

Forgiveness

When asked how many times we should be prepared to forgive, Jesus replied, in no uncertain terms, that forgiveness should know no bounds – not seven times, but seventy times seven. (I doubt if even the most rabid fundamentalist would say he meant that it's alright to hit back the four hundred and ninety first time one was wronged!). Then, the parable of the debtors shows vividly how hypocritical it is for us not to forgive when we have been forgiven so much. The parable is rather like a commentary on that clause in the Lord's Prayer, 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us'.

That clause is the only one in the Lord's Prayer that seems to insert a condition – forgive us as we forgive. But I think it's very important *not* to take 'as we forgive' to be a condition of our being forgiven. On the contrary, God's forgiveness is unconditional. It comes first. It doesn't wait upon our readiness to forgive. (Think of Jesus' words on the cross: 'Father forgive them, for they know not what they do'.) But of course God's great forgiveness finds its natural and obvious consequence in our forgiving those who trespass against us. That's the point of the Lord's Prayer's 'as we forgive them that trespass against us'.

The parable of the debtors brings this out by showing so vividly how unnatural it is if God's immense forgiveness doesn't issue in our own readiness to forgive what by comparison, are relatively small offences. The king lets off the huge debt quite unconditionally. Hence the monstrousness of the servant's subsequent conduct. Admittedly the end of the parable rather spoils this point by making the king turn nasty and hand the servant over to be tortured, and I can't deny the fact

that the threat is made that God will do the same to us if we refuse to forgive. But again I don't think even the most rabid fundamentalist would really use that text to recommend the torture of the unforgiving. That would be a classical example of how a literal approach to Scripture can undo the greatest moral insights to be found in Scripture, of which the moral imperative of unbounded forgiveness is one. I can only take that rather crude stuff at the end of the parable as part of its rhetoric, bringing out the enormity of the refusal of the forgiven to forgive. The moral point of the Gospel's teaching on forgiveness is not to be found in the parable's conclusion, and, as I say, that's precisely not what the comparable clause in the Lord's Prayer is about.

But now I want to dwell on the significance of forgiveness in Christian ethics generally – both in personal and in social terms. Forgiveness is one of the three key notions in Christian ethics. The other two are love and justice. But sometimes we forget what a novel and creative thing forgiveness is, how different someone of a forgiving spirit is from someone who retaliates, takes offence, or plots revenge, and how different a society where the spirit of forbearance and forgiveness prevails is from a society permeated with the spirit of the vendetta. Sadly, in our own day, we have only too many examples of the vendetta spirit, something we all had hoped was on its way out with the progress of Christian civilisation. And I do not just mean in Middle Eastern countries such as Iraq, but much nearer home, in the Italian Mafia, in Northern Ireland still at times, in our gutter press, and, I fear, from time to time, in the American and British governments. It is extraordinarily hard, humanly speaking, to go on forgiving, seventy times seven. It can only be the effect of grace – the consequence of God's boundless forgiveness taking effect in human lives, and, hopefully, coming to permeate more and more our society and our civilisation. Sometimes we are tempted to despair at the recrudescence of the anti-Christian

spirit of retaliation and revenge. But, as the retired, and admittedly rather maverick, bishop, Richard Holloway, says in his marvellous little book, entitled *Forgiveness*:

Only unconditional, impossible forgiveness can switch off the engine of madness and revenge and invite us, with infinite gentleness, to move on into the future. Until we can do that, we are exiled in the horror of the past, locked in the unspeakable nightmare. Sadly, unconditional forgiveness is beyond most of us, even though we believe it might be the very thing that could release us. It comes, when it comes at all, the way great genius suddenly visits us in extraordinary people.

Holloway, very appropriately, mentions Nelson Mandela in this connection. And he adds, of this impossible possibility:

Believers say it has its source in God, who pours out life without calculation from a pure excess of being. For those who do not believe in God or can find no meaning in this kind of language, the mystery remains that this prodigal universe sometimes redeems its own pain through extraordinary souls who, from somewhere beyond all possibility, forgive the unforgivable.

And, I might add, that mystery may well give those who do not believe in God some reason to think again.

I hope I've said enough to bring out the deep, extraordinary, far-reaching nature of forgiveness as a basic theme in Christian ethics, and to persuade you that this is one of the things that the Christian Gospel is all about. And also I hope you see how silly it would be to take the last verse of this evening's second lesson as a text for Christian ethics, then or now. If ever anything could show up the idiocy of biblical fundamentalism, surely this is it. Precisely as Christians inspired by the Bible, we have to ignore that crude conclusion where the king consigns the unforgiving servant to torture and where Jesus is made to say (or even said - with his tongue in his cheek) 'so likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you'.

