

September 17, 2017 The Unmerciful Servant Homily: In the summer of 2016, an eighty-five year old French priest, Jacques Hamel, was brutally murdered by Islamic State terrorists while he was celebrating mass in his parish church. The small number of worshipers watched in horror as the utterly defenseless man was martyred because of his Catholic faith. The worldwide media picked up the story and shortly thereafter made public the news of the priest's death. Soon after the murder the bishop of the diocese in which the murder took place, Dominique Lebrun, received a phone call from the then President of France, Francois Hollande, who was greatly alarmed by the priest's tragic death. Fearful of civil unrest between the nation's Christians and Muslims, he requested that the Bishop speak with him first before making any public statements. "What will you say?" asked the worried President. "I am going to pray and ask God to help me love my enemies", replied the Bishop. A few months later, Mr. Hollande conceded that the bishop's gentle words stunned him. He did not insist on retaliation, nor did he openly call for avenging the death of a fellow cleric. His tone of forgiveness and reconciliation was, from the President's point of view, instrumental in restoring calm to the unnerved people of the country. It is worth noting that many Muslims condemned the murder in the strongest terms and even attended the funeral mass of the slain priest.

In the parable of the unforgiving servant, today's gospel reading (Mt.18:21-35), the king's incredible mercy stands in stark contrast to the servant's mercilessness. After the king forgives the enormous debt of his servant, he hears that the very same servant had failed to show mercy to his fellow servants whose debt was much smaller.

Jesus calls his disciples to a very high standard of mercy. They will receive mercy only if they show mercy to others. This teaching runs throughout Matthew's gospel. Recall one of the Beatitudes in his memorable Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy". (Mt.5:7) And the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors". (Mt.6:12) Christ warns his disciples that if they do not forgive others, neither will their Father forgive their transgressions. (Mt.6:15) The only reason a Christian can forgive, have mercy, be compassionate, perform works of kindness is that God has done those things for him first. In the very act of having mercy on the Christian, he has communicated to him the ability to do likewise. Still, forgiveness is a gift we frequently withhold to those most in need of it. It always represents a significant challenge for any person who has been wounded by another. The English writer, G.K. Chesterton once remarked, "I find it easy to love Eskimos because I have never seen an Eskimo. But I find it hard to love my neighbor who plays the piano over my head late at night." Yet time and again we hear of extraordinary acts of generosity and forgiveness, singular moments of grace for the human community.

In the recent past, a deranged White Supremacist entered a predominantly African-American Church in a South Carolina town and murdered several of the congregants while they were praying. It was a shocking display of willful hatred and senseless violence. One would naturally expect those who survived the attack to seek revenge on the assailant, a bitter and troubled malcontent. But many members of the congregation spoke glowingly of Christ's call to forgive others for their evil deeds. One woman spoke simply and movingly of her faith in Christ's words of mercy. "Jesus tells me I must forgive my brother who wrongs me. It isn't easy but if I am a true disciple I must accept his teaching".

Forgiving others is one of the distinguishing marks of a true disciple of Christ and sets him apart from those who refuse to show mercy and persist in holding a grudge. We cannot expect forgiveness on a large scale between peoples and races... so sorely needed today... if we fail to practice it on a small scale in our lives. With the help of God all things are possible... even forgiving from our hearts all who offend or wound us!

Amen!