

Pentecost 15 13th September 2020

Matthew 18:21-35

Contemplatio: Michael Wood

On forgiveness

If we turn our mind back to Genesis Chapter 4, we may remember the story of the foundation of human violence in Cain killing his brother Abel in a fit of jealousy. To avoid a tit for tat escalation of violence in return, the Lord puts a mark on Cain to prevent anyone coming against Cain with an 'eye for an eye' mentality. The Lord says, 'whoever kills Cain will suffer a seven-fold vengeance.' But of course this is very soon forgotten and Cain's descendent Lamech says, "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged seven-fold, truly Lamech seventy [times] seven fold. And within a few more generations, we hear in Genesis 6, that the "earth was filled with violence" (Genesis 6:13)

Forgiveness, as the antidote to human violence, is absolutely central to the Christian story.

- Whereas Lamech says he will avenge seventy times seven, Jesus, in response to a query by Peter, says that Peter must not only forgive seven times, but seventy times seven (Matthew 18:21). It's a clear reference back to the story in Genesis
- Even more significantly, where Abel's blood cries from the ground for vengeance (Genesis 4:10) the first words that Jesus speaks in the resurrection are words of forgiveness. Jesus is raised as a forgiving victim. The first words to those who have abandoned him are 'be not afraid – peace be with you'.

I heard a radio interview a couple of years ago where the speaker, who was a bishop, reflected on this passage in relation to how forgiveness happens or doesn't happen in church communities. He said that Jesus command to forgive 70 x 7 times is all well and good until the church treasurer embezzles half the church finances and then we really find out how far forgiveness extends.

This is really just to reinforce a point I made last week, which is that forgiving someone does not mean we have to accept bad behaviour. Last week I pointed to the example of how the church has sometimes confused forgiveness with tolerance of abuse.

When we talk about forgiveness we are not talking about accepting that anything goes. Rather, we are talking about a certain kind of attitude of the heart. To live in a state of *unforgiveness* towards someone basically means to be **holding something over** another person – a kind of 'you're in debt to me and unless you do something for me – like apologise, then I will make you pay....endlessly. Regrettably lack of forgiveness often gets weaponised in families and certainly in churches. It is to live in a permanent state of hostility towards the other person. To live in such unforgiveness is to take our pain and turn it into a weapon which basically destroys our own soul as well as relationships with other people.

In some ways, the way we hear this story of the King can be problematic, particularly last two verses, verses 34-35

“and in anger the slave’s master handed the slave over to the torturers until he would pay his entire debt...so my heavenly Father will also do to everyone of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart”

It’s a troubling verse because if we treat Jesus’ illustration as a straight analogy, where the King represents God, then we end up with a God who looks less like Jesus and more like an abusive alcoholic father - incredibly benevolent at one moment but then incredibly vindictive and punishing the next.

In Eugene Peterson’s loose translation of the New Testament, he rather playfully translates the verse like this:

*“the king was furious and **put the screws on the man** until he paid back his entire debt”.*

This is actually, historically, probably pretty accurate. Being thrown in a debtors prison was like being thrown into a filthy miserable hole full of rats and cockroaches. It was designed to make you appeal to your family or friends to come up with some ‘get out jail’ money as quickly as possible.

So one way of reading the passage which doesn’t result in turning God into a dangerous alcoholic father, is to consider how living in a state of unforgiveness towards another is actually a kind of miserable imprisonment. It may be that if God get through to us with the magnificence of unlimited debt relief, that God MAY, with deep sadness, be willing to allow us to rot in a prison of our own making until we are ready to call out for help. As 12 step programs recognise, we sometimes have to hit rock bottom before we are ready to change.

So what happens WHEN we are ready to deal with those rats and cockroaches of unforgiveness running around in the psyche? Well that is a longer story, but I want to commend a very good little book on the subject written by Desmond Tutu and his daughter, Mpho. It is called *The Book of Forgiving* and is a practical little work-book which takes us through the steps of telling our story and naming the hurts. Because it only after the depths of our pain, which underlies the forgiveness issue, has been named, heard and properly acknowledged, can we then decide whether it is time to let it go.

When Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, he is naming his grief over Jerusalem’s violence and hardness of heart which he foresees will lead to catastrophe. When the risen Jesus shows his disciples the wounds of his crucifixion, he is naming in a particularly stark way, the hurt he has experienced.

Only the person who has been injured can know if and when they wish to grant forgiveness.

The other thing that is important to say about declaring forgiveness is that it doesn’t rely on the other person saying ‘sorry’. *There are many stories in the Bible where Jesus says ‘your sins are forgiven’ without any evident act of apology or repentance. St Paul summarised it like this, ‘God demonstrates his love for us like this: why **we were still sinners** Christ died for us’(Romans 5:8). Or to*

put it another way – God does not forgive us because we repent. Rather, ‘we repent because we are forgiven’. Christ died for many unrepentant people.

NOW – clearly we know that receiving an apology makes it somewhat easier to forgive BUT sometimes receiving an apology is not going to happen. The question is whether we may need to forgive anyway, simply to be released from our imprisonment....and perhaps send the rats and cockroaches a rest from all their activity.

Finally, to forgive someone does NOT necessarily mean we will have the same kind of relationship as before. In fact, we might choose to have no relationship, or a different kind of relationship. But it will be relationship shaped by a different kind of energy – the energy of peace rather than the energy of resentment.

So....the four steps that the Tutu’s walk as through are:

Tell the story
Name the hurt
Grant forgiveness
Renew or release the relationship

I have found these to be helpful guides but we recognise it can be a challenging journey and so, like the apostles, well may we pray, ‘Lord – increase our faith’.

If there is a person or situation in our lives that is crying out to us for forgiveness, what is the next step which, by God’s grace and mercy, we may wish to take?