

Sermon 13 September 2020 forgiveness

Found some chocolates that had been left for Alison. But I was hungry and I ate them all down quickly.

We can move on to the service though because Alison is a priest and her job description says she has to forgive people. So we are all OK and everything is fine right? I'm completely forgiven automatically, and we're all done.

Really, OK, well if you're going to be like that then sor-ry. Alright? It's just some chocolates OK. I was hungry. I need to eat too. Honestly.

Are things all settled then between us?

Ok then let's try another one.

Yeah, sorry [shrug]. Whatever. Just chocolates.

So I need to try another one?

Alison I think your feeling is that you might have been deprived of something which you would consider to have been yours. So if you think that your feelings have been offended then under those circumstances I would be sorry to hear that is your response to the situation which happened to come about for a wide variety of reasons.

Any good?

OK, OK, Alison I am desperately sorry. It was wicked and bad of me. If you can find it in your heart to forgive me I would be truly grateful.

[Alison accepts the apology]

I've even got a box of chocolates in my pocket which I bought for here which I will give you to make up for taking yours. Sorry.

So that is an apology, and an act of forgiveness will follow suit.

In our Gospel reading today Jesus makes clear that the process of forgiveness is not to be regarded as a simple, one-off act of mercy that we sit back and receive because of God's loving goodness. Forgiveness is reciprocal and needs to be reciprocated. Forgiveness is a work in progress that can and should touch every part of you and every relationship around you, it is transformational and entirely dependent on context and on the way you behave with other people.

I was exaggerating with Alison of course but it is very easy indeed to say sorry without really meaning very much by it. First of all there is an assumption that we don't even need to say sorry in the first place, that we can leave all the work up to the other person to put things right. Then there's a sorry that is passive aggressive, where you imply the blame is somehow shared. There is a sorry which is insincere, there is a sorry which is legalistic and convoluted, the 'sorry if...' that makes it conditional and half-hearted.

And then obviously there is the sorry that involves a change of heart, mind and behaviour. A sorry that will affect my actions more deeply still. Alison has forgiven me, yet I continue to work to make it up to her.

How can I or someone in a real situation possibly have any hope of forgiveness unless the apology is sincere and is properly communicated, and is met with a visible change of action. Most of the time, let's be honest, life is not as simple as we have just seen here together. Relationships are complicated and messy, problems linger, people do not make amends in such a clean and clear cut way and people do not forgive so easily either.

Being forgiven is much more like a work in progress than it is about a single moment in time, a process rather than an event. And it damages us long term. It can take a lifetime sometimes to forgive something hurtful that has happened to us, there can be pain we carry with us through years, even decades, and moving on from it can seem impossible, even if we have had an apology and forgiven. Jesus suggests that we need to break the cycle.

The greatest sign of genius in Christian teaching is found in the Lord's Prayer: forgive us our sins *as we forgive those who sin against us*. Do you know what comes after the Lord's Prayer in the form that Matthew's Gospel has it? This is a further teaching on forgiveness:

<sup>14</sup>For if you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you.

<sup>15</sup>But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive yours.

In some versions of the Lord's Prayer, 'sin' is translated as 'debt'. In fact the word 'debt' and the word 'sin' are the same in Aramaic so the link, the allegory, is made even clearer in the original version of this Gospel reading we hear today: sin is a burden and a negative obligation between two people. Debt and sin are frighteningly alike in their capacity to harm.

This is an astonishing recognition of the psychology of forgiveness and reconciliation, of moving on, not holding grudges and not getting stuck in the past, endlessly cycling through the old hurts, the old pain. In the Gospel reading today we hear of an even more extreme version of that loop of sin and forgiveness breaking down, that inability to place our human relationships in to the bigger picture, to hold up our small, insignificant and detailed little problems up to the light and look at them in terms of God's mercy, God's forgiveness, God's example to us.

And you know sometimes it does feel impossible to forgive. I think I'm OK with the chocolates but I would imagine that all of you have in your hearts some hurt, some pain, some slight, some scar from things that have happened that just won't go away. And this is where God comes in. When you can't forgive and you can't move on there is one clear way out that is available to us here and now. Ask God to forgive them, because sometimes it does feel like only God can forgive.

But whenever it feels difficult to the point of being impossible, remember the words of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross as he looked at his own executioners, and managed to say all that any human being could possibly do in that situation. He didn't say "I forgive" but something even bigger, better, more wonderful and more divine still. Whenever you really

can't forgive, can't break out of the cycle of pain and bitterness, you will need to ask for God's help. And here we can all say the words that Jesus himself said on that Cross: "Father, forgive."