

Is there a limit to God's mercy? Are there some things he simply cannot forgive? Are there unforgivable sins?

Some may say, 'Oh absolutely not. God's mercy is infinite. He forgives all.' And yet, how many times do we go from here, watch the news or scroll through social media, come across some shocking report of a terrible crime and have absolutely no mercy for the person who committed it? How many times do we hear of God's mercy, take great courage in it and then the first conversation we have we fall into gossiping about others without mercy? How many times do we hear of God's mercy and yet we find it so difficult to believe that we are worthy of it?

The only limit to God's mercy is us.

We see this both in today's Gospel and the second reading from St. Paul. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul explains how often and how magnanimously God extended his mercy to the Israelites wandering in the desert. He fed them; he protected them; he gave them water. And yet, he says, most of them failed to please God. And this was not because of some cruelty on God's part. It wasn't because he is unjust and too exacting. It was because rather than turn to the Lord after he offered his mercy, rather than taking what was offered, the Israelites longed for vain and useless things, and they complained. In other words, they were ungrateful. And so God could not forgive them. Not because he didn't want to forgive them, but because the Israelites didn't want to be forgiven.

And so, Paul warns the Corinthians: 'The man who thinks he is safe must be careful that he does not fall.' We all need God's mercy, all of us. He wants so much to shower us with it, to fill us with it. But only if we want it. He doesn't violate our freedom in order to give us mercy. He waits for us to turn to him and ask for it. And we don't have to turn much. All we need do is open the door of our hearts the tiniest fraction for

him, and that is enough. He steals into our hearts like light into a dark room and we are flooded with his mercy. But we have to turn. We can't simply presume that we can do whatever we want and God will forgive us. 'That's his job', we might think. Paul warns against precisely this. We ought not presume upon God's mercy.

See the only limit to God's mercy is us. We see this again with the fig tree in the Gospel. The man who owned the vineyard comes to the fig tree and he has had enough. He has come to his limit with this tree and it must be cut. We are so often like this man. Someone wrongs us once and that's it, they are out of our lives forever. Or we fall into a particular sin again and that's it: we write ourselves off. But God is like the gardener: he asks for another year and he gives the tree everything that it will need to grow in that year.

God offers us so many second chances, so many opportunities to return to him. He waits another year for us, another day for us, another moment where we might turn to him and ask to start again. But he never forces himself. He will dig round us, he will offer us food, he will give us time: it is up to us whether we take it or not.

So many people come to confession and they say, 'Oh father, I don't even know why I'm here. I keep bringing these same things all the time.' Or they say this and so stay away from confession. Or indeed, they are like the Israelites and have no desire for God's mercy offered in this beautiful sacrament of confession, or they think they don't need it. And yet, how great are the riches that await us in this sacrament. How many times God is so willing and so ready to offer us his mercy, to embrace us in this sacrament? How much does he want to shower us with his mercy whatever we bring to him? Why do we stay away? Why put these limits on him, on his mercy?

Don't limit God this lent. Don't limit his mercy. He is offering us all another year in the vineyard, another chance, another opportunity to flourish in him. Take it. This

lent let us all make a good confession, a humble confession, an honest one. We have confessions available every Wednesday and Friday nights and even Saturday mornings. Don't be afraid to come to him, to show him your heart with all its wounds and bruises. He so desperately wants to take those burdens we carry and to heal them, to destroy them, to drive them from our hearts...but only if we let him.

There is only one limit to God's mercy, and that is us.