

Sermon: 'Generosity, Transformation and Certainty'

Rev. Gordon Newton

Methodist Central Hall, Westminster – 14th September 2008 11am

LESSON: Genesis 50: 15 – 21; Matthew 18: 21 - 35

There are some things that make a particularly striking Christian witness. One is a life of loving service, given consistently over a period of many years; that is why Mother Teresa made such an impact on many people.

Another striking Christian witness is what I call "a good Christian funeral", when a congregation gather together to remember a good life and people aren't completely devastated but there's an air full of resurrection hope and confidence.

The other striking Christian witness is the occasion when someone offers forgiveness in the most unimaginable circumstances.

In recent years we have seen a number of examples of Christians offering forgiveness in unlikely circumstances.

Anthony Walker was a teenager who was murdered in his home town of Liverpool three years ago. He was brought up in a Christian home and was a devout Christian himself. Two teenage lads were convicted of his murder. Anthony's mother, Gee Walker, made a great impact on many people when she spoke after his death: "I have to practise what I preach" she said. "I don't feel bitterness towards them, truly; all I feel is sadness for the family". Her daughter, Dominique, whose appeal in the aftermath of Anthony's death was seen as a key turning point in the police investigation, echoed the same thought when she said: "I did say that I forgive them, and I do still stand by that because you have to. I feel sorry for them because they didn't understand the magnitude of what they were doing".

The reaction and behaviour of people like Gee and Dominique make a very powerful impact on people. Many people are impressed but not able to react in the same way, and they wonder what it is that motivates people like the Walker family.

The parable of the Unforgiving Debtor takes us to the secret of being able to embrace that kind of spirit. I want to look at the parable for a while and then to ask two related questions.

The story Jesus told takes the scenario of a man who was in debt. It was a common enough scenario in the time of Jesus and sadly it's still very common now; and debt engulfs not only an individual but often a whole family. One of the ultimate consequences was for the debtor to be sent to jail and in this parable the king was about to send this debtor to prison until he pleaded for mercy; but having been let off the debt this man was not inclined to show the same mercy to someone who owed him some money. The almost laughable feature of this story is in the sums of money involved. Some years ago the Scottish Bible commentator, William Barclay, calculated that the 10,000 talents (owed to the king by the first debtor) translated into about two and a half million pounds, whereas the 100 denarii represented about £5. It was a simply way that Jesus used of helping his listeners to think about the difference between what we ask of God compared to what others ask of us in terms of forgiveness.

The cross of Jesus shows us very clearly just deeply we are indebted to God - it helps us see the extent of our sins and the extent of God's love.

In 1940 the city of Coventry in the West Midlands suffered a severe air attack and Coventry Cathedral was bombed and left in ruins as a result of the fire that broke out. Very soon discussions took place about building a new cathedral but the Dean and members of the Cathedral leadership were anxious for the new building to be seen not just as an act of defiance in the face of the enemy but to be a symbol of forgiveness.

They discovered two wooden beams that were charred but had fallen together in the shape of a cross, and they placed these on an altar in the ruined part of the cathedral and behind the altar they inscribed the words: "Father, forgive". That phrase "Father forgive" has become the theme of a litany which has been prayed ever since in the cathedral, at noon, every Friday. Many people around the world associate themselves with this litany and join in the prayers each week wherever they are.

The cross of Jesus is the source of our forgiveness, the sign of God's love reaching out to all of us, and it is the cross that begins to help us get in perspective the smallness of what we are so often asked to forgive compared to what we are - and have been - forgiven by God.

Of course, the story Jesus told was prompted by a question. The disciple Peter wanted to know how often he should forgive his brother and offered the suggestion of seven times. On the surface of it that seemed a reasonably generous suggestion because many of the Jewish rabbis taught that a person should offer forgiveness three times (they based their teaching on a passage in the prophet Amos). But Jesus isn't impressed with Peter's apparent generosity! He replies that he should be thinking in terms of seventy times seven, not just seven times.

