Forgiveness **by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 13th September 2026
at St John the Baptist Church, Aldenham

Reading(s): Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-3

Introduction: reacting to atrocities

On Friday the United States commemorated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the tragic atrocity on 11th September 2001, known simply as "9/11".

The day after the tragedy, the American branch of the Catholic organisation Pax Christi issued a statement that included these words:

> *As people of faith and disciples of the nonviolent Jesus, we must be willing, even now in this darkest moment, to commit ourselves and urge our sisters and brothers, to resist the impulse to vengeance. We must resist the urge to demonize and dehumanize any ethnic group as "enemy." We must find the courage to break the spiral of violence that so many in our nation, we fear, will be quick to embrace.*[1]

This same exhortation applies just as much to recent atrocities, such as the massacre of Jews by Hamas on 7th October 2023, and the deliberate destruction of life and property which the Israeli Defence Force subsequently inflicted on the people of Gaza. The first atrocity led to a rise

[1] https://paxchristiusa.org/2011/01/16/statement-pax-christi-usa-official-statement-following-the-terrorist-attacks-of-september-11-2001/

in anti-Muslim hatred in this country, and the second to an increase in anti-Semitism. Some people respond to such injustices by finding others to scapegoat. But I hope you will agree with me that people who demonize all Muslims because of the actions of a Muslim terrorist group, or who demonize all Jews because of the actions of a government in a foreign country are illogical, unjust and, frankly, stupid.

This week the media, especially in the US, have retold many stories of the people caught up in 9/11 – wives whose husbands were in the World Trade Centre and whose last communication was a desperate phone call, firefighters who lost colleagues as they heroically attempted to rescue people, or volunteers who rushed to the scene to try to help. I wonder how many stories there have been of people being able to forgive the terrorists who carried out this atrocity?

Reconciliation and forgiveness

Last week we looked at the topic of reconciliation – how to handle conflict, or to resolve a grievance against another person. We thought about how all meaningful relationships are likely to have their moments of conflict, and how the church is not exempt from this: in fact, Jesus seems to be addressing his teaching particularly to a church context[2]. There are always going to be people we find it difficult to get on with, and sometimes relationships can become strained. So as Christians we need to know how God expects us to handle these situations.

[2] Matthew 18:15-20

This week Jesus addresses a related topic – forgiveness. It's something we've been taught about since childhood – if you have any brothers or sisters I'm sure you'll remember how your parents tried to get you to make up after a quarrel or a fight, and to pronounce that difficult word "sorry". You may have said it just to get your parent off your back, but if the quarrel was over a minor matter, you may have soon forgotten about the incident and found it easy to move on.

Seeking revenge

But sometimes the wrong someone has done to us hurts badly. We may feel humiliated and angry, even violated. Like physical wounds, emotional wounds can take a long time to heal. In addition to nursing our hurt pride and dignity, we may feel a strong sense of wanting to get our own back, to get justice for ourselves by punishing the other person. Revenge may seem sweet. But the history of the human race testifies to the fact that revenge never solves anything – it simply creates more anger and violence.

A recent example is the attitude of the current Israeli government towards the people of Gaza: the language of Israel's prime minister in the weeks following the appalling terrorist atrocity by Hamas on 7th October 2023 wasn't just about destroying Hamas so as to protect Israelis: it was the language of revenge. And it shows a remarkable blindness on the part of Mr Netanyahu and his associates not to realise that some of the little boys whose parents, siblings and other relatives have been annihilated by the massive violence inflicted on Gaza, will turn into future terrorists, intent on getting their revenge on Israel for its atrocities towards

innocent civilians, and they in turn will commit atrocities against other innocent civilians.

A personal story

The desire for revenge is just as real on the much smaller level of interactions between individuals. In his book, *The Lost Art of Forgiving*, Johann Christoph Arnold recounts the stories of many people who have managed to come through the hurt and bitterness of being wronged by others to a place of forgiveness. One example is Bill from Louisiana, who tells the story of his long journey to be able to forgive. Bill wanted justice for his son Michael, who was killed in a car crash while travelling in a car driven by another young man who was under the influence of alcohol. The driver escaped with minor injuries, but Michael and another passenger were killed.

Here is an abbreviated extract from Bill's testimony.

> The wheels of justice grind very slowly. The courts took more than a year to find the case against the driver…. Finally, the defendant pleaded guilty and was sentenced to six years per count, to be served concurrently.
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> We suggested to the probation office that a boot-camp-style program might be of benefit to him – we really weren't out to hurt him, but we believed he needed to pay for what he had done. All the same, we received a pretty ugly letter from his mother suggesting that we had somehow pushed for the maximum sentence… Her son was finally sentenced to six months in boot-camp, with the rest of his six-year sentence to be served on intensive parole. In six months, her son was coming home. Ours was not.

I suppose I had bought into the belief that, somehow, things would be different after the driver had been brought to justice. I think that is what people mean when they talk about “getting closure.” We think that if there is someone to blame, then we can put the matter to rest. It’s sort of like thinking that if it somehow makes sense, or if the victims get some sort of justice, then the pain will finally go away…

I was angry at the driver, of course. But I was angry at Michael, too. After all, he had made some really bad decisions that night; he had put his life in jeopardy. I had to go through this anger in order to come to grips with my feelings. However, even after the sentencing, I did not find closure. What I did find was the same big hole in my soul – and nothing to fill it with.

It was some months later that it hit me: until I could forgive the driver, I would not get the closure I was looking for. Forgiving is different from removing responsibility. The driver was still responsible for Michael’s death, but I had to forgive him before I could let the incident go. No amount of punishment could ever even the score. I had to be willing to forgive without the score being even. And this process of forgiveness did not really involve the driver – it involved me. It was a process that I had to go through’ I had to change, no matter what he did.

