

Forgiveness

Let us begin by saying together that terrifying prayer: Our Father who are in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, give us this day our daily bread and FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. Amen.

Why do I say terrifying? Because, for most of us, to pray that God will forgive us our failings to the same extent as we forgive others is going to leave us seriously short.

What do we mean by forgiveness? When I forgive someone who has hurt me in some way, I am saying “Yes, you have hurt me and I feel it but I am not going to let this get in the way of my relationship with you”.

It is the difficult part of loving. St Paul tells us that love is living as if the other person is more important than I am. When I forgive I am saying that you and my relationship with you are more important than the hurt that I am feeling.

People say ‘Forgive and forget’. But forgetting is a long way down the road. You may have heard the saying: “Yes, he’s buried the hatchet. But he never forgets where he’s buried it”. Sometimes we keep on bringing up the old grievance time after time. It’s why ‘not bearing a grudge’ is part of St Paul’s definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13. Mother Teresa once remarked that forgiveness is not complete until we have forgotten the hurt. I think she must have meant that until I have forgotten the hurt that wounds me, I have to go on consciously forgiving the person and that is difficult and takes time. And it’s not a matter of how we feel, it’s an act of my will.

Forgiving is not fair. That is one reason why it is so difficult. But it is of God and we are made in God’s image and so we have to learn how to forgive. God’s idea of Justice is not our human understanding of fair shares for all; God’s idea of Justice is equal unbounded Love for each and everyone of us, not because of what we do or don’t do, but because of who we – each one us –are.

He told us: “Love your enemies”. No one had ever said that before. “You have heard it is written ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’” Yes, that’s our idea of justice. But it’s not God’s. And he didn’t just tell us; he showed us. One of the first miracles he worked was the cure of the paralytic who was let down through the roof by his friends. But he worked that miracle of healing, to prove that he could forgive; because the Pharisees didn’t believe he could when– first of all – he said “Your sins are forgiven”.

When they brought him the woman caught in adultery he said “I do not condemn you”. Note that he didn’t condone her action: he said “Go and do not sin again”.

Forgiveness costs us. It cost Jesus, the Son of God, the agony of being tortured to death on a cross. Even there, he said “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing”.

Immaculée Ilibagiza was a 20 year old undergraduate at home during the university vacation in Rwanda, when the rest of her family were murdered in the genocide. She was given shelter by a pastor in the village and hidden in a small lavatory, one metre by a metre and a half, off his bedroom with seven other women for three months. No room for them all to sit down at once, no privacy. She heard people outside shouting “Where is Immaculée? We must kill her like the rest of the family.” She prayed the Rosary she’d been given by her father. But she couldn’t pray the phrase at the end of the Our Fathers. How can I forgive them?

On one occasion when she heard the house being searched, she was praying frantically when she heard a voice saying to her: “You don’t expect God to listen to your prayer when you can’t even pray the Lord’s prayer do you?” But they went away. The pastor had put a wardrobe against the door of the bathroom so that it could not be seen.

On another occasion she heard them searching and this time they were moving furniture. So she was praying even more frantically and this time heard a different voice saying to her “But Immaculée, these are my children too. I hate what they have done but I can’t stop loving them”. And for her, this was the breakthrough. She found that she was able to pray all of the Our Father and mean it. She began to see her family’s killers through God’s eyes.

After three months they were rescued by French troops and later she had the chance of returning to her village where she was met by the Chief of Police who told her that they had the people who had murdered her family in the gaol. Would she like to see them? She went with him to the gaol and he brought out the man who had killed her parents. She put out her hand and shook his hand. The gaoler was furious. “I’d have done anything you wanted to him” he said.

“That way, it will never stop” she answered.

It’s the most moving account of forgiveness I’ve ever read. We learn so much from it. It takes time. It is of God. We eventually learn from God how to do it after much prayer. It absorbs evil: only when we refuse to retaliate and bring ourselves to forgive instead, when we act like absorbent cotton wool, does the cycle of violence stop. I am told that the Hutu and the Tutsi are now living in peace with each other in Rwanda 25 years on from the genocide.

When Jesus said “Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven ...” I don’t think he was just giving the Apostles and priests the power to forgive and absolve sins. I think he was recognizing that forgiveness is so unfair and unnatural that unless we experience forgiveness from each other in everyday life we haven’t a hope of ever believing that God could forgive many of the things we do to each other and therefore to Him. ‘Whenever you failed to feed or visit someone in need, you did it to me.’ And, of course, for many if not most of us we learn the reality of forgiveness in our families from our parents and siblings.

