

Forgiveness, reconciliation, inclusion

We hear a lot about atrocities - war crimes and beheading of hostages, soldiers targeting children, another anniversary of 9/11 coming up; we are afraid of harm nearer at hand - talk about armed police in Scotland, worries about abuse over the referendum, criminals in our streets (there was a young man hiding from the police in our church this week); or personally - verbal abuse or violence in the home, or just falling out with each other.

We can see the need for reconciliation and arbitration in the big things. But are we not just as interested in the things nearer home? Is there someone you have hurt? Is there someone who has hurt you - so that you can't forgive them?

What do we do when we are sinned against? When someone hurts you or takes from you or abuses you in some way? Where, except in the teaching of Jesus, and hopefully in those who follow him, do we find a refusal to be caught up in a cycle of blame and revenge? Where is the place of reconciliation; freedom-from-fear and forgiveness – big-hearted, full-on forgiveness?

The gospel text outlines a clear procedure designed to help those who do wrong recognise their wrongdoing and return to the community. It sees that **reconciliation and forgiveness** is deeply related to God's mercy and shows us the foolishness of those who try to set limits on their willingness to forgive others. [next week Peter is told forgive 70x7, limitlessly] It is the basis of absolution in the prayer Jesus taught: 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.'

Therefore, reconciliation begins in our seeing that we are forgiven – that **God forgives us**.

I heard a great, if probably apocryphal, story about a Catholic girl in the Philippines. It was claimed that she could hear the voice of God. When she prayed she could hear God talking to her – in a conversation. Anxious to set the matter at rest and to avoid any mis-representation of God a local bishop went to see her – to prove the veracity of her story.

He asked, 'Does God talk to you when you pray?'

'Yes,' she replied.

'OK. Then next time you are praying can you ask Him what it was that I said to him in the privacy of confession.'

'Alright,' said the girl.

The bishop came back to her a few days later. 'Did you ask God about my confession?' he asked. 'Yes,' she replied.

'Did he tell you about it?' Again, 'Yes.'

'Then what sins did I confess?' asked the bishop, 'what did God say?'

'He said he had forgotten.' Said the girl.

When we recognise we are forgiven then there is a chance we will want to forgive - to look for reconciliation. If we read the scripture this is the advice over and over. In Romans today: 'Owe no one anything, except to love one another.'

This is advice that the Church has needed down the centuries and is still relevant today, worldwide in the Anglican Communion and when local communities fall out – sometimes over something very silly.

We can't always be united, though we could probably manage it more often than we do. Yes, we must sometimes hold out for what we think is truth against falsehood, though probably less often than we would like. But against all the temptation and need to squabble, Jesus slips in the vision of what our unity might do: *if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.* And, incidentally, Jesus adds, "I will be there too." There is a terrible sarcasm in that phrase... 'if even just two of you could agree about something /anything. I will be there. ' The things we forfeit by our love of discord.

But sometimes real wrong is done to us – people do sin against us and I would like to think about the place of lament. I think this is a liturgy/ a style of singing and worship [known to God's Hebrew people and evidenced in scripture] that we have sadly forgotten and that we may need to revive as a nation.

I think about the story of dancing in the dark. Many of us remember the reporting of horrors that took place in Chile during the Pinochet regime. It was a time of killings, torture and rapes; families torn apart in the middle of the night; men young and old simply disappeared never to be seen again. 3,000 of them, los *Desaparecidos*. At the height of the regime, groups of bereaved women, the mothers and wives of the 'disappeared' would gather together and simply dance in front of the police stations. In gestures of lament and protest, they would pin photographs of their loved ones to their clothes and dance with invisible partners. It was a spiritual and symbolic act, dancing with the spirits of their lost ones and refusing to lie down before the evil that caused their grief. This spiritual act of lament challenged evil at its very roots. Their action led to the eventual end of that regime and curtailed evil. They

showed a peaceful way to counter and resist the wrong without embarking on violent actions that quickly become evil themselves. Can we find ways to forgive, even as we are forgiven? Can we find ways to resist evil, so that it will be transformed and ultimately defeated through peaceful gestures of lament?

So, in summary

First: we ourselves are forgiven,

Second: we should try for reconciliation

Then: ...

What if that doesn't work? If all else fails, Jesus says, treat them like a Gentile or a tax-collector. Now how did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? He talked to them, he went and ate with them, he forgave them. And maybe (if Jesus were saying this), he would say, 'they might be as bad as a renegade, stubborn and obdurate. They have hurt us. Maybe you are right.' He would say, 'but I have found tax collectors and sinners not altogether hopeless. My experience is that they too have a heart to be touched and some have become my best friends. You might still win them over as I have.'

and if two of you can agree - I will be there!