**Forgiveness - February 2022**

I want to start by affirming how deeply “forgiveness” is part and parcel of how we make ordinary, every day life happen and sustainable.

Just imagine for a moment if we didn’t have the ability and normal willingness to offer forgiveness….. how hard our everyday relationships would be. If every small irritation, error, oversight, wilful act was rendered unforgivable by us.

When I was about 7, a pupil at Ryelands Primary school in Lancaster, they had a scheme where parents would come in to staff the little library. And when it was your parent on duty, you were meant to go and get them a cup of tea at playtime. When my mum came in – I completely forgot and went out to play! I didn’t remember until I got home, opened the front door, and realised that the temperature had just dropped about 10 degrees! My mum had been embarrassed, and she was disappointed in me. She let me know all about it – for a while. But then – forgiveness. Unsurprisingly, and thankfully, of course now it’s not a sore area that we can’t go to. It’s one of those stories that gets told often! We laugh about it. I feel liberated. I’m pretty sure my mum, now 91 isn’t caught up in angst about it all. It’s gone. Not forgotten, but now - because of forgiveness - recast as a humorous episode.

Gill, my wife, could also now at this point quickly pitch in by pointing out that there are still some mornings when I forget to take up her cup of tea! This may need further work!

So, just imagine if we weren’t accustomed to being a forgiving and forgiven people. What household could survive? What friendship, marriage, workplace could thrive? The grudges would pile up, and their weight would smash every relationship apart! And sometimes, that happens…. I have a friend whose wife cited in grounds of divorce how he ate his apple (which just begins to open up for us in this discussion the rightful place, often, for expecting changed behaviour in the arena of forgiveness – more of that later!)

As I say, it’s part and parcel of how we do life – of how we sustain relationships. It is the ‘WD40’ for relationships.

And for us as Christians, we recognise too our absolute human need to receive, as well as to give, forgiveness.

That’s why a prayer of confession is a standard, essential building block in every time of worship – seeking to restore and be renewed in our relationship with God.

Though perhaps sometimes that part of our corporate worship can be in danger of being somewhat more symbolic than transforming? I’m aware of two dangers when I’m part of a congregation and the worship leader says: “We’ll now keep a moment of silence as we think about all the ways we’ve failed God this week.”

Firstly…. The blank mind! Does anyone else have that? It’s absolutely not that there’s nothing to recall - it’s just that at that particular moment I can’t think of anything more than I forgot to put the recycling out! And then the guilt! Why can’t I think of anything! If only I could phone a friend – they’d be able to fill in the blanks!

And then the other danger: the worship leader says “well now let’s just have a moment of silence as we think about all the ways we’ve failed God this week.” And then 2 and a half seconds later says…. and now having laid all that before God, we thank God for his forgiveness. And I’m like – hold on! I need far, far longer here after the complete travesty of what I realise I’ve been like this week.

**But** in the sweet spot – how precious it is to be in worship and to be able to come to God as we are knowing that God comes to us as He is, and that as we’re real before Him, we can know his Spirit and grace pouring forgiveness over us in response to our faltering but sincere ‘sorry.’

What healing and wholeness we can find, in affirming that God is a forgiving God.

**So** – thank goodness for the gift and healing of forgiveness. That ordinary, ‘in-the-everyday-routine-of-life-forgiveness’ that means we manage to stay in good relationship, that we can let go of both grudge and guilt - and move on.

That we can say ‘sorry’ – and mean it – and sometimes, but not always, do better in the future. But that the forgiveness can be offered – and received. Relationships, trust and wholeness can be restored. The WD40 of so many normal and ordinary relationships.

And thank goodness – thank God – for that opportunity to affirm and know God’s forgiveness of us.

And all of this that enables us - day by day – in the normal and ordinary to know we are forgiven - by each other, by God, and therefore we’re more able to forgive ourselves.

So far so good?!

**But** of course – this whole theme has its enormous challenges.

Because although we can rely and be truly thankful for the ‘ordinariness of forgiveness’ in the ordinary, the challenge is to think through how we respond and act in those times that are not ordinary, and the normal operating systems can’t cope.

