

'Forgiveness- the Christian's heart' – SJD – 17/9/17 – Matthew 18: 21-35

The great 19th Christian, Charles Spurgeon once wrote, ***"To be forgiven is such sweetness that honey is tasteless in comparison with it."*** Forgiveness is one of the most powerful and controversial forces operating in our world. One modern author puts it like this, ***'Forgiveness is the door to peace and happiness. It is a small door, and cannot be entered without stooping. It is hard to find. But no matter how long we search, it can be found.'***¹

The parable of Jesus we heard is about the potential power of forgiveness and the inevitable consequences of not doing so. Nelson Mandela had more reasons for not forgiving than many of us. He was incarcerated for 27 years for his views opposing Apartheid. He could so easily have become a bitter and resentful man but he didn't. This is what he wrote. ***'Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies'***.² Instead, when he came to power he encouraged the power of forgiveness through the 'Peace and Reconciliation Commission' in S Africa.

Jesus, through this parable speaks ***first*** of a fundamental need in each of us to receive God's forgiveness. It was G. K Chesterton who responding to an open debate in the Times newspaper about what was wrong with the world wrote, ***'What is wrong with the world? I am.'*** G.K. Chesterton was a practicing Catholic and saw that an essential and potential evil lay within each of us. We, as fallen human beings, are all essentially self-centred instead of God-centred. As one American writer has put it, ***'The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart'***.³ Or as St Paul puts it, ***'All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God'***.⁴ We all possess this genetic imperfection –even Reuben and Margot - as delightful as they appear now! We have done things wrong and will continue to do so – it is in our very nature. As such we need God's forgiveness if we are to be able to stand in His presence without guilt.

The greater our sin the greater the effect of forgiveness can be. It is no coincidence that it was a famous slave trader, John Newton, who after coming to faith wrote that great hymn 'Amazing Grace'. It is also no coincidence that in the parable Jesus gave, the debt owed by the servant to the King, (representing God), is so colossal. The servant owed the King 10 thousand talents – a vast amount, equivalent to millions of pounds, impossible ever to pay off. This is a picture of the scale of the problem we have before God. Yet we also know and will recall in the Communion meal later that this was debt was paid by Jesus' death on the Cross. To receive God's forgiveness to be freed from the power those sins have over our lives, but now and eternally.

BUT Charles Spurgeon also reminds us that ***'there is one thing sweeter (than receiving forgiveness) ..., and that is to forgive. As it is more blessed to give than to receive, so to forgive rises a stage higher in experience than to be forgiven.'***

¹ J. C Arnold (2008) 'Why forgive?', Plough Publishing House p. 1

² Quoted in J. C Arnold (2008) op. cit. p. 1

³ Dr. Adrian Rogers.

⁴ Romans 3 v 23

This is at the heart of the second part of the parable. Indeed we could go further and suggest that Jesus was implying that if we don't practice forgiveness we not only hurt ourselves, we ultimately risk depriving ourselves of God's forgiveness of us. Our forgiving others is a mark or indicator of the reality of the forgiveness and the work of the HS we have received. Like John Newton we should be so transformed by the reality of the forgiveness we receive from God that we find ourselves open to forgive others. It is a natural response. We see this, for instance, in the first Christian Martyr, Stephen, who prayed for those stoning him to death. Their action towards him seem small compared to the forgiveness he received from God.

So what effects can we expect if we practice forgiving each other? Gordon Wilson held the hand of his dying daughter as she lay dying in rubble following the Enniskillen bomb planted by the IRA at a memorial Service in 1987. Following his daughter's death he felt the need to forgive the perpetrators of this evil act – something which was ridiculed by many at the time. Yet by speaking of his forgiveness he broke temporarily the cycle of killing and revenge when the Protestant para-military also refused to retaliate. He knew that nothing would bring his daughter back but through his Christian faith he also knew that he would meet with her again. He records that ultimately forgiveness freed him from hatred, bitterness, anger and the like. Instead of retreating into himself and wishing his life away forgiving enabled him to move on, to accept the death of his lovely daughter and find a new freedom in life. Forgiveness can truly liberate if we persevere.

To finish let me return to an earlier quote. ***'Forgiveness is the door to peace and happiness. It is a small door, and cannot be entered without stooping. It is hard to find. But no matter how long we search, it can be found.'***⁵ May we all take this seriously in all our dealings both within the church and with those we deal with outside world. Christ expects nothing less – it is what he did and through the HS it is the way he wishes us to be equipped to live and demonstrate his love to the world. Amen

⁵ J. C Arnold (2008) 'Why forgive?', Plough Publishing House p. 1