True forgiveness can't be calculated! It springs deep from the heart. It's a spontaneous action and for those of us who are followers of Jesus it should be a thank offering for what God has done for us in the generous forgiveness offered to us, what Charles Wesley described as His "ceaseless, unexhausted love, unmerited and free".

That generosity is mind boggling and beyond our understanding, but when Tom Wright, the Bishop of Durham, writes about this parable he offers a simple picture that I guess we can all get our heads around:

"Every time we forgive we pass on a drop of water out of the bucketful that God has already given us".

If we want forgiveness to be real and meaningful and address difficult situations it has to arise from the generosity God has shown to us. "Forgive one another" says Paul "as God in Christ has forgiven you".

Ephesians 4:32

I said I wanted to ask two related questions about this story.

The first question is:

What is the relevance of this message for Racial Justice Sunday?

Many churches of different denominations, across Britain, are marking this Sunday as Racial Justice Sunday. It's an opportunity to acknowledge that our racial differences have so often been at the root of hatred and conflict. According to the newspaper reports of this last week, race is at the root of certain conflicts within the Metropolitan Police Force of this city.

This Sunday also provides us with the chance to pray for racial justice in all our nations, and in all our institutions, and to commit ourselves to work for racial justice where we are.

Some of the worst pain ever inflicted by people on their fellow human beings has arisen from race hatred. The very name of Auschwitz, or the famous picture of its entrance, sends a chill down our spines. Auschwitz, located in Poland, was the largest of Nazi Germany's concentration camps during the Second World War and over one million people died there in the gas chambers, ninety percent of them were Jews from almost every country in Europe. The atrocious activities of Auschwitz were the outcome of the cruel philosophy of the Nazi regime based on race hatred.

So the question is posed "how do we deal with the hatred that causes so much suffering?"

Of course, goodwill and a desire for peace are important factors, but goodwill and a desire for peace – by themselves – aren't enough to make a difference. There was no shortage of goodwill and desire for peace when representatives of 51 nations met in this Hall back in 1946 when the inaugural meetings of the United Nations Association took place. But it takes more than a little goodwill and a desire for peace to make a difference when deep injustices have taken place and it takes more than a little goodwill and a desire for peace to maintain harmony and justice.

Following the atrocities of the Second World War, life has moved on for many of the Jewish people but only because they have – to some extent – laid down the burden of bitterness.

Following the Apartheid years of deep injustice in South Africa, life has moved on, because many people have – to some extent – laid down the burden of bitterness. It hasn't been a sweeping under the carpet of all that was wrong or a suggestion that the sin of racial injustice didn't matter. Many people have used the "Justice and Truth Commission" that was set up to enable perpetrators of violence to acknowledge their part in what had been wrong, without punishment, and to enable victims to be heard, and to enable some reparations to take place. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who chaired the "Justice and Truth Commission" wrote about that experience and entitled his book "No Future without Forgiveness".

When things have gone deeply wrong in human relationships and serious injustices have taken place then forgiveness is the transforming factor.

People in Northern Ireland have had to learn a similar lesson in moving on from the days of "The Troubles" – the sectarian violence that engulfed Northern Ireland for several decades.

People in Rwanda have had to move through a similar experience following the genocide of 1994. One of our younger members here at Central Hall returned recently from a visit to Rwanda and was telling me about encouraging signs of reconstruction in that nation, but she went on to say something about this challenging process of people having to lay down past bitterness in order to move on.

In some of the large arenas of life, on the national and international stage, where wickedness has been on a scale almost too terrible to be contemplated, forgiveness isn't achieved easily. It isn't a simple matter of one individual forgiving another. It's a matter of people being prepared to lay down their burdens of being victims and feeling bitter and being willing to make a fresh start. That's forgiveness.

Earlier in our service the choir sang the words of Richard Farrant's famous anthem, couched in 16th century English, "Lord, for thy tender mercies sake, lay not our sins to our charge". "Lay not our sins to our charge" is a simple request to God to give us a discharge from our sins.

Giving a discharge to one another, especially in large matters of social injustice and international conflict, can be the most transforming power we can find.

