

Peter said unto Jesus, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?

Forgiveness is at the heart of the teaching and the example of Christ. Forgiveness is an expression and a foundation of Christian life. At the same time, from a merely human perspective, to be asked to forgive sometimes seems like to be asked to do the Impossible. How do we forgive, how can we forgive? The divine-human possibility of forgiveness is tied up with what we know about God, and what we know about ourselves. After we have a chance to consider these two things, what our readings show us about God and what they show us about ourselves, we can consider the challenge which comes with having a message about forgiveness on Remembrance Sunday. For pacifists, the demand to forgive is linked to their argument that no Christian should bear arms. Others suggest that forgiveness cannot be a principle for societies or nations. The Professor of Moral Theology here at Christ Church, Nigel Biggar, argues that the doctrine of just war is a Christian ethic because it conceives of ‘the right use of violence as an expression of love for the neighbour’, and of forgiveness.¹ How could violence and forgiveness go together? I will use Nigel Biggar’s ideas both to consider what forgiveness means.

how oft shallI forgive? ... Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times; but, Until seventy times seven.

In the Gospel of St Luke, there is a passage which makes it clear how difficult this teaching is. Jesus said ‘And if [a brother - a colleague, a friend, a partner-] trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent, thou shalt forgive him.’ *“And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith.”* (Luke 17.5) I love this response – it’s so honest and clear – to forgive as Christ asks is impossible from a merely human point of view. The apostles make it clear that to forgive like this they need a greater faith. What makes forgiveness possible is the faith which enables us to see both ourselves and God more clearly.

The point of the 70 x 7, or 7 times/day is not the numbers. We don’t keep a record which frees us from the call to forgive after 490 occasions. Rather, the number points beyond itself to the great depths, the inexhaustible depths, of the divine mercy.

Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king...A servant owes him an impossible debt, a sum which he could never hope to pay, a debt which on reckoning of strict justice deserves prison, and not only for himself, but for all who are part of his life. The servant asks for mercy and the king sets him free.

This is the compassion and love to which St Paul bears witness when he writes the Church in Philippi: ***For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ.*** St Paul’s loves his brothers and sisters with and in God’s love, ***in the bowels of Jesus Christ***, with ***the affection*** of JC (RV). To forgive is to love with the love of God which seeks to restore and rebuild, the love which unites mercy and truth. This is the message about God and God’s love.

The parable also has a more difficult message, a message about us. The servant who is forgiven by the king refuses to forgive a fellow servant who is in debt to him. This second debt is a small one, a tiny debt compared to what he was forgiven. Instead of showing

¹ In Defence of War, 61 and ff.

the generosity and mercy which the king showed him, the forgiven-servant throws his colleague in prison. The parable is meant to shake us up -- to help us to see ourselves clearly. If we see at all, then we know that we have received more of the divine mercy and love than we can ever repay. We are always debtors to the divine love. If we don't see this, we are blind and dangerous, to ourselves and to others. The judgement of the parable is not arbitrary -- to refuse to forgive is to find ourselves in prison.

These two truths, the revelation of human debt, and the revelation of divine love which sets us free, are the two keys which unlock the 'impossible' in the door to forgiveness.

Nigel Biggar, Prof of Moral theol at Christ Church, has a helpful section on forgiveness in his book considering how war can express an ethic of love. I'm not sure if I can explain this clearly, but there is a purpose which I hope will be obvious all the same.

Forgiveness, says Prof Biggar, has different parts or moments. Forgiveness-as-compassion is the first step or stage. Forgiveness-as-compassion is required of all, it is unconditional and unilateral, it turns away from vengeance, and seeks to build up not destroy. Forgiveness-as-compassion is motivated by an appreciation of our own moral weaknesses and failures, and by a knowledge of the mercy of God.

But forgiveness as compassion is only the first stage. Forgiveness in its complete form includes forgiveness-as-absolution. For forgiveness-as-absolution, the one who has committed the wrong must acknowledge that wrong and seek forgiveness. Absolution – a term here without the technical meaning of the confessional – this absolution can only be offered to repentance. So, in our Lord's teaching, the command to forgive 7 times per day is linked to the brother saying 'I repent', I admit what I've done wrong, I seek to make amends, I turn from the wrong, and I turn toward the good.

