

The Logic of Forgiveness

Mike Starkey, Holy Trinity Twickenham, 8th October 2006.

Matthew 18:21-35

Back in 1985 a professor of Educational Psychology decided to look into what it was that helped people stay happy and emotionally well-balanced. His name was Robert D Enright. He found there was a lot of research on treating the symptoms of depression and addiction. In other words, dealing with people's unhappiness. But there was very little research on the sorts of lifestyle habits that make for an emotionally healthy life.

In particular Professor Enright wanted to find out about the place of forgiveness. Being able to forgive another person - did that make any difference to the person who did the forgiving? Well, it's an interesting question. So he did a survey of all the academic literature on forgiveness. And what he found was: precisely nothing.

And he was amazed. He said this: 'I didn't find a single academic paper, which is rather extraordinary to me. Something that the wisdom of the ages tells us is good had never been put to the psychological test.'

But of course this was precisely the problem: the fact that it was part of what he calls the 'wisdom of the ages'. Psychologists would dismiss forgiveness because they thought it was something only for the church. It was a 'religious' idea, and not a fit subject for real scientific research. And if you talk to people now about the whole idea of forgiveness, lots of people have the idea that it's for wimps, it's a way of sweeping wrongs under the carpet and letting people walk all over you.

So professor Enright started to do some hard-nosed research on forgiveness, to see whether it helped people and made them happier, or whether it made them victims and made them more depressed. And what he found was fascinating.

He found that forgiveness can significantly reduce anxiety and depression and increase self-esteem. Let me give you an example of how this works. When researchers stick electrodes onto volunteers and ask them to think about somebody who's wronged them in the past, what they find is that people's heart rates and stress levels rise dramatically. People who hang onto grudges from the past and a desire for vengeance have a greater vulnerability to heart-attacks and they have a weakened immune system.

On the other hand, people who're able to put past grudges and that desire for vengeance behind them show very different physical symptoms. In other words, the ability to forgive makes you healthier and happier. And over the past 20 years that's been established beyond all doubt by countless research projects. Not to mention the experience of whole countries like South Africa, where they've attempted to use forgiveness and reconciliation as a way of putting the past behind them.

Now, I don't think all this would come as a surprise to Jesus. In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus says one of the distinctives of his followers is that they take forgiveness seriously. They're people who're willing to forgive.

It starts with a question from his friend Peter. Peter knows from his Jewish upbringing that forgiveness is important. The rabbis of the day said that if somebody keeps on wronging you, then you can forgive that person up to three times. So Peter asks Jesus how many times he thinks you can forgive somebody, if they keep on doing whatever they're doing to hurt you. He obviously thinks by suggesting as many as seven times he's being radical and generous. More than twice as many times as the rabbis suggested.

And Jesus's reply stops him in his tracks. 'Not seven times, but 77 times!' Now, Jesus isn't laying down a new limit. He's not saying that on the 78th time you punch the person in the mouth! He's taking Peter's suggestion that seven is really very forgiving and saying 'No! It's more like 77 times'. In other words, an unlimited number of times.

Then Jesus tells this story of a king who lets a man off a massive debt, but then this same man goes out and refuses to cancel the debt of another man who only owes him a few pounds. The message is clear. If you've been forgiven much, then you in turn should forgive others.

But here's the big question: what is forgiveness? And this is what a lot of people don't understand. Especially people who think it's wimping out, or ignoring what somebody did to you. Real forgiveness isn't sweeping something under the carpet or pretending something never happened. It's not ignoring what's happened. It's not becoming a doormat. It's not doing away with the need for repentance and saying sorry by the person who did something wrong.

No. Forgiveness is facing squarely up to what's happened, but surrendering your right to get even with the other person. In other words, you're letting go of a hurt, rather than holding onto it and demanding punishment. It's showing mercy and not vengeance. That's not a soft option. It's not an easy option. It's actually very hard. But as psychologists are increasingly discovering, it's worth it. Especially to the person doing the forgiving.

But in a way, the practical benefits to us should be secondary. What matters is that Jesus says it's the right thing to do. Jesus says a radical willingness to forgive should be a characteristic of his followers. Why? Because God has forgiven us so much. It's like the characters in Jesus's story. The servant in the story is forgiven a massive debt. Actually, the way Jesus tells it, he owes the king billions of pounds! And it's all written off by the king. But then this same man goes out and strangles another guy who owes him a fiver.

Jesus is saying that if we refuse to forgive people, we're like the man in the story. People who've been forgiven much, but who then refuse to forgive a little in others. The stories of Jesus are never airy-fairy and abstract. They're always about real life in the real world. And the message from this story is clear.

We need to be people who're generous in offering forgiveness: here in church, at work, and at home. Forgiveness is not just good for me personally. It's also a key to repaired relationships. And it's a sign to the watching world that God's at work among us. The church is a community of people who know they've been forgiven so much by God, so they extend a radical, counter-cultural forgiveness to others.

So I want us to pause and think for a moment. Is there a relationship or situation where you and I can make that kind of forgiveness a reality this week? Is there a situation where I need to surrender my right to get even, let go of the hurt and leave it in God's hands?

It may be a relative, or a work colleague, a husband or wife, or a neighbour. It may be that as you come forward for Holy Communion later in this service, you want to offer that situation into God's hands, and ask him to help you forgive.

People who've been forgiven much need to extend that forgiveness to others.