

## Study and Prayer (Freeland) 2013.

### The Canticle of the Creatures: Forgiveness

#### 'Praise be to You, my Lord, for those who grant pardon for love of you...'

##### 1) Reading:

Francis makes peace between the bishop and mayor of Assisi, adding a verse to the Canticle; see *Early Documents 2, The Assisi Compilation (84)*. P. 18.

##### 2) Reflections on forgiveness.

**The Old Testament** writings indicate that the power to forgive sin is vested in God: *'To the Lord God belong mercy and forgiveness'*; (Dan 9:9). God is seen as merciful: *'You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love'*; but also just: *'by no means clearing the guilty.'* (Ex 35:6/7). God requires repentance: *'If my people ... humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I ...will forgive their sin;'* (2 Chron 7:14).

The Covenant required a high standard of morality in God's people, and those who sinned against a neighbour sinned also against God. The Levitical Code was clear that when one offended against another, restitution must be made to the victim. Then followed a process of atonement through which the sinner might be reconciled to God.

In the **New Testament**, the understanding of forgiveness was developed within Jesus' ministry and by the apostles, but it was clearly built on Old Testament foundations. When Jesus forgave sins, he proclaimed his special status in relation to the Father: *'The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.'* (Mk 2:10). Later this authority was further delegated to the disciples (and to their designated successors.) The risen Christ says: *'If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven.'*(John 20:23). Upon this saying the church's role in offering absolution to penitents is built.

Relations between people are the focus of forgiveness in Jesus's ministry. In Matthew 6:14, Jesus says: *'For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.'* This is developed in the Antitheses: *'I say unto you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'* (Matt 5:44.) Although this saying does not specifically mention forgiveness, it is certainly implied. These statements suggest *unilateral* forgiveness.

As to the settlement of differences between Christians, Peter asks: *'Lord, if another member of the Church sins against me, how often should I forgive - as many as seven times?'* Jesus answers: *'Not seven times, but seventy times seven.'* (Matt 18:21). The Lucan parallel is somewhat different: *'If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive.'* (Lk 17:3). This suggests that forgiveness between Christians is not unilateral, but depends on one asking pardon and the other offering forgiveness. Is more expected of fellow Christians than of enemies?

### **Atonement.**

Following the death of Jesus, the leaders of the young church began to teach that Christ's sacrifice on the cross had provided expiation for sin, and restored once and for all the relationship of God and his people ('at-one-ment'.) A number of attempts have been made, from the fathers to the present day, to elucidate the mystery of the Atonement.<sup>1</sup> Some of the early metaphors used to open up a profound idea (sacrifice, victory, ransom,) are so distanced from our culture as to obscure meaning rather than offer enlightenment, and may even cause disillusion.

In my view, the most helpful metaphor of atonement today is that of reconciliation, as used by Paul, in 2 Cor. 5:18:

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<sup>1</sup> For further elucidation, see for example: Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor*, SPCK 1953; and Frances Young: *Sacrifice and the death of Christ*, Xpress reprints, SCM 1983.

*'All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.'*

The concept of reconciliation is commonly understood and has a positive meaning, associated with the bringing together of estranged people, tribes or nations. Reconciliation suggests the loving kindness through which God offers forgiveness to repentant human kind.

Yet the central Christian idea of a suffering God is crucial in a world made terrible by the acts of the powerful, where the God of love may be recognised more in his weakness than his power. Writing from prison, a captive of the Nazi state, Bonhoeffer reflected upon the weak and helpless Christ on the Cross:

*'God lets himself be pushed out of the world onto the Cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which He is with us and helps us. Matt 8:17 makes it clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.'*<sup>2</sup>

Victims of oppression are more likely to relate to Jesus, the *Deus Crucifixus*, who reconciled God to the world in pain and weakness, and - perhaps – feel able to bring to Him their own pain and sin, and to forgive in his name.

