Once there was a girl with a very irritating younger brother. He enjoyed annoying her whenever he could and she was inclined to give as good as she got. So the house was always full of fighting or shouting. Then one day everything changed. The boy was still the same but the girl had stopped reacting. She told her mum that she'd remembered what Jesus had said and was keeping a tally of everything her brother did. "I'll forgive him for now", she said, " but when I get to 490, I'm really going to wallop him!"

Now I'm pretty sure that's not the sort of forgiveness Jesus talks about. He means that we are to keep on forgiving countless times. Over and over again. These countless acts of true forgiveness might indeed be for the one individual who keeps on upsetting us, it might be for anyone and everyone who hurts us in any way at all. Or maybe, and this is the hardest of all, for that one person who has so deeply hurt us that feelings of anger, even of hatred, keep welling up over and over again and we need to keep on forgiving.

So Jesus told this parable about forgiveness. And I had a sermon all planned. But then when I looked at the reading more carefully, I spotted a couple of inconsistencies; which got me thinking about something else entirely.

First of all, the figures that Jesus quotes are ridiculous and contemporary listeners would immediately have understood this. The first servant owed 10,000 denarii, such a colossal amount, that it's hard to imagine him having such a debt in the first place nor how he would ever have been able to repay it, no matter how laudable his intentions. Then for a reason we are not given, the master does not impose the sanctions for non-payment of debt, which may seem harsh to us, but which by law he was entitled to do.

And he does not just give the servant more time to pay. He lets him off this enormous debt entirely.

This act of incredible generosity would not have been popular with other landowners or masters. It would have completely destabilised the economic structures of the time. If people could have even the smallest hope that their debt might be remitted, then the whole system would be racked with uncertainty.

So is Jesus telling us not just about forgiveness, but about something else as well. As I have come to realise, the more you look at some of those familiar passages, the more you learn. And some of these lessons are not altogether comfortable.

So what else is happening here?
The master forgives his servant a debt of almost unimaginable proportions and in doing so, completely changes the rules of the time. But does the servant recognise this momentous change? Does he, even for one moment, appear to rethink the small amount he himself is owed? No, he doesn't. He goes straight ahead, does what the law entitles him to do, and pursues his debt, ignoring desperate pleas for mercy - the same pleas that he himself has just made. And it is for this failure to forgive as he has been forgiven that he suffers a far worse punishment. The master has turned the entire social

and economic system on its head. And the servant has taken absolutely no notice.

In his life and death, Jesus himself turned a whole system on it's head. Love your enemy, Turn the other cheek. Love and compassion were more important that rules and regulations. He lived alongside the poor and the outcast and castigated many of the rich and powerful. When Jesus showed that God's forgiveness is available for all, no matter who they are or what they have done, He changed everything.

But do we sometimes, like the unforgiving servant, act as if 2000 years ago, nothing happened? And this is a question that has been haunting me all week. Does our faith, my faith, make any difference in the world? There are those who would say that Christianity has actually made the world worse. And it is sadly true that people have done and still do, some dreadful things in the name of Christ. But we can also point to innumerable ways in which belief in Christ has brought about God-given change. People who have worked hard to bring about social change such as the great Victorian reformers, But what about me and ordinary Christians all over the world? Are we continuing to make that difference?

I hope and pray that those around us, will see reflected in us, those kingdom values that Jesus taught. But I also hope and pray that somehow I can reflect these values in the wider world. In the way I try to act sustainably In the way I try to support organisations seeking for a fairer sharing of the worlds resources. And I the way I challenge the increasing amount of hatred and violence aimed at people who are different.

However, I know I could do more and this brings me the second thing in Jesus parable that struck me as odd. The unforgiving servant was not forgiven once let alone 490 times.

But Jesus assures us that God is always ready to forgive. So this week, I give thanks for the gift of God's forgiveness for my many failings and for the times I do not work hard enough to make a difference. I remember that I must forgive others as I am forgiven. But I also know that I must forgive myself and resolve afresh to continue to do all that I can to make a difference in this broken world.

Amen