

HOMILY THIRTY-SIX

ON SAINT MATTHEW'S GOSPEL
FOR THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
ABOUT THE PARABLE, WHICH SAYS,
"THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKENED UNTO A
CERTAIN KING, WHICH WOULD TAKE AN ACCOUNT
OF HIS SERVANTS"⁵⁵⁵

ALSO ON FORGIVENESS OF WRONGS⁵⁵⁶ AND COMPASSION⁵⁵⁷

WHEN GOD FORMED MAN WITH FREE WILL,⁵⁵⁸ He deigned to make careful provision for him so that, by using his freedom rightly, he would incline not towards evil, but towards the good. From the very beginning He made him in His own image and likeness (Gen. 1:26), that looking towards his good archetype, man might not fall away from goodness, and God might thereafter justly show him, as His own image, the riches of His kindness to a greater extent than He would to the rest of His creatures. Thus would He draw man more and more towards goodness commensurate and compatible with His own. It is possible for man, by imitating His Creator, to be good in His image, though no one can equal God in goodness.

2. Observe how many great gifts God has bestowed on us, and that He presents Himself to us as an example of active kindness. I shall pass over for the present those natural benefits which He has given us from birth. Looking just at these, David said to God, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain

to it" (Ps. 139:6). I shall, however, briefly mention those gifts which surround us from without. All things visible and invisible God made for man's sake. Nor was it just the heavens, the earth, water, air, fire, and everything they contain, and all the species of animals and plants, which we cannot enumerate in detail, that He made for man, but also the multitude of different kinds of angels (cf. Col. 1:16),⁵⁵⁹ some of whom He appointed to guide the world and lead the nations, as God's prophets, who learnt these things from Him, tell us (Dan. 10:13),⁵⁶⁰ and others, to be ministers for the sake of those who are to inherit eternal salvation, as the great Paul, who also was taught by God, revealed to us (Heb. 1:14). But why speak only of His creatures? For our sake He made Himself man. What speech can express the words He Himself uttered for us, His way of life, the virtues He taught us, the greatness of the miracles which He did for us? By far the greatest miracle of all was that He gave Himself over to death for our sake, rose again and ascended for us, He who, as God, lives and has His Being eternally in heaven, and is everywhere and above all,⁵⁶¹ who was before all ages and continues throughout all ages and beyond.

3. Mercy was the source of all He did for us. What else but love for mankind, charity and mercy moved Him to bestow such great benefits upon us? There are two aspects of this mercy. Before we sinned against Him, He mercifully made up for what was deficient in our nature with His many bounties. Then after we transgressed, He was not only constantly forbearing, but in His abundant compassion He continually gave us more and better gifts and led us onwards. He did not requite evil for evil, nor did He just give good for evil, but the most excellent of good things, greater and nobler than all else. Afterwards, He gave Himself for our sake, which of all goods is the first, and greatest, and most excellent, or rather that which is uniquely good and beyond compare.

4. Mercy is therefore a twofold virtue. On the one hand, it means giving shelter, protection, food, and necessary aid to those in want. On the other, it is patience, forgiveness of wrongs, and compassion towards those who offend.⁵⁶² When the Son of God became man for our sake and deigned to be our teacher, He led us towards the first kind of mercy, which consists of sharing our possessions, by saying, "Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away" (Matt. 5:42), and, "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and

where thieves do not break through nor steal” (Matt. 6:20), and again elsewhere, “Give alms of such things as ye have; and, behold, all things are clean unto you” (Luke 11:41).

5. Urging us to give to others, not just by these words but also with a parable, He brings before our eyes that terrible future advent, and shows us Himself as King sitting upon His throne of glory (Matt. 25:31–46). He sets those who have been generous on His right hand, as they have acted rightly. The rest He sets on His left, reproaches them for not giving, calls them cursed, as though by failing to help the needy they had shown unkindness to Him Himself, and dispatches them into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. As for those who have been generous, He praises them openly, and accepts their benevolence to the poor as if it had been offered to Himself. He bears witness that they have His Father’s blessing, and makes them heirs of the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. By making such statements in the Gospels the Lord urges us towards one type of mercy, giving alms to those in need.