I have been arguing that we have to probe beneath the surface of Scripture to the deep moral truths that are disclosed in the teaching of Jesus and in the response of the biblical authors to the revelation of God's love given in the whole story of Jesus. The creative power of forgiveness is one such moral truth. But it is not, of

course, the only one. We cannot afford to be sentimental in Christian ethics. We cannot ignore that other great biblical theme, which also manifests, in another mode, the searching, all-embracing, scope of the divine love. I mean the theme of justice. I do not want to give the impression that governments as well as Christians, law-courts as well as individuals, should simply forgive with the limitless patience and forbearance enjoined here in today's Gospel by our Lord. I do hope and pray for a Christian spirit of forbearance and forgiveness rather than a spirit of vendetta and revenge to characterise our institutional and communal life. That must come to pass if the ethics of the Gospel are to have any impact on our social life. But it would be sentimental, indeed it would be wrong, to expect judges and governments just to forgive the wrongs against which they have a mandate to protect the citizen and the state. The claims of justice cannot simply be abrogated in favour of the claims of forgiveness. It is not for us, let alone for the judiciary, just to forgive wrongs done to other people. But the spirit of forbearance can and should colour the way the government and the courts enact and carry out the demands of justice. I mentioned the name of Nelson Mandela just now. And the way in which the new South Africa, through its Truth and Reconciliation Commission, faced up to and dealt with the terrible injustices of *apartheid*, is a classical example of the way in which a Christian spirit can shape the way in which the claims of justice are met.

I mention this difficult question of the social ramifications of the command to forgive, because I do not want us to confuse the direct personal ethics of forgiveness of wrongs done to ourselves with the indirect social ethic of forbearance and restraint in the proper administration of justice. My main theme this evening has been the first of these – the personal theme: the way in which we Christians, ourselves accepted and forgiven irrespective of desert, can do no other than forgive and go on forgiving those who trespass against us.

But what if we don't? What if God's forgiveness and God's love fail to win our response? I must say something here about persistent wickedness and impenitence. The key question is this: Can human beings really resist God's forgiveness and God's love for ever? Do some people really end up in hell? Is the threat of endless, maybe self-inflicted, torture a real threat after all? Well, human wickedness is a terrible reality. People do create hell on earth. There's plenty of evidence of that in history and today. There's much that needs not only forgiveness but also purgation, radical reform and transformation. But can we seriously believe that God's forgiveness and God's love can fail to win a response for ever? Does it really make sense to speak of everlasting damnation for the impenitent? If what I've said about God's unbounded forgiveness and about the miracle of forgiving the unforgivable is true, we surely have to regard biblical talk of everlasting damnation, like that parable's talk of torture, as rhetoric, not straight theology. And I think we should believe St Paul meant what he said when he said, 'As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive'.

The great nineteenth century Christian Socialist, F. D. Maurice, was dismissed from his post as Professor at King's College, London, for suggesting in an essay on 'Eternal Life and Eternal Death' that the latter - eternal death - does not have to be construed as everlasting punishment. 'Eternal' doesn't have to be interpreted in a temporal sense. Eternal death is the state of self-inflicted separation from God from which the human race has been delivered by what God has done for us in Christ. Now fortunately I'm retired and can't be sacked for what I'm saying in this sermon. But what I find I have to say is this: if we concentrate long and hard on the forgiveness and the love of God and on what God has done and is doing to purge and transform all those made in his image, we simply cannot restrict its scope or limit its effectiveness. The hope - let's put it in those terms - of universalism, the view that, in the end, if not here on earth, then in God's eternity, all men and

women will be saved, has never been wholly absent in the Church, from Origen in the third century to Karl Barth and Karl Rahner, the greatest Protestant and Catholic theologians of the twentieth century, and indeed to that great, conservative, Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, with his astonishing theology of Christ's descent into hell and Christ's harrowing of hell – but I can't go into that here. I might just mention, though, your former Dean of Chapel, John Robinson, whose early book, *In the End, God*, is a fine defence of Christian universalism.

But, one may ask, is this a morally serious view? Can we really believe it, when we think of the Holocaust, of September the eleventh, or of what was done in my neighbouring village of Soham a few years ago? Can we really make moral sense of the idea of anyone, even God, forgiving the unforgivable and thereby eventually winning their response?

All I can say is that the forgiveness of Nelson Mandela for the perpetrators of *apartheid*, or the forgiveness of that Northern Ireland father who forgave the IRA murderers of his daughter in the Remembrance Day atrocity at Enniskillen, can surely be thought to afford some analogy for God's own infinite forgiving and transforming love. Only so can we really make sense of St Paul's words, 'as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive', or indeed of the famous words of Julian of Norwich at the end of her *Revelations of Divine Love*: '... all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.'

Amen