

Forgiveness

Genesis 50: 15-21 and Romans 12: 14-21; Matthew 18: 21-35

Lance Stone

Emmanuel United Reformed Church, Cambridge, England

The assumption behind our readings this morning is that the church can be an uncomfortable place. When a group of people so diverse come together there are bound to be bumps and bruises, and we glimpse some of these in our reading from Romans. Clearly there are conflicts and disputes in the church of Rome. Therefore, it's not surprising that as we continue this week in Matthew 18, we come to Jesus' teaching on forgiveness. As a community that tries to share life, the church is called to be a community of forgiveness.

Indeed, here we come up against one of the fundamental, distinctive features of the Christian faith, something we cannot escape: this faith has forgiveness at its very heart and core. Our faith, after all, centers on a Christ who, as he died an innocent victim of human hatred and violence, prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And Christians have seen in those words a prayer not only for those immediately responsible for Christ's death but also a prayer for the whole human race in all its fallenness and tragedy: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." As Saint Paul explained it, somehow in a profoundly mysterious way, in Jesus' death on the cross "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Godself, not counting their trespasses against them." And therefore, we are called to forgive, too.

But this is deeply problematic; there are huge issues here. Let me put it very bluntly: can the loved ones of almost 3,000 people who perished in the hell of September 11 four years ago, can they – should they – forgive the perpetrators? Or consider the loved ones of those blown up in the underground and on the bus in London on July 7 this year. Should they forgive? Consider a particularly distressing child murder, a horrible event that seems to blight our summer months every year: Can the parents of children so brutally murdered forgive those who do such things? In terrible situations, dare we speak the language of forgiveness?

This, of course, is what our passage from Matthew's Gospel is all about. In a way it is an absurd story, filled with exaggeration and caricature, and yet it makes a crucial point. Peter starts it all by asking Jesus how often we should forgive someone who has wronged us. The Jewish teachers had a rule of thumb that stipulated three times, a sort of "three strikes and you're out" policy. So when Peter suggests seven times, he probably thinks he is being very generous, going far beyond the stipulated number. Perhaps Peter thinks he is exaggerating, but not for Jesus. For Jesus he is woefully underestimating. Not seven times but seventy times seven. In other words, indefinitely. There are no limits on forgiveness. It is not a question of mathematics—you just keep on and on and on doing it. And then Jesus tells this story about a servant who owes a king a vast sum of money. It is a ridiculous figure; it has been estimated that 10,000 talents is equivalent to millions of pounds, in all likelihood more than all the money circulating in the entire land at that time. It would take an ordinary laborer about 150,000 years to pay back this sum. And so the servant pleads, and the king lets him off. This massive burden of debt is gone – just like that! But then this servant meets

another servant who owes him a trifling sum, little more than loose change in comparison. He violently demands the money, throwing his fellow servant into jail, despite the servant's pleas for patience.

The message is obvious, yet when we try to apply it, there are huge problems because whole story rests upon a comparison between what the servant owes the king, which is millions, and what his fellow servant owes him, which is trivial. We could take this as suggesting that our sins against one another are as nothing compared to our sins against God, which are we forgiven. Our sins against God are equivalent to millions, and in comparison our crimes against one another are but small change. But that is a very dangerous argument. Just imagine that I had lost one of my children in the World Trade Center four years ago. Am I really supposed to say that alongside my sins against God, that sin against me is trivial? Are parents of children brutally murdered supposed to conclude that alongside the magnitude of their sins against God, such crimes are just small change? Can we really say that? Should we? Does that not cheapen, diminish, and demean human life? Is it not the case that crimes of terrorists and child murderers are sins of infinite magnitude, and that the blood of these victims cries from the ground for retribution, like the blood of Abel? Can such terrible crimes be forgiven? Should they be forgiven?

I know good arguments can be put forward in support of forgiveness. For a start, forgiveness is profoundly healing and therapeutic. There is, after all, something about the refusal to forgive that is like a cancer, eating and gnawing away at us, like a toxin poisoning our very souls. I am not being judgmental, for heaven knows I have no idea how I could cope if I found myself in their situations. But I look at some of the people we encounter in the media, parents of children who have been murdered dreadfully and who cannot forgive, and see a terrible bitterness and hardness that is further damaging their lives. It's as if their hearts have become calloused and their anger and bitterness have corroded their spirits. That is what revenge does: it festers and destroys the avenger as much as it destroys the perpetrator. And you just long for these people to let go and forgive. If only they could just let go, a huge weight would drop from their lives. Forgiveness is such a release. It heals. It restores. We can think of the example of Gordon Wilson, who, in the rubble of Eniskillen, held the hand of his dying daughter and said afterward of the perpetrators, "I bear them no ill will... I will pray for them every night... dirty talk achieves nothing." There, surely, we see the extraordinary healing power of forgiveness.

And yet it hurts to forgive. It hurts to lay down that sense of grievance and resentment. If we are to forgive, something in us must die—and that is a very painful death, as if something in us is being ruptured and torn. We speak about the Christian life as one that involves taking up the cross, and here we encounter that cross – in the sheer pain of forgiving. As the great Scottish theologian H.R. MacIntosh put it, "forgiveness is a voyage of anguish for the forgiver." And part of that anguish is the suspicion we harbor that to forgive is somehow to condone evil. To forgive is to fail to punish wrongdoing, and that can never be right. It's bad enough for me if I have been wronged, but it is even worse when someone has harmed a loved one. We feel somehow that to forgive is to let our loved ones down, to betray them, to fail to honor them. There is something deeply satisfying about vengeance, retaliation, and punishment. We feel that we are not surrendering one inch to evil. We feel that we are somehow defeating the wrong done to us or to our loved one. We cannot allow evil to

win, and forgiveness seems to risk that. And it was all very well for Joseph in our reading from Genesis to say to his brothers, “you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.” After all, everything went well for him in the end. His brothers’ evil against him was not the last word: good triumphed. But things do not always work out that way, and we fear that to forgive is to allow evil to triumph. To let go is painful—and to forgive is “a voyage of anguish.”

So what then are we to say in the face of September 11, and July 7, and all the wrongs that have been done to us and that still burn within us? Two things must be said. The first is that God forgives. That is the fact that we are confronted with: God forgives. That is God’s nature, and the point of this parable in Matthew. Using his customary exaggeration and sense of absurdity, Jesus is making a deadly serious point. God forgives—again and again. Not just seventy time seven times, but indefinitely. In Jesus Christ we see God embracing and absorbing all the hatred, crimes, and wickedness of humanity, absorbing it in himself, painfully and agonizingly, and forgiving it. There is nothing that is not forgiven by God.

The second point is simply this: we are called to be imitators of God, and again this is the point of the parable and what the Christian life is all about. It’s about being formed and shaped into the likeness of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Embarking upon the Christian life means embarking upon a journey of change, changing into the image of God revealed in Jesus. To forgive is to be like God, to be drawn into the life of God and to be transformed. To refuse to forgive is to distance ourselves from God, and to cut ourselves off from that possibility.

That is what it all comes down to. I can give you many reasons why forgiveness is a good thing, but at the end of the day there is only one compelling motivation. It is that God is like that. Jesus is like that. And we are called to be like him.