6. But what does He say about mercy’s other aspect, forbearance and compassion towards those who have wronged us? “Recompense no man evil for evil” (Rom. 12:17), but “overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21). “Condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned” (Luke 6:37). And, “If ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses” (cf. Matt. 6:14–15). As in the case of the first type of mercy, He used words of exhortation and also spurred us on by means of what would happen when He sat before us as Shepherd and King, so in the case of forgiveness of wrongs and compassion He not only spoke the words to which we have referred, but also went on to give us a parable, which was read to you today from the Gospel, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents” (Matt. 18:23–24).

7. He is here referring to His Father as a man who is a king, just as He refers to Himself as such when He speaks of the end of the world (Matt. 13:40–41; and 16:28).⁵³ Although the Father is likened to a human being, this is only by way of a parable. Christ Himself, however, was not just likened to a man in a parable, but was actually made man like us. Of course, the Son and the Father have the same throne and the same kingdom, but since, in His words about doing good to our

neighbour, the Lord said, “I was an hungered”, “I was thirsty”, and so on, and called the destitute His brethren (cf. Matt. 25:35–40), in addition to making other allusions to His Incarnation, that is why He speaks of Himself there as the King sitting before us. And by referring to sheep and goats in that parable, He set Himself before us as King and Shepherd. Here, by contrast, as He makes mention of servants, accounts, and money from the royal treasury, He is speaking of His Father sitting before us, balancing accounts and calling in debts.

8. Why is it that the first passage says the king shall sit, the nations shall be gathered, He shall separate them and shall speak, with everything in the future tense (Matt. 25:31–46), whereas here the kingdom is likened to a king who wanted to settle accounts, the debtor was brought, and the Lord gave orders, with all the words referring to the past (Matt. 18:23–35)? Because those things related in the former parable belong to the age to come, whereas most of the events in this one take place here and now. When the man owing ten thousand talents was brought before the king, without being able to pay, “His Lord”, it says, “commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made” (Matt. 18:25). But when he fell down, asked him to have patience and promised to pay, the Lord was moved with compassion, released him and forgave him the debt. In the age to come there will be no such thing as postponement, promises from the debtor, settlement of debts, or any sort of forgiveness from the giver of all, who will demand an account of all.

9. Even the fact that the man owing ten thousand talents was brought when the king began balancing accounts is not compatible with the age to come. Then all things will come to an end, whereas here they are just beginning. The subsequent events in the parable also belong to the present. “But the same servant went out”, it says, “and found one of his fellow-servants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest” (Matt. 18:28). And when the fellow-servant fell down before him, pleading with him and promising to pay, he was not in the least merciful, but went and threw him into prison, until he should pay all he owed. What way out will there be when that time comes? What debts will then be owed to fellow-servants? Will payment be demanded or attacks made? “And his fellow-servant”, it says, “fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison till he should

pay the debt” (Matt. 18:29–30). In the age to come we shall not suffer violence from one another, nor shall we fall down one before the other with entreaties. For then there will be one before whom “every knee shall bow, of things in heaven and things in earth, and things under the earth” (cf. Phil. 2:10). But the other fellow-servants, it says, were very sorry on account of the man’s heartlessness to his fellow-servant, and told their lord all that had happened. He angrily accused the pitiless servant, and handed him over to the tormentors, until he should pay all that he owed (Matt. 18:31–34).

10. Although you could see this final incident as happening in the present, it belongs more to the future. Then the accusation will be public, the sentence without mercy and the torture never-ending: “till”, it says, “he should pay all that was due to him”. It is absolutely impossible for payment equivalent to our debts towards God to be obtained from us. So “till he should pay all” means he was tormented for ever. But how do all the earlier elements in the parable take place here and now: the king’s court, the accusation of debtors, the subsequent demand for repayment and condemnation, then forgiveness, followed by condemnation once more, and all the rest? This church of God is like another heaven within the holy veil (cf. Heb. 6:19; 9:3ff), which, like the tabernacles beyond the heavens, holds the royal throne on which the King of all sits and invisibly settles His accounts with His servants, all of us who stand round about and pray.

11. Many, myself included, are reproached by God through the words we hear sung and read in this place, because we have not put these ten thousand (cf. Matt. 18:24), meaning this large number of words, to good use, each of which is a talent, as it carries a great and heavy punishment.⁵⁶⁴ Cain apparently committed one sin by killing his brother, but according to Scripture, vengeance was taken on him sevenfold, that is to say, many times (cf. Gen. 4:15). We are not just accused of being in debt, but learn from the divine words about the punishments stored up for the guilty. When we hear of these matters, for as long as we remain in church, we repent, prostrate ourselves, make entreaties, promise to live as pleases God from now on, and even obtain forgiveness, when we have stayed here until the end in fervent supplication. As the Scripture says, “Turn ye unto me, saith the Lord of hosts, and I will turn unto you” (Zech. 1:3), and “I will remember your sin no more” (cf. Jer. 31:34).