So…..when a bomb explodes in a relationship which pushes trust to breaking point, and with it, all that the relationship was built upon……that means that the relationship no longer stands on common safe ground.

When one person abuses another – physically, emotionally, sexually, spiritually – however. Sometimes over a long period. Or in a significant, horrific, moment. And the scars go so, so deep. The scars that can be physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual – or a traumatic mixture of all of them.

Or in a church, when someone in a position of leadership or responsibility abuses their role – and a child, a young person, a vulnerable adult - in fact anyone – is hurt.

At these points we’re way beyond the normal operating systems.

And we therefore need to tread so carefully as church – as the people of God - about what we say to each other about these circumstances, and how we set in place patterns of life that can take seriously the consequences of very significant long-term harm. We need to tread so carefully about how we talk about God’s offer of forgiveness, and how that can be both gladly and wholly embraced, but also incorporated and lived out within a community that is committed to the safe-keeping and healing of all.

It's within this church context, that we’re going to focus our thinking for a while now.

**Thinking about forgiveness beyond ‘in the ordinary...’**

Navigating our way through:

* our celebration of the wonderful gift of forgiveness
* and creating a safe and healing space for those who have experienced abuse and harm.

Our grappling with this will also speak into relationships beyond the church, but we’ll keep our thinking primarily located within the challenges.

So, firstly to remind ourselves – and celebrate - the nature of the community that we seek to be as a church:

“The Church’s witness to God through Jesus Christ involves its seeking to be a community marked by love and care for one another and **for all** whom it encounters. Christians believe that God wants human beings to flourish and grow in loving relationship with one another and with God.”

*Theology of Safeguarding para 2.2* **“For All”**

So here’s the challenge for us:

How do we become a community that:

* offers the amazing liberating gift of forgiveness to those who have done serious harm;

 AND

* is a safe and healing space for those who have experienced serious abuse and/or harm.

The Sweet Spot!

And as we dig into this, I think it’s important to be explicit about another deep challenge here “of being able to forgive that which really feel like it’s unforgivable.”

*CS Lewis: Everyone thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive,*

*In the Methodist report, Church and Sex Offenders we read this:*

*“We were greatly exercised by the question as to how readily victims of sexual offences and survivors of abuse should be expected to forgive their abusers. This forgiveness has sometimes been bluntly commanded within the Church, but to expect immediate forgiveness has been pastorally unwise, grievously insensitive and unrealistic. In the long run God calls us to forgive our enemies and his commands are for our good; in the short run it may be both impossible and undesirable, though it may eventually happen almost as a 'by-product' at the end of a long, hard process of recovery. It may be quite wrong for an abused person to meet the offender again, and always wrong for an offender to try to coerce a victim into forgiveness and reconciliation.”*

Be so careful not to imply of each other that we’re failures if – in the face of challenging behaviour – we’re not immediately able to forgive….

The “Theology of Safeguarding” report highlights 3 misunderstandings:

Firstly….. “Forgiveness involves forgetting behaviour that has caused harm so that past sin and behaviour is blotted out and the forgiven sinner can start again with a blank piece of paper.”

Tutu: “Forgiving is not forgetting; it's actually remembering – remembering and not using your right to hit back. It's a second chance for a new beginning. And the remembering part is particularly important. Especially if you don't want to repeat what happened.”

……Truth and Reconciliation process.

As the report says….

Language of renewal, or a new start, or of being washed clean, is problematic if it implies that the past has been dismissed. Forgiveness does not negate the consequences of the past: the risen Christ still bears the scars of the cross; in the Hebrew Scriptures Israel’s sins are constantly rehearsed for all to remember. Forgiveness does not change what has happened as if it never happened, but it does enable people to live in a new relationship to the consequences of the past.

Secondly… “forgiveness means the cancelling of debts and obligations.”

Tutu: “Forgiving and being reconciled to our enemies or our loved ones are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not about patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the hurt, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking but in the end, it is worthwhile because, in the end, only an honest confrontation with reality can bring real healing. Superficial reconciliation can bring only superficial healing.”

