FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS

I am a fan of the Indiana Jones’ films starring Harrison Ford; they are good fun and good adventure stories. The last of the series of 3 is all about the search for the Holy Grail; Sean Connery plays Indiana Jones’ father whose life-time search has been for grail lore and legend. Finally the find the grail’s hiding place, but before they can get to the cave, there are 3 tests, word puzzles. The first of them is this: “Only the penitent man shall pass!” Jones needs to work out what this means to avoid the booby traps that have kept people out for centuries. “Only the penitent man shall pass!” What does that mean? Finally, and in nick of time, he works it out. “The penitent man kneels before God!” He goes thru’ cave entrance on his knees; he passes the first test. “Only the penitent man shall pass… the penitent man kneels before God.”

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray: we have already seen lots of other bits to this prayer. When we pray, Jesus teaches to begin with God, to realise that God is a father who loves us, that He is a big God who made world and who deserves worship, that God is King and we should serve Him and as we pray this prayer, we may also need to be the answer to our own prayers and give ourselves to serve Him and do His will. The same God provides for us in all that we need for daily life, food, clothes, health, relationships, He gives us our daily bread and so we express sense of dependence on God. These words allow us to express our love for God, our faith, our commitment, our trust. Then, Jesus says “Forgive…” (Matthew 6:12) and these words lead us to a different place, to penitence, repentance and so to ask for forgiveness.

Have you ever made a mistake? Do you remember being in school, and the dreaded red pencil that the teacher used to mark your work? The cross beside the sum you got wrong, underlining the word that was misspelled or used wrongly; the red pencil made these mistakes so easily spotted! What about life? Have you ever made a mistake? Have you ever neglected something good? Have you ever said something that hurt someone else, either by accident or even deliberately? Have you turned away from God or Church or faith? The truth is, we have all made mistakes, we have all neglected good things at times, we have all turned away from God at times and we only need to do one of these things once for it to count against us. Before we pray this prayer “Forgive…” we must admit to ourselves and to God that we need to pray this prayer.

Jesus deliberately used the word ‘debts’. It’s an unusual word, but the right word here. Some new versions of the Lord’s Prayer change it to something else, but ‘debts’ is the right translation of the word Jesus uses. Faults, mistakes, shortcomings, make us debtors to God; they place us under a spiritual obligation; we need to make it up to Him. Money debt is a huge issue in our society; people devise all sorts of strategies to try to deal with their debt, but the truth is that at some point in some way, you need to pay it off. If money is borrowed, it needs to be paid back, usually with huge rates of interest. Our faults and failings create a debt that we owe to God and that we somehow are obliged to pay off, to make it up to Him. The problem is, that debt keeps building up, because not only have we made one mistake, but we keep making mistakes, we keep having faults and shortcomings. What then are we to do? We have this burden of debt that keeps building and we have obligation to God to make it up, but we just can’t! It’s impossible!
The heart of the Christian gospel is that Jesus has done what we can’t do. He has paid off that debt. He lived a perfect life and has offered His perfect life to God as fulfilling our obligation; He died on the cross to pay off the debt for our mistakes. Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves; because of His life, death and resurrection, God offers us forgiveness; Jesus paid the debt, now we can go free; and so we can pray “Forgive...” The communion service reminds us that Jesus gave His life for us; the bread and wine show us His body and His blood in this visible form to remind us of what Jesus did, so that we can take to our hearts all over again today the gift of forgiveness from God, secured for us by the dying and rising again of Jesus.

What is left to us is to be penitent people. When we pray, when we come to Church, when we take bread and wine, we do so with an attitude of repentance. We admit our faults and mistakes, we acknowledge our debt and obligation to God, that we can do nothing about this on our own, and in name of Jesus we ask for forgiveness. Forgiveness is not about God being soft on us; it is not about God simply overlooking our past, it is not about God condoning our faults and mistakes; forgiveness says that although God recognises our wrongdoing, He treats us as if we have done nothing wrong. He does this because Jesus has died on the cross for us.

Jesus told a story of a man who had a great debt: he owed thousands of pounds to the king; the king wanted to settle accounts and the man couldn’t do it; he didn’t have money! He said to the king “Be patient...” (Matthew 18:26,27) His debt was cancelled, written off, forgiven. That is how God is with us. That is what God has done for us; He knows what we have done, He knows what we are like, but He treats us as if we have done nothing wrong; He treats us as if none of these faults, failings or shortcomings ever existed; forgiveness is ours thru’ Jesus; all that is left for us to do is to pray with a penitent heart “Forgive...”

That story goes on: the same man went out and found another servant who owed him just a few pennies, nothing compared to the sum of money he had just had cancelled. Yet, he had this man taken to prison and his assets seized until this smaller debt was paid off. Here was the forgiven man who did not forgive. The king was outraged at the attitude of the man whom he had just forgiven; so he changed his mind and had him thrown into prison because of his unforgiving, heard-hearted attitude. The parable ends with these chilling and challenging words: “This is...” (18:35)

“Forgive us...” (v12) The little word ‘as’ causes a whole heap of trouble for people trying to make sense of this part of the Lord’s Prayer. What does ‘as’ mean? At least it means two things:

1)Forgiven people are to be forgiving people. There are people who hurt us and do things, say things against us that cause us pain; we are the target! Since God has forgiven us our mistakes, we should be forgiving to those who hurt us. That does not mean that we condone what they did, nor that we are soft, but it does mean that while we recognise what they did we treat them as if they had done nothing wrong. It is hugely difficult for us to do that. Our pride is hurt. We are hurt. Sometimes those who hurt us don’t see what they have done, or simply won’t admit it or recognise it. Yet, as those whom God has forgiven, we should be forgiving people. “If the Church is the community of the forgiven, then all its relationships will be marked by a forgiveness which is not a mere form of words, but an essential characteristic.” (France) Forgiven
people should be forgiving people – there is a huge challenge here about the quality of our relationships.

2) Our penitent spirit and our willingness to forgive others go hand in hand. There is something insincere about the prayer for forgiveness from someone who is unwilling to forgive others. We all know how hard it is to forgive people who do us wrong and yet we try to do it. That’s good. The willingness is there, even if we find it hard. This is about people whose hearts are simply unwilling to forgive; that unwillingness presents a barrier to this prayer! That barrier needs to be removed; the only place where that barrier can be removed is at cross. Pilgrim’s Progress by John Bunyan is the story of the Christian’s journey of life; he begins carrying a burden on his back, and this burden is all his faults, the debts he owes to God; his journey leads him to the cross and he kneels at the foot of the cross and as he kneels there in penitence and faith, this burden falls from his back and rolls away never to be seen again. He is a changed man, and his attitudes begin to change, his attitudes to himself, to God, to other people. That’s how it is for us: kneeling at foot of cross in penitence and faith, takes away our faults, mistakes, but also breaks our pride and our self-centredness and begins to change us as people, our attitudes to ourselves, to God, and to other people. We become people willing to forgive because our pride is broken.

This is the heart of the gospel, and the heart of the communion service. We sit together round the Lord’s Table as the community of forgiven people; this is the first and greatest blessing of gospel of Jesus Christ, the first and greatest blessing of Christian faith. We sit together round the table as penitent people, who recognise our faults and mistakes and simply pray “Forgive...” The challenge for us is to sit together round the table as forgiving people; maybe sitting next to someone who has hurt you in the past and the challenge is to treat them as if they have done nothing against you. That’s the impact of the gospel; that’s the renewed impact of the communion service; that’s what it means to pray “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” (Matthew 6:12)