



**Genesis 50.15-21**  
**Matthew 18.21-35**  
**13<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

## **Forgiveness: Nearly Always a Process**

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**ALL AGE TALK: Forgiveness: Nearly Always a Process**

In the middle of last month our nation commemorated the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of VJ Day.

Eric Lomas, a Scot, served in the Far East as an Army Officer and was captured and tortured by the Japanese after the Fall of Singapore. He was then forced to build the infamous Burma railway that went over the River Kwai.

The horror of those brutal days stayed with him and in 1987 he sought help from the Victims of Torture Foundation. He said of his life at that time: *People thought I was coping but inside I was falling apart.* And in all this he hated the Japanese people. Eric Lomax's story is told in the book and film: *The Railway Man*.

In his retirement he tracked down one of the soldiers who had tortured him, Nagase.

Nagase himself was so full of remorse for what he'd done in the war that he'd set up a Buddhist Garden of Atonement at the Bridge over the River Kwai. Nagase, after the war, dedicated the rest of his life to the search for international peace.

Eric Lomax was eventually persuaded to meet up with his former torturer, Nagase, in 1995. He arrived in Thailand not at all sure he could go through with the meeting as he was still raging inside against his torturer.

And then he met him. Lomax met Nagase. What happened next demanded great courage and humility from both men. They talked for

three days, and in the talking they even began to laugh together.

In place of anger and rage, guilt and shame, these two complex, yet wonderful human beings found a new pathway, a united one that led to reconciliation.

None of this was easy for either man, it was a process that took decades. Even that initial meeting was one full of fear and hidden agendas.

Yet, by meeting together it was as if they looked into the other's soul and in doing so found a mutual humanity.

Forgiveness is often messy and nearly always a process. At least it is in today's reading from the Jewish Scriptures. Joseph and his brothers are reconciled after years of mistrust and it's a process that has mixed motives and unresolved issues still apparent even at the moment when peace is offered.

Joseph and Eric Lomax show us what it means to be bridgebuilders of hope and forgiveness.

## SERMON: Forgiveness: From Different Points of View

Minister: For the Word of God is scripture  
**All: For the Word of God among us**  
Minister: For the Word of God within us  
**All: Thanks be to God. Amen**

Our Junior School play was The Pied Piper of Hamelin and I was all set to go. I went through the auditions and won the part of the mayor. That meant I wore a gold chain and fine clothes. I even had a few lines. Two weeks into rehearsing and I had to tell the teacher that my family might be moving away from town before the end of term. Well, that changed everything. We didn't actually move after all, but I was demoted. My chain and fine cloths were taken from me and passed on to another and I simply became a Member of The Cast.

I've got over it now, or perhaps I haven't and that's why I'm telling you about it! In the process I saw the play from two angles, and it felt totally different. In my original role I was on the front line with a speaking part and that felt very different from the back row and being a mere non speaking member of the cast.

Today's reading from Genesis, of the brothers asking forgiveness from Joseph reads differently depending through which character we view this narrative.

If we start with the perspective of the brothers, then we are in a pretty sticky place. They ditched Joseph years ago because his ego annoyed them. They sold him as a slave to a passing trader. And in the process, they broke their father's heart.

The guilt of those days and that incident lingered. It coloured their past and infected their future. They felt as if they could never break free from what they had done.

As one commentator puts it: *Family Harmony is not a hallmark in Genesis.*

It's the siblings who continually fall out with one another, Ismael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau and now Joseph and his brothers.

In this family no one seemed to learn from the past. The brothers had lied to their father about Joseph's disappearance. Indeed, we never really know if Jacob ever fully realised what his sons had really done. Yet now they take it one step further and lie about their father. They say to Joseph that it was his wish that if ever they were to meet again then their father wanted Joseph to forgive them.

Now, we have long speeches from Jacob before his death but in none of them is that request ever recorded. So, could it just be that the brothers made it all up just to save their skin?

Here they were before Egypt's saviour, Joseph, whose agricultural strategy had saved the nation from starvation and they feel weak, guilty

and vulnerable and they invoke a false memory of their father.

From this perspective this is a duplicitous tale of one wrong leading to yet another.

So, how does it look from Joseph's point of view?

Back in his youth Joseph was quite the peacock. He wore that long-sleeved coat of his with aplomb. He strutted around his brothers and often taunted them with dreams showing his superiority over them.

And yet it all seems to have come true. What they hated then was now a reality and at this point their little brother had the power of life or death over them.

Perhaps, unlike them, Joseph had become a tad more self-aware. He does not lord it over them but says: *Do not be afraid, I shall provide for you and your dependants. Thus, he comforted them and set their minds at rest.*

He may not have used the word 'forgive' but his actions showed 'forgiveness'.

The word 'forgive', used in the brothers' request has about it, in the Hebrew, the idea of 'lifting'. It is as if, when we forgive, we lift the burden from another person. The burden of guilt that has been weighing them down, by offering a hand of forgiveness it is as if we can take the burden from off their shoulders.

I find that a beautiful picture and in essence it's exactly what Joseph does here. In doing so he opens up a different sort of future for both them and him. Instead of the division between them continuing to fester, it can now heal. Everyone moves on from this scene with a lighter spirit because this burden has been lifted from weary shoulders.

So what of our last perspective this morning? How would others view this story of forgiveness and reconciliation?

Our passage today belongs to a genre of Jewish literature called *Court Stories*. These were tales from exile chronicling the heroic actions of Jews whilst living in a foreign court, serving the king and people of another country. These moments were not just personal but ambassadorial. At such moments others looked on and made judgements about the faith and God of these Jews. These were moments that spoke.

Joseph serving in Egypt is a court story, as is Daniel in Babylon or Esther in Persia. These characters make powerful statements about retaining their religious identity even when living and serving in a foreign land.

I wonder how people see us? Surely our prayer is that in some way the faith that defines us becomes visible even to those who don't share it. Never more so than in our relationships and the way we deal with friction and faction.

Others looked on in Egypt. At first, they see a family at war. Yet as Joseph lifts the burden of guilt from his siblings, they witness a family restored.

None of this is easy and often it is messy. Lomax and Nagase show us that forgiveness is often a process. Joseph and his brothers remind us it is essentially about lifting the burden of guilt. And Jesus and Peter teach us in the 70x7 passage that the call to be forgiving never really ever goes away.

May we, in the many perspectives of our lives, know the reality of both forgiving and being forgiven, in the name of the one who cried out from the cross: Father, forgive. Amen.

*Ian Green, Finchingfield and Amersham, 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2020*