

Forgiveness: what's so hard about it?

Genesis 45:3-11, 15, Luke 6:27-38

24 February 2019

'If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?' You have probably all heard this tongue-in-cheek question before, as I have, but I was reminded of it again last week. It was not in a sermon, not even in church; interestingly, it popped up in the middle of a lecture about Consumerism, Religion and the Environment. The lecture was given by dr Ruth Valerio, who works for Tearfund. Apart from being an environmentalist, a social activist and author, Ruth is also a committed Christian and a theologian and everything she says and writes about comes out of her convictions as a follower of Jesus Christ.

I think what she wanted to emphasize when she posed the question in connection with her environmental interest was, that there should be distinct signs in the way we live our lives, which 'prove' that we are, indeed, Christians. Taking care of God's good creation and looking after all living creatures with respect, is as much the hallmark of a Christian, as loving our neighbour and giving to the poor. That our faith is not simply a set of beliefs, creeds and doctrines we sign up to, for the One we follow wasn't just talking the talk, but also walked the walk. He wasn't killed because of his innocent talk, but for his subversive teachings and radical life-style, which posed a great threat to those in power, who invested much in upholding the status quo. Ironically, they were the ones who did get Jesus' message loud and clear, but the question is, can we say the same of 2000 years of Christianity?

G K Chesterton is reputed to have said something like: "Christianity isn't a failure, it just hasn't been tried yet." What an indictment! Well, all right! I agree, it may have been an exaggeration, for it didn't take account of people like St Francis and St Clare of Assisi, or Mother Teresa or millions of other nameless followers of Christ. But it did highlight the historical tendency of the Church as an institution to spiritualize Jesus' teachings. As we heard in last Sunday's sermon, it started quite early, when Matthew's Gospel was written, who talks about *'the poor in spirit'*, in his Sermon on the Mount, while Luke keeps to the material understanding of poverty in his Sermon on the Plain.

Today we have heard the second half of the Sermon on the Plain as related by Luke. The message of the first part was hard enough, as it put centre-stage those who were nobody's priorities: the hungry and the poor, the distressed and the hated; those on the margins of society. The very ones indeed, whom Tearfund, Christian Aid and similar charities are trying to help. But today's reading goes into even harder territory when it raises tough questions about how we deal with the wounds inflicted on us by others, the hurts and personal attacks we may receive, how to resist or not to resist evil and finally the greatest of all the challenges, loving and forgiving our enemies. Unfortunately, we are so used to hearing the words in church *'Love your enemies'* that, in a way, we are anasthetised against their full weight until we have to face their virtual impossibility if we want to practice them in our daily lives. Did Jesus really know what he was asking his followers to do? Didn't he realise that it went against the grain? Against human nature, against all our sense of justice and fairness?

Jesus, of course, didn't invent forgiveness. If we look at the Hebrew Bible, our OT, which would have been Jesus' spiritual food, we find that it contains a lot of references to God's forgiveness. Within God's gracious covenant with Israel, the people time and time again violate their relationship with God and end up in great need of forgiveness, which is always forthcoming. But today's other Lectionary reading from the book of Genesis also gives us a human story of forgiveness, as we witness the reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers.

Now, the passage we've heard is not the whole story. The generous, forgiving words of Joseph do not just trip off the tongue. Many years had passed since Joseph's brothers nearly killed him and he got sold into slavery in Egypt. He had gained wealth and power since, he had been more than compensated for his childhood misfortune. Yet, if we read the preamble to today's passage, in chapters 42-44 of Genesis, we are shown that forgiveness is not an easy option. Joseph had not forgotten his hurt. Although he now holds all the winning cards and could afford to be generous, he can't help himself and he plays cruel games with his brothers, actually punishing them, and making them taste some of their own medicine before revealing to them who he is and finally saying the forgiving words. It could be argued that this is to help the brothers to repent, but even so! Commenting on the way the book of Genesis treats

Joseph's story, Jonathan Sacks says: To create a universe takes up no more than a single chapter (Gen 1) but to mend, to recreate human relationships takes many years and three full chapters in the story of Joseph. (*Not in God's Name 2015, Hodder*).

So, knowing all this, how does Jesus think, his disciples, and we, his current day followers can measure up to his impossibly high aspirations for us when he says: '*Turn the other cheek*', *Be compassionate as your Father in heaven is compassionate*' (Luke 6: 36)? How can we be God-like? Some weeks ago I had trouble with my computer and had to call in an 'expert'. He confirmed that my system was 'fatally compromised'. Well, I more or less expected the diagnosis, as I lost access to all my Word documents, but I thought all I needed was a little up-grade here and some adjustments there, and all would be well. But I was told it wouldn't be as simple as that. I needed a totally new system, which could be downloaded from the internet. I was terrified at the prospect. Would it mean that I have lost all my files containing the hard labour of many years, documents, pictures, powerpoint pres. etc? No – said the expert – the new system will still give me access to all my stuff from the past, except that now everything would go through the freshly installed filter of the new system. It will probably re-organise things – he said – but once you learn the different way this system operates, you will find it will be even better than your old system.

Well, it all came to pass, I'm glad to say. And I think this is the kind of change Jesus is teaching his followers. For loving our enemies and forgiving those who harm us is incredibly hard. Jesus knew this, for it is said that as much as two-thirds of all his teachings talk about, or at least imply forgiveness. A little tinkering here and some adjustments there, a bit more effort here or a bit more determination there simply won't cut it. How could they, when we think of the likes of the Holocaust, or 9/11, the atrocities of the apartheid regime in South Africa, or the so-called troubles in Northern Ireland. But also people's individual tragedies, when their spouses or children are tortured, abused or murdered. Yet, we know that it can and it does happen. How? Well, it's like my computer, we need a new component, we require something radically new, a completely different system, which Jesus calls the kingdom of God. And he doesn't mean a place by this. Richard Rohr has a brilliant way of putting it: The Kingdom is not where we are going to, it is where we are coming from.

The good news is that, like my computer, we too have the inbuilt compatibility to receive the new system and it's in our hands to activate the process. Jesus introduces this passage of hard teachings with the words: This is for those who are listening. Do we have trouble with people who don't like us? Do we have trouble with people, whom we don't like for this or that reason? Do we find it impossible to forgive the sins of others, especially if they have committed them against us? Do we despair at the rampant machinations of evil in the world?

We need to stay in the vicinity of Jesus. We need to keep him in sight and see him in action, we need to hear his voice, receive his power and energy and live out of the same divine love that motivated and carried him through his life. It is not easy, but once we start, it becomes possible and not the slightest bit of compassion and kindness and forgiveness we are able to give will ever be lost in God's economy; it will merge into the great stream of well-being our gracious God planned for our world. And we should never underestimate the power of that stream, which penetrates every corner of human life, right into its deepest, darkness recesses, where seemingly all hope is lost and no redemption is to be found.

To illustrate this, let me finish by quoting a beautiful prayer written by an unknown poet and left beside the body of a dead child at the Ravensbruck death camp, one of the lesser known concentration camps in WW2;

O Lord, remember not only the men and women
Of good will, but also those of ill will.
But do not remember all the suffering they inflicted on us;
Remember the fruits we have bought, thanks to
This suffering – our comradeship,
Our loyalty, our humility, our courage,
Our generosity, the greatness of heart
Which has grown out of all this, and when
They come to judgement, let all the fruits
Which we have borne be their forgiveness.

Erna Stevenson
Amersham Free Church