

**Reflection on the Gospel–24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A  
(Matthew 18:21-35)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

The opening verses of this Sunday's gospel reading have Jesus advocating limitless forgiveness (not seven but seventy-seven times). The parable that follows is anything but consistent, however, with this teaching and with the teaching of Jesus in the gospel as a whole. We are all familiar with the beatitude, "Blessed are the merciful for they shall be mercied" (5:7) and with the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (6:12). How then do we read today's story of a king who is prepared to forgive the debt that his slave has incurred, only to resort to torture when that slave fails to forgive his fellow slave? This story raises endless issues: the unquestioning acceptance of slavery and the plight of slaves; the absolute power of the king over his subjects; the institution of debt slavery; the treatment of women and children; the collection of crippling taxes to finance the power of the king; an unjust and cruel ruler as an image of the God of Israel; imaging God as a loving father who nonetheless acts in tyrannical ways. In other words, the parable encodes institutions and practices of the time that Jesus and the Matthean community seem to accept without question.

Does the parable come from the lips of Jesus or from the Matthean community? It would be anachronistic to expect a critique of slavery since the institution of slavery was simply taken for granted in the Graeco-Roman world. It persisted without critique for some 1800 years. It has now taken a new and sinister turn with the widespread practice of sexual and labour slavery of the vulnerable, exacerbated by the experience of pandemic. It is totally out of character, however, for Jesus to image his "heavenly Father" as a merciless torturer. It may be that Jesus did in fact tell such a story in another context and that the Matthean author has rather arbitrarily linked the sayings on forgiveness (forgiving 77 times and forgiving from one's heart) with this story. It is conceivable that Jesus insisted on the consequences of refusing to forgive. While God is merciful and forgiving, disciples must not exploit God's capacity to forgive. Bad behaviour is not to be tolerated. It has its consequences and those who continually exploit others or fail to forgive can expect to suffer the consequences of their actions. Whatever we make of the story of the merciless king and the unforgiving slave, we might take on board Jesus' response to Peter. We might also note the reminder that true forgiveness is "from the heart". In the biblical world, the heart was the core of the person's being, the seat of cognition as well as of emotion. To forgive from the heart is to forgive with the whole of one's being. We are all in need to God's forgiveness if we are to find the freedom to address "from the heart" the plight of the planet.