

Forgiveness

*In 1998, many of us hoped that the Good Friday Agreement would bring an end to troubles in Northern Ireland. Recent difficulties with post-Brexit border arrangements and a proposed amnesty for both British soldiers and IRA bombers have proven that old grievances are not so easily resolved. There have been numerous attempts to defuse the tension between Jew and Palestinian in the Middle East. But there too we are seeing renewed violence. The same disappointing story could be illustrated by examples of perennial civil strife drawn from every corner of the globe. Perhaps this address, edited from a sermon first preached at a Communion Service on Easter Sunday 1998, has something to say about **the moral and spiritual** nature of the challenge involved in healing such deeply embedded conflicts.*

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Nearly two centuries ago, Benjamin Disraeli spoke in the House of Commons of 'the intractability of the Irish question'. Already then, the roots of that problem went back a further two centuries to the time of the English Civil War. I am reminded of the Irishman who tried to explain to me once why the Irish problem was so 'intractable'. He said: 'Well, it's like this. Whenever the Irish start talking about religion, they get historical about it!' I said: 'I think you mean *hysterical*?' 'No,' he replied: '*historical*. They keep on bringing up things that happened years and years ago! They will not bury the past!' Many of us hoped in 1998 that the troubled history of Ireland was at last going to be 'buried'. As the Times editorial expressed it:

'The congregations that have prayed for peace beneath the steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone have seen compromise take root in Ulster's narrow ground.' (The Times 11th. April 1998)

But recent events have revealed once again how fragile such peace treaties are, and what a long shadow is cast by the violence of the past. They chose an appropriate date for the signing of that agreement, for it is clear, if its ambitions for reconciliation are ever to be fulfilled, there needs to be a great deal of forgiveness on both sides. And there is no day in the Christian calendar that speaks to us of forgiveness more eloquently than *Good Friday*. Here is how the apostle Paul expressed it:

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.' (Ephesians 4:32-5:2)

It is a remarkable injunction; Paul is telling the Ephesians believers to 'copy God'. Think about the way he has treated you and then treat one another similarly. Specifically, that means forgiving each other '*just as*' in Christ he has forgiven you. What are the implications of that phrase '*just as*'? Let me first suggest three ways in which God does NOT forgive us.

1. God does not forgive us by absentmindedly ignoring our offences:

It is true of course that the Bible speaks of God '*remembering our sins no more*' (Jeremiah 31:34), but that is not the same as saying he forgets them. No, forgiveness for God involves a deliberate decision. We speak too glibly about 'forgiving and forgetting'; in practice, the only sins it is possible to 'forget' are those that are so minor they do not seriously offend us. To suggest that the victims of violence in Northern Ireland should 'forgive and forget' the injuries perpetrated against them would be to trivialise their pain in a quite grotesque fashion. No what is required of them is far more difficult; they need to 'forgive' when they know they cannot by any conceivable stretch of the imagination ever 'forget'. And that means a decision to remember sins no more, 'just as' God on that first Good Friday decided so to do. Real forgiveness is never an absentminded ignoring of sins; it is always a deliberate act involving unusual moral courage.

2. God does not forgive us by sentimentally excusing our offences.

I guess we've all tried to patch up situations at times with feeble comments like 'they didn't really mean any harm', 'she was led astray by others', 'I suppose he couldn't help it, could he?'. And at times it is perfectly proper to take such considerations into account when assessing the degree of blame that should be attributed. The courts rightly recognise pleas of 'diminished responsibility'. Jesus himself sought to mitigate the guilt of those who crucified him (Luke 23:34). But extenuating circumstances are one thing, pathetic excuses quite another. God was not impressed by Adam's attempt to pass the buck onto Eve, nor Eve's onto the Serpent. On the contrary, he affirmed their culpability and insisted that they accepted it.

You may be sure that he will apply the same rigorous and impartial standards of justice to all who have been responsible for the troubles in Ireland over all the centuries that they have continued. That includes the English, whose highhanded injustices originally embittered the Irish, and the Ulstermen, whose obstinate bigotry has perpetuated the cultural alienation between the two communities, and the nationalists, whose reluctance to abandon violence has made peace so elusive. God will accept no evasions or rationalisations; he will treat it all with the moral seriousness it deserves. His forgiveness is based on truth, not the whitewash of propaganda.

He does not expect us, therefore, to make excuses either for ourselves or those who sin against us. In fact, we demean the sinner when we suggest that for one reason or another they are not really to blame. No matter how dysfunctional our family, no matter how distorted our moral education, no matter how intense our personal provocation, when we sin it is never because we must but because we choose to do so. In the final analysis, there are no excuses; excuses are just an undignified contrivance on our part to avoid the humiliation of confession.

3. God does not forgive us by hardening his heart against pain.

The Greek Stoics recommended a remedy for injury that, although presented as noble, is in fact the most dangerous of all. They called it *'apathy'*. Tell yourself that you do not care, they advised. Forgiveness is only difficult because you are emotionally vulnerable; steel yourself, therefore, against all forms of adverse circumstance. Harden your heart against suffering and tears. Then there is nothing people can do to hurt you. As Paul Simon's famous song goes: *'I am a rock. I am an island. And a rock feels no pain. And an island never cries.'*

But if feeble excuses diminish the humanity of the criminal by undermining their moral responsibility, the Stoic stiff-upper-lip diminishes the humanity of the victim by undermining their moral sensibility. There is absolutely nothing apathetic about the God of the Bible. He is hurt by our sins, as we might be hurt by a slap across the face or a stab in the back. Indeed, on the cross, it is that very suffering that we witness. Not for nothing do we speak of Christ's 'passion'; God feels passionately about our sin. His righteous indignation burns against it with an intensity which only perfect holiness can know. He does not forgive us by denying that sense of moral outrage. We may harden our hearts as agents of sin, but he as the offended party embraces no such strategy of callous indifference. On the cross God suffered the pain which a world of sin inflames within him; he suffered it, and he *absorbed* it.

