

## 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

Jonathan Edward Pierce may not be a name with which you're familiar but he is the man who almost gave the world one of the most surprising names for a town. In 1903 he started a settlement on some land he owned in Texas, USA. People moved in and they couldn't believe it when they were told that Mr Pierce had decided to call their town 'Thank God.' Sadly Mr Pierce was not allowed to call his town 'Thank God'. The United States Postal Department rejected his proposal. A compromise was worked out which is why today there is a town in Texas called 'Blessing.'

It's got a post office, a fire station, two churches and the population when last counted numbered 861. When I checked their local news yesterday there were two big stories: one told of what they're doing to clean up after Hurricane Irma and the other big story was that border collies were leading cattle through the obstacles at the Texas Oklahoma Fair. I want to go to Blessing, a town which nearly got called 'Thank God.' Those two words trip off my tongue many times a day. As a priest I am often asked to give a blessing and I know of some people in our parish who are fortunate enough to be called Blessing, a lovely name to have. The more we thank God, the more we try and become a blessing to others, the more we will be living out the word of the Lord this Sunday.

These readings are not just about forgiveness. The word of the Lord this Sunday is about God and of how God's way of behaving should always set the bar for how we behave. Left to ourselves we do much if not all of what the writer of the book of Ecclesiasticus told us. We nurse anger, we neglect to show pity, we cherish resentment and we often have anger in our hearts. What the word of the Lord in that first reading told us though was: yes you are all of this but '*remember the covenant of the Most High.*' In other words, thank God, count the ways in which God has blessed you and then go and imitate. The psalmist beautifully described God and did so for two reasons. Firstly they wished to lift up their heart in praise of God but they also knew that by describing God they were setting out how they should then behave.

*The Lord is compassion and love, slow to anger and rich in mercy.* Strong is his love, he forgives, he heals and all God asks is that we *never forget his blessings*, we never tire of exclaiming to the heavens and to each other thank God, those two words which the US Post Office told Mr Pierce he could not use as the name for his town. In the parable told by Jesus in this Sunday's gospel, we are supposed to feel the outrage of the fellow servants, furious that one of their number has been so unforgiving and especially after he had himself been forgiven for having owed so much more. In telling this parable to Peter and presumably to the other disciples, Jesus wanted them to think about the kingdom of heaven, where divine behaviour will always outdo human behaviour.

God will always be better than us in forgiveness and mercy, in compassion and love. For this we can pray thank God. But to just pray this is not enough. We must also try our best to imitate divine behaviour. Forgiveness is not easy, for some people and very understandably in view of things they have suffered, it seems an impossible requirement. The capacity to forgive is a grace, something we need to ask for and it may take time for us to make any progress in it. What Jesus invites us to pray for is forgiveness from the heart, in other words from that place within us which only God's grace can touch and heal. Let's be united in praying for this today.

None of us can say we are perfectly imitating God or that we are already a blessing to everyone. No, but God is at work among us, taking the long view and never denying the grace necessary for our salvation. Let's pray for his amazing grace for ourselves and for each other. Let's remember the covenant of the Most High, made visible for us in Jesus our Saviour, and let's try and live this week being more ready than normal to say thank God, two words which should often be on our lips even if the US Post Office said they were not to be the name of a town which you now know is instead called Blessing.