

Lenten Reflection Auckland Diocese 2016
Matthew 6:14-15

We all know we should forgive! We say the Lord's Prayer and hope God doesn't engage too closely with the line about forgiving others, but in truth we know that as Christians we're great on paper, but not so hot on practice! There's always a gap between our aspirations and the reality of our brokenness. We also know that it's the one topic that is of universal concern: most people will engage in conversation about forgiveness: they all have a story to tell and most have someone they currently struggle to forgive.

Why is it so hard to forgive? We've all heard the saying – "forgive and forget", or – "time heals". But experience tells us that it's very hard to forgive and forget and that while time heals some wounds, others fester and lead to bitterness which ultimately affects not only our psychological wellbeing but our physical health also.

If we're going to take Jesus seriously then it's helpful to note just what forgiveness is – and isn't!

Forgiveness is not:

Weakness. Mahatma Gandhi said, "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong".

It is not an excusing of wrong, nor denial that a wrong has been done. Forgiveness requires us to face the reality of what has happened.

Neither is it forgetfulness, so the old saying 'forgive and forget' is a fallacy.

Chris Marshall said, "It is possible to forget without forgiving...it is impossible to forgive while forgetting." (2001:273) Many believe that if they can't forget then they haven't forgiven. But it can be morally dangerous to say 'we're going to forget this ever happened'. God doesn't undo the past, he redeems it! So we need to remember in order to learn to remember differently and well.

Finally, forgiveness is not automatic. It doesn't just happen: Chris Marshall notes that forgiveness is "a craft to be acquired, a lifelong learning process" (2001:274). In other words, forgiveness is a disposition, a way of life which takes commitment and practise.

Forgiveness is:

Freely given to the wrongdoer by the person who's been hurt: it cannot be required or coerced: it is always offered as gift.

It is release for the person who's been hurt. Forgiveness is the only thing capable of freeing us from the prison of our own pain and negative feelings: it empowers us to move on from being a victim.

Forgiveness takes time. Much like grief, we all journey toward forgiveness in different ways and time frames. Forgiveness is often a decision we then live into moment by moment day by day. Jesus' words confront us with a choice between two kinds of pain: we can choose to continue to live with the pain of the offence and its consequences, or we can choose to embrace the pain of forgiving our offender.

Finally, forgiveness is fulfilled in reconciliation. Forgiveness is not a stopping place but a starting place on the road to reconciliation. Reconciliation can only happen when both parties have walked the path of forgiveness and is never about going back to the way things used to be. Rather it is the creation of a whole new relationship which replaces the despair of un-forgiveness with the hopefulness of a fresh start. Jesus' tough call to forgive is ultimately a call into the freedom and joy of renewed relationships.

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