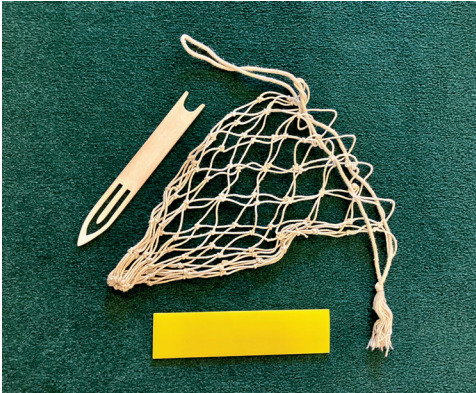


# Forgive us our trespasses

The sermon given by Professor John Sawkins at the Rosyth Methodist Church service of Morning Worship on the 6th Sunday of Easter, 5 May 2024  
The readings were: Acts 10.44–48; Matthew 6.7–15



From Matthew's Gospel:

“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.” (Matthew 6.14–15)

## Introduction

What words can we find to describe the horror that is unfolding day by day in Israel and the Gaza strip? What words will adequately capture the pain and the fear of peoples caught up in a conflict whose roots run deep into history? What words can we, that are insulated from it, use, that do not sound superficial, trite and hopelessly disconnected?

Perhaps there have been too many words?

Perhaps our only proper response is not more words, but silence?

Perhaps that is why, on 11 November, as we do every year, we stop using words, and keep silence, to remember? Because words fail us.

And yet, it is in words that we describe the horror in order not to forget the scale of it.

It is through words that we give expression to our emotions. Our shock and anger, and our deep sadness.

And it is in words that we try and process what has happened and try to articulate how on earth a future can be built on the ruins of people's lives.

## Gospel Reading

Let me turn then to some words of Scripture – our Gospel reading. Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount, from the middle section of that collection of teachings which run from chapters 5 to 7 – his teaching on prayer. And the model which we call the Lord's prayer.

There are in fact two gospels – Matthew and Luke – in which the prayer is set out.

And I want us to note a couple of things that they have in common.

First, the main clauses are the same – the hallowing of God's name, the call for the coming of his kingdom, the request for food, the petition for forgiveness, and the request to be saved from the time of trial or temptation.

Second, that one petition, only one, is conditional. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those that sin against us. Let me unpack that a little bit more.

It's striking to me that the other petitions are, if you like, a simple 'ask'. Give us today the bread we need, save us from the time of trial. Just a request – no quid pro quo.





But the request for forgiveness comes with a condition. Forgive us our sins as we forgive. And I want to argue that this condition is very, very significant.

Now if we were reading only from Luke's Gospel maybe we could note and pass over the condition. It's there in the prayer, but it is not repeated.

However in Matthew's Gospel, this is what comes immediately after the prayer.

v.14: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you;"

That's, what we might call, the positive case. But he hasn't finished with us yet and here is the stinger.

v.15: "but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Forgiveness, it seems, operates according to a simple but immutable rule. And let me avoid doing that thing preachers are tempted to do – i.e. find words to soften its edges to make it sound less harsh. Here it is with the filter taken off:

Forgive others and you will be forgiven. Don't forgive others and you won't.

That, it seems, is the deal.

### **Working it out**

Putting to one side for the moment the spiritual dimension – does this ring true in purely human terms. Let's look at the macro level – does the rule function in the context of the nation state?

Let me offer the striking example of where powerful political leaders ignored it – at the 1919 Paris peace conference at the end of the First World War. Here the war's victors determined to punish the defeated German state, constructing a post war

settlement which was not only unjust, but vindictive. Territorial reassignment and crippling war reparations became, of course, the seedbed of the rise of the National Socialist movement, the Nazi party, and a Second World War just two decades later. Absent the spirit and practice of forgiveness the European powers failed to step off a treadmill of punishment, retribution and retaliation. The pattern repeated itself.

Roll forward to the end of the second world war and, at least in the case of political leaders in the United States, the lesson had been learned. This time there were no grinding reparations; instead a commitment to assist in the rebuilding of European infrastructure through the Marshall plan. And so the cycle was broken.

So much for the nation state. What about at the level of individual humans. Does it operate there? Yes, it appears to.

We know that ancient feuds between tribes or individuals can be passed on from generation to generation over hundreds of years. The Montagues hate the Capulets or, if your prefer, the Sharks hate the Jets. And nobody can remember why. It rolls on like some ghastly film on an endless loop. And the only way to break the curse, is for some group or some individual in the tribe to cut the loop through an act of forgiveness. Only then does the ancient feud lose its power to poison the present and the future.

### **Mechanics of forgiveness**

But what does this forgiveness require in practice? Is it a steely determination to forget what has happened, put it behind us and start again? Forgive and forget – is that the trick?





I don't actually think forgetting is either a necessary or sufficient condition for forgiveness, because forgetfulness makes us focus on the wrong thing.

We may or may not forget a wrong – a murder or a theft. That, I want to argue, is beside the point.

What is the point is that we do not forgive, we surely should not forgive, the sin itself, the murder or the theft. But we might learn to forgive the murderer or the thief.

Forgiveness I suggest then is always of individuals and never of actions.