The road to forgiveness was long and painful. I had to forgive more than just the driver. I had to forgive Michael, and God (for allowing it to happen), and myself. Ultimately, it was my inability to forgive myself that was the most

difficult. There were many times in my own life I had driven Michael places when I myself was under the influence of alcohol. But that was the key to my forgiveness – to forgive myself. My anger at other people was just my own fear turned outward. I had projected my own guilt onto others – the driver, the courts, God, Michael – so that I would not have to look at myself. And it wasn't until I could see my part in this that my outlook could change.

That is what I learned: that the closure we seek comes in forgiving. And this closure is really up to us, because the power to forgive lies not outside us, but within our own souls.[3]

The unforgiving servant

In today's gospel passage from Matthew chapter 18 we move from the principle of restoring relationships to the nitty-gritty question of forgiveness. Peter is thinking, "That's all very well, Jesus, but surely there comes a point when it's fair enough to call it a day. How many times do you expect me to forgive the same person – seven times?" Jesus replies, "How about seventy times seven?" And then he tells a story to show how important it is to God that we are willing to forgive others.

A servant owed his master a huge sum of money, which he has no chance of paying, and was threatened with being sold, together with his wife and children. But when he pleaded with his master, the master forgave him the whole debt. And

[3] *The lost art of forgiving* by Johan Christoph Arnold (Plough Publishing House of the Bruderhof Foundation, 1998)

yet, in spite of having been on the receiving end of incredible generosity, he rejected the pleas of his fellow-servant who owed him money, and had him sent to prison. Not surprisingly, the other servants were shocked at this behaviour, and told the master, who threw the first servant into prison as he deserved.

The gift of mercy

We, and the original hearers of Jesus' parable, can easily see the point he is making: those who have received mercy themselves are expected to show mercy to others. But the aim of Jesus' story is to get us to consider how this applies to ourselves. We are the ones who have received mercy – will we show it to others? As Christians, we come to the Lord's table week by week to receive the bread and wine which reminds us of what it cost Jesus to pay the debt of our sin. Jesus' death on the cross wasn't just a nice gesture – it was an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Without this, we would be cut off from a holy God for ever, lost for all eternity. Our sin – our choices we make about running our lives on our own terms rather than in accordance with God's commandments – is not a light matter. And yet Jesus was willing to be cut off from God as he died on the Cross so that we might never be cut off from God.

So if you refuse to forgive someone else, you are behaving just like the first servant in Jesus' story – forgetting how much you have been forgiven. Forgiving someone can be costly – but the cost to Jesus for us to be forgiven was a million times greater.

Jesus tells the story because he wants us to take seriously the words of the prayer he taught his disciples, and which we repeat so frequently: forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. If God has paid such a high price to forgive our sins, it is not unreasonable for him to expect us to be willing to forgive others the wrongs they have done to us.

And let us not forget: refusing to forgive someone doesn't punish *them*, but it does hurt *us*. Like Bill from Louisiana, who had a long journey before he was able to forgive the man who caused his son's death, we need to realise that letting go of anger is the only way to find peace. In our reading from Genesis, we saw Joseph forgiving his brothers. If you read the whole story, you will see that Joseph also had a long journey to be able to forgive his brothers for selling him as a slave and telling his father that he was dead. It was only on the second time they visited Egypt that he revealed himself to them, and explained that he could now see the bigger picture – God had used his suffering to save his family and many other people from starving to death.

The road to forgiveness

It may be that someone listening to this or reading this sermon is harbouring bitterness and anger against another person for something they have done to you. You may be thinking, "I can't possibly forgive. If you knew how much I have been hurt, you would understand". Well, I can't pretend to understand how hurt you may be, but I do understand that the road to forgiveness can be a long and hard one, as illustrated in the story of Bill who lost his son Michael, as well as in the biblical story of Joseph.

Emotional wounds can be deep, but we have a God who in the words of the Psalm, "heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds"[4]. So if you are aware that you are still suffering from an emotional wound that is preventing you from forgiving someone, don't leave things as they are – seek help and begin a journey to healing and forgiveness. It might be something that happened many years ago, or something more recent. Or it may be that there's someone else you know who hasn't been able to forgive another person for the hurt they've inflicted, and you might like to pray for them.

I'll finish with a short time of reflection for us to bring these things to God, starting with some verses from Psalm 103.

> The Lord is merciful and gracious,
> slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
> He will not always accuse,
> nor will he keep his anger for ever.
> He does not deal with us according to our sins,
> nor repay us according to our iniquities.
> For as the heavens are high above the earth,
> so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him;
> as far as the east is from the west,
> so far he removes our transgressions from us.
> As a father has compassion for his children,
> so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.
> For he knows how we were made;
> he remembers that we are dust.[5]

Prayer

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[4] Psalm 147:3 NRSV
[5] Psalm 103:8-14 NRSV

Lord, you see us in our weakness and know all the hurts we have suffered throughout our lives.

You know how hard we can find it to forgive.

Help us to realise how much it cost you to forgive us our sins, and reconcile us to you;
give us courage bring our wounds to you for healing;
as we come to see your love for us, soften the hardness of our hearts;
help us to let go of anger and resentment;
and give us grace to forgive those who have wronged us, whether or not they have acknowledged what they have done.

We make our prayer in the name of the one whose healing hands were wounded by the nails of the Cross, and whose heart was pierced that we might be forgiven, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.