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24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Date: Sunday, September 17, 2017 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** A
First Reading: Sirach 27:30–28
Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 103:1–4, 9–12 | **Response:** Psalm 103:8a
Second Reading: Romans 14:7–9
Gospel Acclamation: John 13:34
Gospel Reading: Matthew 18:21–35
Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein **in the** Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa**.**

I'd like to thank the children and the catechists in our parish who teach our children every week. They take great care in preparing the children for the sacraments and as a parish we are very grateful to them.

Quite often in Jesus' parables there is a hidden meaning – but in today's story it really is a message that children can understand, and quite often, we as adults can learn from them. I think today the children have done a wonderful job in explaining it. The logic is simple – if we refuse to forgive, how can we expect God to forgive us. We pray it every day in the Our Father… 'forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us'. It is one of the most basic lessons of Christianity – indeed of most faiths. But it is also one of the hardest.

We all know the experience of being angry with someone. In our first reading Sirach talks of us harbouring anger… this is the anger that is nourished, treasured, and cultivated. It drives out all peace in our lives and ends up poisoning our life. It can quite often be for the most stupid reason – but over time the anger and resentment can build and slowly choke our life. The only antidote to anger is forgiveness – and quite often the only obstacle to forgiving someone is admitting that we are angry and allowing ourselves to give up our anger.

In our second reading we hear from St Paul who tells us that we are meant to live not for ourselves but for the Lord. If the Lord is the Lord of Love and Mercy – the way and the truth to life, then we owe it to ourselves to love. Love is the greatest sign and guarantor of a free person. We all know this from observing Nelson Mandela who was able to forgive and love because he was free interiorly. He did not allow himself to be imprisoned by anger. He was able to forgive.

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I'd like to just leave you with a brief image of forgiveness that I heard from NT Writght.

As Christians we must see forgiveness like the air we breathe and store in our lungs. There's only room for us to inhale the next lungful when we've just breathed out the previous one. If we insist on withholding it, refusing to give someone else the kiss of life they may desperately need, we won't be able to take any more in ourself, and we will suffocate very quickly. Whatever the spiritual, moral and emotional equivalent of the lungs may be, they are either open or closed, living or dying – the Old Testament often uses the metaphor of a hardened heart. If it's open, able and willing to forgive others, it will also be open to receive God's love and forgiveness. But if it's locked up to the one, it will be locked up to the other. Peter's question and Jesus' answer in today's Gospel say it all. If we're still counting how many times we've forgiven someone, we're not really forgiving them at all, but simply postponing revenge. 'Seventy times seven' is a typical bit of Jesus' teasing. What he means, of course, is 'don't even think about counting; just do it'. We must forgive like we breathe – because if we don't we suffocate ourselves.

Let us pray today for the grace to forgive. And if we can't bring ourselves to forgive just yet – let us pray for the grace to want to forgive. God always welcomes us where we are, as we are – even if that place is one of unforgiveness. Let us pray today that God's mercy might soften our hearts, and that we might share the joy of God's mercy with others.

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