

## **“Forgiving Well”**

Readings Genesis 50:14-21 & Matt. 5:38-48

Martin Luther said:

“To try to deny the Trinity endangers your salvation, to try to comprehend the Trinity endangers your sanity”.

John Wesley said:

“Bring me a worm that can comprehend a human being, and then I will show you a human being that can comprehend the Triune God!”

Genesis 50:14-21 Joseph forgives his brothers

Matthew 5: 38-48 Teaching about revenge and love for enemies.

Three questions concerning forgiveness: whether we can – whether we may – whether we should.

Three stories: one historical, two personal. May God by his Holy Spirit encourage us as he draws us ever deeper into his love and purpose.

Story One: ‘whether we can forgive’, that is do we have the right to forgive?

A Jew was in a Concentration Camp in Poland in 1943 and performing physical labour at a local hospital when a nurse came up to him and asked, "Are you a Jew? Come with me." She led him to a room, in which a catastrophically injured young man lay with his eyes bandaged. The injured man asks the Jew to sit and listen to his story.

The young man Karl is a 21 year old Nazi. He was raised a Catholic and hoped to become a priest before deciding (against his father’s wishes) to become a member of the Hitler Youth. He then joined the SS "as soon as he could" and became a soldier of the Third Reich. Presumably he was happy enough with his choices until his company moved into a tiny Russian town, rounded up the 300 Jews left (men women, and children) and crammed them into a three story house along with numerous petrol cans which the Jews had to carry in themselves. His company then proceeded to set fire to the house, throw grenades through the windows, and shoot anyone who tried to escape by throwing themselves out the window. This experience affected the young Nazi so badly that he froze during the next skirmish and was shot through the stomach and horrifically burned. He was dying, was haunted by what he had seen and done, and he wanted to confess to a Jew and ask for forgiveness.

The Jew listened to the whole story (including his upbringing) and all the gruesome details of the massacre. He tried several times to leave but Karl held him back. When

he was finished Karl said: "I want to die in peace, and so I need . . ." He could not initially get the word – that word past his lips.

"I know that what I have told you is terrible. In the long nights while I have been waiting for death, time and time again I have longed to talk to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him. Only I didn't know if there were any Jews left. I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you but without your answer I cannot die in peace.

What would you have done if you were that Jew?"

The Jew, whose name was Simon got up without saying a word and walked out. Karl died later that day.

So begins the philosophical question around which this story revolves. Would you, would I have forgiven the young Nazi? Would we have the right to forgive him even if we wanted to?

Simon felt he had no right to forgive on behalf of others, in this case the people murdered by the man. He walked away from Karl but apparently not so simply from himself. Simon Wiesenthal became famous after World War II for his work as a Nazi hunter who pursued Nazi war criminals in an effort to bring them to justice. He visited Karl's mother in Stuttgart in 1946 and chose not to tell her of her son's crimes.

The question of guilt and forgiveness, and all of the subtle issues connected with it would not let him rest – and so we have his book *The Sunflower* which tells the story and asks fifty-three distinguished men and women: theologians, political leaders, writers, jurists, psychiatrists, human rights activists, Holocaust survivors, and victims of attempted genocides in Bosnia, Cambodia, China and Tibet: "What would you have done?"

Some said forgiveness ought to be awarded for the victims' sakes, others that it should be withheld. Their responses, as varied as their experiences and world views challenge us to examine our beliefs about justice, compassion, human responsibility and forgiveness as we each work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

Whether we can forgive - even if we would want to.

Second story: Whether we may forgive

Two families: Both personal friends to Dee and I, but not known to each other. We all had children the same age.

One day the youngest daughter (just a toddler) of one of the couples (who were in full time ministry) walked out onto the busy road where she was hit by a driver and killed. Only a week earlier she had been running round our lounge playing with our daughter Sarah who turned 24 this month.

The parents were bereft. The town was devastated. The ministers of the town were in shock. And what of the driver and his family whoever they were? Well, it was the 'other couple' who were close friends of ours also. You wouldn't meet a more caring and helpful couple.

The next day or so everything seemed in slow motion. The parents who lost their daughter decided to turn their Church into a Marae – mattresses and announced they would be taking Kristen there.

