

## Forgiveness 2 (Forgive others)

Given by Kathy Roberts at St Mary's, Black Torrington 17<sup>th</sup> August 2008 as part 2 of a three part series

### Introduction

Last week we looked at **God forgives you**. We saw how our sin separates us from God, and that God's forgiveness is costly, but freely given – if we will receive it.

Today we consider **forgiving others**. CS Lewis once said *everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive!*

A story from South Africa:

*A frail elderly black woman rose slowly to her feet. Across the room from her were several white security police officers, one of whom, Mr van der Broek, has been tried and found implicated in the murders of both her son and husband some years before.*

*He had come to her home, taken her son, shot him at point blank range and then set the young man's body on fire while he and his officers partied nearby.*

*Some time later he and his cohorts returned to take away her husband as well. Then almost two years after her husband's disappearance, Van Der Broek returned to fetch the woman.*

*She vividly remembered going to a place beside a river where she was shown he husband, bound and beaten, but still strong in spirit lying on a pile of wood.*

*The last words she heard from him as the officers poured petrol over his body and set him alight were, Father forgive them .....*

*Now the woman stood in the courtroom, listening to Mr van der Broek's confessions. A member of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission turned to her, asking what she wanted and how justice should be done.*

*The old woman said calmly, 'I want three things. I want to be taken to the place where my husband's body was burned so that I can gather up the dust and give his remains a decent burial.'*

*She paused, then said, 'My husband and son were my only family. I want, secondly, therefore, for Mr van der Broek to become my son. I would like him to come twice a month to the township and spend a day with me so that I can pour out on him whatever love I still have remaining in me.'*

*'Finally,' she continued, 'and this is my husband's wish also, I would ask someone to come to my side and lead me across the courtroom so that I can take Mr van der Broek in my arms and embrace him and let him know that he is truly forgiven.'*

*As the court assistants came across to help her, Mr van der Broek, overwhelmed by what he has just heard, fainted.*

*As he did, family, friends, neighbours – all victims of oppression and injustice – begin to sing softly Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. (John and Stibbe 2003:76-7, adapted)*

### **What forgiveness is not**

Forgiveness is not easy - many of us struggle to forgive. In the light of that story I would like to highlight what forgiveness is not, because there are so many strange and false ideas about forgiveness

1. Forgiveness is not forgetting: People will often say forget it, or get over it, or I'm getting on with my life. Forgetting is **not** *the litmus test of forgiving*. On the other hand if people say I forgive, but I will never forget as a way of saying they will never trust again, or remain always on their guard, *their process of forgiveness has not run its full course* (Monbourquette 2002:32)
2. Forgiveness is not denial: a. When something bad happens to us, we often respond by building a wall to protect us from the pain – and any other emotions. Sometimes this can be a denial – and if left to fester is our emotions can become frozen and we do not *feel the need, or the desire, to heal – and certainly not to forgive* (Monbourquette 2002:32)  
b. Neither does forgiveness mean excusing the offender. Sometimes that can also be a way to reduce our suffering. *Convincing ourselves that the person is not responsible is easier to deal with than accepting that he/she inflicted the injury consciously and freely.* (Monbourquette 2002:39)
3. Forgiveness is not about willpower: Will alone cannot conjure up forgiveness. It is part of the whole, but forgiveness *mobilises all our faculties: sensitivity, heart, intelligence, judgement etc* (Monbourquette 2002:35)
4. Forgiveness is not given on command: Often Christians are told you *must* forgive – and the Lord' Prayer is cited. William Barclay says, *The literal meaning of forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors is forgive us our sins in proportion as we forgive those who have sinned against us...it is quite clear... that if we pray this petition with an unhealed breach, an unsettled quarrel in our lives, we are asking God not to forgive us* (Barclay 1975:222)  
This is no eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth expectation. It is rather, *Forgive us our trespasses so that we may forgive those who have trespassed against us* (Monbourquette 2002:36)
5. Forgiveness does not take us back to where we were before the offence  
Once forgiveness has been given, it does not mean that our relationship with the one who has hurt or offended us returns to what it has been. *After you've made an omelette, can you retrieve the eggs?* (Monbourquette 2002:37) If we try to do that, we will be denying that anything has happened. Forgiveness means reviewing the quality of the relationship and moving on from there.
6. Forgiveness does not mean giving up our rights  
Often when forgiveness is spoken about, people will ask about those who have perpetrated terrible things such as abuse and argue that forgiveness could encourage them to continue in their abusing ways. Forgiveness does not mean giving up one's rights and the demands of justice. *Forgiveness that does not fight injustice, far from being a sign of strength and courage, shows weakness and false tolerance. It encourages the offender to repeat the crime.* (Monbourquette 2002:38)
7. Forgiveness does not mean leaving it up to God  
People sometimes say *Only God can forgive* which is something of a cop out. *God doesn't do for us what is up to us to do!* (Monbourquette 2002:41)

### **What forgiveness is**

Forgiveness depends as much on us as it does on God. The human and the divine are *co-ordinated and complementary* (Monbourquette 2002:42). What is asked of us is to be open to receive

from God, the grace, the energy and even the desire to forgive: To want **to want** to forgive, because sometimes the hurt runs so deep that even the desire to forgive is absent.

To forgive brings us healing – to forgive even as we have been forgiven. Terry Fullam remarks that in his ministry as an Episcopal priest:

*I have counselled many people, and one of the most prevalent problems ... is depression, often very deep. I have become convinced that a central cause is bitterness and resentment in the heart, an unforgiving attitude. It can have deep and wide repercussions that spread outward with strange behavioural and physical manifestations, for forgiveness touches all of life, reflecting our relationship with our Creator and our fellow creatures.* (Fullam 1980:109)

Our emotional, social, physical and spiritual well-being depends on our willingness to forgive.

Sheila Cassidy who was imprisoned and tortured in Chile during August Pinochet's regime said this:

*I can only say: however much we have been wronged, however justified our hatred, if we cherish it, it will poison us. Hatred is a devil to be cast out, and we must pray for the power to forgive, for it is in forgiving our enemies that we are healed.* (Sheila Cassidy, quoted in J John and M Stibbe 2005: 80)

## Conclusion

The journey to forgiveness is not easy – and as always, we can choose to take it... or not. We can choose to be healed, or to let the poison continue to infect us and cripple us.

*Resentment*, for instance, said someone, *is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die.* (J John and M Stibbe 2005: 81)

Preparing this material caused me to reflect deeply. I was shocked to realise that I had not forgiven some cousins for a whole list of offences spanning years. My question to myself was, did I want to forgive them. The answer initially was no. I quite enjoyed the litany of complaints that I sometimes rehearsed in my head. The Lord has convinced and convicted me, in the light of all that I have been saying, that I am to let each offence go – not forget them, but let them go and release the people - and myself - from those things of the past.

God says to each of us, as he said to his people through Jeremiah *I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.* (31:34) – I will not put their sin together again .... That's what re-member-ing means – don't put it together again. Let it go. And if you can't let go, ask God for the ability to start doing so – to want to want – or event to want ... to want .... to want to let go.

What will you choose to do today?

## References

William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, St Andrew Press, 1975  
Everett Fullam, *Living the Lord's Prayer*, Chosen Books, 1980  
John Monbourquette, *How to Forgive*, DLT 2002  
J John and M Stibbe, *A Barrel of Fun*, Monarch, 2003  
J John and M Stibbe, *A Bundle of Laughs*, Monarch, 2005