

## Reflection on the Readings for the Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

*...and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us...*

Many of the world's religions teach about the importance of forgiveness. The idea that because we have been forgiven by God we should then forgive others is certainly common to Judaism, Islam and Christianity. We also know that is possible to forgive another human being even in the most painful of circumstances and much research has been done into the healing power of forgiveness. I begin my reflection today with two very different countries but each with extraordinary stories of forgiveness...

In the northern Iranian city of *Nowshahr*, outside the gates of Nour prison, on the morning of the 15<sup>th</sup> April 2014, a young Iranian man Balal was standing on a chair, blindfolded and with a noose around his neck. He was crying out for forgiveness and was just a few moments from his very public execution. Just then Samereh Alinejadi, the mother of Abdollah, the man he had stabbed to death seven years ago approached him. According to some interpretations of Sharia Law, the victim's family participates in the punishment by pushing the chair from under the condemned man's feet. But this time, the mother of the victim slapped the blindfolded Balal full force across the face and then helped her husband, Abdolghani, remove the noose from around his neck, effectively sparing him the death penalty for the murder of their son. One week after pardoning Balal, Samereh had found a peace lost since her son Abdollah's death. "Losing a child is like losing a part of your body. All these years, I

felt like a moving dead body,” she said. "But now, I feel very calm, I feel I'm at peace. I feel that vengeance has left my heart."

Now we turn closer to home, it is Saturday February 1<sup>st</sup> 2020, in Oatlands, a outer suburb of Sydney, an ordinary day when tragedy struck. On this warm summer day four innocent children were walking to the local shop to buy ice cream. A car, allegedly driven by an intoxicated driver Samuel Davidson, mounts the footpath, strikes the children and this results in the deaths of Antony Abdallah aged 13, and his younger sisters Angelina, 12 and Sienna, 8, and their 11-year-old cousin Veronique Sakr.

Leila, the mother of three of the Abdallah children said this.....  
“Our children are our reason for living. Bringing them up in accordance with the ways of God, teaching them to love, affording them every opportunity and nurturing them into positive and impacting young men and women was, and is, our life's purpose. What is life without your children. How and where do we begin to pick up the pieces so that we may be effective parents to our three remaining angels?” “We start with forgiveness. We forgive the driver that killed our innocent children. His actions will be met before the earthly and heavenly judge. We have decided, in our hearts to forgive him – for our sake, for the sake of our children and more so for Christ's sake. Our faith in Jesus Christ remains the foundation of our family and we believe it will continue to help us through this difficult time. Each day that passes is a day closer to the day we are reunited with our angels. We will look toward this moment; not backwards at yesterday's pain”.

What powerful stories and witness!

Every Christian knows that we ought to forgive when others wrong us. The biblical teaching is clear. Jesus' teaching in last week's gospel Matthew 18:15-20 aims at this goal with the phrase, "you have won your brother;" that is, you have reached reconciliation of the relationship. It is important to note that the biblical pattern is first repentance, and then forgiveness, and that forgiveness may have goals other than organisational or even personal reconciliation, excepting that of course between the individual and God. Moving on though, in today's gospel Peter approach's Jesus and asks him, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus answers, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times."

To fully understand what Jesus was saying, context is important, once again we must look what Jesus has said previously about church discipline. In this he sets out the way to restore a sinning brother or sister in the nascent Christian community, reconciliation within the Church. There is also the question of moving beyond what the apostles accepted as normal and surprising them with a new command. In this the Jewish rabbis taught that forgiving someone more than three times was unnecessary. It is a little bit like modern day example where a baseball batter swings and misses three times and then the batter is out; three strikes and you're out! There are also modern laws that follow this adage, two repeated offences followed by a third means automatic goal for the offender or even a life sentence in some American states.

When Jesus talks to His followers about forgiveness, He uses a different kind of rule. When someone has done something wrong to us, He doesn't say three strikes and they're out, his

forgiveness isn't something you can put a limit on. Forgiveness just keeps on giving under God's rule, a big surprise to his apostles and what a far more challenging way of being it is, to keep forgiving others the way God has forgiven you!

There is no denying how tough this is, it's a big ask, this is probably why when we read about the two examples of forgiveness I outlined at the beginning of this reflection many people are somewhat taken aback. Also the world's media in its reporting of something that appears to challenge a natural sense of justice and even retribution, often struggles to position its response. It's complicated and raises a variety of responses.

Perhaps for our purposes today we need to spend a few moments discussing what forgiveness is and what it isn't. In doing this I intend to move away from theology to what the social scientists can tell us about forgiveness. Now before I do this I acknowledge that like all topics of note there is breadth and depth, I am sharing depth with you today because the topic deserves it. I know through my own ministry how people's lives can be affected by these issues and how painful that struggle can be, so I want to do justice to it, let's begin.

We are told that forgiveness is defined as a change, a change that includes the reduction of negative thoughts, and in some cases, an increase of positive thoughts and emotions, and motivations toward an offender(s). This might or might not eventuate in changed behaviour. Forgiveness can be categorised as follows;

1. Forgiveness can be a development or trait that we develop over a period of time, through various situations and relationships, in other words this is how we develop as

‘forgiving’ persons rather than unforgiving persons during our lifetime.

