

ON FORGIVING THE UNFORGIVEABLE¹

**A sermon preached by Professor Michael Horsburgh in St Luke's Church,
Enmore, on the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 11 September 2011**

On 11 September 2001, my wife and I were in Boston, Massachusetts, visiting our son and his family. Our first grandson was nearly one year old. We were alerted to the unfolding events and watched as the second plane smashed in to the Manhattan tower and then as the two towers collapsed into rubble. That morning had been planned as a morning tea for young mothers, all of whom still came, though stunned at what had happened. One of the mothers, married to an Asian postgraduate student at Harvard, was worried that her husband might be attacked by those who regarded all foreigners as guilty of the outrage. All of them were, understandably, unable to comprehend how anyone could hate the USA sufficiently to do such a thing.

The planes that hit the Twin Towers had taken off from Boston and everyone seemed to know someone who had died. One of the planes had been used by our son when, in a previous job, he had travelled regularly to Los Angeles. The next day we attended mass at the Roman Catholic Cathedral, where families of some of those killed were present.

A week or so later we were in a still shocked New York City. Parts of the subway being closed, we walked from midtown to as close to Ground Zero as we could, and where everything was still covered in dust. All the available sites were covered with photographs of missing persons. In Union Square, groups of citizens stood around debating what their nation should do in response to the attacks. Some advocated a devastating nuclear response that would wipe the Islamic world from the face of the earth. Others took a more measured line but none showed a clear understanding of the international situation that lay behind what had happened.

We were far from the public figures who made and implemented the policy following that event but close to the ordinary citizens whose lives had been changed forever by the hatred of a small group of terrorists. And we, too, have been affected. The certainty of our own lives has been shattered. The consequences of that day still come home in the bodies of soldiers killed in Afghanistan.

This 10th anniversary of that day falling on a Sunday, we have been confronted by the lectionary. Our Old Testament reading tells of the crossing of the Red Sea in the drama of the exodus from Egypt. The Lord apparently wreaks his

¹ Readings: Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114 or Exodus 15:1-13, 17-18; Romans 14:1-14; Matthew 18:21-35

vengeance on the pursuing Egyptians in a divinely orchestrated mass killing. Our psalm rejoices in the event.

By contrast, the reading from Romans urges us to refrain from judgement and to concentrate instead on our own actions. More directly, the gospel reading talks of the absolute necessity of forgiveness.

There are fewer more dangerous topics for a preacher than suffering and forgiveness. There is nothing less edifying or more offensive than someone standing up and telling others how they should deal with their grief and loss. Such talk tends to treat the pain of others as a subject for dissection; to treat it objectively and thus with an appearance of superiority and uncaring. Nevertheless, the gospel challenges our instinctive reactions to such events and we must take the time to consider its implications.

I want first to observe that the Bible is a far from sanitised book. It does not hesitate to show the imperfections of its principal characters. Neither does it hide from us the fact that large scale human actions are almost always accompanied by violence. We must know that from the history of the invasion of this country by European immigrants. The country had to be taken by force. Likewise, the departure of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt was accompanied by its own form of violence. It can hardly be imagined that a society would simply allow its entire slave labour force to walk away. Neither ought we to be deceived by the way in which the authors of Exodus attribute everything to God. We already know that God is on the side of the oppressed and desires their freedom. In one sense, therefore, the associated violence is part of what must happen if the people are to be free. It is not that God desires or orders the death of the Egyptians, but that human freedom, which is God's plan, will involve it.

Whilst this may be somewhat shocking to those of us who have thought that the Bible was a different kind of book, this is nothing compared with the New Testament demands for non-judgement and forgiveness. Such demands, in the face of overt and large scale violence, seem not only hopelessly idealistic but actually wrong, in that they seem to condone or, at least, tolerate, terrorism.

