

13 September 2026 – 24th Sunday ‘A’

Sirach 27:30–28:7; Romans 14:7–9; Matthew 18:21–35

Homily

This business of ‘seven times’ and ‘seventy times seven’ is a very old story. It dates back to the time of Cain and Abel. After Abel’s murder, according to the account in Genesis, God banished Cain from Paradise. Cain then said to God: ‘If you drive me out today from this land, I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.’ And the Lord replied: ‘Well then! If anyone kills Cain, he shall be avenged sevenfold.’ And, a few generations later, Lamech, Cain’s grandson, took two wives, Ada and Zilla, and said to them, rather defiantly: ‘Ada and Zilla, listen to my voice! Wives of Lamech, lend an ear to my words! Yes, I have killed a man for a wound, a child for a bruise. Yes, Cain will be avenged sevenfold, but Lamech seventy-sevenfold.’

We can therefore immediately see just how far we have come from those early days of humanity to the time of Jesus, and the stark contrast between the teaching of the Old Testament and that of Jesus. Instead of taking vengeance seven times or seventy-seven times, the emphasis is now on forgiving not just seven times, but seventy times seven.

I did indeed speak of ‘the journey we have made’. Indeed, the concept of forgiveness appears very early on in the Old Testament – as early as the Book of Exodus, which speaks of the Lord as a ‘God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger and full of love’ (Exodus 34:6–7), as well as in the teachings of the great Prophets. And then there is this beautiful passage from Ben Sirach the Wise, which we read as the first reading. His book, known today as the Book of Sirach, and formerly known rather as Ecclesiasticus, was written in the second century BC and contains profound theological insights. The author describes the sinner as one who persists in resentment and anger, and reminds him that if he takes revenge, he will be the object of divine vengeance, whereas if he forgives, he may count on God’s forgiveness.

People in ancient times readily attributed symbolic significance to numbers, something to which we are less attuned. In biblical culture, the number seven signified completeness. In Christ’s time, the rabbinical schools held differing views on the number of times one ought to forgive someone who had wronged them. The most generous among them taught that one should forgive up to four times. When Peter asked Jesus whether one ought to forgive up to seven times, he was in fact

asking whether one ought to forgive always (seven being the symbol of completeness). And when Jesus replied that one must forgive seventy times seven, he was simply affirming that one must absolutely always forgive.

And to illustrate his teaching, Jesus tells this parable of the man to whom the master had forgiven an enormous debt and who immediately attacks someone who owed him a paltry sum.

The teaching of the parables is so clear that they almost never require explanation. This one requires less explanation than any other. The teaching could not be clearer. God's willingness to forgive is boundless, infinite. We alone can limit it by refusing it. And the best way to refuse God's forgiveness is to refuse to identify with Him, by refusing to forgive our brothers and sisters.

Whilst forgiveness is difficult, it is also demanding. It is quite different from an amnesty, such as those sometimes granted by certain heads of state, which are often nothing more than a form of self-pardon. Such amnesties often merely confer impunity for crimes that call not for vengeance but for punishment, and they prevent justice from being done for the victims of these crimes. True forgiveness is quite different. It restores bonds of love between brothers and sisters who recognise one another as children of the same Father.

Let us ask our Father, the God of forgiveness and tenderness, to instil in each of our hearts—just as in relations between peoples and between groups within peoples—this evangelical attitude of forgiveness.

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