

24A

Late one night a cheerful truck driver pulled up to a roadside café for some refreshments. As he was eating, three mean, wild looking motorcyclists roared up to the café's entrance. Immediately they selected the truck driver as a target for their meanness. One poured salt and pepper on his head, another took his apple pie, placed it on the floor and squashed it under a dirty boot; the third knocked over his coffee, causing it to spill on his lap. The driver didn't say a word. He merely rose, walked slowly to the cashier, calmly paid his for his meal and made his exit. 'That dude ain't much of a fighter', sneered one of the invaders. The waiter peered out of the window and said: 'He doesn't seem to be much of a driver either. He's just run his truck over three motorbikes'. I suppose most of us would say they deserved everything they got.

They say that revenge is sweet but eventually it leaves a bad taste in the mouth. You remember the 1990's war between Serbia and Croatia – well that could be primarily attributed to settling old scores from WW11. By and large Israel sticks to the Old Testament passage which reads: 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. Even the bombing of places like Dresden, during WW11 seemed to be given justification by quoting an Old Testament passage; 'they sowed the wind they'll reap the whirlwind'. But the teaching of Jesus turns this Old Testament teaching on its head.

Many people in their personal lives have chips on their shoulders whether real or imaginary - all waiting for an opportunity to get even. Feuds, vendettas, grudges are nurtured in parishes, in streets and especially in families. Many are even passed down the generations. Some make up and bury the hatchet but are careful to mark the spot. But when God forgives he immediately forgets.

Jesus died on the Cross to cancel all the debt of our sins. Forgiveness is a sure sign of holiness in a person. The opposite is also true as the First Reading states: 'Resentment and anger, these are foul things and both are found with the sinner'. A good example of heroic forgiveness was when the late Pope John Paul 11 forgave the man who tried to kill him.

We're advised not to let the 'sun go down on our anger'. In forgiving someone we're not justifying wrongdoing but praying for the person and leaving the door open to reconciliation. If we say sorry from our hearts and the person we've wronged pushes us away, then the 'ball is firmly in their court'. Time is often the great healer but there are some who regrettably carry their un-forgiveness to the grave.

So let us not let God's forgiveness go-a-begging, bearing in mind that God can only forgive us inasmuch as we forgive others. There is no relationship so strained, no hurt so painful, no sin so heinous, no heart so wounded that cannot be healed by the grace of God. The Good Thief sought forgiveness in his dying moments and was rewarded with Paradise. Jesus forgave his executioners from the cross. No one is outside the range of his mercy.