In 1988, I attended a conference in Beijing on the reintroduction of social work education into China. What education there had been was abolished after 1949, when the Communists took over. While there, I had conversations with local scholars and discovered that suicide had risen sharply amongst the new class of capitalists that the regime was now tolerating. As we observe even today, China does not have a rule of law. In particular, it had then no bankruptcy laws. Thus, new ventures, which mostly existed on borrowed money, had no way out

when they failed, as they often did. Thus the number of suicides rose as desperate borrowers sought a solution.

It occurred to me then, and I have strengthened in this view, that bankruptcy laws are a form of institutionalised forgiveness. What their absence in China symbolised was that, if a society cannot forgive, death is the consequence.

Forgiveness is never easy and cannot be demanded from those injured. Yet the absence of forgiveness might have serious social consequences. Certainly, forgiveness is important to Christians. That is what we look forward to at the end of Lent. What is Christianity without a message of forgiveness? If it's that important, it must have real consequences. What might they be?

Forgiveness has the capacity to put an end to a cycle of vengeance arising from anger at the violence that has been inflicted.

[The sociologist] Hannah Arendt [herself a refugee from the Nazi terror] recognised ... that the act of revenge was self-perpetuating and unending while forgiveness stopped the vicious cycle. "Forgiveness is the exact opposite of vengeance, which acts in the form of re-acting against an original trespassing, whereby far from putting an end to the consequences of the first misdeed, everybody remains bound to the process..." To her the act of revenge was predictable as an automatic response to a transgression, while the act of forgiveness was not. "Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it. ... Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever..."²

Forgiveness also demands something from the offender; at least some acknowledgement of responsibility and concern for the victim. There is a close relationship between apology and forgiveness.

[I]n his book *Mea Culpa*, Nicholas Tavuchis describes the relationship between [apology and forgiveness]. "Something happens; something is said or done that is interpreted and judged offensive, improper, or harmful. An apology is called for, someone apologizes, the apology (let us assume) is accepted, the offender is forgiven, and life goes on *as if* nothing had happened." His emphasis on the 'as if' in that statement, acknowledges that some tension and lingering antagonism may remain, but on the surface, 'the social slate is wiped clean' although the act itself cannot be undone.³

One of our problems is, therefore, that ideological terrorism neither apologises nor forgives; the terrorists see themselves as heroes. Undoubtedly, apology and

² Marcia Byrom Hartwell *The Role of Forgiveness in Reconstructing Society after Conflict*,

<http://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/140>

³ Hartwell

forgiveness apply to all parties. That Islamist extremists refer to present-day Americans and Europeans as ‘Crusaders’, shows how far we have yet to go with them. Likewise, long memories emerged in the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, when Slobodan Milošević argued that the Serbs fighting for Serbian national survival then were somehow the same as the Serbs who fought against the Turks in Kosovo in 1389. We must know that, for this reason, the path to eventual healing will be long and difficult. It is hardly possible without some kind of reciprocity. Those who wish to forgive in such situations must go it alone as an act of faith and in the absence of apology.

Forgiveness is compatible with both punishment and remembering. Forgiveness does not mean that evil has no consequences, or that suffering should simply be forgotten. On the contrary, forgiveness allows punishment to be contained and memory to be healed.

The kind of forgiveness I am talking about today is not only that from one individual to another. It is forgiveness in the larger social context; it is forgiveness that can heal a society. We should not be surprised at this. I think that often we do not understand the implications of what we say about God. Whenever we attribute something to God, we are saying something about the state of reality. If we say that God is love, we mean that the world is founded on love. If we say that God offers forgiveness, we mean that forgiveness is an essential part of a healthy society.

On this 10th anniversary of 9/11, we are not in any position to judge the actions of others who were more closely affected than we were. Our only proper reaction is support and help. But we must point to what we know: that forgiveness alone can heal us.

A poem by the New England Quaker, John Greenleaf Whittier, author of the hymn ‘Dear Lord and Father of mankind, forgive our foolish ways’:

Forgiveness

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!⁴

⁴ John Greenleaf Whittier, <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/forgiveness/>