

Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us

To Jesus' listeners, the idea of a man running was quite disturbing. Maintaining dignity and not losing face is an important part of many cultures, and most certainly amongst men in middle eastern culture. People didn't go jogging to keep fit in those days. And the older a man was, the less dignified and more shocking the idea of him running. The man in this wonderful story of the Running Father is, I would imagine, at least 40 – and that was fairly old at the time. So why was he running? Well, he was running out to welcome someone who had brought disgrace upon the whole family and who had been insultingly disrespectful in asking for his proceeds of the will to be given to him now. Running to welcome someone who had dishonoured the family was especially shocking. So, who is this undignified man running to greet such a disreputable person? Well, says Jesus, it is God Himself. We are now in the realms of beyond shocking.

“Forgive us our trespasses”. This father really had forgiven the son even before he reached him. So, we might well want to ask, why do we need to ASK God to ‘forgive us our trespasses’ when it looks like He’s already done so. And the answer surely lies in the fact that the son had no idea of it until he met his father face to face. He had to go back to his father to make that loving forgiveness real.

I used to scratch my head when I heard preachers go on about sin and my need to be forgiven. It didn't used to ring very true. In fact, I used to envy folk who seemed to have some amazing story to tell of how they used to be drug addicts, or violent offenders and then discovered Christian faith. Not only would it all seem more real to them, but they could probably also write a book about their life and get both money and fame as a result of their previous life. It all seemed grossly unfair to me.

But I'd missed the point. The point is not that we have done somewhere between 40 and 50 individual misdemeanours since getting up this morning, which need confessing and forgiving. It's to recognise the implausibility of a very imperfect, selfish person such as myself being invited to have the honour of being a child of the all-loving creator of the universe. Deep down, that just can't be right, surely. But, looking at the welcome the Son received when his Father embraced him, that is exactly what God has made possible.

I gather that when Napoleon's army was once encamped somewhere, a young guard on the night shift fell asleep. That obviously exposed the whole army to enormous danger, and when the man was discovered asleep, he was sentenced to be executed for such a dereliction of duty. Apparently, somehow, the young guard's mother was informed – I think the camp was not so far from the family home. The mother rushed to the camp, managed to gain access to the tent where Napoleon was and begged for him to show mercy to her son. Napoleon's answer, not unreasonably, was “Does your son really deserve my mercy?”. Whereupon the woman very cleverly and humbly replied, “Sir, if he deserved it, then it wouldn't be mercy.” And the young soldier, so the story goes, was duly reprimanded but spared execution.

How much or how little we deserve has nothing whatsoever to do with God's forgiveness and running welcome to us. They are, against all our instincts, totally unrelated. That is what grace is.

I wonder if that all sounds a bit too easy? After all, justice needs to happen. We live in a harsh world where there is plenty of greed, dishonesty and cruelty. So, is this picture of God running to welcome us just all a bit too simple? Maybe naïve? After all, we all know that parents who are too soft and never set boundaries are doing their children no favours. So why God make this so apparently easy? To which the answer is, and I'd let us ponder this: easy for whom? Easy for us, who need to go back to him accept this extraordinary gift of forgiveness and unconditional love? Or easy for the one who had to suffer the injustice, the dishonour and the intense pain on the Cross. God's forgiveness of me is part of what Good Friday is all about.

“Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us”. God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others go hand in hand. We can helpfully look at the whole area of forgiveness as being like

a door: the more we open the door to understand and live in God's total forgiveness and acceptance of us, the more we can open that same 'forgiveness' door to other people.

So, that brings us on to the issue of forgiving other people. Some of us keep a firm hold of memories of wrongs others have done us or to those we love; some people need to forgive themselves for stupid decisions made with damaging consequences. And for all of us, how are we meant to get forgive the perpetrator of a terrorist attack, with innocent civilians unnecessarily slaughtered. Forgiveness in one sense seems unnatural and even unjust.

So just what is the forgiveness we are urged to show ? To 'forgive' is not to condone. It is not to say, "Oh, it doesn't matter. We'll just let it go and not make such a big thing of it." It is rather to say, that person is answerable to God in the end. I'll leave it in His just hands. And in the meantime, I won't let resentment or bitterness make my own life more miserable. Because when I hold on to a festering wound from someone who wronged someone I love, the irony is that it is me who suffers more than the object of my anger. As Marley's ghost in Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol, said "we must not drag the chain of the past with us wherever we go."

So how can we get to that point ? First of all, sometimes we need to ask ourselves: do I really want to forgive that person ? Or is there some bizarre satisfaction in holding on to my bitter feelings towards them ? Sometimes, people need to start by honestly saying "Lord, I don't feel like forgiving them one little bit, but I'm happy for you to make me willing." Another valuable step, according to many writers on forgiveness, both religious and secular, is actually really trying to clarify in your mind what it is that needs forgiving. So often, past hurts are a mixture of what someone did or didn't do, bound up with my original expectations of that person, and the way I perceived and reacted to what they did. Actually, trying to isolate precisely what needs forgiving can be an important step. The next step is the toughest. It is actually making a decision to let the resentment go. This may initially have to be done through gritted teeth, but is no less valid for that. Some folk I've heard of have even found some symbolic act helpful – taking some leaves, each representing an area of resentment and throwing them one by one into a stream, and watching them disappear into the distance. I've never done that but I understand the value for people who do.

I end with a story that demonstrates the fruit of forgiveness: what makes it all so worthwhile. Abraham Lincoln was once described by a colleague as "Not very good at hating people." As President, he chose as his secretary of war a man called Edward Stanton, who was not an easy man and who had been a long-time critic of Lincoln, once referring to the "painful imbecility of Lincoln". He had regularly lambasted Lincoln in the press. So when Lincoln appointed him to such a high office, many asked the President why he was appointing a man who apparently disliked him so intensely. The answer was simple "because I consider him to be the best man for the job". Years later, Stanton was one of just a few people who stood by Lincoln's deathbed in his last moments, after years of working closely together, and one of the many things he is reported to have said later was that Lincoln had been the "best handler of men the world has ever seen". He had developed an affection and admiration for the great man. Lincoln's forgiving attitude to all the insults of previous years had made that possible.

Forgiveness is not the soft option it can sound. But it undoubtedly helps us to become much more effective channels of God's outrageous love, the love of the middle-aged man running to greet his undeserving son and welcome him home.