

## Forgiving (Matthew 18:21-35)

One unusually bright moment in the long history of the troubles in Northern Ireland came in 1987. It followed a particularly black moment, the bombing of a peaceful Remembrance Day service in Enniskillen, in which ten innocent people died and many more were injured. Gordon Wilson held his daughter Marie's hand as they lay trapped under the mountain of rubble. He was brought out alive, she died. Only hours later, interviewed by the BBC, he refused to express any bitterness towards the murderers of his daughter, saying that angry words could neither restore his daughter nor bring peace to Northern Ireland: 'I have lost my daughter and we shall miss her. But I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge. That will not bring her back.' These were spontaneous words, spoken from the heart, and remarkable for that. Some people might think them superficial: could real forgiveness in such circumstances be so immediate and apparently easy? But in the weeks that followed Gordon Wilson had to struggle to be true to those words. It helped to have said them; he knew they were right and he could hold onto them as he tried to come to terms with his daughter's death. He was misunderstood, even ridiculed for not wanting revenge. That it seemed beyond comprehension to many highlights how alien forgiveness is to the world the media usually depict for us. After all, we shouldn't know how many other victims of violence and injustice feel about those who've injured them were it not for reporters who almost eagerly prod them into voicing hatred or declaring such crimes to be beyond possibility of forgiveness.

Most people, of course, believe in forgiveness up to a point. If the offence is fairly trivial, if there are excuses for such behaviour, and if the offender really regrets it, says sorry and means it. But for most of us forgiveness quickly runs out. Some things are just too serious for forgiveness: I can never forgive him for *that*, people say. Peter's question to Jesus makes a lot of sense: how often should I forgive? What's the reasonable limit? If we forgive and forgive and it makes no difference, the person just goes on hurting us again and again, there must be a limit. So - seven times? Peter suggests. Not 7 times, says Jesus, but 77 times. And of course he means: stop counting. It doesn't matter how often your brother or sister sins against you, just go on forgiving.

But those numbers - not 7, but 77 - come somewhere else in the Bible too, and it's worth noticing why. Way back in the early chapters of Genesis, a rather obscure bit that not many people remember, after the wellknown stories of Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel, before the story of Noah and the Flood, there's a little sketch of the way human evil, starting with Adam and Eve, snowballed through the early generations. And it's a descent into violence. Cain's murder of his brother Abel was the first murder, the archetypal murder. And God protected Cain from vengeance and the start of an ongoing cycle of violence by declaring that anyone who killed Cain would suffer vengeance sevenfold. A strategy of deterrence to prevent the descent into violence. But seventh in descent from Cain comes a man called Lamech. Lamech too was a murderer, but Lamech composed a song which he sang to his two wives boasting of the murder:

I have killed a man for wounding me,  
a young man for striking me.  
If Cain is avenged sevenfold,  
truly Lamech is avenged seventy-sevenfold (Gen 4:23-24).

Lamech was not unprovoked. He was retaliating against someone who struck him, but there is no proportion in his vengeance. Unlimited vengeance is Lamech's proud principle, and it's the principle that drove early humanity's descent into unstoppable torrents of violence.

Unlimited vengeance is the extreme to which Jesus' principle of unlimited forgiveness is the precise opposite. Right down through human history, right through the Bible, there have been laws to stem the spirals of injuries and retaliation, laws which limit vengeance to proportionate retaliation, criminal justice systems which take the matter out of the sphere of personal revenge and into that of impartial justice. Human societies couldn't survive without such strategies of law and justice and punishment. But Jesus is in the business of proposing a more radical strategy, one which halts the spiral of evil entirely and puts in its place a spiral of healing and reconciliation. In N Ireland in 1987 one particular advance of hatred and evil stopped with Gordon Wilson, with a man who refused to continue it, refused to add hatred to hatred. We can't trace the spiral of healing that started with his act of forgiveness, but we can be sure there was one, less obvious and less newsworthy than the continuing violence. Gordon's forgiveness may not have affected his daughter's killers in the least (though of course we cannot know that), and in that case we might say it failed - at least to attain its most desirable end. But it wasn't by any means wasted. Violence isn't deterred by failure, nor should forgiveness be. Forgiveness needs to be as determined as hatred.

But for many of us, forgiveness often seems quite out of reach - not just for monstrous evils but even for the relatively trivial things we hold against each other. Jesus, characteristically, deals with that by telling a story. It's a parable, I think, just as central to Jesus' teaching as the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son, though less well known. Let's look at it carefully. One of the things to look for are the surprises. Jesus' parables often turn on a surprising element in the plot, usually just one - but in this story there are two surprises.

