

Hebrews 1.3: Jesus 'is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.'

Mark 10. 7-9: Jesus observes, " 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'...Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

The story of Christ's life on this earth virtually begins and ends with the gospel of peace, healing, forgiveness and purification of sins. At the outset, angels sang 'Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace...' and on the cross we hear the amazing words. "Father forgive..." Was it because, in knowing the human heart, Jesus knew that much of *our* time on earth can be taken up with pride, anger, resentment, unforgiveness and estrangement? I mentioned J John's arresting words a couple of sermons ago: *The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart.*

Today, Jesus talks about marriage, divorce, adultery and little children, and some of his words are hard to swallow. A somewhat bizarre kind of package for a Gospel don't you think? I fought long and hard in the 80's, both in the Diocese of Perth and nationally, for the marriage of divorced persons in church before the eyes of God, when it was not allowed, and we have come a long way in recognising that newness of life is possible and wonderful for wounded and broken people. Forgiveness, even in separation, is a healing blessing beyond price. The innocent trust and acceptance of little children is a secret of the Kingdom for those who would receive it. It comes right alongside Jesus' harsh words in our Gospel. Like with my pet dog, who used to lick me and wag his tail not long after I yelled at him, I would understand the gift of forgiveness and grace.

For many people, one of the hardest things to do is to forgive. For some, the hardest thing of all is self-forgiveness. The action of forgiveness seems to go to the core of our being, involving the fiercest defences of the ego as well as its most vulnerable aspects. After all, in this world of competition and rampant individualism, why should we be forgiving of those who step on our toes? When push comes to shove, then shove right back. ("Skin for skin!" is Satan's prescription in responding to God about Job in our First Reading) Often there's a great deal of satisfaction in doing just that. And people who never forget a slight and remain great haters often seem to be some of society's greatest success stories – well they *seem* to be.

But the price of anger, resentment, unforgiveness, can be high. Psychologists say that a big percentage of their patients would find healing if they could find forgiveness, and in particular, if they could forgive themselves. There are words of wisdom in Ephesians where it cautions, 'be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.' It is not hard to see what this means in terms that are very familiar to most of us. Richard Holloway, in his book *Seven to Flee, Seven to Follow* observes a phase in relationships he calls 'slow death'. 'Members of the same family can cease to address a single word to each other; husband and wife can live under the same roof and never exchange a meaningful remark; members of the same congregation can snub each other for years, living out a hideous contradiction of the faith they profess, for a reason they have long since forgotten'.

It was for very good reason that Jesus told Peter and the disciples that they were required to forgive not seven times but seventy times seven, an unimaginably huge number for them. He meant 'without limit'. It was for very good reason that when the disciples said, 'Lord teach us to pray', that Jesus gave them the prescription, 'forgive us our sins *as we have forgiven* those who sin against us'. You can't pray the Lord's Prayer with any real conviction without a forgiving heart. Indeed, in that prayer you are presuming

on God's forgiveness by the example of your own. It's a radical prayer because it turns the whole deal around. God is watching our human behaviour, always more willing to forgive than we are, but the Lord's Prayer puts the ball in *our* court. Of course, it's the *Disciple's* Prayer –*our* prayer– that's why. It's a prayer-recipe for those who want to follow the way of Christ, but it is not the world's way. Witness the very place where he was born, where now there is a regional escalation of the vicious cycle of vengeance, retaliation, mass destruction and death.

You often hear the expression, "forgive and forget". I think it's full of holes! True forgiveness involves the free and complete acceptance of a person in love, knowing full well that they have offended, albeit never holding this sin against them. But we never forget it. Indeed, our love often grows in strength, joy and confidence as a consequence of it. The liberating irony is that we never really earn forgiveness, or necessarily deserve forgiveness. Neither can we justify our right to forgiveness. Forgiveness isn't 'fair'. Often things are done to others, said to others, for which reparation is impossible. Forgiveness is sheer Grace. Forgiveness knows that the bridge of love that is built to bring reconciliation provides a joy and peace that can be overwhelming. If you've experienced that in a relationship with another person, you will know what I mean. But let me be clear, this does not mean that people should be allowed to get away with abuse; that is an entirely different matter. They need serious help. Deep contrition and repentance is the other side of this coin.

Deborah and I have visited Coventry Cathedral in England. It is an impressive modern cathedral that rises, phoenix like, beside the ruins of the old cathedral destroyed by German bombs in the 2nd World War. I was impressed by the décor and acoustics and the famous sculpture of Michael and the Devil fixed to the outside wall. But the most moving thing of all was to be found in the ruins of the old cathedral. There, it is possible to see where the altar once stood and beneath that place are inscribed two words still left after the bombing, words which bear testimony to what Christian faith and love are all about: 'Father forgive..'. These are the words of the dying Jesus from the cross – spoken for those who were crucifying him, mocking him, abusing him. They were putting God's Love made Flesh to death. And this incarnate Love, even at the moment of extreme agony and dying, continued to love them. Knowing full well their actions, Christ could only offer back amazing love. Most of us will never have our love tested to anywhere near this extreme. But this is how to walk the way of the cross.

Listen to this amazing prayer found beside a dead child at the Ravensbruck Concentration Camp in 1945 near the end of the Second World War.

*Lord,
remember not only the men and women of goodwill,
but also those of ill will.
But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted;
remember the fruits we have bought, thanks to this suffering-
our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity,
the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this.
And when they come to judgement,
let all the fruits which we have born be their forgiveness. Amen*

Lord Jesus, teach us truly to forgive. Amen