Dee and I were absolutely grief stricken and I kept thinking of the poor driver standing at the side of the road seeing the child's lifeless form in the curb. Fancy carrying that image for the rest of his life without some way of being helped to move on.

Dee and I were in a unique position of relationship with both couples but I personally struggled to find a way to respond. I prayed a lot – cried out to God – and kept saying over and over again – something has to be done for this couple – someone has to do something to try to bring the couples together and build a bridge. But who? Surely in a town of 17,000 people there was someone.

In the silence following that prayer it was clear there was someone: Us!

Even so it was a struggle to pick up the phone and ring (the parents who lost their child) with the preposterous suggestion that with their permission, Dee and I would offer to bring the other couple to the church that evening. Eventually I did ring – and hesitantly stated why I was ringing. They listened and said they would have to think about it and ring back. Sometime later they rang back and said yes.

Then I had to phone the driver and his wife and tell them that I had spoken with the other parents and if they 'wanted to', they could meet up with them at the church. Dee and I would pick them up and take them. They needed time to consider this and then rang back to say they would (with all the trepidation you could imagine).

Much later that night Dee and I picked up our friends and drove to the church. We entered the church and introductions were made – amid tears and hugs. We sat on mattresses around the little child in her white casket – listened to her parents talk about her – touched her and shared their deep loss and pain. There was a sense of timelessness as we shared those moments – those sacred moments.

Then we took our friends home.

Personally that was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do – to initiate something that could have backfired on me/us – to pick up the phone and make myself vulnerable. I desperately wanted there to be someone else to do it – but in all reality it had to be us.

The peace and the presence of God was tangible. We went to bed that night knowing we had done something special. The words "I forgive you" were never Spoken (as with Joseph and his brothers) but the incredible strength, and faith in action of the grieving parents provided a way forward for healing both for them and for the other couple.

Whether we may forgive. We may.

To be involved in Christ's ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation is both hard work and a privilege because it is life giving.

We are all players in the forgiveness story. Sometimes we are the penitent, sometimes the injured party. Other times we find ourselves in the role as an ambassador of Christ's reconciliation. Whatever we do: whether asking someone for forgiveness (not easy for us kiwi blokes), or forgiving another person in such a way that truly releases them, or being a bearer of Christ's reconciliation – let us do it well as only Christ on the cross shows us how.

Third story: Whether we should forgive

In 2009 at my farewell service as vicar of St. Mary's Pro Cathedral NP my bishop publically asked for my forgiveness for hurts caused – and he forgave me for any hurts I had caused him. This took me completely by surprise. A couple of years earlier I had gone through a very messy process which I initiated against a member of my staff for unprofessional conduct – called Title D. It dragged on for nearly a year and besides me and the staff member concerned, involved two judges, two QCs and at times two bishops. It nearly destroyed my ministry and my health – caused angst in the parish and I felt totally betrayed by the process and the people in it. I was totally unprepared to be asked for forgiveness. At the time I couldn't process it and I didn't respond.

We left NP and came to Nelson and I 'moved on'. However last year I had occasion to be in a setting where my previous bishop was the guest speaker. As he spoke I found I was unable to hear a word he said. Everything came back into my consciousness with a vengeance. I honestly thought I had moved on but I hadn't. As I sat there I found myself getting angry with myself. Clearly this was no longer anyone else's problem but mine. What to do about it.

The next week I wrote to him – explained what had happened to me that day – how all the hurt came back -and told him that I forgave him. Now I am truly able to move on.

Whether we should forgive? We should – I should.

Who is forgiveness principally for?

Boarding School: “If you resent someone they live rent free in your head”. When the boys got that – they laughed at themselves – it was a game changer – it dramatically shifted the paradigm-they could let go in order to fill their heads and lives with good things.

(Harold Kushner – rabbi writing in the Sunflower) writes: What does it mean to be forgiven. What does it mean to forgive? A woman in my congregation comes to me. She is a single mother, divorced, working to support herself and three young children. She says to me, “Since my husband walked out on us, every month is a struggle to pay our bills. I have to tell my kids we have no money to go to the movies while he’s living with his new wife in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him?”

