

1. What is forgiveness?

The retired Bishop Sandy Millar speaks of a time when he was walking along the beach and he noticed how the sand had been churned up by the footprints of those who had gone before him. The next morning the footprints were all wiped away by the sea. He sensed Jesus saying to him, *'That is a picture of forgiveness.'*

But it can be very hard to forgive when what someone has done to you was wrong, unfair and undeserved. It can be particularly hard to forgive those who have hurt us when they feel not the slightest twinge of conscience. When we can see that they are sorry it makes it a lot easier.

But no-one seemed sorry at the cross of Jesus. There was no justice at his 'trial', if you could call it that. There was glee in the faces of those who got what they wanted. And what was Jesus' response? *'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'* By asking the Father to forgive them showed he had forgiven them; he released all of them from their guilt.

The first sermon in our short series on forgiveness asks the question: What is forgiveness? The ultimate proof of forgiveness is when we sincerely appeal to Father God to let off the hook those who have hurt us or those close to us. But it's not easy, which is why Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18 which Lottie will preach on next week, a parable that is prompted by Peter asking: *'Lord, how often am I to forgive my brother if he goes on wronging me? As many as seven times?'* And Jesus replies *'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times'*. Why, because he knows forgiveness isn't easy.

Sixteen years ago, in 2003, my best friend's dad died and she was deeply upset. Her loss had a profound impact on me as I was forced to consider for the first time how I might feel if my own father died.

My parents had separated and divorced when I was just 8 years old. Theirs was not a match made in heaven. They married young, and had four children within five years. Their marriage was dogged by affairs on both sides, domestic violence and emotional abuse. It is no surprise then that they didn't make good parents and frequently neglected the needs of their children.

At first after he left, dad would visit the family home, but rows would break out and then fights, which would be extremely distressing to us children. He'd moved in with a girlfriend who had her own daughter the same age as my

sister, and occasionally he took us out, or had one of us to stay for the weekend. As a small child, I hadn't been particularly close to him. For reasons known only to him, he was closest to my older sister, and the eldest son, one down from me, who he regarded as '*his children*', with myself and my younger brother being regarded as my '*mums*'. But he *was* my father and I *did* feel rejected when he chose my sister or brother to stay for weekends, but never me. On one occasion when he arrived to collect one of us, I hid around the corner, where I listened to mum argue that it was either my turn, or he wasn't taking any of us. He left alone.

For most of my life, he had sporadic contact with the other three, but never made any attempt to contact me. I never understood why. I was just 8 years old and hadn't done anything wrong. In my heart, my response was to reject him, to tell anyone who asked, that I didn't love him. If *you* don't love, then it hurts less if you're not loved except of course that it doesn't. Mum didn't cope well on her own and life was incredibly hard. In many respects, we parented ourselves and had responsibilities far in excess of our ages.

In the end, I did ok, pretty well in fact. I worked hard, recognising that a good education was my ticket to a different kind of life – and I was the first in the family to go to university, get a degree and qualify as a social worker. I'd also been fortunate to have met Martyn at the age of 17 and he has provided much stability, love and support over the years. And we have two wonderful children, a son-in-law and a grandchild.

I knew however that if my dad died, I wouldn't go to his funeral. This would feel hypocritical as *what* had I lost? But I'd often struggled to reconcile my experience with a Christian faith that says, '*Honour your father and your mother*' – which is the first commandment with a promise – '*that it may go well with you.*' Would I always struggle as a Christian if I couldn't get this basic principle right?

Shortly after the death of my friend's dad, I went to a New Wine Women's Day. The theme was healing, particularly the healing of relationships. My thoughts strayed to my father. And the next day at church, the vicar preached a sermon on forgiveness from Isaiah 58 in which God asks: '*Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice, to set the oppressed free, to share your food with the hungry, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood*'. Was God prompting me to rethink my stance? In response, I drafted a letter to my dad, spewing out my feelings of hurt and rejection and seeking

some explanation for his actions, and I made some enquiries within the family as to where he might be living. I didn't send the letter, as the act of writing seemed to have a therapeutic effect and I didn't have an address anyway.

Having put my feelings to bed, I was completely unprepared for what happened next. I received a message through a family member that Dad had learned of my enquiry regarding where he may be living, wanted me to contact him and passed on a mobile telephone number. This caused me to completely re-think. This was the first time *he'd* made contact for 30 years.

