

Lenten address 2019 – week three, Forgiveness – healing the sore.

Good evening, and thank you for joining us for evensong, and for the third of the Lent addresses. In week one, we thought about sin – working out what’s wrong; last week we heard about repentance – doing something about it. This evening we are exploring forgiveness which has as its subtitle, healing the sore.

I really like the image that “healing the sore” gives us; it is a rich metaphor for forgiveness. I expect that all of us have experience of some injury to our body, and the process that the body goes through to bring about healing so that our sores eventually become scars. They may leave their mark but they are no longer open and weeping and potentially dangerous and life threatening.

The scholar Daniel Migliore in his work, “Faith seeking understanding” says this about Forgiveness:

“Forgiveness is God’s reception of sinners into new communion in advance of and apart from reparations for offences committed. As an act of divine grace, forgiveness is free, scandalous and costly.” (Migliore, 2004, p. 410)

Forgiveness is free, scandalous and costly.

As Christians we believe in the forgiveness of sins, we said so earlier this evening as we proclaimed the creed. But how often do we pause over those words and think of the enormity of them for our own lives, and for the whole world. In the Eucharist we give thanks for the forgiveness of the sins of the whole world, as we remember through broken bread and wine outpoured the saving act of Jesus to restore the relationship with God, fatally wounded by sin.

As we remember the life, death and resurrection of Jesus we reflect on the boundaries that God crossed in order to bring about this work of healing. The act of forgiveness that is free, scandalous and costly involves God crossing boundaries, so it shouldn’t be any surprise that when we also are called to forgive we too find ourselves crossing boundaries. We enter into the mystery of forgiveness as we cross the boundary of holding on to the offence, and instead let it go. It equates to a healing of deep, deep wounds that have been inflicted by others or by ourselves, which cannot be self-healed, and can only be released. It is

not to “let them get away with it”. Rather, it is to cross over the boundary of self and enter into the kingdom of God, seeking the one who can apply the balm of forgiveness to our wounded self, to soothe the immediate pain and to build up the right conditions for healing to take place.

It is not easy.

Whilst our bodies are hard wired to heal physically, the wounds of our souls require the attention and ministrations of the divine healer.

Our reading from the Old Testament this evening (Genesis 28: 10 – 19a) may help us with this insight, as the story of Jacob sheds some light on the gift of forgiveness.

Nico Ter Linden writes

“We’ve heard about Jacob’s deceit on his mother’s prompting, about his father’s bitterness and Esau’s wrath, but not a word about heaven until now” (Linden, 1999, p. 120)

Jacob is in a place of desolation – he is wounded; he has open and running sores which run deep within him, and his only response has been to run as far away from the outward source of the pain as he physically can. But he cannot run away from himself, the inner source of his pain.

But then Jacob has a dream, and in his dream he sees a ladder, set down on earth from heaven, with angels ascending and descending it. As they ascend they carry up Jacob’s distress, his shame, his guilt, his sorrow for what was, and his anxiety for what is to come.

As they descend they carry God’s consolation with them. God’s presence, His promise, His forgiveness, His healing all of which are poured into Jacob for his preservation.

Jacob awakes from his dream a forgiven man, having received salvation and consolation. His sores have been healed in a most unexpected of places, as he finds out that the house of God, the Bethel place, is not constrained to geography but is found wherever God is – in this case, in the middle of the desert. Here Jacob experienced what it was for him to cross the boundaries of his homeland, and to experience the God who crosses boundaries of heaven and earth to offer him forgiveness and bring His healing power to Jacob’s deepest needs.

The author Ruth Simons reflects on forgiveness thus:

“if we are honest, forgiveness doesn’t come naturally or easily, even for one who walks with the Lord. What comes naturally is musing over wounds, repeating the offense over and over gain in our minds, and harbouring bitterness inside where others can’t easily see. We call it forgiveness when we’ve moved on, but I think forgiveness is when you let tenderness in.” (Simons, 2017, p. 151)

We learn from the Bible that God is always ready to let tenderness in. (Isaiah 55: 1-9; Numbers 14:18; Ps 103:8). God is swift to forgive, for that is God’s nature. But we are not God. No, but as we seek God with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength God is faithful and God dwells within us. The indwelling of God brings us a constant reminder that we are forgiven people. We do well to root ourselves deeply in the truth that Christ forgave us first, and so we are not only capable of, but we are called by God to “forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13 NIV).

As Christians we have first-hand experience of forgiveness, and as you can only give that which you have first received, in theory at least, Christians are to be the most forgiving people. In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians he writes

*Be **kind** to one another, **tenderhearted**, **forgiving** one another, as God in Christ forgave you (Ephesians 4:21 NIV).*

Who in your life needs to see your tender heart?

Where in your heart of hearts would you like the balm of God’s forgiveness to reach?

Tell God – he knows already, but in the act of acknowledging before God that we recognise there are hard places, hard relationships, hard memories, hard attitudes, then and only then, we open up to receive the grace that is on offer, and we accept into those hard places, the grace, mercy and love of God that softens our hearts and enables us to once again extend what is impossible apart from God.

How do we tell God about the hardness in our hearts? We do so through prayer. Through prayer we release the occasion, the offender, the opposition to God. How many of us haven't on occasions stuttered over the words of the Lord's prayer:

"Forgive us our trespasses, **as we** forgive those who trespass against us"

I know I have.

Boundaries again – when we trespass, we cross a boundary into a place we shouldn't be. When we forgive, we cross a boundary into a place we should be. It's a struggle, but then why wouldn't it be for as Daniel Migliore reminds us:

"the message and ministry of Jesus clash profoundly with the world. He announces God's forgiveness of sinnersa forgiving love that is greater than our often paralyzing awareness of our guilt" (Migliore, 2004, pp. 189-191)

So to conclude. Forgiveness is God's idea. Forgiveness is God's grace. Forgiveness is active and not passive. Forgiveness is what storms the gates of hell and sets its prisoners free. Forgiveness crosses boundaries and takes us into new relationships with God, with others and with ourselves. If we so desire it, then forgiveness will also softly bloom in the gardens of our lives as we root ourselves deeply in the truth that God first forgave us.

Amen

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