And forgiveness needs to be accepted. It is part of love and so it is a two way operation.

The one sin that cannot be forgiven is blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, which effectively means looking God in the face, saying “I don’t want your f...ing forgiveness”. And that can’t be forgiven, not because it’s so serious but because it is an act of love and, as any unrequited lover knows, love has to be accepted as well as offered. Because God has given us free will he can never force us into accepting his gift.

But he will never stop trying.

A commercial sex worker on a street in London one summer evening spots a probable client walking along the pavement towards her and gives him the glad eye. But he just raises his hat, smiles, says “Good evening” and walks on. Well, she’s met shy English business men

before so she isn't surprised when she meets him the next evening. But he just smiles at her, raises his hat, says "Good evening" and walks on. This goes on for some time and she wonders how long it will be before he plucks up the courage to employ her. She mentions it to a colleague who says "Oh he's not a punter. Don't you know? He goes each evening to visit old Marge who used to be on the game. He makes her bed and cooks a meal for her. He belongs to some St Vincent club or something." So she's furious and scowls at him that evening but he just raises his hat, smiles and says "Good evening" and passes on. Then if she spots him she crosses to the other side of the road to avoid meeting him. Now it's November, cold and wet, she's been beaten up by her ponce and is feeling miserable and is quietly weeping and doesn't see him coming. This time he stops. "Is something wrong? Can I help?" Before she can stop herself she finds herself pouring out her woes and he takes her off to a café for a cup of coffee and he listens and eventually helps her. God will never stop loving me, living as if I am more important than He is, forgiving me and he will go on battering us with his love until, despite ourselves, we find ourselves vulnerable and are able to accept Him.

So we have to not only forgive others; we have to learn how to accept forgiveness. We have to bring ourselves, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to bring ourselves to believe that I really am loved to bits by God, who continues to take delight in me, His child, however I behave, however I ignore Him. This is quite difficult because we have been brought up with the idea that when we are good we get rewarded or praised and we are naughty we're punished and people are angry with us.

St Benedict says in his Rule that boys and immature monks are to be punished because he recognizes that we are young: if we're allowed to get away with behaving badly we'll just go on behaving badly – or worse. The difference is that the punishment is not given to satisfy my own anger but to help the young man to grow and mature and learn what is right and wrong and to want to do right. The punishment is given out of love. It might be easier to ignore the wrong and do nothing but that is satisfying myself – just as a punishment given in a rage is satisfying myself and not living as if the boy and his development is more important than myself.

An American monk who gave us a retreat some years ago gave us a tip from his experience as a superior. "I learnt," he said, "never to discipline a young man until I had thanked or congratulated him for something he had done, at least twice beforehand – with at least three-hour intervals in between." This way the delinquent not only appreciates that he is not all bad but he is also more likely to believe that his correction is being done out of love for him rather than an ego trip on the part of the superior.

So to forgive is not to condone.

I can't encourage you to go and receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation, to go to Confession – (though I have heard of priests giving Absolution over the telephone or hearing confessions outside at a 2 metre distance).

But try Psalm 31. It is about the joy of being forgiven and recognizing that in order to be forgiven the only thing necessary is to recognize that we've done wrong and need to be forgiven, that is, to be loved. And all sacraments are signs of God's love for me, signs that make that love real to us. So look up Psalm 31, (32 in some books) in a Bible or on Google, and pray it.

And then, why not spend some time thinking of people we need to forgive. Pray that the Holy Spirit may help us to see that person as God sees him or her.

Perhaps a telephone call or an email or a card or a letter to show that we're not going to let that hurt get in the way of our relationship.

Loving our enemies (who are more often in our own communities or families, rather than other countries overseas) means asking ourselves to see the hurt from our enemy's point of view rather than that of my own hurt and what I feel like. (I may even recognize that it was something I said or did that caused my enemy to react. Why did he do it? How can I help him grow?)

If I behave like cotton wool, I'm playing my tiny but important part in bringing about a world of peace.

If you join us for Compline live streamed at 8.15 this evening, we always begin with saying the I confess, praying for forgiveness from each other and from God.

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful

Kindle in us – kindle in ME - the FIRE of your love and forgiveness.

Send forth your spirit and we will be created and you will renew the face of the earth.