

Christ Church, Totland . September 17th 2017 Trinity 14.

Psalm 103. vv 6-12

Matthew 18vv 21-end

FORGIVENESS

Some years ago, Michael Christopher wrote a powerful play about a former German General called Engel. He had been sentenced at the Nuremburg Trials for war crimes. Now, incognito, he and his wife were building a cabin in the mountains outside a little French village. He had served 30 years in prison and without much time left to him he wanted to forget the past and build for the brief future that remained.

But, there was a French Journalist who could not forget. His whole family had been brutally massacred in a village that Engel's army had over-run in the early days of the war. Every person in the village had been executed on the general's orders. For 30 years Marrieu had waited and planned his personal revenge. He went to the village and spread his bitterness and hatred and fear into the hearts of the people there. It worked and they made plans to go up the mountain, burn down the cabin and murder the General.

After 30 long years of waiting, burning and fostering hatred, he began to have doubts. Plunging himself into Engel's soul, he tore into his own also. He found that he had no alternative than to warn Engel of the attack that night and offered to take him to safety.

The old General kept Marrieu waiting a long while, and at last said, he would agree to the offer, on one condition - that

Marrieu would forgive him. But that Marrieu could not, would not do.

He could rescue him but not forgive him. The villagers came, burned down the cabin and shot the General and his wife.

There was one thing that Engel wanted more than life itself. What was it that his heart deeply needed so much that he would rather die than live without?

And what was the one thing Marrieu did not have the power to give without losing his integrity?

What is this Miracle called Forgiveness?

Surely, it is so much deeper and more fundamental than simply shaking hands and going home as if nothing had ever happened.

Let's look at it. 5 points

1. The Expression, "I cannot forgive", has all to do with feelings.

The Truth, "I will not forgive", is what needs to be challenged and faced up to.

It is not a feeling issue of "I can" or "I can't" but a matter of the will. "I will" or "I will not"

It is a matter of Choice. Will I or Won't I? That is what concerns the Christian.

2. Forgiveness is not about Forgetting.

To forgive and forget is not a helpful expression at all.

It implies that one cannot be done without the other.

It is a psychological fact that nothing that happens to us in life is ever really forgotten. Passing years dim the memory.

The details blur. Painful events sink into the sub conscience or are, as a matter of survival, pushed there.

But these things are not forgotten and can often, and especially when God is in the healing process, startle us with their re-emergence, even after a life-time of repression.

The fact is - we cannot forget. But we can forgive.

Just let us not get them muddled together.

God can forgive and forget.

We cannot.

Yes, we are instructed in Scripture exercising our will, "Forgetting the things that lie behind us we press on...."

But we can only choose to forget what we first choose to remember. We need to know what it is that we need to forget.

But with the memory very much alive, we can choose to forgive.

Once the seriousness of remembering has been grasped and faced, then there is, I believe, a Gift of God, that comes straight from Heaven, called Forget -ery!

3. Forgiveness is not pretending that the issues are unreal nor unimportant.

"I'm so sorry" "Oh, forget it, it's not important"

That is pretence and it is neither real nor adult.

I am not to say sorry where there is no offence and conversely I am not to pretend there is no offence just because I want to avoid the painful truth. Some people can only deal with an offence by pretending that it wasn't serious or it didn't happen.

4. Forgiveness is not re-calling.

"Love keeps no record of wrongs", says St Paul.

The Greek word (logizesthai), is straight out of James's book! It is used for entering an item into an Accountant's ledger.

It is one thing to be able to forget. It is quite another, as in Marrieu's case, to store matters in the mind and keep fanning them before our eyes. Brooding on them so that it stays hot and hurtful until the day of reckoning comes.

So go through the ledgers of the mind and through the archives and cross out the enmities. Burn the photos and letters that serve to feed the memories.

Everything that serves to awaken the memory and nurture its pain needs to go.

Corrie Ten Boom, in her old age, was challenged to destroy the correspondence she had stored, which proved the character of a deep injury inflicted upon her by Christian friends years earlier.

