

When do we feel prompted to say sorry? When we get caught out? When guilt overwhelms us or when realise what action we have undertaken?

Some people find it easy to recognise when they have caused injury or when they have done something wrong – in fact some people find it too easy and spend their entire lives with the burden of guilt. Others seem to not be able to recognise that they have done anything worth seeking forgiveness for.

Forgiveness and reconciliation can be difficult things to talk about and yet they are necessary for healthy communities and relationships. They are difficult because what helps us heal will be different in each context. In any act of forgiveness however it is the person who has been wronged, or those who have experienced the injustice who need to define what is necessary for healing, rather than the offender of the person in power.

Forgiveness seems to be something which is uncomfortable for most of humanity, on either side of the experience. But as Christians it is not something we can shy away from – it is the heart of the Gospel message. I have always felt encouraged by the words of C.S. Lewis on this topic when he said *“To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.”*

I was reminded of this phrase again reflecting on the amazing end to the story of Joseph we hear in Genesis today. We rarely hear this part of the story, I suspect because it is not as dramatic as the rest of the passage – but here, as the brothers come to term with their father’s death Joseph forgives his brothers for their thoughts and actions saying that out of their actions God had been able to still achieve amazing things for the community. In the context this is true; but also in the story of Joseph he too has been forgiven and welcomed at many points in the story – to not forgive his brothers after all that has take place, would in itself seem unforgiveable.

Forgiveness requires a great level of self-awareness and a level of strength, as well as vulnerability. Three virtues which at times are quite difficult to hold together at once.

When Peter asks Jesus about forgiveness, I am sure he was not expecting the answer that he received. He may have even been hoping for a reason not to be able to forgive someone. But Jesus provides a very profound answer – not just in the perfect number of forgiveness – but in what we hear about the nature of non-forgiveness.

The parable Jesus offers of the slave and king, is an example of a story we need to hear first as allegory and secondly in context. Jesus is using this story in a Mediterranean context. While Jesus uses the story to give an example of God’s actions – we shouldn’t be too quick to equate God’s actions with the King’s! This is a story about not allowing something to happen.

According to many scholars¹ ; although the figures in this parable are exaggerated, as so often in parables, the king and his slave represent and follow scripts that would have been familiar to ancient Mediterranean audiences. Kings used agents like the “unmerciful servant” to organize lower levels of agents, from tax-farmers to torturers (Matthew 18:34), who together made up a system that ensured the continuous flow of wealth, power, and honour to the top of the pyramid. The example Jesus gives of the unforgiving servant – who had accrued a great deal of debt – would have given to Jesus audience the image of a servant who was quite high up in the order of this system.

What this would mean is that the forgiving of his debt had a pass on effect on others within the system. This would have been a very public act, and it would have given an example of not just this one act – but on future acts. The expectation would have been that such an action of forgiveness would have resulted in ongoing loyalty to the King, and within the system. The forgiving of the servant’s debt would have created a kind of year of jubilee within the system and in many ways would have been felt by others in the system. The failure of the servant to act in the same way as his master; in a sense his inability to accept and embody the forgiveness he has received, breaks the new system – but more importantly it dishonours the king! The whole system, which would have been changed by forgiveness, now reverts back to the old obligations and violence.

So the point of the story rather than being about vengeful kings, or unforgiving servants, is about what happens when we fail to accept a new system of forgiveness. It is not God or the King who bring violence, but the inability of one not to be able to live with the consequences of a system of living which has changed – one who cannot accept they are forgiven!

I think in many ways Jesus gets how hard forgiveness is for us as humans. The story highlights how hard it is. But it also highlights the consequences of this inability.

In this story, accepting forgiveness is as much of a key as offering forgiveness. So often we are unable to forgive others, because we are unable to forgive ourselves, or we may be unable to accept the forgiveness that others have offered us, because we cannot forgive ourselves.

At the heart of the Christian faith is the message that God forgives us. God forgives us for our inability to love ourselves, for our inability to love our neighbours and friends and families, for our inability to care for God’s creation. God forgives us individually and as a community. This is the heart for the message that Jesus was sent to teach.

But for every person, for every community most often the hardest thing for us to accept is that this is true. The most frequent conversation I have with people who

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3393

believe in God, is that they do not feel that they are worthy, or good enough to be a part of God's family. But this means in many ways we miss the point of God's forgiveness and of the story Jesus has told.

The failure of the first servant isn't simply that he won't forgive his fellow servant, but that he has just experienced an utterly unexpected, completely beyond-his-wildest-dreams, life-changing moment of grace and he seems absolutely untouched by it. And for this reason, he lives devoid of any sense of gratitude. His whole life changed...and he didn't even notice².

God isn't asking us to be perfect, but to notice what a big deal it is that we are forgiven and in turn to do our best to live out this forgiveness in the way we go about our daily tasks and lives. We won't always get it right – but by living intentionally that we know what it means to be forgiven means that we too can change a system.

If the servant had passed on the forgiveness in the story, the whole system of guilt and debt would have changed for that time and that generation. The same is true for us, if we live out our forgiveness. If we live with the same grace and generosity that we have received from God – we change a system. But this takes a great deal of self-awareness and a level of strength, as well as vulnerability.

As a society there are large number of historical actions that we need to ask for forgiveness for; but it is not just historical. Even in the face of the pandemic we need to consider how our choices and actions impact on others. But our faith, should guide us in this - we know God's love, and we know God's forgiveness, and as such we seek to live and work in a way that expresses that love and forgiveness.

That means we need to be aware of who we are, know what our trigger points might be, know the things that challenge us to show forgiveness. That means we need to have strength enough to stand up knowing that we have made mistakes, and yet are forgiven and loved, and it means we need to have the courage to be vulnerable enough to share that experience when it is appropriate.

So regardless of how challenging these readings might be, we are invited to embrace the forgiveness that God offers us, and share that, pass it on, to those around us. For it is this that will restructure the system in the world. It is this that will help us to embrace that we are forgiven and we too can forgive. Amen

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/09/pentecost-15-a-forgiveness-possibility/>