

Year A – 24th Sunday

What is heaven like? Today's Gospel compares it to a king settling accounts with his servants. The king's servants are high officials who are employed by the king not people who are slaves. The Gospels also have other descriptions of what heaven is like: heaven is like a mustard seed which grows into a large bush, heaven is like an expensive pearl that one sells everything to be able to buy, heaven is like a woman who finds a lost coin and then celebrates that it is found.

Can heaven be all these things? The only answer to the question is yes!

When we hear all these different descriptions of heaven we can begin to realize that heaven is beyond the description that any human words can adequately describe. It would be wonderful if any of the descriptions of heaven did not begin with "it is like" and would actually tell us what it is. Adding to the mystery of the description of heaven is that it is Jesus who is doing the describing, the only one who has actually been in heaven since he is God's only son.

When we look a little deeper at any of the descriptions of heaven we can see a pattern beginning to develop. The descriptions are all intended to instruct us on the behavior that is expected of us in order to reach heaven.

Peter asks Jesus how often he must forgive someone who sins against him. He feels confident to suggest seven times is more than enough times. Jesus has another idea and the number he offers, 77 times, is meant to mean as often as necessary. Jesus then presents the parable of the king and the unforgiving servant. Jesus draws a contrast between the generous compassion of the king toward his servant, who owes a vast debt, and that of the servant with his fellow

servant, who owes a small fraction of that debt. However, the compassion of the king is not unlimited. The parable ends with punishment for the unforgiving servant.

We might think that it is easy for Jesus to be generous in requiring endless forgiving, he is divine and the only Son of God. We are human and when someone sins against us there are deep feelings and hurts that have to be overcome. How can it be possible for us to be as generous as God in forgiving? The answer to the question is found in last week's Gospel.

Jesus gave his disciples the power to "loose" things on earth and to "bind" things on earth. We know that the early disciples are the foundation of the Church we know today, so it is to the Church that Jesus gives the power to "loose" and "bind." The "loosing" and "binding" are related to sins committed after Baptism, this power has become what we now call the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

In the early Church when someone had committed a sin after Baptism they were required to make a public confession and do an extended period of penance. Over time the understanding of the spiritual and healing nature of the sacrament has grown and even what we call the sacrament has evolved. Some of us of a certain age may recall the sacrament being called Confession or Penance, each of which names could send a type of message of the underlying reason for the Sacrament.

Today the Sacrament of Reconciliation is only between the person coming for the Sacrament and the person who represents the Church and the believing community, the priest. This is even true when the Sacrament of Reconciliation is celebrated within the context of a large community celebration. Though the form and name of the Sacrament may have changed over

time the essential purpose of the Sacrament has not, it is still about forgiveness. All of us are human and we are all subject to committing sin. Whether the sin is “I took a toy from my sibling” to “I committed murder,” there is nothing new under the sun that the priest has not heard before. We are not that original when it comes to committing sin! The priest is there to offer spiritual guidance to the person for overcoming whatever sin that is being confessed.

The conclusion of the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is freeing. You hear from another human being, a person representing both God and the believing community, the words “I absolve you of your sins.” These are similar to the words Jesus speaks to the paralytic brought to him by his friends, “your sins are forgiven you,” before Jesus heals him. When we hear the words from the priest we are like the healed paralytic, we can resume our life in full relationship with God, and put behind us the sin that tried to separate us from God’s love.

John’s Gospel tells us that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son for our salvation. God’s mercy is unlimited for those who seek forgiveness, and once the forgiveness is given the cause is forgotten by God. With the help of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, are we committed to living our lives as generous givers of the same mercy and compassion that God freely grants to us?