Shortly before I began my work in my last parish, the churchyard had been re-ordered. (that clearly required the moving of awkward grave-stones and levelling out bumps and such like). On the files there were some very bitter letters. I destroyed them, and then told the Church Council what I had done. What help is it to know who wrote what. They are no longer on file. They are crossed off the ledger.

5. Forgiveness is not demanding.

It does not require that the other person must change.

"Freely have I received, and freely I am to give". My forgiveness is without cost. It has to be unconditional. It cannot demand that my needs be met, nor that my position or character be vindicated. Not even that I must be forgiven in return. The other is being released into the hands of God. I forgive and step out of the picture. With me out of the way the other is free to hear what God is saying to them (if they want to that is).

Do not think that the relationship you once had will be restored...it doesn't work like that.

What it might do is lead to a new relationship. That will be very different to the former relationship and almost surely richer. It will be based on forgiveness, each to the other. If my forgiveness is not reciprocated I can do nothing and there will be no further relationship.

Step 1. It starts when God, in his mercy and forgiveness, brings us sinful people into a right relationship with himself. Psalm 103. "He does not treat us as our sins deserve". Matthew. "The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go." That's freedom. The freedom and joy of God's forgiveness.

Step 2. We, who have received such a gift, pass it on and give it to another, not, as in the parable of Jesus, to imprison our brother or sister.

No! I bring my brother/sister before God and say to him, "Father, as you have forgiven me so I forgive this one". Perhaps he is my enemy....it isn't any different.

Should you ever be in Bedfordshire, visit Olney churchyard. You will find a headstone. It reads:

John Newton. Clerk. Once an Infidel and Libertine and Servant of Slaves in Africa — was By the mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, Preserved, Restored, Pardoned, and appointed to Preach the Faith he had so long laboured to destroy.

There was no father in John's life. His godly mother died when he was 7. Every day for those 7 years she prayed with him and laid a foundation vital for what followed.

He was a Prodigal. With no concept of a father You probably have forgotten in a previous sermon, that I presented to you two sons who were lost: the elder lost at

home and the younger lost in a far-away land.. These boys were not from a dysfunctional home but from a perfect one. John Newton went to sea, aged 11. He went to Africa he says in his own words, “that I might be free to sin to my heart’s content”.

He was press-ganged. He deserted from the Navy. He was flogged. He became involved in the unbelievable atrocities of the African Slave Trade. He was captured and became a white slave, sold to an African woman, who made him depend on the crusts she threw off her table. His degradation was complete. Like the prodigal son - a life with the pigs. Then in the midst of a terrible storm, the ship likely to sink, he rushed to the pumps and said to the captain, “If this will not do - the Lord have mercy upon me”.

Later he wrote, “Mercy! Mercy!, What mercy can there be for me? This was the first desire I had breathed for mercy for many years”.

And God reached back to him. He was 23 years old now. What he received on March 10th 1748, he then made his life’s business to share with others.

Recap. 5 points FORGIVENESS

1. Not a feeling but an act of the will. I choose to forgive.
2. Not forgetting. That can’t be done. I choose to forgive despite the pain and the memory of it.
3. Not pretending that I am not hurting. No minimising the seriousness of the injury nor denying it. Rather, choosing to forgive what is really hurting. Yes, you did hurt me and I forgive you for that.
4. Not recalling the items listed on the ledger. I choose to destroy the list. No sitting on the egg and keeping it warm for ever.

5. Not requiring the offender to change his or her ways as a precondition for my forgiveness. No “If you will then I will”.

Finally, I remember the measure of mercy that has been lavished upon me. What I am called to forgive in others is petty alongside what He has done for me.

So, let us come to the Cross and find mercy in our time of need. It is here that we come face-to-face with the enormity of our offence against God and the relative triteness of others offences against us.

He invites us into a relationship with Him so that all our own relationships fall into place and are sweet.

Lord. Have Mercy!