The story's about a king - some quite fabulously wealthy monarch - and one of his servants who owes him 10,000 talents. The servants in this story aren't ordinary workers - cooks or gardeners or whatever. They're the top people in the kingdom: privy councillors, government ministers, people like that. They must be because this servant owes 10,000 talents - an astronomical sum of money, unimaginable to Jesus' first hearers. Only the richest people in the world would have so much. When the king finds the servant can't repay this extraordinary debt, he first takes the sort of action one would expect. He takes steps to recover as much of the debt as he can: he orders all the servant owns to be sold, and the servant himself and his wife and family to be sold into slavery. (In this world you could sell people.) But the servant - again not surprisingly - goes down on his knees and begs the king - not to let him off his debt, which would be unthinkable, but just to give him time to pay. It's fairly silly to imagine he could ever find that much money to repay it, but it might be a way in which the king could recover some of the debt. But here comes the first surprise: in fact the king takes the quite astonishing step of simply forgiving the debt, outright. No conditions. He just lets the servant off completely.

So something stunning has happened: this amazing generosity of the king. When something like that happens in a story, you expect it to have remarkable effects. Life

can't just go on as though that hadn't happened. Big changes will follow. It's like throwing a stone into the middle of pond: you expect to see at least some ripples circling out from it.

But here comes the second surprise. There are no ripples. The world ought to have changed but as far as the servant's behaviour is concerned, it's business as usual. He behaves just as if this extraordinary event had not happened to him at all. He meets another servant of the king, who owes *him* something. And we get an exact repeat - up to a certain point - of what had happened between the king and the servant. The servant demands that his fellow-servant pay the debt he owes him, the fellow-servant goes down on his knees and begs to be allowed time to pay. The only difference so far is that the debt in this case is only a tiny fraction of what the first servant owed the king. But unlike the king, the servant refuses even to give the man time to pay. he has him put in the debtor's prison until he can.

Our reaction as hearers of the story is surely just like everyone else in the story: indignation. It's outrageous that the servant should behave like this. But notice the reason it seems to outrageous is because it follows that extraordinary act of generosity by the king to the servant. If the story had just started with the servant meeting the other servant who owes him 100 denarii, the servant's behaviour would occasion no surprise. The servant is acting entirely within his rights when he tries to recover the debt. He's only doing what most people - no doubt most of Jesus' hearers - would do in such circumstances. What makes us indignant is that the servant has received such extraordinary generosity - and then shows not the slightest generosity himself. After the initial surprise of the king's behaviour, what would not otherwise surprise us becomes shocking. The king has changed the world, rewritten the ordinary rules of behaviour, but the beneficiary of that new world behaves as though nothing had happened.

So Jesus is saying, of course: God has forgiven *us everything*, the whole of the vast debt of sin that we owe - all of it cancelled outright. We are the recipients of God's mercy and generosity on a mind-blowing scale. But if that's the case, it ought to change our whole lives. We're no longer in the book-keeping world in which the parable begins, a world in which accounts have to be settled. God has just torn up the pages of our debts. So for us not now to forgive those who wrong us is quite outrageous. To insist, as it were, on our *rights* not to be generous, our right to feel hurt and resentful, our right to seek redress - all that is to live as though the extraordinary fact of God's forgiveness of us had never happened.

So must we forgive others - however often, to any extent? Yes, because God has forgiven us to an unimaginable extent. God has forgiven us and he means his forgiveness to overflow into our dealings with each other. he forgives us so that forgiveness should become the principle by which we live our lives.

But can we forgive? can we get over all the hurt and resentment, can we bring ourselves to forgive? Again the answer is that it's God's forgiveness that makes us forgiving. It's when God's mercy overwhelms us, heals the hurts and softens the natural hardness of our hearts, it's the experience of being forgiven that *enables* us to treat other people generously, compassionately, forgivingly. And if we feel ourselves hardening in resentment, the first thing to do is to remember our own need of

forgiveness, and bring our resentment to God for him to let his forgiveness gradually dissolve it away.

