



19 February 2022

The Quality of Mercy (Luke 6.27-38)

© Sarah Bachelard

Between 1910 and 1970, roughly one in five First Nations children were taken from their families in Australia; countless communities were broken up and cultures forcibly suppressed. In some jurisdictions, such as Western Australia, the figure is over one in three First Nations children removed.¹ According to a report from The Healing Foundation,² the effects of this policy continue to be felt not only in the deep sorrow and irreparable losses borne by its victims, but also in the intergenerational trauma responsible for continuing social, health and economic disadvantage for First Nations peoples.³

It took years for an Australian government officially to acknowledge these wrongs, and even longer for an apology to be offered. Finally, in 2008, then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said the words:

For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry. To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry. And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.

On Monday this week, the current Prime Minister of Australia, Scott Morrison, gave a statement marking the 14th anniversary of this apology to the Stolen Generations. And he said this: ‘Sorry is not the hardest word to say. The hardest is “I forgive you”’. He went on to express his belief that ‘forgiveness does lead to healing. It does open up a new opportunity. It does offer up release from the bondage of pain and suffering that no simple apology on its own can achieve’.

¹ James Blackwell, ‘Forgiveness requires more than just an apology. It requires action’, *The Conversation*, 14 February 2022, <https://theconversation.com/forgiveness-requires-more-than-just-an-apology-it-requires-action-177060>

² *Make Healing Happen*, <https://healingfoundation.org.au/make-healing-happen/>

³ Blackwell, ‘Forgiveness requires more than just an apology’.

Many have found this offensive. Although, according to Cameron Gooley writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the Prime Minister ‘did not downplay the seriousness of the history’ and did apologise ‘for lives “damaged and destroyed”’, and although he noted that forgiveness is ‘never earned or deserved’, nevertheless as the leader representing the perpetrators of injustice his words encouraging the sufferers of that injustice to forgive for the sake of their own healing have been experienced by many as patronizing and insulting.⁴

Against this backdrop, the gospel reading set for today occurs as even more fraught than usual – and, let’s face it, it’s always pretty fraught! ‘I say to you that listen’, says the Jesus of Luke’s gospel, ‘Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you ... Forgive and you will be forgiven’. And even more confrontingly: ‘If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt ... if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again’.

Jesus says the outcome of such generosity of spirit will be abundance, a surfeit of blessing – ‘a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back’. But can this really be said, with integrity, in the hearing of those whose life prospects have been blighted by injustice? Or to survivors of sexual abuse, family and religious violence, whose sense of well-being may be forever compromised? How are Jesus’ words anything more than a license for perpetrators to get away with it, and for victims being morally blackmailed into keeping silent, keeping the peace, ‘getting over it’ so as not to make others uncomfortable by being angry, by demanding reparation, accountability, respect? In a context where we’re more than ever aware of how the exhortation to forgive can and has been weaponized, what are we to make of Jesus’ words?

⁴ ‘Stolen Generations survivors owe nobody their forgiveness, Prime Minister’, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/stolen-generations-survivors-owe-nobody-their-forgiveness-prime-minister-20220214-p59wdo.html>

It's with trepidation that I offer something here – please hear it not as a last word ... but an invitation to share in reflecting on these difficult questions.

Context, I think, is relevant. Our passage is part of the so-called 'sermon on the plain' – Luke's version of what occurs in Matthew as the 'sermon on the mount'. It's early in Jesus' teaching ministry, and he's communicating a vision of life and its fulfilment that goes radically against the grain of his hearers' expectations. In the verses just before our reading, he's declared a bizarre overturning of the usual order of blessing and woe. Contrary to received opinion, it's not the poor who are ultimately wretched, he says, but the rich; not those of good repute, but those who are reviled and defamed whose reward will be great in heaven.

What he seems to be saying is that God's regard for us, our being 'blessed', has nothing to do with whether we 'make it' in the world; God's blessing cannot be effaced by our poverty, despair or failure. Indeed, it's quite the opposite – wealth, fame and success are highly likely to get in the way of real and open-hearted relationship with God. So subverting any supposed 'prosperity gospel' type connection between worldly achievement and divine blessing, Jesus speaks almost hyperbolically: woe to you who are on top of the pile now, and blessed are you who are persecuted, who suffer, who struggle.

