

## Remembrance Sunday 13 Nov 2022

Revd Andrew Gosler

BCP 08:00: 22nd Sunday after Trinity Philip 1.3—11, Matt 18.21—end

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer **Amen**

Berlin is the Nightingale capital of the world. Whereas in the UK this is a bird of conservation concern, in Berlin it is abundant, and with more than 1500 breeding pairs, its parks and gardens echo in May with the sweet song of this virtuoso songster. A year before the pandemic struck, I experienced the joy of breakfast in a park in Berlin one Sunday morning to the melody of two Nightingales and a Melodious Warbler. And as joggers trotted past, and dog walkers exercised their pets, Nightingales hopped out on the lawn in search of food. My hosts, Johannes Vogel and Sarah Darwin, had thoughtfully checked if I was happy to miss worship on a Sunday morning for this. I replied that I was in no doubt that this *was* worship, I had to be here.

Today is Remembrance Sunday, a time for deep reflection, and for many of us a time of conflicting emotions as a sense of loss and sacrifice collides with a discomfiting sense of thanks to those who gave their todays for our tomorrows. I say discomfiting because this tapestry of emotions may be woven through with some threads of unease for a debt we feel unable to repay. Perhaps then, we are discomfited also by a sense of guilt for words said or unsaid, things done or undone; for sometimes, the hardest reconciliation is with ourselves.

Into this turmoil of emotions, today, by God's grace, the Book of Common Prayer invites us to reflect on one of Jesus's great, and most challenging parables: in Matthew 18, on forgiveness. How many times, Peter asks, should I forgive my brother; seven times? That may have seemed to Peter a reasonable

and rational kind of number, as well as a number of sacred significance. But Jesus replies, not seven times, but 70 times 7, in other words, don't count the times, don't rationalise, objectify, or legalise the terms of your forgiveness; just forgive. And he goes on to teach the parable of the wicked servant.

For years I wrestled with this. Although many years before my birth, half my family were lost in Amsterdam in 1942, and my grandfather's own sister perished in the concentration camp of Bergen Belsen. I had little problem, in concept at least, with 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us', but how do I forgive the holocaust? Is it even my right to forgive such evils inflicted on others, or is it a vanity to think that is even within my gift. A turning point for me came when I discovered the writings of Eva Kor, an Auschwitz survivor, who very publicly forgave the Nazis. In a speech she made to the United Nations in 2001, she said:

"Forgiveness is more than just letting go. It is proactive rather than passive. We become victims involuntarily, when a person or entity with power takes away our power to use our mind or body or both. Something was done to us that put us in a position of feeling powerless. Thus, the conscious choice to forgive provides healing, liberation, and reclamation of this lost power."

She went on to say

"Forgiveness in my opinion brings serenity, healing, respect, freedom, peace, and love. Let's see what the opposition brings: pain, anger, revenge, and war. Forgiveness provides the choice to live in peace and be happy instead. Let's work together to heal the world through forgiveness. Not bullets, not bombs. Just forgiveness.

Three elements form the core of Jesus's parable of response to Peter. They are debt, compassion and forgiveness. But as Christians, I believe how we understand the debt is the key to unlocking the wisdom of this parable.

Conceived as a debt, it is the price we all must pay for life, for there can be no life without death. So Jesus is saying have compassion for your brother, for he too must pay this debt, yet through the saving grace of God in Christ, that debt has been paid. Here is the existential ground for forgiveness, which recognises that, as Eva Kor said “Anger is a seed for war; Forgiveness is a seed for peace.”

As we honour the lives of service men and women whose sacrifice bought our freedom, let us remember also those real, tangible, and inspirational expressions of post-war reconciliation that speak of God’s healing power: of the International Community of the Cross of Nails, which links Coventry Cathedral with the rebuilding of the Dresden Frauenkirche; the words of Eva Kor; and the Nightingales of Berlin.

In 1924, just two years after its founding, the BBC embarked on the first ever live outside broadcast. The famous cellist Beatrice Harrison, who liked to practice in her garden on a summer’s evening, had elicited a response from a Nightingale. The first ever outside broadcast was to be of the cellist and Nightingale duetting in harmony. It was so popular with listeners that they repeated the event every spring for years.

On 19 May 1942, BBC engineers had set up their recording equipment as usual for one of these broadcasts when 197 RAF Wellington and Lancaster bombers on their way to Mannheim could be heard approaching in the distance. A sharp-witted engineer at Crystal Palace pulled the plug on the broadcast, claiming a technical fault rather than alerting the Germans to the impending raid. But they continued to record. They never repeated the Harrison-Nightingale broadcasts after that year, although the BBC released the full 1942 recording many years later, and we can hear it through the internet.

It is an extraordinary recording, as the sound of the bombers builds it comes to the point of drowning out cellist and nightingale, but as it recedes into the

distance, the sound of peace, human and nature in harmony, is restored. It is a metaphor made tangible for me as I sat in that park with Sarah and Johannes listening to the Nightingale's sweet music, for the secret of Berlin's unique and extraordinary Nightingale density lies in the history of the bomb sites in East Berlin. Here, these sites remained unrestored until after reunification in the 1990s. They were reclaimed by nature and occupied by Nightingales, whose song presents itself to us now as a tangible sign of God's reconciliation with creation.

**Amen**