What happens if instead we refuse to forgive? It's one thing to want to forgive but to find it hard; another thing not to want to forgive, to set our face in hatred against the possibility of forgiveness. We can do it with the most minor hurts and injuries. We nurse grudges. That word nurse that we sometimes use in that way is very apt. We tend and nurture our resentments, we deliberately help them to take root and to grow. We don't want to give them up because we find them in an odd sort of way comforting or pleasing. Our hearts get hard and bitter little by little because we can't let go of the memory that so-and-so did such-and-such and we were badly hurt and it's their fault we still can't forgive.

But here then comes the hardest and most insightful element of what Jesus says about forgiveness. People who can't forgive others are people who can't admit they need forgiving themselves. If being forgiven enables you to forgive, conversely also refusing to forgive inhibits you from receiving forgiveness. That's why the parable ends in the tragic way it does. The servant has not really accepted his forgiveness. If he had, he couldn't have gone on living as though it hadn't happened. By not forgiving others, the servant is insisting that the world is still the same, still the merciless world in which people get exactly what they deserve. Because he can't accept his forgiveness, his huge debt still burdens him and he consigns himself to the impossible task of repaying it. Forgiving and being forgiven belong inseparably together. You can't have one without the other, Jesus is telling us.

He makes the connexion elsewhere too. It's one of the most characteristic features of Jesus' teaching. Remember the Lord's Prayer. In Matthew's version, it uses exactly the image of the parable: indebtedness. "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." Our more familiar version: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Forgiving and being forgiven belong together. But what precisely is the force of that 'as': Forgive us *as* we forgive others? Does God really make his forgiveness conditional? Only if we forgive others will God forgive us? It seems to be what Jesus is saying: "if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt 6:14-15). I don't think it means God waits for us to be forgiving before he forgives us. After all, the parable, among other things, says the opposite. God forgives us and our forgiveness of others follows, as the result. But God's forgiveness of us can't take effect unless we actually accept it. And accepting it makes us forgiving. By refusing to forgive others we also refuse God's forgiveness. The connexion goes both ways.

Three final points about forgiveness:

(1) To forgive is emphatically not the same as to excuse. Forgiveness implies wrongdoing and guilt. Otherwise there would be nothing to forgive. So forgiveness isn't pretending that no wrong has been done. And forgiveness can't be properly accepted without acknowledging that one has done wrong. So forgiveness isn't at all a matter of taking evil lightly. When fully effective, it is God's surest way of destroying evil.

So being forgiving has nothing to do with that sort of amoral relativism that treats wrongdoing as only a matter of personal preference. The truly forgiving person is hurt by evil, outraged by evil when it warrants that, angry at injustice and cruelty, but chooses not to play evil's game, not to let evil provoke evil.

When I say that to forgive is not the same as to excuse, I don't mean there aren't ever excuses. When we think about the everyday wrongs we all feel others do us, we very often should consider that others may not be as culpable as we too readily think. We mistake people's motives, we ignore the pressures they're under, and so on. If we understand, often we can forgive more easily. But, still, it is not true that to understand all is to forgive all. I'm not sure who said that, but I don't believe it! There are serious evils - evils we do ourselves as well as evils we observe or suffer - serious evils that forgiveness certainly does not condone, serious evils that forgiveness fully recognizes in the act of forgiving those who do them.

(2) I find it helpful to think of forgiveness as gift. It's the gift God gives us to pass on to others. It's gift because it doesn't arise out of or follow from what has happened. It's not the natural response. It's something fresh from outside, and so it's the new element that can change situations. It interrupts the otherwise endless spiral of evil and starts something new and transformative. It even interrupts the ordinary course of justice. It admits the claims of justice but brings something more than justice into the situation. It's the miracle cure we should never have thought there could be had not God given it to us.

(3) Forgiveness liberates. Forgiveness the one thing that truly frees us from the entail of the past. It's very noticeable if you think about people who've suffered some serious injury or injustice, especially if it's involved losing a loved one - such people feel very strongly the need for some kind of closure to the experience. To see justice done in the outcome of a court case, to get some kind of government enquiry to determine what really happened - people look in various ways for some way of letting go of the matter, allowing the dead to rest (they sometimes put it), a closure so that their lives are not forever burdened with the wrongs of the past. They know that bitterness left to linger and to fester can poison a whole life. They long for revenge, or for justice, or for some definitive verdict on the matter ... as though these things close the whole chapter. Experience shows they do not. Forgiveness is the one form of closure that leaves no unfinished business to go on nagging at our lives. Full and complete forgiveness, that is. That may take time, it may take a long time. Not everyone is a Gordon Wilson, for many different reasons. But forgiveness is the process of true and full healing.