

An Address by Nigel Guthrie – 13th September 2020, 14th Sunday after Trinity

When the bible teaches about forgiveness it is often through stories. Perhaps this is because forgiveness is not at all easy to define. It is easier to say what it is not. Forgiveness is not excusing wrongdoing or ignoring accountability. We are all accountable for what we do. And even if a victim of crime can forgive someone who has seriously hurt them, that perpetrator still needs to pay the legal penalty for their crime.

And forgiveness is not about denying or suppressing anger. Sometimes it is right to be angry, especially when we see injustice committed against other people. We have the example of Jesus overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the temple who were profiting from those who wished to come and worship.

And forgiveness is not forgetting what has happened.

That well known phrase ‘forgive and forget’ is really not a good guide. We need to remember what has happened so that we can learn from what has gone wrong in the past as well as what went well. That’s why it is so important that we keep some terrible and tangible reminders of our dark history such as the concentration camps. And there is also an argument for keeping statues of people whose legacy we might think of as rather dubious, although, personally, I think that there is a case for moving some of them! But statues do remind us of how attitudes change over the generations and how the today’s heroes might be seen in a very different light in the future.

And forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation although it may be part of the same process. Reconciliation must always be two-way, learning how to live peacefully with each other. Forgiveness, however can be offered from one person to another. Perhaps forgiveness is best seen as a change of heart towards another person, just as repentance might be said to be a change of heart within ourselves.

In the story of Joseph when his brothers first came to him as prime minister in Egypt he pretended not to know them. But his heart softened and he promised to provide for them and their families. This was quite a change of heart. How many of us could ever forgive our families if they threw us into a pit and then sold us into slavery? Many families have been permanently divided by less! But Joseph came to see his life in the bigger picture of God’s purpose for him. He wasn’t defined by the evil that was done to him ‘Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.’ It was that bigger vision of God’s purpose that helped Joseph come a place of forgiveness. And it is often that desire to be free from what has happened that can prompt us to forgive. The other useful lesson which I take from the story of Joseph is that forgiveness was a process for him. It took time. Joseph needed to test his brothers to see that they

would be true to their word and to see that they had faced up to the wrong they had done to him many years before. I remember very well one man who told me that he really couldn't forgive his brother for the way he had treated their parents. He wanted to forgive but there seemed to be no recognition from his brother that any wrong had been done. That made forgiveness very hard for him. Coming to a place where we can forgive others is often complicated and messy. Forgiveness is a journey that may take some time. But we should never give up on it!

When Jesus teaches about forgiveness he references the Old Testament. When asked how many times someone should forgive he says 'not seven times but seventy times seven'. Part of the point is that seventy times seven is simply a large number. But it is also a number which appears in Genesis chapter 4 where it illustrates the spiral of vengeance which can follow when there is no limit to retribution. The Old Testament phrase 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth', may to our ears suggest a lack of forgiveness, but to the people of those times it suggested a level of response which was appropriate, or equivalent, and which should prevent an unending and escalating cycle of violence and bloodshed.

Which must have made Jesus' own teaching all the more challenging to his original hearers! His parable of forgiveness appears to be told in exaggerated terms to make the point. Ten thousand talents would have been a staggeringly large amount of money as talents were the largest units of currency. To repay such a debt would be impossible and to be forgiven it would be quite unbelievable. So it is even more extraordinary that the servant who is released from his debt should deal so harshly with his fellow servant who owed him a mere 100 denarii, denarii being our equivalent of small change.

But Jesus isn't exaggerating because his story is a parable of how God treats us. We can never repay our debt to God for all that he has given us or make amends for what we have done wrong. But, as St Peter says about Jesus ' (1 Peter 2: 24) ***He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.*** Where our faith and repentance meet the loving kindness of God in Jesus Christ we find forgiveness and mercy which is wider than we can imagine. Our response should always be to forgive those who sin against us, even when that is a steep and rugged road.