

**Sermon**

Sunday 13 September 2020

The apostle, Peter, asked Jesus, ‘Lord, how often am I to forgive my brother if he goes on wronging me? As many as seven times?’

Jesus replied, ‘I do not say seven times, but seventy times seven.’

We are to forgive ‘from the heart.’

Too many sermons on forgiveness sound trite and do not appear to take account of the depth of pain or injury suffered. Too often preachers call us to forgive and leave it at that with little or no exploration of how we might *learn* to forgive. A cold ‘command’ to forgive may be more of a hindrance than a help, a burden rather than a pathway leading to fullness of life. Jesus said, ‘I do not say seven times, but seventy times seven’.

Almost a year ago to the day, the Archbishop of Glasgow, Philip Tartaglia, entered Scotland’s largest prison, Barlinnie, escorting the relics of the nineteenth century saint, Thérèse of Lisieux. The relics are linked with prisons because, as a teenager, Thérèse prayed for the

conversion and forgiveness of a convicted child killer before his execution by guillotine in 1887. Before he was executed, he kissed the figure of the crucified Christ. Few in society will know as well as prisoners do the emotional, psychological and spiritual struggle of seeking to obtain forgiveness: the forgiveness of others and the forgiveness of self.

In His parable, Jesus told a typically hyperbolic story full of exaggeration and colourful imagery. A king released a servant from a debt which the servant could never have hoped to repay. In turn, the servant failed to release a fellow servant from a trifling debt. The debts are not money, but wrongs we have done. At its core, Jesus was saying that God desires to make a real and lasting change *in this life*, hence the king's desire to settle all debts and release the servants from all burdens. Imagine for a moment what it feels like to be free of every burden, of every wrong we have ever done to others, of every injury we have caused. It is not that wrongs can be undone, but imagine what it feels like no longer to be defined by the wrongs we have done, the injuries we have caused. This is the tender, radical,

offensive love of God which lies at the heart of the gospel: this is holy ground, and we must tread carefully.

In 2018, Vivienne Taberer watched as the murderer of her partner was jailed for life. Her partner, Daniel, was stabbed to death by Logan Petersen, a 24 year old man who broke into their home in Cape Town three years earlier. A robbery gone wrong, Vivienne is now a single mother of two boys aged 10 and 12. The murderer, Logan, grew up in a 'war zone'; an area of Cape Town abandoned by the police and run by armed gangs. Of Logan, Vivienne said, 'I felt sorry for Petersen, he seemed just a shell of a person. What a complete waste of a life.....' She remembers graphically the shock of seeing her husband dying and her fear for the safety of her children, Joshua and Luke. In 2015, Daniel had been one of 50 people murdered in South Africa every day. In her pity and compassion, she began to walk the road of forgiveness.

What of the trials and traumas in our life? The things we have done to others or the things others have done or are doing to us?

Written by Desmond Tutu and his daughter, Mpho, *The Book of Forgiving* draws on the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. His daughter, Mpho, had her own experiences and motivation for writing the book. On 12 April, 2012, Mpho Tutu's life was dramatically changed. Returning home that day, she found her housekeeper, Angela Machinga, lying dead on the floor in her daughter's bedroom; she had been strangled and stabbed to death. Two years on, the Tutu family is still coming to terms with the brutality of Angela's death. Mpho and her daughters still cry for her. Mpho says:

The murder of Angela was the event that made real for me the idea of forgiveness as a process rather than an event. Writing this in the book felt to me like the way of honouring my own process and also honouring Angela. I don't want her story to get stuck away in a corner somewhere. This was a beautiful person who was an important part of our lives and I want to hold her up.

From nausea, disgust, fear and overwhelming grief, Mpho says:

How could anyone be so vile? How could any person be so brutal? Why Angela? What harm had she done? How dare anyone violate my home? There are moments when the anger turns to rage and there are moments I want to strike back.

The book written by Desmond and Mpho is not trite, superficial or detached from reality. Forgiveness is not like a magic wand able to make pain, injury and past events disappear. Forgiveness does not pretend things never happened; it does not remove the scars. In the story of the Resurrection, the Risen Christ stands among His disciples with the holes in His hands and the scar on His side visible for all to see. Forgiveness demands that we face our wrongs and, more deeply, face our own brokenness.

In the book, Desmond Tutu reflects briefly on his own injury, namely, growing up in a home in which his father verbally, emotionally and physically abused his mother. Tutu carries the pain still.

Acknowledging our common humanity, Tutu wonders if he had lived his father's life, would he have behaved any differently? He says he would like to think that he would never done what his father did, but, he says, 'I do not know.' In the course of his ministry, he visited men on death row, spoke to police officers who admitted the cruellest torture and listened to child soldiers who committed acts of

nauseating depravity. Tutu says, 'I have recognized in each of them a depth of humanity that was a mirror of my own.'

Mpho Tutu says that forgiveness is a process. It is a spiritual discipline. Though we may not be the victims of torture or see loved ones murdered, nevertheless, in ordinary living, we will be injured, bruised or wronged. Our feelings of hurt, which have the capacity to dominate our moods and entire outlook, are no less real. It is unhelpful, however, for preachers simply to say, 'We must forgive.'

Forgiveness is a process. Mpho Tutu has written a prayer which she calls the 'Prayer before the Prayer'. She writes:

I want to be willing to forgive  
 But I dare not ask for the will to forgive  
 In case you give it to me  
 And I am not yet ready  
 I am not yet ready for my heart to soften  
 I am not yet ready to be vulnerable again  
 Not yet ready to see that there is humanity  
     in my tormentor's eyes  
 Or that the one who hurt me may also have cried  
 I am not yet ready for the journey  
 I am not yet interested in the path  
 I am at the prayer before the prayer of forgiveness  
 Grant me the will to want to forgive  
 Grant it to me not yet but soon.

When we listen to the words of Jesus, ‘Not seven times...but seventy times seven’, we are invited to see the utter *brokenness* of humanity, our *common* humanity and our *universal need* for forgiveness, in small things as well as for the greatest injuries. Awareness of God’s forgiveness, penetrating the heart, frees us so that we are no longer defined by the events which have broken us or, indeed, by the injuries we have caused. There must be acknowledgement of wrong done but the gospel of Christ says that, immersed in God’s infinite love, our story can begin again. We are more than the wrongs we have suffered or committed.

Amen.