



Sermon: - 31st July 2016

Forgive one another

*If we have to forgive before we can truly be forgiven,
what does it really mean to forgive?*

As God in Christ forgave you ... so forgive one another.

What a month July has been for violence and destruction. Terrorist attacks seem to be on the increase;

We saw a lorry inflict devastation in Nice; although it failed, there was an attempted military coup in Turkey. More recently, a teenager wrought carnage in Wuerzburg, and another teenager shot dead nine people in Munich. Just this week a Syrian refugee killed a woman with a machete and wounded five other people as he fled before being arrested, a 27-year-old man blew himself up outside a bar in Ansbach wounding fifteen people and an 84-year-old priest was killed and four other people taken hostage by two armed men who said they were from the so-called Islamic State. They stormed Fr Jacques Hamel's church in Rouen and killed him in the most brutal fashion during a morning Mass. This priest, who was in fact standing in for a colleague, has been described as a courageous and dedicated man who had pledged to serve the church "until my last breath".

What is the world coming to and how do we cope with it. What is our response to anger, hatred, greed, and violence?

Last week we considered the Lord's Prayer and what I called that most terrifying of phrases, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors". I commented that forgiveness is a complex issue and that it deserved a whole sermon all to itself. I thought it made sense to look at that issue sooner rather than later; little did I think that the news this week would not only be so full of hurt and aggression but that it would provide me with such a poignant illustration as the death of a faithful priest who had spent his life in the service of God dying such a violent and undeserved death. How do we react to that? With anger? Yes! With outrage? Yes! With forgiveness? That situation is perhaps not ours to forgive but often in these very public examples of violence and hurt we see the difficulties of forgiveness enacted for us in a very open forum.

I wonder if you remember the case of Jill Saward, raped at her Ealing vicarage home at the age of 21. Her capacity to forgive astonished the country.

Do you also remember Gordon Wilson who was bombed by the Provisional IRA along with his daughter Marie who later died? His response was this; "I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge. Dirty sort of talk is not going to bring her back to life. She was a great wee lassie. She's dead, she's in heaven, and we'll meet again."

Mr Wilson's words touched many hearts. They also brought about a spirit of reconciliation among the people of Enniskillen when fear and confrontation might just have easily taken hold."

Are these people saints? Are they somehow superhuman, different from you and me? Are they especially holy, endowed with a unique gift of faith and love denied to the rest of us? I don't believe they are. I think part of the problem is a misunderstanding of what forgiveness is, and this is what I want to look at today.

In considering this, however, I'm going to start on the flip side. I'm going to begin by looking at what forgiveness is not because I think this is both important to our

understanding of what forgiveness is, and also crucial to our ability to forgive. There are five things we can say about what forgiveness is not.

The first thing is; it is not saying, "It doesn't matter!"... whatever "it" is, it matters very much, and if it did not there would be no need for forgiveness. I can't overstate that – it matters.

It is not ceasing to hurt... feeling hurt is not wrong, it is natural and inevitable when we have had pain inflicted on us whether intentionally or unintentionally and whether that pain is physical, emotional, psychological or spiritual.

It is not forgetting ... I think this is really important. I think we imagine that if we don't forget that therefore we haven't forgiven and that if we do forgive we will inevitably forget. No! We cannot forget things by an act of will. What it does mean, however, is that we no longer need or desire to use the memory against another person, memory might remain; vindictiveness fades. We may not be able to wipe our memory clean, but we can choose what we do with the memory. When we forgive someone, we find that the sting is drawn from the memory. So to say I can forgive but I can't forget is not an indication that we have not forgiven, as it is so often painted.

It does not mean everything will be as it was before... the prodigal son had spent his inheritance and there would be no more! There was no going back. It does not mean that justice will not be done.

Finally forgiveness is not a feeling, rather it is an act of will ... Choosing no longer to hold the hurtful act against the person who hurt you. To decide not to allow what happened to you to dictate to you how you will behave.

Forgiveness then, if that is what it is not, what is it?