I answer her, “I’m not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable. It wasn’t; it was mean and selfish. I’m asking you to forgive because he doesn’t deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter, angry woman. I’d like to see him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is out of it physically, but you keep holding on to that resentment and you’re hurting yourself”.

Forgiveness is the game changer for us as Christians – it can clear the log jam – help us move on.

177: (Christopher Hollis) The law of God is the law of love – we were created in order to love one another, and, when the law of love is broken, God’s nature is frustrated. Such bonds when broken should be re-forged as soon as possible. We are under obligation to forgive our neighbours even though he has offended us 70x 7

So where does this leave us as followers of Christ who sin and who have been sinned against through ignorance, weakness, and one’s own deliberate fault?

Firstly we open ourselves up to the Holy Spirit to search our conscience – we examine ourselves. What God brings to mind we name and confess (including those things we are painfully aware of yet consciously continue to repress – which is exhausting!) Then we repent. Our prayer book is such a helpful resource.

Forgiveness comes to us via the work of Christ on the cross. It also comes with a challenge.

408 Through the cross of Christ, God have mercy on you, pardon you and set you free. Know that you are forgiven and be at peace. God strengthen you in all goodness and keep you in life eternal. Amen

Prayer book 458 – God forgives you. Forgive others; forgive yourself. Silence. Through Christ, God has put away your sin; approach your God in peace.

460: God the Creator brings you new life, forgives and redeems you. Take hold of this forgiveness and live your life in the Spirit of Jesus.

What then if someone is stuck in the area of forgiveness? What if we made an inner vow years ago never ever to forgive 'that person'.

What if the bitter fruit from those bitter roots is only too evident, but now seemingly too difficult to deal with?

In such cases it is entirely appropriate to have professional counselling and prayer ministry where through prayer confession repentance and blessing un-forgiveness and/or the inability to forgive can be brought to the cross and dealt with.

Following this the healing and forgiveness can be sealed in a sense, with the liturgy of reconciliation of a penitent on page 750 between an individual, or a couple and their priest. From my experience this is very powerful and life giving.

Jesus said: I have come that you might have life and have it in abundance. God calls us to live well, to be reconciled to one another and to God. One fruit of our living well is our ability to forgive well. As ambassadors of Christ we are to bring reconciliation to a needy world. Perhaps nothing should distinguish us more from others in this world than our capacity to live our lives fully in the Spirit of Jesus.

Albert Speer pg. 245

Afflicted by unspeakable suffering, horrified by the torments of millions of human beings, I acknowledged responsibility for these crimes at the Nuremberg Trial. With the verdict of guilty, the court punished only my legal guilt. Beyond that remains the moral involvement. Even after twenty years of imprisonment in Spandau, I can never forgive myself for recklessly and unscrupulously supporting a regime that carried out the systematic murder of Jews and other groups of people. My moral guilt is not subject to the statute of limitations, it cannot be erased in my lifetime.

Should you forgive, Simon Wiesenthal, even if I cannot forgive myself?

On May 20<sup>th</sup> 1975, we sat facing one another for more than three hours at your Vienna-based Documentation Centre, a meeting preceded by a six-month correspondence. It was in fact your *Sunflower* that led me to you: "You are right," I wrote you earlier, "No one is bound to forgive. But you showed empathy, undertaking the difficult trip to Stuttgart in 1946. You showed compassion by not telling the mother of her son's crimes. This human kindness also resounds in your letter to me, and I am thankful for it."

You showed clemency, humanity, and goodness when we sat facing one another. You did not touch my wounds. You carefully tried to help. You didn't reproach me or confront me with your anger. I looked into your eyes, eyes that reflected all the murdered people, eyes that have witnessed the misery, degradation, fatalism, and agony of your fellow human beings. And yet, those eyes are not filled with hatred:

they remain warm and tolerant and full of sympathy for the misery of others. When we parted, you wrote for me in my copy of your book that I did not repress that ruthless time, but had recognized it responsibly in its true dimensions.

My trauma led me to you. You helped me a great deal – as you helped the SS man when you did not withdraw your hand or reproach him. Every human being has his burden to bear. No one can remove it for another, but for me, ever since that day, it has become much lighter. It is God's grace that has touched me through you.

Forgiveness: Can we, may we, should we? And then, can we do it well?