

Ecclesiastes says, “There is no new thing under the sun.”

Veganism may sound modern, yet something suspiciously like it appears in our reading of Romans. Some Christians in Rome ate meat; others ate only vegetables. The meat eaters judged the vegetarians as weak, while the vegetarians regarded the meat eaters with spiritual suspicion. Two thousand years ago, the Church was arguing about food.

The disagreement went deeper than diet. Each group believed it was honouring God, and each judged those who saw things differently. Words were spoken, feelings were hurt, and perhaps some of those Christians needed to forgive one another.

Paul tells them, “Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions.” Welcome: make room for one another and remember that God has already welcomed the person who sees things differently from us. That may require us to give up our judgement, acknowledge the hurt we have caused and forgive the hurt we have received.

I remember one day walking the Camino de Compostela. It had been raining all day; I was walking alone, and by the afternoon I was feeling tired and quite emotional. Around two o’clock, I came to a little hamlet. Through the rain, I could make out a collection of walking sticks outside a small bar, so I knew there must be other pilgrims inside.

When I opened the door, everyone cheered.

I recognised a couple of people who I’d met earlier along the Camino, while others were strangers to me. At that moment it made no difference. I had walked through the door wet, weary and alone, and suddenly I was among fellow pilgrims.

The rain was still falling, but that welcome changed everything. It said, “There is a place for you here. You don’t have to complete the journey alone.”

We experienced something of that after our Patronal Festival last Sunday, when we gathered for our bring-and-share lunch. People arrived with different dishes; we made room around the tables, and together there was more than enough for everyone. We shall do the same again at Harvest, so perhaps this is also a gentle warning to begin thinking about what you might bring!

A bring-and-share lunch works because everyone brings something different and everyone is welcomed at the same table. The Church is like that too. We bring different histories, temperaments, wounds and ways of expressing faith. Some arrive cheerfully; others come as I did on the Camino—tired, emotional and in need of company. Christ gathers us all and says, “There is a place for you here.”

But living together means that we sometimes misunderstand, disappoint and wound one another. Welcome then requires the humility to seek forgiveness and the grace to offer it. Peter asks the question I’m sure many of us have asked, even if only silently.

“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?” Peter suggests seven times. Seven is the perfect number, and he probably thinks he is being generous. Most of us might agree. After the seventh time, surely, we have done enough.

Jesus answers, “Seventy-seven times.” In other words, stop counting, so that forgiveness becomes part of the way we live.

That sounds inspiring until someone actually needs forgiving. C. S. Lewis, the Christian writer and Oxford scholar best known for *The Chronicles of Narnia*, put it honestly:

“Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.” Most of us know what he means. The word forgiveness is used easily and readily in church. It becomes a much harder word when the person who betrayed us, lied about us, never apologised, or changed our life is standing in front of us.

Jesus answers Peter with a parable. A servant owes his king ten thousand talents, an absurd sum amounting to thousands of years of wages. He begs for time and promises repayment, although both he and the king know that’s impossible. The king is moved with compassion and cancels the whole debt. The servant receives his freedom and his life back.

The servant then goes out and finds a fellow servant who owes him a much smaller amount. That debt is real; it amounts to several months’ wages. Yet compared with the debt just cancelled, it is tiny. He grabs the man by the throat and demands payment.

The tragedy is that mercy changes the servant’s situation but not his heart. His debt is wiped away, but he keeps account of what another owes him. He has been welcomed by mercy without learning to welcome another into mercy.

Lewis later expressed the same connection between mercy received and mercy given:

“To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.” That is demanding.

Forgiveness begins when the excuses have run out. It faces what happened truthfully: someone did wrong, someone was hurt, and a debt remains.

So how do we forgive?

Well, we begin by being honest with God, saying, “What happened was wrong. I am angry. I feel betrayed. I am still carrying this, and I don’t know how to put it down.”

The Psalms give us permission to pray like that. They contain anger, bewilderment, grief and even vengeance. God would rather receive our honest pain than our disguised resentment.

Having told the truth, we ask God for the grace to begin the process of forgiveness. Perhaps the most honest prayer is, “Lord, I want to want to forgive.” That small prayer opens a door for grace to enter.

Forgiveness is seldom a single heroic decision. Lewis once described praying for years before realising that forgiveness had quietly taken root in him. It’s reassuring that forgiveness may take time, but God is patient with us as his grace works within us.

Perhaps that is part of forgiving seventy-seven times. We may release the same injury on Monday, remember it on Wednesday, and place it back into God’s hands on Friday. Gradually it loosens its hold, and we realise we are no longer holding it.

This is why forgiveness also means handing revenge over to God. We may need to pray, “I will not make this person’s punishment the centre of my life. I entrust them to your justice and your mercy.”

That prayer may not change our feelings at once. Anger and hurt cannot be switched off. But we can stop feeding them by replaying the argument, rehearsing the accusation, and trying the case again in our minds.

Nor does handing revenge to God mean pretending the harm was small or returning to danger. Forgiveness does not silence the person who has been hurt, erase consequences, or prevent us from seeking justice. Sometimes Christian love requires firm boundaries to protect ourselves

or others. Forgiveness is not reconciliation. We can release revenge in our hearts, but reconciliation requires truth, repentance, change and rebuilt trust. We may forgive while recognising that the relationship cannot yet be safely restored.

We see in our world how grievances pass from one generation to the next. Each injury fuelling another. Reconciliation and peace requires truth, justice and the resolve to end the cycle. The same pattern can grip families, friendships and churches. Repeated wounds become stories that define others—and sometimes us.

Forgiveness cannot change the past, but it can loosen its hold on our future and gives reconciliation a chance.

Forgiveness is, I think, like a pilgrimage. We find ourselves walking through pain, anger and loneliness, wondering whether we are getting anywhere. Then, through prayer, grace or another person's kindness, we glimpse that we are not alone on the road.

Christ does not wait at the journey's end to judge whether we have forgiven. He walks beside us through every difficult mile. The first step may simply be to hear his welcome: "Come. Lay down your burden for a while. There is a place for you here."

At our bring-and-share lunch, everyone contributed and there was more than enough. At communion, we come empty-handed; Christ welcomes, feeds and gives himself to us. His mercy enables us to welcome others and continue the journey.

At the beginning I said, there is nothing new under the sun. Like the Christians in Rome, we may need to forgive someone, or seek forgiveness ourselves, and perhaps all we can pray is:

"Lord, you know what happened and what I still carry. Let your mercy touch this wound and give me grace for the next step."

That is enough for today. God will be with us as we make our way through. Amen.