12. Afterwards, when we come out of church and meet people who have wronged us, who sometimes fall down before us and beseech us, we are severe, merciless and implacable towards them, even though their sins towards us are not worth a penny in comparison with our own sins against God, which are measured in huge numbers of talents. The Lord pitied us when we repented, and forgave us much, but when He sees how heartless and unyielding we are to our fellows, His wrath is justly kindled against us, and He delivers us up to unendurable torments, both temptations here, and unending future punishments, in accordance with the words of the Truth Himself. “So likewise”, says the Lord, “shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses” (Matt. 18:35). What is even more terrible is that we shall find, alas, that God’s true servants, the holy angels and the saints, whom we hope by our prayers here to have as ambassadors and intercessors to God on our behalf, will be inciting Him against us, if in this present life we fail to show compassion to those who offend against us. This is because the holy angels and saints are those whom, as we learned earlier, with great sorrow denounce to the Lord our hard and merciless frame of mind.⁵⁶⁵ We were correct in saying at the outset that the king and judge of whom the Lord speaks in this parable is His Father. For He does not say here that He Himself will deliver the cruel man to the tormentors, but that His heavenly Father will do so.

13. Brethren, let us be afraid of the zeal of the saints against us on that day. Let us tremble at the divine sentence, and respect God’s earlier patience towards us. Let us reckon up how much we owe God, compared with other people’s debts towards us. “How oft”, Peter asked the Lord, “shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?” And he heard in reply, “I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven” (Matt. 18:21–22), although it is almost impossible for our brother to wrong us so often. But each of us has sinned more frequently than that against God. If you look carefully at how great one sin is, bearing in mind against whom it is committed, you will find it incomparably worse than all your brother’s sins, be they seventy times seven.

14. Seeing that you owe so many weighty talents to God, and as soon as you asked Him to be patient, your debt was written off, if you are then asked by a fellow-servant to be forbearing over a small debt of silver coins (which is what “pence” means), will you not eagerly

comply? Otherwise the whole amount will be rightly demanded from you. How can it be unjust for you to suffer the loss of everything as well as receiving condemnation for your ingratitude? For that reason one of the prophets says, "As thou hast done, so shall it be done unto thee: thy reward shall return upon thine own head" (Obad. 15). Let us not, brethren, wait for God's accusation, wrath and judgment, but let us put on, as the apostle says, "bowels of mercies" (Col. 3:12). By showing compassion in our words and deeds, let us, as the same apostle teaches, "be kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another", if we have a complaint against anyone, "even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32). In this way, the grace of Christ will surely be with us, and will, moreover, be an earnest of the unspeakable promise to come.

15. The man who wrongs us causes us so many benefits, if we are willing, that I regard him as a richly laden merchant ship easily capable of paying off our debt of ten thousand talents and of guaranteeing future riches. I inwardly perceive him as the spiritual equivalent of what we recently witnessed with our own eyes in this city. The barbarians attacked, besieged the town, and cut off vital supplies from inland, posing the grave threat that they would conquer us through lack of essential provisions. But then a vessel laden with many tons of wheat appeared and landed in our harbours, making the barbarians' threat ineffectual, lowering the price of food, and also providing us with a store of necessary supplies for the future.⁵⁶⁶

16. In the same way, the spiritual enemy of all Christian people, who is far more savage than any barbarian, invisibly attacks us. He cuts off the soul on all sides from everything it needs for salvation, surrounds it with a dearth of virtue, crushes it with despair because of its lack of good deeds, and so conquers and destroys it. Then, obviously, by the providence of the Saviour of sinners, someone comes along who has wronged us and needs our compassion, and when he has received it from us, he makes all the devil's malice against us of no effect, reconciles us with God, offers us abundant supplies of mercy and salvation, and gives us a promise of eternal life.

17. May we all attain to this through the grace and love for mankind of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belong all glory, power, honour and worship, together with His Father without beginning and His all-holy, good and life giving Spirit, now and for ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.