In the same way then, we are not to offer forgiveness out of some desensitised state of Stoic analgesia. The forgiveness we offer must be free, but it can never be cheapened in that way. Real forgiveness is inevitably costly, because there is pain and anger that must be swallowed without the palliative of nursed grievance or anticipated revenge to sweeten their bitter taste. There are many bereaved in Northern Ireland who must live with the fact that those who took their loved ones will probably never be brought to justice on this side of the grave. Forgiveness is only possible when we learn to absorb the pain others have caused us, '*just as*' God himself demonstrated on the cross. But that brings us to the central question posed by our text.

4. How then does God forgive us?

If God does not forgive us by absentmindedly forgetting the fact of our offences; if he does not forgive us by sentimentally excusing the guilt of our offences; if he does not forgive us by hardening his heart against the pain of our offences; how then does he forgive us? The apostle's answer is as simple as it is profound. He forgives us as an act of overwhelming ***generosity***.

There are two verbs in the Greek New Testament that are regularly translated 'to forgive'. One means 'to release from a debt' or 'to remit a penalty'. That's the word used in the Lord's Prayer when we say '*forgive us our trespasses*'. But it is the other verb that is used here. Interestingly, it derives from the noun '*charis*', which is often translated as 'grace'. It means to treat someone with a degree of kindness that they simply do not deserve. That, says Paul, is what forgiveness means for God; it is gracious, generous, utterly undeserved. Forgiveness is not a duty that he feels he must grudgingly offer in order to retain the moral high ground. No, it flows out of the compassion and tenderness of his divine heart. He delights to forgive because he delights to see relationships restored. In his moral calculus there is something even greater than the pain of our sin, and that is the *love* he bears us.

By that phrase '*just as*', Paul is not of course suggesting that we can aspire to reproduce the act of atonement by which Jesus paid the penalty for sin. That was a unique, unrepeatable event. No, he is urging us to emulate the merciful love that motivated that sacrifice. '*Live a life of love, just as Christ loved us*'.

Jesus himself commanded the same thing in his Sermon on the Mount when he said: '*Love your enemies*' (Matthew 5:44-45). This he insisted would be a vital distinguishing mark of his disciples; anybody can love their friends, but there is something distinctively God-like in loving one's enemies. It proves you are really the children of a gracious heavenly Father. Maybe Paul has that very dominical saying in mind when he prefaces his admonition here with the words: '*As dear children*'.

Jesus' words are important because they make clear that forgiveness is not to be extended only to those in the Christian community, like the Ephesian believers whom Paul is addressing in his letter. No, it must be offered to all: Jew or Gentile, Protestant or Catholic, Israeli or Palestinian, Christian or Muslim. Of course, forgiveness may be refused, in which case the enmity will remain. But '*just as*' in Christ, God was reconciling *the world* to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19-20), so there must be a universal and unconditional willingness in our forgiveness.

This is what Jesus requires of us: a forgiveness that flows from an overwhelming generosity of heart. On the cross that is precisely the kind of forgiveness he demonstrates.

I remember, when I lived in Africa, hearing an old African tell of a time when there had been great tension between neighbouring tribal communities. Murder was done, and many relationships were broken, within the church as well as outside it. He told me of a sermon that had been preached in the midst of that trouble in which the pastor had said:

'Listen, God's forgiveness is NOT given to us in a bucket for our private enjoyment; it is always given to us in a pipe, so it flows on to others.'

It was a sermon, he said, that transformed many hearts at that time of bitter social division. It would bear repetition in many other parts of the world today, not least in Northern Ireland.

Do you recall the story Jesus told of the servant whose Master forgave him a huge debt, of the order of millions of pounds, only for that servant to throw a colleague into jail for the sake of a mere pittance. *'Should not you have shown the same generosity as I showed to you?'* demanded his Master. And in his wrath, said Jesus, he threw the unmerciful servant into prison until he paid back the vast sum he owed. The postscript that Jesus adds is ominous: *'This is how my heavenly Father will treat you, unless you forgive your brother from your heart.'* (Matthew 18:21-35)

Such generosity of course is not easy. But as Christians we have the incentive of an irresistible example to follow. I am reminded of the film *Ben Hur* (1959) that is so often screened at Easter time; that too is all about a man's difficult journey to forgiveness. Judah Ben-Hur, a Jewish nobleman was driven all his life by a lust for revenge against the Romans who had treated him and his family with outrageous cruelty. In the closing scenes, however, he recounts how his encounter with a man on a cross had healed his bitter spirit.

'Almost at the moment he died, I heard him say "Father, forgive them" ... and I felt his voice take the sword out of my hand.'

I doubt that there is anyone else who can take the gun so effectively out of the hands of warring communities today.

Of course, it is dangerous. I recall the visceral shock I experienced when a missionary colleague told me how the entire executive of the student Christian Union in Rwanda had been murdered in 1994 because they had stood up in the town square and preached that in Christ there was neither Tutsi or Hutu. Leaders take their lives in their hands when they seek to dissolve inter-communal hatred with forgiveness.

But that is what Good Friday is all about. There can be no reconciliation without risk; there can be no forgiveness without a cross.

I believe there are many places in our world today where the never-ending cycle of tit-for-tat violence, passed on from parent to child through countless generations of harboured resentment, can only be stopped by Christians who have learned this lesson and forgive *'just as'* God in Christ has forgiven them.

[the audio of the original sermon is available at <https://royclements.net/sermons/forgiveness-ephesians-432-52/>]