

Benedictus Reflection 13th September 2014 (Matthew 18:21-35)

A friend of mine recently said that she understood that the reason why Jesus told Peter that he needed to forgive seventy-seven times was that it usually took her that many times to forgive the one offence! And she was only half joking.

At the outset I must admit I have really struggled to write this reflection on forgiveness. On the one hand I welcomed the opportunity – after all it is an area I am familiar with, not only from personal experience, but from sitting with people in counselling and spiritual direction over the years. I have even ‘taught’ it to counselling students. As if you can ever teach it! But I do see it as an area where the psychological and spiritual intertwine and that is an area of great interest for me.

Even now I feel the gestation is incomplete. The baby (this reflection) is not ready to be delivered. But perhaps that is how forgiveness is: always a work in progress. And that is perhaps because it is a way of being in the world.

When I first heard the parable of the unforgiving servant as a child the message was obvious. If God is so generous and forgiving towards us, we should not be unkind to others. It also made sense to my child’s sense of fair play that the unforgiving servant should be punished until he had learned his lesson.

Now I am older I find some aspects of the parable, puzzling, even unsettling. Then again parables are meant to be unsettling, to rattle our cages a bit. I don’t remember, hearing about ‘torture’ in the version I was told! Then, there is the contrast between the spectacularly generous behaviour of the king at the beginning of the parable and his seemingly abrupt and punitive response at the end. How is this final response an illustration of Jesus’ injunction to Peter that he should be willing to forgive seventy-seven times – in other words indefinitely?

Whatever else the parable means, we are left with the impression that the one sin that is unforgivable is unforgiveness. It does not pay to not to forgive. The warning is clear: ‘So my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother and sister from the heart’ (Matt. 18: 35).

Does this mean we should forgive others as a kind of insurance policy so that God will forgive us? God forbid! When we pray in the Lord's Prayer, 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us', isn't it more in the spirit of the old chorus:

Freely, freely you have received

Freely, freely give.

What if, instead of seeing forgiveness – or punishment for that matter – as something given arbitrarily or in strict accordance with some obedience/reward formula, we see this parable as describing how things *really* are? Maybe we cannot experience ourselves as loved or forgiven if we withhold forgiveness and love from others, because we *really* do unto ourselves what we do to others. But sometimes it takes time for us to learn this. And it is never *just* up to us. Will power alone is not enough. Forgiveness always requires grace.

What does it mean to forgive from the heart (v.35)? For me I think this means forgiving with integrity and authenticity, and it often involves a struggle. It certainly does not mean denying our own pain, but it does mean being open to letting go our resentment or need for revenge – eventually. And this can take time.

Most of us would agree that true forgiveness is not a self-righteous, holier-than-thou (or masochistic) turning of the other cheek, a sweeping of things under the carpet. Especially where the offence is great, it probably will involve a process, an often-painful psycho-spiritual journey of coming to terms with the reality of what has happened, and being open to being transformed in the process.

Where the offence, betrayal or abuse has been serious it is important that the pain (and that may include anger) is acknowledged and heard. Basically we want the one who has hurt us to acknowledge what they have done, to ask for forgiveness. But in many cases this will not happen. Those who have made progress along the forgiveness journey will tell you that along with feeling the pain and anger, at some point they experienced some compassion for the one who had hurt them, as well as for themselves. This does not mean they condone what has happened, or that it is

appropriate or even safe for them to be friends with that person, especially where abuse is involved.

But it does represent a willingness to seeing the wounded person behind or within the one who has offended or betrayed them, rather than seeing them one-dimensionally, as all bad. If it involves a condescending or pathologising attitude (e.g. they are sick; I am well) designed to protect our own self-esteem, then it is probably not genuine compassion. The transformational journey of forgiveness might also require us to get in touch with our own capacity to hurt others. This is not to say we deserved this or that particular betrayal, but that we all wittingly or unwittingly hurt others.

Some who have made significant progress in this journey would even say they wouldn't be who they are today without the event that prompted the need for undertaking such a journey. One such person was one of the participants in my research about counsellor spirituality. Previously a protestant minister, he had found his true vocation as a family therapist. He would have been in his 50s at the time of the interview and the event he was referring to was sexual abuse by a neighbour when he was 13. He had obviously done a lot of inner work in not only addressing the usual betrayal of trust, but in coming to terms with its happening just when he was making an initial commitment to Jesus. Where was God when this happened? He said:

I ask myself questions like, 'If I was in charge of my life and could map it out and say what was going to be out and what was going to be in, what would I do with this? Would I have this in my life or not?... I couldn't be who I am today without that being there. But I wouldn't ask for it... But it has meant I have a platform of being able to sit with people [in their pain].

Maybe we haven't experienced betrayal on the scale suggested above. But daily life offers us all numerous opportunities to give and receive forgiveness – ranging from minor slights to the ego to more serious violations of our sense of self. Sometimes we need to forgive life itself for not being the way we think it should be. The

invitation here is perhaps to cultivate a forgiving attitude – allowing life to teach us what it requires of us.

Practices like meditation and compassionate mindfulness can remind us that we are part of a much larger story – as indeed can listening to the invitation of spring, as we have done in the liturgy. Richard Rohr says:

Some form of contemplative practice is necessary to be able to detach from your own agenda, your own ego, and your own fear... Without contemplation everything is about you and you see everything through your own agenda, anger and wounds' ... contemplation helps you see your woundedness: 'O my God I've done it again. I still don't know how to love.'

Giving and receiving forgiveness can be two sides of the one coin. We are part of all suffering; we are part of all healing. We have such power to bless or wound ourselves and each other. We are in this together.

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