Firstly, forgiveness is a truly liberating experience, for all concerned. It liberates the person who has wronged us. It liberates them to truly repent, it liberates them from their past, it liberates them to form a new healthier relationship with us... if they choose to accept our forgiveness, and if we choose to continue the relationship, although the relationship will change – it can never be the same. But even if they don't choose, even if they never acknowledge that they need to be forgiven, still forgiveness liberates us from the bitterness and despair of unresolved anger. It liberates us from the burden of the past which can constrain, and warp and infect the present and the future.

Forgiveness...is focussed on the person, not the action. This is an important distinction. The action will have been wrong, and remains wrong, but we forgive the person, for love of them, or perhaps simply for love of God.

Forgiveness... begins at home... we will find it very difficult to forgive others if we cannot forgive ourselves, and too often we carry a burden of guilt which we refuse to lay down.

Forgiveness...does not require repentance on the part of the other, although it may make it easier to want to forgive them if they do repent; however it can sometimes create repentance... because it will change our attitude towards them. Just as we repent because God loved us while we were still sinners, so it is possible that we may, by our forgiveness, call out repentance in another.

And that last is perhaps the most significant thing of all. We forgive, we are called to forgive, because Christ first loved and forgave us, and because others are guilty of no greater sin against us than we are against God. We recall the parable of the unforgiving servant. Forgiven a huge debt by his master, he throws a fellow servant into jail for not paying a paltry sum. We read that with indignation, yet how often are we like that servant? How often do we harbour feelings of resentment against another for some sin against us,

not realising that we may have hurt or offended, or upset someone else. Because we don't always know when we have hurt another. We don't always know what sins someone else may have laid at our door. We can't always see the log in our own eye, even although the speck in our brother's or sister's is perfectly plain to us. It is said that to know all is to forgive all – if we were to stand in another's shoes, and feel their feelings, and think their thoughts, is it not possible that we might act the way they act? Perhaps understanding might allow us to begin the process of forgiving. After all, "There but for the grace of God go I" or perhaps, "there but for the grace of God I may yet go" or maybe even, "there I have already been and I did not know it".

As I said last week, I do not mean to sound glib, or to suggest that forgiveness is easy. For every example of astonishing forgiveness reported by the press there are other examples of people who cannot bring themselves to forgive. You may recall PC Philip Olds, the policeman who was shot at point-blank range and was then wheelchair-bound and who eventually committed suicide because he could not live with what had been done to him. You may also recall Rev Julie Nicholson, who resigned her charge because she couldn't forgive her daughter's killers and as a result felt compromised as a priest. Forgiveness is hard, and it does not come naturally to us.

But perhaps we can learn from those who have made the courageous decision to forgive. Jill Saward said: "It's not a question of whether you can or can't forgive. It's a question of whether you will or won't. Of course, sometimes I thought it might be quite nice to be full of hatred and revenge. But I think it creates a barrier and you're the one who gets damaged in the end. So, although it makes you vulnerable, forgiving is actually a release. I don't think I'd be here today without my Christian faith. That's what got me through."

To return to the examples with which I began – the cause of all these incidents is lack of forgiveness, leading to anger and hatred. Without forgiveness revenge escalates. Forgiveness matters and I do believe that a proper understanding of what it is, and support and encouragement in trying to offer forgiveness, is one of the most important things the Church has to offer the world in the 21st Century.

The final challenge to us is to make forgiveness, grace and mercy a way of life, so that when we stand before the judgement seat we can in turn be forgiven for all our sins, sins committed in secret, sins committed in ignorance, sins committed in error, sins committed in lack of understanding, in lack of maturity, sins we have committed because we are human, sins we do not see and do not know, because we can never see into another's heart and know the pain there of which we might be the cause.

Forgiveness is difficult, but perhaps it is not as difficult as we imagine. Remember what it is not; it is not saying it doesn't matter. It is not ceasing to hurt. It is not forgetting. And it is not saying that everything will be as it was before. It is not feeling but an act of will. Let us pray that God will help us to choose forgiveness so that we may live grace-filled lives free from burdens of bitterness and resentment, and so that, on the last day, we too might find that we are forgiven.

Rev Jane Denniston

Campsie Parish Church