So if the individual, a person, becomes the object of our forgiveness, then the forgiveness of that person becomes a deliberate and purposeful act, of love. Hence the shorthand 'hate the sin and love the sinner'.

### **Justice and Forgiveness**

But wait, never mind the warm theoretical idea of forgiveness, where is the justice in all of this? What about the terrible crimes that continue to scar our world? What about the horrors that humans inflict on one another? Surely there are some crimes in which talk of forgiveness is not only ill judged, but cruel, heartless almost obscene?

Surely in those cases the refusal to forgive is the righteous thing to do, the thing that justice commands?

Yes ... but no.

Richard Holloway, former Episcopal Bishop of Edinburgh, in his moving book on forgiveness<sup>1</sup> confronts this point head on. He argues, yes, some crimes are so terrible that retaliation, not forgiveness, seems the only just course of action. But, he concludes, even there the immutable

law of forgiveness applies. The horror of the particular circumstances does not alter the fact that the inability or refusal to forgive, though it may be morally appropriate from a moral point of view, always projects the effects of the past sin into the future. Without forgiveness the shadow of the past falls over the lives lived now and in the future.

Retribution, an eye for an eye, ultimately leaves the world blind. Only forgiveness can break that tragic cycle.

### **Difficulty of Forgiveness**

But this is hard. Very hard.

In our own lives we know about the many ways in which breaks in the network of human relationships can occur. The ill-judged word, the thoughtless act, the unintended insult. Looked at in the context of terrorism and war we know this is low level stuff, but we also know the very real impact that it can have on us. We can be stopped in our tracks by it. If we are to move on, we have to learn to forgive each other, and, what is often even harder, to forgive ourselves.

And what about those on the receiving end of great horrors. Glibly urging forgiveness can in some cases add to the trauma being felt.

In the early 1990s, after decades of apartheid in South Africa, two people emerged who were prepared to cut that loop that I was talking about. F. W. de Clerk, president of the country, and Nelson Mandela, president of the African National Congress. And they knew that they needed

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Holloway (2002) *On Forgiveness: How Can We Forgive the Unforgivable?*, Canongate Press.  
ISBN: 978-1841953588





to model a new way of dealing with the horrors of the past. The landmark Truth and Reconciliation Commission aimed to draw the poison of the apartheid regime through a process of confession and forgiveness. And here is where the theory of forgiveness met the reality of the injustice, the suffering and pain experienced by many thousands of people.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, chair of the Commission, recounted how one day a black woman came to testify before the Commission. Her husband had been tortured then killed by police officers ... Tutu translated her words in this way. She said, 'A Commission or government cannot forgive. Only I, eventually, could do it. And I am not ready to forgive.'

In human terms forgiveness is hard, very, very hard. And forgiveness is costly.

Or, closer to home, after decades of inter-community violence in Northern Ireland, leaders emerged in the 1990s who were prepared to look for a new way to cut the loop. Their deliberations resulted in the Good Friday Agreement which offered a new way of dealing with the differences. Not by ignoring them, but by recognising them and offering a mechanism to live with them.

Does it always work? No, clearly it does not. Neither Northern Ireland nor South Africa are models of perfection but they are infinitely better than they were and, crucially, the cycle has been broken.

### **Forgiveness in Christ**

Let me bring us back to base. Our worship in church together, today.

Whenever we, or other Christians, meet together for worship we talk of forgiveness.

Whenever we, or other Christians, meet together for worship we meet around a symbol of forgiveness – the cross.

For we believe that it was on the cross that Christ demonstrated the length to which God went to forgive us our sins.

In Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapter 5 and verse 8 we have this,

"God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

That's the heart of the matter. That's the good news that we recall every week when we gather for worship. That whilst we were still sinners God offered his forgiveness.

He didn't wait until we were sinless, he didn't hold back until we were perfect. He stepped into our sinful, messy, compromised lives and said "your sins are forgiven."

In every act of worship that is what we claim. We confess and then we claim forgiveness for our sins – not by virtue of anything we have done to earn forgiveness – but because God loves us, every one of us, with an everlasting love. And will never let us go.

This is our faith.

We believe – God loves us.

We believe – God forgives us.

We believe that, in Christ's death on the cross, the power of the past to destroy or overshadow our present and our future was defeated.

We believe, that because of Christ, we can step into the future liberated from every shadow of the past.

And, given that, can we find the courage in ourselves to be the first to reach out our hand to those who have sinned against us?

## **Call to mend nets**

The first disciples that Jesus called, Simon Peter and Andrew, were fishermen. So were James and John, who were in a boat with their father, mending their fishing nets, when Jesus called them.

Mending nets – fixing breaks in the cords that joined the knots in the nets to each other.

That's a good image for what we as disciples of Christ, are called to do.

To re-join connections that had been broken. To re-establish the bonds of association, of friendship and of love, between people. To play our part in doing so through forgiveness. And to support people and organisations whose work it is to do that across our society.

For in Christ we have been forgiven.

In Christ we are forgiven.

And in Christ we are called to forgive.

Thanks be to God.

Amen

---

The photograph is of some of the items that John used in his all-age address, entitled "Being joined up". We see the ball net made by John when at school in Hull, together with the tools used to make the net – which still works. And this is because the knots are working ... and apt illustration for "The first word" and for the sermon that followed.