

Matthew's weekly musing, 11th September 2020

Long, long ago I was watching a serialised TV programme (possibly in black and white.) It was a George Eliot novel and at some point an indignant father said something like, "of course I forgive her, but she will never enter my house again". (There's a small prize for the first person to give me book, chapter and paragraph).

I remember thinking, "What a haughty, unpleasant man." This was before I realised that Mary Evans was being sharply satirical. My reaction, despite my youth (!) was that this man hadn't explored the meaning of forgiveness. He hadn't grasped that forgiveness involves beginning again in a relationship.

Now it may surprise you to know that I have found forgiveness difficult. I have found forgiveness frustrating, especially when I've been put down and need to shout out my indignation. It is hard to put down a public slight without first counter-attacking. I even had a devious side which wants to gossip, "And do you know I had to forgive so and so because she said such and such!" It is as if I reverted to a childish place.

Over the years I've struggled to know how to forgive if someone has never said sorry. It became helpful to reflect on Jesus' invitation to forgive 70 x 7 times. Which of course is code for *always*:

Matthew 18

- 21 Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the community sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"
- 22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven."

I found a perspective in Nelson Mandela's autobiography, "Long walk to freedom." It was helpful and challenging. At some point in Mandela's long silence on Robben Island he realised that he must put to one side his suffering and loss and indignation. He realised that if the apartheid régime could not walk towards him, he would walk towards them. Someone had to take responsibility for change.

Here was a profound internal forgiveness. Offered before apology was received. Offered to reverse the endless cycle of oppression and violence.

Perhaps this is a particularly deep love of neighbour. The Sermon on the Mount contains, "Love your enemy" and, "blessed are the peacemakers."

Well that puts my petty slights into perspective.

But then only recently I noticed that, on the cross, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them." He didn't say, "I forgive them. I forgive you". He does say, "Father, forgive them."

Why did he say that? Was it that Jesus knew the Father's wrath would fall on those who so denigrated, tortured and destroyed His son? Possibly. Jesus spoke often enough of judgement and the consequences that come from offending God.

Let me pick up a colloquial phrase, "forgive and forget." I think it is complete nonsense. I forgive and remember. I don't mean the petty stuff. I do mean the big life-changing deeds and words. I remember because they are a part of me, and forgiveness is the process by which I seek the grace to find a perspective to stop the big things tearing at my peace and my purpose in life.

The big things haven't gone away. I have given them to my Heavenly Father who knows what to do with them. He knows how to look an abuser in the eye and ask, "Why did you do that to my child?" Or look the suicide bomber in the eye and say, "Why did you do that to my people?" Or look the rich man in the eye and ask, "Why did you exploit my children?" Or look the cynical dictator in the eye and ask, "Why did you spread civil war in your neighbour's country?"

In this short piece I've come a long way from a Victorian novel to a 21st century context via my own small life. Perhaps I've explored forgiveness a little and shared my discovery that there are three parties: me, them and The Judge.