

Matthew 6:9-14 Forgiveness

Given by Maureen Dean at All Saint's, Bradford on 17th August 2008

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. *Forgive us as we forgive*. That, I believe, is one of the most difficult sentences in the bible. It sounds OK in theory - but finding the grace to forgive someone who has hurt you really badly has, I think, got to be one of the greatest tests facing a Christian. C S Lewis once said that everyone thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea - until *they* have something to forgive!

But Jesus reminds us that our own forgiveness depends on how we forgive others. There is a connection between what God does and what we do. If we refuse to do our part, we cut ourselves off from God and make it impossible to receive forgiveness from him.

If you were in church last week you will know that the reading was the healing of the paralysed man - healing that began with the recognition of the man's need for inner healing - God's forgiveness of his sin - before physical healing could take place. Doctors today are very aware that often inward turmoil - guilt, remorse, anger - all the negative emotions - will show themselves in physical ill-health.

And it is the same with unforgiveness. If we let it, it will grow and fester within us, hardening our hearts, weighing us down and making it more and more difficult to receive the forgiving, healing love that we need ourselves, and that God wants to give us.

So, what can we do about? How do we set about this business of forgiving someone who has hurt us badly? Well, we have to be realistic. We are human - there is no instant 'quick fix' answer. Working through trauma or conflict takes time, and at first forgiveness may seem impossible.

Corrie ten Boom was a Dutch woman who was arrested by the Gestapo during the second world war for helping Jewish refugees. She and her sister Betsy were sent to Ravensbrook concentration camp, where Betsy died. Corrie survived, and after the war began work as a Christian speaker and writer. One day, after speaking at a church service in Germany, she recognised in the congregation a former SS guard at the camp and this is what Corrie wrote...

It was at a church service that I saw him, the former SS man who had stood guard at the

shower room door in the processing centre at Ravensbrook. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there - the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsy's pain-blانched face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. "how grateful I am for your message" he said. "to think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!" His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him. I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness.

...and at that moment she found the strength to hold out her hand. Sometimes, all we can do to begin with is *want* to want to forgive.

Forgiveness does not mean giving up our rights - God does not ask us to. We are not meant to accept injustice. What happened to Corrie; what is happening today to people like the refugees Marjorie told us about, is wrong and we must not accept it as something we just have to bear - we must speak out against it.

And neither are we asked to forget. How often do we hear the expression forgive and forget? Or maybe we've heard someone say I can never *forget* what he or she did, so I can never forgive? Our memories are part of us - they make us what we are, and we don't have control of them. We all know, I'm sure, how sometimes a memory that has lay hidden for years will suddenly surface, triggered by an unexpected sight or sound.

And, neither can we be sure that we will never *be* hurt - unless we take care never to have anything to do with anyone else - unless we cut ourself off from people and become a recluse. Life *is* sometimes painful, and people *do* sometimes hurt us. We can't always *control* what happens to us - but it is how we *deal* with the bad times - the pain and the hurt - that matters.

Do you remember when you were a child, how, if you fell and hurt your knee a scab would form, and sometimes it would itch and you would want to pick at it? I can remember my

mother getting cross with me and saying leave it alone - it will never heal. I think it's a bit like that when we refuse to let go of a hurt - it itches, and we keep picking at it so that it never heals, and then it becomes infected and makes us ill. In the home, a grudge held over a harsh word can grow and fester until it affects the whole family.

Communities can be torn apart by something that happened years ago, and sadly, even in the church, unhealed memories of un-forgiven wrongs can cause painful division.

When I lived in Gloucestershire, I came to know a woman called Myra. Many years before she had wanted to know more about the church, and had plucked up the courage to go alone to a Sunday service. As she was sitting, waiting for the service to begin, a woman came to her and, I think, very ungraciously said *you're sitting in my seat*. Myra walked out of the church vowing never to return, and as far as I know to this day she never has. Whenever the church was mentioned, she would react with bitter, angry words - and she herself was always at odds with people; she seemed to have lost the capacity for joy in life.

It was *not* a nice thing to happen. She had every right to be hurt and angry about it. But, because she kept the hurt inside, hung on to the anger - it grew so that not *just* that one thoughtless person, but the *whole church* was included in it, and because it was a small town and some of those church people were her neighbours, it spilled out to affect her relationship with them and so have a profound effect on the whole of her life. So, by not letting go, and taking herself away from God's healing love, she hurt herself more and more.

Forgiveness is not easy. It takes determination. As we saw with Corrie Ten Boom, we have to want to do it, even if it goes against our human, instinctive, feelings of anger and the desire for revenge.

Forgiveness means -

- Deciding not to seek revenge - determining to let go of injury.
- It means taking a good look at what happened, and accepting that it was painful - was unpleasant, not trying to pretend it doesn't matter. When we grazed our knees as children we wouldn't just ignore it, hoping it would go away. If we had, it may have become infected. It hurt, and we wanted it to be made better. So we would go to mother, and she would clean the wound and put soothing ointment on it to help it heal. We need to do the same with our inner hurts - recognise that we have been wounded, and take steps to help it heal. Acknowledge the hurt, talk about it to someone who can help you find a way through, pray, as Corrie did, for the strength to forgive.
- Forgiveness also means recognising the value of the person who has hurt us - as Corrie did when she realised that Jesus had died as much for that ex SS man as he had for her. In God's eyes, we all have value.

- And in the same way it means recognising that we ourselves may at times hurt other people - and being prepared to ask for forgiveness in our turn, and hold out the hand of reconciliation when necessary.

Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive. The reply probably shocked him - not seven times, but seventy times seven - in other words unlimited - as often as is needed, as much as it takes.

In God's kingdom values, nothing has a higher rating than forgiveness. It is so important that Jesus accepted the horror of the cross so that we may receive it. And what God has given to us he expects us to give to others - if it is not given, it cannot be received.

Forgiveness takes commitment, focus and dedication.

No-one who has ever had to forgive a wrong done *to* them would ever say that it is easy.

But when we forgive, we

exchange anger, bitterness, hatred, depression and possibly health problems for joy, peace and freedom - and that's not a bad trade!