



St Mark's Lenten Study 2009

Forgiving Jesus

Then Peter went up to him and said, 'Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?' Jesus answered, 'Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times'¹.

When they reached the place called The Skull, there they crucified him and the two criminals, one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing'².

The theme of this week's session is primarily about forgiveness and the teaching of Jesus about forgiveness. But I also want to point out something that we would do well not to overlook – the need that some of us may have to 'forgive Jesus'. This is why the session is called **Forgiving Jesus** rather than **The Forgiveness of Jesus**. Of course, I am not really suggesting that we need to forgive Jesus at all, rather that we may need to forgive those things that through the years, indeed centuries, have been done in the name of Jesus. There is a song by a British artist called Morrissey, formerly the lead singer in a band called The Smiths, who wrote a song called, *I Have Forgiven You Jesus*³, the theme of which was his own need to acknowledge and forgive the things that had been done to him by the church as he grew up in a restrictive religious environment. In this song Morrissey simply articulates the experience of a multitude of people who have in some way been mistreated or deceived in the name of Jesus by those professing to speak on his behalf. We cannot assume that we are exempt from this and it is true to say that in many cases we may not even realize it. Because of this we can often project a distorted image onto God, which creates a filter through which we perceive and experience our faith. I flag this up simply as something to bear in mind as we continue with our journey and especially in this week's session on the theme of forgiveness.

How Many Times?

In the passage quoted above from Matthew we see Peter approaching Jesus to clarify something about the nature of forgiveness. "How many times should I be expected to forgive my brother if he does me wrong?" This question could be linked to a passage in Luke where Jesus says, 'if [your brother] wrongs you seven times a day and seven times comes back to you and says, "I am sorry," you must forgive him'⁴. The number seven has great significance in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the Jewish consciousness. The number seven is a complete and sacred number - seven days of creation etc. The number seven symbolizes God's perfection, His sovereignty and holiness. It recurs again and again in its symbolic context both in the Old and New Testament. It is hard to imagine that Peter would not have understood this but not impossible that he would have taken Jesus literally. Whether he understood the significance of Jesus using seven as the number of times one should forgive isn't important since his question asking if he is only required to forgive his brother seven times allows for Jesus to take his teaching on forgiveness to the next level. "No", says Jesus, "not seven times but seventy seven times". In other words, time without number. There is no limit to the number of times we are required to forgive, and not only our brother either, since Jesus

elsewhere teaches that we are to love and bless (and therefore by implication forgive) even our enemies also⁵. This once again is radical teaching from Jesus and he does not only teach it but he also models it for us.

There are two significant stories about forgiveness, which we will now take a brief look at to see what Jesus is teaching about the nature of what it is to forgive.

The woman forgiven much⁶

In this story we see a woman of ill repute entering the house of a respected Pharisee named Simon who had invited Jesus to dinner. Once again we must employ our imaginations to visualize the scandal of this scene. Those present are immediately aware of the woman's presence as she weeps at Jesus' feet, washing his feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair before anointing them with oil – all the time covering his feet with kisses. From the story it would appear that Jesus is not at all fazed by the presence and actions of this woman regardless of her reputation and this must have surely added to the indignation of the others in the company. Indeed they begin to comment to one another whispering, "Does he not realize that this woman is unclean and yet he allows her to touch him in this way?" Knowing this, Jesus presents Simon with a riddle, "There are two men who owe money to a creditor, one owes five hundred dollars and the other only fifty, neither has the means to pay so the creditor writes off both of their debts. Which is the more grateful?" Smiling with a smug satisfaction that the riddle is so easy to solve Simon answers, "Why the one who owed much of course". At which point Jesus cuts them all to the heart by making it very clear that the actions of this woman who was despised by all of them present had exceeded anything they had been prepared to do for him and as such she was deserving of his forgiveness. It does not say that she begged his forgiveness rather it was her actions, showering him with the respect and honor he deserved – something that his host had failed to do – that brought her forgiveness. Her reason was that she was only too aware of her unworthiness whereas Simon was too full of self-importance. Forgiveness is the process by which this woman is restored to her full self. Her determination to brave the condemnation of the self-righteous and offer true worship to the one she perceives as being worthy of her devotion is what restores her self-esteem. This is the purpose of forgiveness in those who are able to acknowledge their faults and who have a healthy understanding of their shortcomings. Her awareness and her actions result in her not only finding forgiveness but also wholeness and peace. "Your faith has made you whole; go in peace"⁷

The healing and forgiveness of the paralytic⁸.

In this story we learn that forgiveness is easy. A shocking lesson to learn. Jesus is approached by a crowd who bring to him a man paralyzed on a stretcher. Jesus is impressed with the faith and devotion of those who have carefully brought this man to him to be healed. He looks with compassion on the paralytic and says, 'Take comfort, my child, your sins are forgiven.' When some in the company hear this they are indignant and begin to accuse Jesus of blasphemy. In their culture there were rigid rules and formulas governing the absolution of sins and the thought that a wondering Rabbi could simply pronounce someone's sins forgiven would be way outside their frame of reference. Jesus was aware of what they were thinking, indeed it is highly likely that he had deliberately provoked them into such thinking in order that he could teach them the true nature of forgiveness. "What is easier", he asks them, "to forgive this man's sins or to tell him to get off his stretcher and walk home?" And then to demonstrate his point he tells the man to walk, much to the astonishment of those present. Their astonishment was not merely that he had the authority to heal the man, something that by now they were becoming accustomed to, but that he brought them a new teaching that it was possible for men and women to truly affect forgiveness by pronouncing it. It actually says that they were in awe and gave praise to God *for having given such authority to human beings*. It is important that we understand that this is not just an indication that Jesus as divine has the authority to forgive sins but that Jesus as a *human being*⁹ just as we are has

such authority. Jesus makes it clear that not only he had this authority but also his followers and he tells them that they have the power to forgive or not to forgive¹⁰.