But the overturning of expectation doesn't end here. For Jesus is not just about reversal – switching the place of those formerly 'on top', in favour of those formerly oppressed. Rather, he's interested in transforming any system in which there's a top and bottom in the first place, in which there are haves and have nots, us and them, successes and failures. Why? Well, it's that way of seeing and competing with each other that blocks the possibility of mutual flourishing and regard, everyone participating as they're created to do in the sheer gift that is life.

So how do we transform this way of seeing and competing? Interestingly, Jesus addresses not those who have power in the system, those you might suppose to have most chance of changing things, but those who are the least. And he says: when you're at the bottom, when someone curses or abuses or takes advantage of

you, don't resist or hate, or retaliate at the same level. Don't let yourself or your responses be determined by what's done to you. Because if you do, it means you've been provoked into taking seriously this zero sum game, this competition for the supposedly scarce resource of life and love. Life at each other's expense; one winning, one losing. No, says Jesus, the trick, somehow, is to start to inhabit a larger reality, to know yourself beloved by and sourced in a grace that overflows all bounds. As that happens, you'll discover freedom from the compulsion to defend or assert yourself. And if you don't get caught in tit for tat, if you move beyond reactivity into a broad and spacious place, you find available new and abundant possibilities for life – not only for yourself, but for everyone. This, says Jesus, is how God is with us – 'kind to the ungrateful and wicked', free with respect to whatever evil we do. Indeed, this quality of mercy, of unmerited giving and forgiving love, is at the foundation of the world, and we are most fully aligned with our nature as children of God when we are this way too. So, 'Be merciful. Just as your Father is merciful'.

I imagine we all sense wisdom here. We've probably experienced its truth in moments when we've released clinging to a grudge, when we've forgiven ourselves or someone else, moved beyond bitterness into a more compassionate, merciful regard for one who's hurt us. We've known a sense of freedom, new energy, joy. Perhaps even a transformation of relationship, or at least a more peaceable letting go.

Yet there remain nagging questions. What about those who've suffered catastrophic harm? What about those undergoing persistent abuse or intergenerational wrong? How are we supposed to respond to the call to forgive our enemy, our persecutor, when it seems just another face of injustice, even a form of self-betrayal? Is there anything in what Jesus says that helps us discern our way here?

Well – let me offer (briefly) two things. When Jesus encouraged his followers to live as generously as God does, he was among them healing the sick, liberating those beset in spirit, seeking out the exiled, the poor and rejected. His concern was

that all should have access to fullness of life and his teaching on forgiveness was part of that. As Desmond Tutu has said, 'Forgiving means abandoning your right to pay back the perpetrator in his own coin, but it is a loss that liberates the victim'.⁵

In his speech this week, our Prime Minister said basically the same thing and I imagine he meant it sincerely: 'a path of forgiveness does lead to healing. It does open up a new opportunity [and] release from the bondage of pain and suffering'. But here is, perhaps, an important difference. Where Jesus (and Archbishop Tutu) encouraged a practice of forgiveness among those whose well-being they were truly committed to enabling and whose costly path they walked themselves, the Prime Minister spoke of it while leading a government that continues to deny First Nations people constitutional recognition, that has so far refused the recommendations of the Uluru Statement from the Heart to establish a Makarrata Commission for truth-telling and an indigenous Voice in Parliament. I wonder if this is why his words were heard, not as an invitation to liberation and a further step on the journey towards reconciliation, but as just one more act of silencing.

My second thought is this: when I reflect on how I've become able to forgive wrongs I've suffered – it's only as I've honoured my wounds and told the truth, allowed myself to be angry and grieve, and to know myself deserving of more – only then, has authentic forgiveness grown in me. Any attempt to short-circuit this process (either because I thought it should go faster, or because others thought I should try harder) were completely counter-productive. For in the end, forgiveness is about wholeness and it's a fruit of grace ... it involves being restored by opening ourselves in humility and truth to the love and mercy of God, and so becoming able to be merciful in the same way. Mercy and truth are met together, says the psalmist. Justice and peace have kissed each other. May it be so.

⁵ From *No Future Without Forgiveness*, <https://www.churchsp.org/nofuturewithoutforgiveness/>