2. Forgiveness can also be categorised as a **state**, we are in, in other words our degree of forgiveness of a specific offence. This is similar to my two examples given above, although it appears clear to me that the family that lost their children were already developing the *traits* of forgiveness way prior to such a tragic life changing loss.
3. A third important element is **self-forgiveness**, the degree of forgiveness of offenses that we ourselves have committed, and this brings up issues of self-condemnation, guilt and shame. This is an element worthy of its own reflection and I don’t have time to do justice to it today.

Social scientists also tell us that our tendency to retaliate or seek retribution after being offended, insulted or victimized is deeply established within our human nature. There appears to be an innate human desire for revenge, people are motivated to respond to injuries and transgressions by committing further injuries and transgressions equivalent to those they have suffered. We can see how easily this can become the stuff that wars are made of!

All this makes me think that many of us will find it very hard to forgive serious offence or injury against ourselves or those we love. This is one reason I find it useful to more carefully define forgiveness above so that you can perhaps see more clearly how important it becomes to pay attention to the gradual development of forgiving *traits* within ourselves, and our life interactions and relationships, and teach them to our children so that we might stand a better chance to forgive a more serious offence, if, God forbid, this should happen our way.

This commentary has so far been focused on the social sciences approach to forgiveness. This is important, but I thank God that as Christians this is only part of the story. Let me return now to a theological consideration of forgiveness and begin by summarising what I think forgiveness is not, that is what it isn't in my opinion.

- Firstly forgiveness is not forgetting, I know we have heard the 'forgive and forget' advice as a mantra for living out forgiveness, but I think this is unhelpful. We can be sure that God does not forget, God know all things. As I get older I know that I was not designed to hold everything in my memory. Despite a desire of imitation, I am certainly not God. I also know that it is near impossible to erase memories of serious wounds and suffering, you may well be much better at this than I, but at best I find that I come to terms with these memories and affects and try to hand them over to God to look after when I struggle to integrate them into my being. I think perhaps this is a good point where I can quickly mention how understanding the notion of the Cross of Jesus and God's grace helps me in this process, I will return to this briefly in my conclusion.
- Secondly, and related to the above, I think that forgiving someone does not mean you no longer feel the pain of the harm they have done. That pain may never entirely go away, our emotions are part of our humanity. But I also want to suggest to you that this does not mean that our pain equals our state of unforgiveness. Forgiveness and pain can coexist.

- Thirdly forgiving someone who has sinned or offended against us doesn't mean that they should no longer receive proper justice. It is important to understand that as offended individuals we are just not very good at meting out justice. It is right that we long for and expect justice but there are good reasons why the Monarch, or the State or the Government over a period of history has progressively removed these responsibilities from offended individuals and given it to the judiciary. Our natural inclinations may not necessarily be just. Sometimes the application of justice is, for whatever reason, simply not available or possible, these are the times that we must hold and know that God will be the best judge in all circumstances, because God knows all and is all.

Forgiveness does not ignore that a wrong was done, that a sin was committed, that we minimise the gravity of the sin, that we close our eyes to offence or the calling to account of the offender, or that we make it easy for the offender to hurt us again. I might also add that in some circumstances there may well be unforgiveable offences, it is in the nature of evil and wickedness that unforgiveness requires forgiveness, if forgiveness is not desired or asked for, then it would seem to me that our respect for freedom would determine there is no obligation to provide it, but this determination is best judged by God.

I conclude today by saying in my limited experience I have observed that forgiveness is rarely a one-off event. In God's loving embrace, through God's grace, forgiveness may well be the work of a life time, but for our own sakes and that of others

we really do need to try and start somewhere. Perhaps we can begin by getting to know better what God has done for us in Christ. That is why the key to forgiveness really begins with the reality and symbol of the Cross of Jesus for our own lives. This is also why true forgiveness, beyond the understanding of social science, requires God's grace, which is above and beyond all our natural inclinations. I might also add in finishing, that sometimes it is too onerous and too painful to journey to tread this path alone, we may well need to reach out for help from the experts. I leave you today with a short poem by the 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Poet John Greenleaf Whittier whose own capacity to forgive was increased in his brush with his own sense of mortality. It is a way of saying put things in perspective.

*My heart was heavy, for its trust had been  
Abused, its kindness answered with foul wrong;  
So, turning gloomily from my fellow-men,*

*One summer Sabbath day I strolled among  
The green mounds of the village burial-place;  
Where, pondering how all human love and hate  
Find one sad level; and how, soon or late,  
Wronged and wrongdoer, each with meekened face,  
And cold hands folded over a still heart,  
Pass the green threshold of our common grave,  
Whither all footsteps tend, whence none depart,*

*Awed for myself, and pitying my race,  
Our common sorrow, like a mighty wave,  
Swept all my pride away, and trembling I forgave!*

*John Greenleaf Whittier, 'Forgiveness'.*