This story also presents us with the challenging concept that Jesus is suggesting that forgiveness is easy. This is a hard saying since many of us will have at some point in our lives struggled with the need to forgive. In his book *Forgiveness* Vladimir Jankélévitch, a French philosopher, sums this idea up in these words,

Forgiveness itself forgives in one fell swoop and in a single, indivisible *elan*, and it pardons undividedly; in a single, radical, and incomprehensible movement, forgiveness effaces all, sweeps away all, and forgets all. In one blink of an eye, forgiveness makes a *tabula rasa* of the past, and this miracle is for forgiveness as simple as saying hello and good evening¹¹.

In taking this approach to his understanding of the nature of forgiveness Jankélévitch, an agnostic intellectual of Russian descent, is surprisingly close to what Jesus is teaching through his interaction with the paralytic. Forgiveness is not first and foremost an attitude, mindset or ideology but rather it is an event, a happening that demonstrates the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God in the same way that the healings of Jesus were. When we forgive we effect something tangible that breaks the power of bondage to sin, guilt and retribution. The culture from which Jesus emanates is riddled with ideas of sin, guilt and retribution. Jesus challenges these ideas with statements like,

You have heard how it was said, You will love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say this to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he causes his sun to rise on the bad as well as the good, and sends down rain to fall on the upright and the wicked alike¹².

These would have been hard sayings to those who first heard them – if we are honest they are hard for us also today. To suggest that forgiveness is easy challenges us to consider then what Jesus is saying forgiveness is. It is not a case of ‘letting someone off the hook’ by ignoring or glossing over the seriousness of whatever action demands a consequence. In other words, forgiveness does not mean that if a crime is committed then the criminal is let off scot-free. However, when we think of forgiveness we often site worse case scenarios as examples of things hard or impossible to forgive. Philip Yancey says,

Forgiveness is neither easy nor clear-cut, as South Africans are finding out. The pope may forgive his assassin but not ask for his release from prison. One may forgive the Germans but put restrictions on the armies, forgive a child abuser but keep him [or her] away from [their] victims, forgive Southern racism but enforce laws to keep it from happening again¹³.

Yes, worse case scenarios do require our forgiveness but so do the very many minor issues that injure and end up festering within us if we do not deal with them through forgiveness. We have to understand that such a step of forgiveness is a step into a Kingdom principle as an act of faith rather than will, and obedience rather than duty, in the same way that Jesus demonstrated in his very person. When he announced that the Kingdom of God was near he was indicating that he personally was the demonstration of that kingdom.

In his person the Kingdom of God is here. This he said as a Jew to Jewish hearers [and for them] forgiveness had invariably been regarded as foremost among the blessings which the advent of the Kingdom would secure¹⁴.

Forgiveness is only easy in the sense that for those who are conscious of themselves as members of the Kingdom of God then all things are possible through the power of God’s love and Spirit. *Jesus gazed at them. ‘By human resources’, he told them, ‘this is impossible; for God everything is*

possible¹⁵.

They know not what they do

Ultimately the most challenging example of forgiveness is that which is demonstrated by Jesus himself as he was dying on the cross. He had been beaten and mocked, falsely accused and finally nailed to one of the most ignominious forms of execution ever. Here we see forgiveness personified when Jesus says, *Father forgive them for they know not what they do*¹⁶. The depth of meaning in these words would require more than a single session in a Lenten study – suffice it to say that here is our example. In every act of injustice and inhumanity the cross is present. Above all else the cross is the evidence of God’s full and total identification with all that is human and broken. It is in the breaking of the one who is recognised as the very incarnation of God that we can recognise, acknowledge and ultimately forgive our own brokenness. This is the full and total identification of God with humankind and this is the primary root of our reconciliation and wholeness in Christ. Forgiveness then is not some cheap avoidance of the pain and consequences of our brokenness, rather it is our entering fully into our brokenness through the brokenness of Christ in the knowledge that we will be raised to a new and complete life with him through the experience of the resurrection here and now.

Love does not snatch us from the pain of time, but takes the pain of the temporal upon itself.
Hope makes us ready to bear the cross of the present.¹⁷

And from that cross we also are required to say, Father forgive them

¹ Matthew 18.21,22

² Luke 23.33

³ This song can be found on the album *You Are the Quarry* released in 2004

⁴ Luke 17.4

⁵ Matthew 5.39, Luke 6.27 and others

⁶ Luke 7.36-50

⁷ Luke 7.50

⁸ Matthew 9.2-8 see also Mark 2.1-13 for a slightly different version of this story

⁹ The Greek word is *anthropos* a generic term for humankind

¹⁰ John 20.23

¹¹ *Le pardon*, (tr. into English as *Forgiveness* by Andrew Kelley, 2005)

¹² Matthew 5,43-45

¹³ *What's So Amazing about Grace?* Philip Yancey

¹⁴ *Christian Experience of Forgiveness* H. R. Mackintosh

¹⁵ John 19.26

¹⁶ Luke 23.34

¹⁷ *Theology of Hope* Jürgen Moltmann