The other question I want to ask relates to certainty. How can we be sure about forgiveness?

I ask the question because it was raised in our Old Testament reading and I think it's often raised in our own experience.

The Old Testament story of Joseph is a long one. You know the story. It's the story of a young man, his father's favourite (for understandable reasons) who suffered the equally understandable jealousy of his brothers. Given the opportunity, away from their father, they sell Joseph into slavery. He survives a mixture of fortunate and unfortunate circumstances through 15 or 20 years until he becomes in charge of the food supplies in Egypt. When his brothers come down from Israel, in a time of famine, seeking food he has the opportunity for revenge but chooses, instead, to opt for reconciliation. In that moving meeting with his brothers he assures them that God had been working in this series of events all along – and he preferred to see what had happened as a sign of God's providential working rather than his brother's evil intentions; and that would appear to be the end of the story. Not so!

A few years later Jacob, their old man, dies. Once again his brothers are worried. They are unsure as to whether Joseph really has forgiven them. Perhaps he was kind to them simply because he wanted to please his father. Now his father is dead maybe Joseph will think differently. So we have this postscript to the story. Once again Joseph gives them the same message:

"You intended to harm me but God intended it for good...so don't be afraid. I will provide for you and for your children". His brothers needed a lot of reassurance!

That uncertainty as to whether we really have been forgiven is part of our experience too. The story is told of a minister who had the most frightful row with his wife in the car as they were on their way to church one Sunday morning, the children sat in the back of the car and said nothing. The minister jumped out of the car, went and greeted his stewards with a warm smile, went into church, led his congregation in a prayer of confession, preached a magnificent sermon about the love of God, shook hands in the most friendly manner with all the congregation and then got ready to go home. As soon as he got in the car he turned to his wife and said: "And yes, there was one more reason why you upset me"...the argument went on! So often in our human relationships we just can't lay the problem or the grievance down and we know that others can't lay down their problems about us. If we are not sure about the forgiveness of one another it's not surprising that we feel insecure about God's forgiveness.

John Wesley lived at a time when there wasn't a very certain message being sounded about God's forgiveness by the church. One of the leading Christian writers in the 18th century, Jeremy Taylor wrote a very influential devotional book entitled "Holy Living and Holy Dying". In it he wrote about sin and repentance but there wasn't any clear word about God's forgiveness: "whether God has forgiven us or no, we know not, and how far we know not". Not much good news there!

One of the great contributions Wesley made to the Christian Church was to rediscover the New Testament teaching about the assurance of God's forgiveness. It was something that he felt on that night when his heart was strangely warmed and it was a conviction that grew stronger as he delved into Paul's letter to the Romans.

The central elements of Wesley's preaching have often been described in four sentences, sometimes described as the "Four All's of Methodism".

All need to be saved
All can be saved
All can know they are saved
All can be saved to the uttermost

It is that third statement that I draw your attention to this morning – "All people can know they are saved".

Wesley sometimes talked about how vile people felt before God and how burdened they were by their sins. The news of *certain forgiveness* was welcome news!

These days, we may not describe people as feeling "vile before God" in the same way that Wesley did, and yet we are very conscious of the low self-esteem that many people have, perhaps some of us feel that way. Some of this low self-esteem is brought about because we've placed undue weight on our failings and weaknesses. Psychologists may try to explain *why* we feel as we do, but they can't offer the ultimate cure of forgiveness that comes from God. The certainty of forgiveness brings with it a real sense of freedom.

If you're sitting here this morning feeling unsure about whether some family member or friend has forgiven you for something I can't reassure you.

But if you're sitting here this morning feeling unsure as to whether God has forgiven you or not, I want to say that the teaching of Jesus, and the cross of Jesus and the New Testament are quite clear that God's forgiveness is available for all who are truly sorry for their failings.

And the certainty of being forgiven by God provides the generosity for us to forgive, so that we are able to take drops of forgiveness from God's bucket; those drops will become part of the transformation for all the brokenness around us.

Thanks be to God for this good news!

Copyright Rev. Gordon Newton