### **An Ethical perspective.**

Haber, a Virtue Ethicist, describes *what forgiveness is not*.<sup>3</sup> When a person forgives, he forgives a wrongdoer for injury received; he does not forgive the wrongful act. Forgiveness is related to the *person* not the *act*. Also, forgiveness is not a condonation of wrong. The one who forgives does not give up opposition to the wrong action or even the bad character traits of the wrongdoer.

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 130. SCM Press, 1981.

<sup>3</sup> Joram Graf Haber: *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, SPCK, 1998. Ch 1.

Haber defines forgiveness in terms of the victim *overcoming resentment*. One view is that forgiveness is *not an event but a process*. The act of will (the decision to forgive) may start the process, but the forgiver *'cannot be said to have carried the process to completion until the negative feelings engendered by the injury have been eliminated.'*

Hampton<sup>4</sup> also sees forgiveness as a process. She outlines the stages in the change of mind which lead to forgiveness:

- The psychological preparation involves regaining confidence in one's own worth, damaged by the wrongful act;
- Emotions such as malice and spite, generated by the lack of confidence, can then be repudiated;
- The wrongdoer is understood to be something more, (perhaps better), than the character traits which are disapproved;
- Finally, indignation towards the wrongdoer, based on moral hatred of the unjust action, must be given up: *'The forgiver washes away or disregards the wrongdoer's immoral actions in his ultimate moral judgement of him/her'*;
- The forgiver is able to imagine renewing a relationship with the wrongdoer.

Why should 'giving up' of negative emotions be attempted? Hampton regards forgiveness as having benefits for both victim and wrongdoer. They are each liberated from the effects of the immoral action – the forgiver is no longer a victim, the wrongdoer no longer a sinner. This freeing process is recommended by other writers too; Smedes writes: 'If you cannot free people from their wrongs, and see them as needy people, you enslave yourself to your own painful past ... and let hate become your future.'<sup>5</sup>

Later, however, Hampton wonders whether Christianity requires us to maintain faith in all wrongdoers. Power may be an issue in this: Keene<sup>6</sup> points

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<sup>4</sup> Murphy and Hampton: *Forgiveness and Mercy*, Cambridge University Press, 1990., p.80

<sup>5</sup> Lewis Smedes: *Forgive and Forget*, Triangle/ SPCK 1984, p.29.

<sup>6</sup> FW Keene: *Structures of forgiveness in the New Testament*, in Adams & Fortune: *Violence against women and children*, Continuum, N.Y., 2000, p,30 & 132.

out that, in all the NT examples<sup>7</sup>, the forgiver is either more powerful than, or at least the equal of, the person being forgiven. He believes that in order to reconcile forgiveness with justice, the powerful should relinquish their power in order to receive forgiveness. He gives the example of child sexual abuse: *'The forgiveness of the father by the daughter typically cannot occur until the power relationship has been reversed, when the daughter has reached adulthood and the father has reached old age.'* This point of view may help to avoid pressuring victims of abuse to offer premature forgiveness on religious grounds.

**Example:**

An adult survivor of sexual abuse may see her father / relative as flawed, weak, perhaps dangerous, yet still catch glimpses of a person who was once beloved. Maggie, a survivor of abuse by her father, writes a poem:

*'And through it all – incredulous, incongruent*

*Threads of forgiveness run*

*Spun from the love you gave so lavishly*

*Along with the abuse.'*

**Conclusion:**

We can have clarity about some aspects of forgiveness:

- Only God can forgive sin, although the church, in the name of the Father, has been given the Ministry of Reconciliation;
- Only the victim may forgive the wrongdoer; no other person may forgive on his/her behalf;
- Forgiveness of the person does not condone the evil act;
- Forgiveness benefits both the victim and the wrongdoer: the victim is freed from a life of bitterness, the wrongdoer from the burden of guilt.
- Forgiveness is not complete without reconciliation between victim and wrongdoer.

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<sup>7</sup> Eg: The Parable of the Unforgiving Slave, (Matt 18:21-35).

- **Dilemmas**

- 1) Is forgiveness a decision or a process, and when should the 'decision' be taken?
- 2) Is forgiveness unilateral, or does it depend on the repentance of the wrongdoer?

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