So, giving and receiving forgiveness may well mean the offender having a **greater** sense of obligation than before (as with Zaccheus who, after encountering Christ, offered to repay four times those he had swindled, even though the law only required it to be twofold). Thus forgiveness should encourage the offender to take responsibility for the damage caused and for seeking to rectify the situation or make restitution (e.g by paying for therapy?)

American pastoral theologian, Marie Fortune, tells of a group of incest offenders in a treatment programme whose powerful plea was, 'Don't forgive so easily’ All were Christians and all had asked their pastors for forgiveness. Prayers had been said. They'd been forgiven and sent home. All the offenders said this pastoral response was not helpful because it enabled them to avoid accountability for what they had done.

As the report says, “repentance includes accepting responsibility for past actions and making oneself accountable to others, which includes behaving in ways which enable others to be safe. It is always the responsibility of those who abuse to change their behaviour; and changed behaviour, not just intention, is important. This includes the acceptance that there may need to be ongoing boundaries around the ways in which they participate in church life. This is about more than risk assessment, vital though that is, but also about what particular ways of engagement might represent, and the ways in which they might impede the creation of safer space and the witness of the church.”

Thirdly… “that a person who has abused should be treated as wholly reformed and good.”

Tutu: “Forgiveness is taking seriously the awfulness of what has happened when you are treated unfairly. Forgiveness is not pretending that things are other than the way they are.”

This notion may cause significant further harm to those who have suffered the abuse and provides an unrealistic view of human relationships and Christian discipleship. Forgiveness does not mean that previous patterns of behaviour have been left behind, nor does it remove any risk of reoffending. For some people particular behaviours are pathological.

Conversion does not stop people sinning, nor ‘cure’ abusive behaviour or the temptation to offend God’s forgiveness – that forgiveness, of course, is also a call to a new life, radically different from the old.

For those who have abused, a sanctified life includes understanding the ongoing impact of the abuse on the lives of others and a preparedness to limit the ways in which they participate in the life of the Church in order to enable others to feel safer and grow.

The one forgiven takes responsibility for ensuring that life will be different, not least by avoiding situations which put themselves and others at risk.

Forgiveness helps us on the road to Christian maturity, but does not suddenly place us at the end of our pilgrimage.

Romans 7 reminds us that like Paul "I do not do the good I want", and that is still our condition.

In offering forgiveness God is saying, "I accept you totally. Despite what you did and were, you are reconciled. In the wonder of Christ I am with you to rebuild your life and put the past right. By the energy of the Holy Spirit live now as a new person, be forgiving too and be full of hope." And when we forgive each other we are offering the human level of such goodness.

**So** – the tensions that we seek to hold in balance as a church community are not new at all – New Testament full of passages that talk of a strong discipline for its members and leaders: Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians 6 / 10 1 Timothy.

It’s never been assumed that conversion to Christ so transformed the believer’s character as to make accountability and order unnecessary. On the contrary, discipline was an integral part of the Church – as an agency of the gospel.

And just to press that a little further as Methodists – let’s think of that great truth at the core of Methodist thinking and practice at our best – grace!

Prevenient / Justifying / Sanctifying

‘Means of Grace’ being a key way in which we grow.

SO FINALLY,

How do we grow as communities that can be forgiving AND safe places for all?

By holding these things together in creative tension:…..

* In emphasising the miracle of new life, never forget how hard change can be.
* In developing a safe place for all, never forget that God’s renewing and forgiving power – as supremely displayed on the cross – is at the heart of our Gospel and our life in community.

And a final story….

American Methodist pioneer minister, Michael Beck – tells of his really tough childhood, ended up in prison and a drug and alcohol addict. Through some wonderful grace-filled encounters and moments he gave his life to Christ. He came out of prison, he found his way to church. And he said, with great exuberation: “Jesus has saved my soul.”

He tells of the pastor’s wise response:  **“Well, that’s wonderful. Hallelujah. I’m thrilled that Jesus has saved your soul, but it’s the AA that will save your ass.”**

I think that’s where I conclude with this…. Hallelujah, Jesus saves our souls, but it’s the church – when we truly take seriously our life together – that can save our asses – and keep us all safe, and help us all to flourish – forgiven, renewed, growing in the mind and likeness of Christ. It’s not easy – but it’s so worth being a part of the journey!

*Leslie Newton, February 2022*