The Psalms
Psalm 86 Bow down thine ear

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Jeremiah 31: 31–37 Mark 2: 1–12

Psalm 86 makes two assertions, that God is good (v. 5) and that God is great (v. 10). Both are fiercely contested, and not just in cyberspace, where 'the four horsemen of the non-apocalypse' (Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens) have maintained vigorous patrol, assailing every appearance of the tooth fairy or celestial teapot that affronts their vision.

I can imagine what an Old Testament psalmist would make of equine flu in this context, but I forbear. (There was an outbreak of equine flu in UK in early February, 2019, with serious repercussions for the nation's racing calendar.)

Right now I wish to focus on another element in the psalm, the description of God as 'ready to forgive'. That's a weak rendering of what is just one word in the original text, as we shall see. 'Ready to forgive' certainly won't sound very impressive or attention-grabbing, if we think we are exempted from the need of divine forgiveness. But most of us have joined together in the General Confession and admitted otherwise, so I rest my case. In fact, we need to hear it far more often—that God is 'ready to forgive'. We first experience God as 'ready to forgive' in a one-to-one encounter with him, and then we can with confidence and conviction share the message with the wider world. In that wider world, the ignorance or neglect of the concept of forgiveness bedevils a lot of our public discourse, in parliament, in the media, and elsewhere.

This results in a favourite bête-noire of mine, if that phrasing is tolerable. That is—the habit of referring to a certain kind of individual in the public eye as 'the shamed Mr X' or 'the disgraced Mr Y', and so much the better if X or Y is or was a member of one of the Houses of Parliament, or the Church, or some other bastion of rectitude. The person so vilified may have served sentence, paid their debt, been rehabilitated, or may have come good, but they will never be allowed to live down their crime or indiscretion. Even Judas Iscariot ('who also betrayed him') is treated more generously in the Gospels.

One is often reminded of the story of King David when he was in a(nother) spot of bother with God, and was allowed to choose his punishment. 'Let us fall into the hands of the Lord', he announced, 'for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into human hands' (2 Samuel 24:14). And well said! That God should be more merciful than our fellow, erring, humans, is surely great news.

The text is remarkable for another reason. Over the space of the several chapters prior to this, the story is of David's appalling moral lapses and the consequences that God visited on him through his family. But even under the weight of such a heavy hand, he still finds God to be merciful. Moreover, when he was on his deathbed he gave advice to his son and successor Solomon that reeked of vengefulness and political pragmatism. Mentioning a couple of his more troublesome enemies, he basically tells Solomon, 'You'll know what to do with them!' (1 Kings 2). The notion of divine forgiveness clearly has not impacted his own dealings with his neighbour, and the failure is picked up later in the text (1 Kings 3:11).

'The shamed X' and 'the disgraced Y' are a poor resuscitation of those ancient Homeric epithets, that recur, for reasons of metre and memorability, in the Iliad and Odyssey. So, when dawn appears, it is 'rosy-fingered dawn', and 'Achilles' is mostly 'Swift-footed Achilles'. It's a bit like that with 'shamed' and 'disgraced' and the rest of the nasty argot: tabloid and twitter declaim endlessly about sin, guilt and shame and unremitting judgment—enough to superannuate the prophets of the Old Testament, if not the evangelists of the New. They outdo John the Baptist, Martin Luther, and maybe Jonathan Edwards, except that these last-named have another song to sing, about repentance, faith and forgiveness. Admittedly we do live in confusing times, when in the past week Donald Tusk has mused publicly on the topography of hell, and Donald Trump has voted for the gospel of peace and has disavowed the politics of revenge.

While maintaining this particular focus on forgiveness, I am not denying that there are many wrongs done, in public and in private, that call for the sanctions of the law to be applied. That stares us in the face these days.

Even so, and notwithstanding, Christians should be in the van of protest against the prevailing culture of nastiness, even if things seem never to have been much different. We may then have to listen to the old charge that people of faith are 'hypocrites'—a charge that is sometimes justified. But 'hypocrisy'—a word without much currency until Christ took it up—has a near-neighbour called 'self-righteousness', and there's a lot of it about.

As already will be obvious, the biblical emphasis on forgiveness doesn't begin in the New Testament. It is the Old Testament that gives the lead, alongside the well-known 'troubling texts' and 'texts of terror' that are also there. It's simplism to dismiss the Old Testament as merely the original 'desert religion'—harsh, desiccated and destructive. It is literally straight out of the desert—from the Old Testament tradition of Mount Sinai and the Israelites in the desert—that we hear of 'The Lord…the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, showing love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin …' (Exodus 34:6–7). The text claws back a little after that, but it's a great start.

It's worth stopping over it, because it stands there right at the heart of the foundation story of the people of Israel, and it is given as an exposition of the Name (the tetragrammaton YHWH) of the God of Israel. It's as central as that, and it means that we are not just cherry picking in leaving aside more difficult bits in the Old Testament.

In among the numerous texts cut from the same cloth stands Psalm 86, with the word that so far has been translated 'ready to forgive'. In fact, it's an occupational word such as we have plentifully in English. We have specialists, dentists, psychiatrists, phlebotomists, for example. And decorators, operators, administrators, animators. The forms tell us that we are dealing with occupations.

Some of us will recall the Israeli military leader and politician of a generation ago, Moshe Day(y)an, or 'Moses Judge' as he would be in English. In Hebrew, ancient and modern, 'Dayyan' is the name of a profession. (I had better be careful with 'occupation' in this context.) It is properly spelt with a short 'a', a doubled middle letter, and a long 'a'. The single word translated 'ready to forgive' in English versions of Psalm 86:5 is constructed in the same way. So God is a 'forgiver' by occupation.

(I doubt that the German poet Heinrich Heine was thinking of this text when he said, 'Of course, he [God] will forgive me; it's his business [or profession, or occupation].' The last few words are best known in their French dress: '*c'est son métier*'. Luther's translation [1545] would certainly not have helped in that direction.)

It is because the God of the Old Testament is a 'forgiver' by profession that forgiveness is a recurrent note throughout the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. It is the most important insight about God that the Old Testament has to offer, according to heavyweight German theologians, and many others. But that only makes sense because there are wrongs that need the forgiveness.

This affects the telling of the whole of the Old Testament story.

It's why we hear hardly anything about the delights of Paradise in early Genesis, except for the trees and the river that waters them. Other accounts in Judaism and around the world are more forthcoming with information. In Genesis, it's because the two trees in the middle of the garden—the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—represent the moral test by which Adam and Eve will stand or fall.

It continues like that through the rest of the Old Testament, with aesthetics and audience appeal often sacrificed in the telling of the painful story of human waywardness. But it is in the splicing of these two strands, of serial wrongdoing and supervening forgiveness, that the grand narrative of the Bible reaches its climax. The convergence takes place in the complex of events marked by Good Friday and Easter Day.

Let us return for a moment to those Homeric epithets, in particular 'fleet-footed Achilles'. In fact, if my vague recollection of the Iliad is correct, 'fleet-footed Achilles' spends most of the narrative time in the Iliad sulking in his tent—he didn't get his woman—finally redeeming his epithet when he chases Hector round the city of Troy three times.

So much for epithets, including 'the shamed' and 'the disgraced'. But the 'forgiving God' of the original desert revelation is not dealing in redundant epithets. The theme of 'the compassionate and gracious God' pops up regularly throughout the Old Testament, including verse 15 of our psalm: 'But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.' And it is in the incarnate Lord that the epithets have been translated into saving action for God's estranged ones.

Here is not only the faith of the church, but the hope of the world, and our hope individually who embrace that same good news of forgiveness to ourselves.