I didn't know what to do but knew I didn't want a telephone conversation. The next day as I sat down with my Bible reading notes, the commentary on reading a passage in Philemon read, *'We have to be ready to forgive people who have offended or disappointed us. We have to be ready to show kindness to people who don't deserve it.'* The postscript at the bottom read, *'Is there someone you need to forgive? A letter to write? A call to make? Do it now.'* Just in case I wasn't listening, the postscript for the study the following day was, *'Many successful adults are still desperate for attention and love from their fathers. Ask God to show you how this reality is affecting your life today.'*

I decided to send a text message to the mobile number, giving my postal address and asking him to write. For two months I heard nothing, then a letter arrived. The main text read, *'It's nice after all this time to get a word from you. I know that you are happy, and I have your children, my grandchildren, yet to see. Now that you know where I am, please send me a letter or phone if you wish.'*

A real mix of emotions followed but I did write, all 4 pages of A4 type. I thanked him for writing, explained how I was feeling, and asked him to write back, answering some of the difficult questions I had.

It was a long 18 months before he replied. Sadly, he was unable to address any of the issues I'd raised, give any explanation for his actions or say sorry for the hurt he'd caused, preferring to blame others. There was no regret for having not maintained contact, nor any acceptance of any responsibility that had been his as the adult in the situation. I wrote back expressing my disappointment, but saying that I forgave him and wished him well but wouldn't be contacting him again. In the 14 years that then elapsed, I didn't hear anything from him. I received news last October that he'd died and, after much soul searching, I decided not to go to the funeral. Not because I hadn't

forgiven him, because I had, but more out of respect for the decision he'd made for there to be no contact for the years that it mattered most.

So let's go back to the question 'What is forgiveness?' Over the years, a book by RT Kendall called 'Total Forgiveness' has been really helpful to me. Kendall's book is good because he spells out what forgiveness is, and what it isn't. Let's start with what he says total forgiveness is not:

- It isn't approval of what the other person did, or denying, excusing or justifying what they did. Jesus forgave the adulterous woman, but he did not approve of what she did. He told her, '*Go now and leave your life of sin.*' So too with us. We forgive what we don't approve of, because that is the way God is with each of us.
- It isn't necessarily reconciliation. Forgiveness and reconciliation are not always the same. Reconciliation takes two people, and the person you forgive may not want to see you, or if may not be in your best interests or safety to see them. It can be wonderful where reconciliation does occur, but this is extra to forgiveness.
- It's not forgetting. The saying 'forgive and forget' is unrealistic, even impossible I would argue. Even God doesn't literally forget our sins: he chooses to *overlook* them, to not remember, to not hold them against us.
- It's not a refusal to take the wrong seriously. By forgiving those on the cross, Jesus wasn't saying to his Father, '*What they did actually wasn't that bad. This sin can be easily washed away.*' Anything but.
- And, total forgiveness isn't pretending that we're not hurt.

But what total forgiveness is:

- In being fully aware of what they did, it's a choice to keep *no* records of wrong. So, in our mental computer, erasing the wrong rather than storing it away in a file to be recovered and used during the next argument.
- It's being merciful and giving up the natural desire to see them 'get what's coming to them'. In Matthew 5, Jesus says, '*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*' And in Luke 6: '*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*' One difference between grace and mercy is

that grace is getting what we *don't* deserve, and mercy is not getting what we *do* deserve. But there's a fringe benefit in that, if we show mercy, then we will in turn be *shown mercy*.

- Total forgiveness is graciousness, a word that describes Jesus all the time. In the story of the woman caught in the act of adultery, what was Jesus' attitude? Graciousness. Her accusers expected him to throw the book at her, but he says, *'Let any of you who is without sin throw the first stone.'* And he refused to condemn her.
- It's an inner condition of the heart, and why reconciliation isn't always essential, because if forgiveness takes place in the heart, then you don't need to know whether the other party will reconcile or not. If you've forgiven them in your heart of hearts, regardless of whether they want to speak to you, *you* have the inner victory and peace.
- And it's the absence of bitterness. Nelson Mandela famously said, *'As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.'*

But we know that it's hard, which is why it's there in the Lord's Prayer as something that needs to be prayed day after day: *'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.'* Not once, but over and over, in just the same way that our Father in heaven forgives us.

Next week, Lottie will speak on 'how to forgive' but in the meantime, have a think about what forgiveness means to you, and whether there is a person or a situation that you need to ask God to forgive.