In Biggar's theory, certain forms of resentment and retribution are part of forgiveness-as-absolution. Resentment, as he describes it, is an appropriate hostility to moral wrong. Retribution is part of an acknowledgement both of the preciousness of what has been damaged, and the dignity of the wrong-doer as a moral agent. Despite these qualifications, the challenge of forgiveness remains: both movements of forgiveness demand 'the absolute self-sacrifice involved in swallowing one's impulses to vengeance.'² Forgiveness is a kind of death, a suffering discipline inspired by mercy and truth which seeks peace.

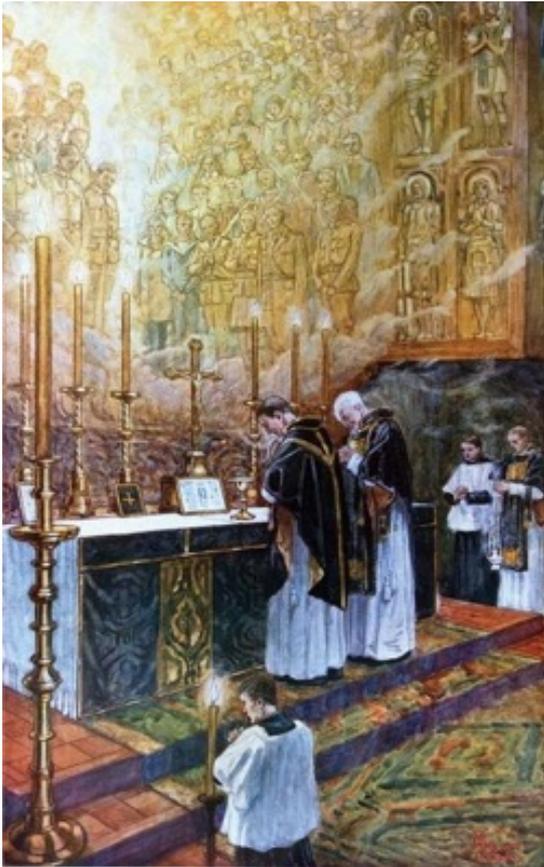
Nigel Biggar's distinctions are helpful, even if I'm only sketching them in outline. If you are interested, I encourage you to read what he says for yourselves. In practical terms, we find forgiveness where our knowledge of God, our knowledge of ourselves, and our hope for reconciliation and peace come together. Whether we can move from forgiveness as compassion to forgiveness as absolution in a given situation, and what is required in order to put an end to violence, is a judgement we find where mercy and truth meet. The point of raising Nigel Biggar's analysis is to see that forgiveness is not a Sunday-school principle for children which must be left behind when we grow up. The divine forgiveness which we are called to receive and to offer is full with divine wisdom and strength, for individuals and for nations, even if preachers and teachers find it difficult to make this clear.

² 'While I do think that forgiveness always involves the absolute self-sacrifice involved in swallowing one's impulses to vengeance and in suffering discipline by the motive of compassion and the intention of peace, I do not think that it must or should involve the bypassing of justice, appropriate resentment and proportionate punishment.' Biggar, *In Defence of War*, 74.

The faith in God which makes forgiveness possible has another element which I've not mentioned yet and which we see more clearly in the Old Testament Lesson. Forgiveness requires a certain kind of confidence in God's government or providence. In the OT lesson, when Joseph reveals himself to the very brothers who sold him into slavery, he describes the justice which reaches beyond all the imperfections of human justice and into eternity

Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life.

Joseph's life is a kind of prophecy of the work of Christ – as Joseph was raised from prison to save a people, Christ was raised from the dead to save a people, to restore life, to give himself as our food here this morning.³



The image on the front of our bulletins can help us to appreciate Joseph's message. The cloud of witnesses around the altar at the celebration of Holy Communion are soldiers who have given their lives. They are those for whom we have and will pray today.

That image expresses what St Paul expresses beautifully and succinctly in the epistle, in his confidence that ***he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.***

Those whose lives are cut short by war or violence are not lost to us because they are not lost to God. The work of God to build up and restore reaches beyond our weaknesses and limitations, and it reaches beyond death and separation. It is this love which makes it possible to forgive at all, and this love which anchors our hope for justice and peace. It is to this love, wisdom and power that we commend ourselves, and all those for him we pray, confident that ***he which hath begun a good work in [them, in us] will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ***

³ In the face of the losses caused by war and human wickedness, this message can seem like a platitude. A simple answer can seem to make heaven an excuse for human evil, or a guarantor for failure. However, despite these dangers it is necessary and possible to anchor forgiveness and restoration in this much wider perspective, in the work of restoration by which God will over-rule all human failings and all evil, to build up and restore.