind. In ancient Greece, the number 7 represents perfection, completion, and efficiency. By using the number 7, Christ admonishes us to forgive countless times no matter how deep the hurt or wrongdoing might be. The Greek word used there for forgiveness or to forgive is *Aphiemi* meaning to send away/expire/abandon/cancel and to give up a thing to a person. Yes, forgiveness entails giving up the hurt others have inflicted on us to be free. Although this sounds so simple, it is the hardest thing to do as a human being. All human beings are wired to protect their honour and prestige and if anyone crosses that line, we are wired to retaliate and get back at that person. However, the way of Christ is counter natural which is to forgive all hurts and wrongs. Today's First Reading from the book of Ecclesiasticus Chapter 27, tells us why forgiveness is important by reminding us that anyone who exacts vengeance will experience the vengeance of the Lord and that if we forgive our neighbours the

hurt they inflict on us, when you pray, our sins will be forgiven by the Lord. When we practice this in our lives, we would be able to influence others around us whether we are alive or dead as St Paul reminds us in today's Second Reading from his letter to the Romans Chapter 14.

My friends, forgiveness is the hardest part of being Christians but equally the most holistic part of it because forgiveness goes against all the natural emotions of our being. This was exactly what Lysa Terkeurst stated in her #1 New York Times Bestseller – **FORGIVING WHAT YOU CAN'T FORGET**. In this book, Lysa exposed the subjects of hurts, wrongdoings, abuse, and forgiveness. According to Lysa, hurts, wrongdoings and abuse are experiences all of us have passed through at some point in our lives; they are crippling experiences and for many of us, their scars are always apparent. For Lysa, no matter the experience we might have borne, we have two options: To Forgive and let go, or To Harbour resentment and plot our revenge. According to Lysa, if we do not choose to forgive, we hold ourselves in the prison of perpetual anger even when those who hurt us might not know or have forgotten what they did. However, when we forgive, we are not exonerating those who hurt us, we are simply setting ourselves free from our prisons and handing the entire situation to God to be the judge. Think of all the times we have nursed anger in our hearts against the wrongs others inflicted on us; we would realise that we are the ones who could not sleep nor concentrate properly. However, when we let go, our peace of mind is restored, and we are whole again. We forgive the oppressor not because he/she deserves it but because we want to free ourselves from the prison where we had locked ourselves. Many have forgiven their oppressors and became their oppressors' saviour.

Like Botham Jean above, we have all been hurt by our nearest and dearest; let us choose the way of forgiveness instead of revenge. If we do not forgive, how can we boldly recite 'THE OUR FATHER' and ask God to forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Forgiveness is the hardest part of being Christians but equally the most holistic part of it. Let us remember Psalm 130:3 – **If you O Lord should mark our guilt, Lord, who would survive**. We have all been forgiven so much, let us forgive countlessly. As Lewis B Smedes stated: **"To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you."**

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Homily for the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A (17/09/2023)