

# Forgiveness

Sermon Message by the Rev Derek Lightbourne September 17<sup>th</sup> 2017

Keynote Bible Reading: Matthew 18.21 – 35, Romans 14.1 -14

Last week on BBC News App I read an item on Angela Merkel, present Chancellor of Germany. The writer recalled she had been mentored by Chancellor Kohl, but noted that Kohl 'never forgave' Ms Merkel for opposing a particular initiative when he was Chancellor.

The concept of forgiveness doesn't very often feature in the public arena. We may nevertheless recall a notable instance. That was the tragedy of school pupils and teachers from Elim School in Tongariro National Park overwhelmed by a flash flood and there were some deaths. In this there were public expressions of forgiveness toward those who had permitted the hike, considering what had occurred. Usually there's a seeking who is to blame. And when forgiveness occurs the secular media can seem quite perplexed. In Polynesian culture especially, we are more likely to read of forgiveness offered to the perpetrator.

This brings us to this morning's theme of *forgiveness*. There's four aspects on which I invite us to focus to give a wholistic consideration of the theme.

- 1) Firstly, *forgiveness is at the heart of God's desire for relationships, both divine and human*. Jesus frequently includes this in his teaching, in giving instruction in how to pray, and illustrating it by parables, as in this morning's gospel story. Note that the parable is introduced by the context of values of the kingdom of heaven. So how might it apply?

I'm mindful of the counsel by Jesus 'When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or your sister has something against you, leave your gift before the altar and go, first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.' Very often action that is needed for restoring relationships is forgiveness. I note also that Jesus suggests to do it quickly ('Come to terms quickly...').

A good reason is that unforgiveness and hurts and resentments have a way of festering. I remember being at a Synod meeting speaking for a Motion to be passed. To my dismay and surprise one of the members of the Committee bringing the Motion stood up and opposed it. I was very hurt. Yet it seemed important to forgive and soon, and this I went to do as soon as feasible after the meeting. I noted also that it is not only to do with the other person it also has to do with God. Thus those words of Jesus 'If you are offering your gift *at the altar...*' Indeed I'm mindful that such can be the prompting of the Holy Spirit to bring such to mind. As written in John's Gospel: 'The Spirit convicts of sin and righteousness and judgement.' That would suggest if one doesn't or feels one can't forgive, it becomes a 'sin' in that it separates from God and another person. So in the 'remembering' I'm sure that is of the Holy Spirit bringing it to mind. The 'judgement' aspect is that it likely will affect our relationships with others, and certainly with God.

## 2) *Forgiveness is a process*

There's no doubt that many find forgiveness very difficult. The extent of hurt can bring this, and my experience is to lie awake and think over and over again about the hurt one's received. Yet also in the forgiving that may not be easy. Thus if I can share something I have found helpful is to regard *forgiveness not so much an action only*, but a *process*. A first step is the *awareness* of the need, and that is within in one's own thinking about actions said or done to us. It's something like the resolve of the prodigal son, realising his situation. There is the *intent* that must come first as he thought to himself: 'I will arise and I will go and I will say...' A helpful starting place is to have an inner intent to *want* to forgive. Thus the beginning of the process of forgiveness lies in oneself.

A next step in the process is then to *act*, like the prodigal son. That is, to go, to seek to re-ignite relationship through forgiveness. As we serve God, it is critically important to be in good relationship with other people, as far as possible. There's helpful counsel from an Apocrypha writer: 'Forgive your neighbours the hurt they do you, and, when you pray, your sins will be forgiven.... Remember the commandments and do not bear your neighbour ill-will. Remember the covenant of the Most High, and overlook the offence.'

Where there is unforgiveness in the heart, it affects relationships, both with God and other persons. That's the essence of the parable of Jesus on the unforgiving servant in today's gospel reading. By not forgiving another after he'd been forgiven the servant brought judgment on himself. Instead of things getting better they got worse. in his actions toward another servant. For us it can be in nursing bitterness or resentment, or being overly critical – or judgmental. The writer of the letter to the Hebrew labels these as 'bitter roots'. This imagery is very apt as they can grow and be projected onto others through hurting words or actions. It is far more desirable to be able to forgive. This also can take the tension out of a relationship. Indeed in that not too familiar passage from the Apocrypha the writer has some wise counsel: 'Resentment and anger, these are foul things....if you nurse anger against another, can you then demand compassion from God?' (Sirach 27) The words of Jesus are so true: 'the lips tell what the heart is full of'. So there's no issue, in our living the Christian life we are to be forgiving people. Hence from the Lord's Prayer we ask 'God to forgive us our sins, *as we forgive* those who sin against us.'

- 3) Third, a key factor *is to be able to say the words*. That is, to be able where possible to verbally extend forgiveness. It may be that an apology is in order, and then the forgiveness aspect. Thus to say '...please forgive me..or 'I forgive you....' Its important it comes from the heart. A simply 'sorry' may not be enough.

Saying the words is not easy. Probably because of a sense of unjust factors that have caused the grievance. It's like the welling up of a big lump in the stomach, and it doesn't easily or quickly dissipate. Yet each time as we come knowing forgiveness is needed, it is difficult to get into saying the words. However we do need to take into account the opening of the gospel passage of today, 'How often should I forgive?' The answer of Jesus: 'not 7 times but 77 times'. In other words each time we know this is needed. We might well consider this as a *healing action*.

Certainly from my involvement in healing ministry that's a component and very often leading to healing of relationships. With the extending forgiveness there's a 'letting go,' and sense of relief. And after, I think well why was it so hard. This I believe is because of 'grace' – that God is affirming what we have done and said.

4) *Self-forgiveness* There's one further aspect which may follow the forgiving of another, highlighted in the words of forgiveness of the NZ Prayer Book Service. 'God forgives you, forgive others, forgive yourself.' Thinking especially of the third phrase, *forgive yourself*. In the course of my ministry I've heard people say, 'I could never forgive myself' .... for something that happened. Yet where we are truly sincere, and seek God's forgiveness, it is real and unconditional, so one can accept that forgiveness. Indeed I would suggest that is motivation for forgiving others. If for our transgressions God truly forgives, we can forgive ourselves, and then are more able to forgive others. I'm mindful of this in ministering to a woman, a mother whose son took his life. There was inevitably a deep questioning of how it might have been different, 'if only...'. Was there something that she could have done that could have avoided such action? Forgiveness issues are all around this. How important in one's relationship with God who is loving, and forgiving - to *accept* that forgiveness. If there might have been factors, then receive that reassurance: 'God forgives you, *forgive yourself*.' Accepting forgiveness enables personal healing, and healing of relationships, in extending forgiveness to others.

*Finally*, whilst I began this Sermon with experiences from the wider society, to reiterate forgiveness lies at the heart of the Christian gospel, and of true expression of our belief. I do like this word of wisdom: '*Forgiveness is not the action of a moment, but the attitude of a lifetime.*' That is inherent in Jesus' teaching of forgiving seventy times seven.

Forgiveness was of the heartfelt prayer of Jesus when being nailed to the cross. The most accurate translation of 'Then Jesus said', is ... 'Jesus *kept on* saying, "Father forgive them..." This means in the context of Christ-love in you and me we are to have a forgiving spirit. St Paul most beautifully expressed in this excerpt in one of his pastoral letters: 'You are the people of God; he loved you and chose you for his own. So...forgive one another; - just as the Lord has forgiven you, you also must forgive. And to all these qualities clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony..... Christ's message in all its fullness must live in your hearts' (Col. 3.12 – 17)

I close with the invitation of Jesus: 'when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember...go...be reconciled...'