

3. Forgiving Ourselves

In today's passage from John's gospel, the disciples are in a familiar place, the Sea of Galilee. For four of the disciples, it was where it had all begun. Remember these words early on in Matthew's gospel: *'As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.'*

So much excitement. So much expectation that day. But, three years on, the disciples are in a very different place. At the time it mattered most, we read in Mathew 26 that *'all of the disciples had deserted Jesus and fled'*. In the Message translation, the words are stark: *'All the disciples cut and run.'*

For Peter, his misery must have been compounded by his actions that night as Jesus stood before the chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin. Just outside, in the courtyard, but close enough to see and hear everything that went on, sat Peter, warming his hands around a brazier, and a servant girl comes to him. *'You were also with Jesus of Galilee,'* she said. But Peter denies it. *'I don't know what you're talking about.'* He then moves to the gateway where another girl says to the people around her, *'This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.'* This time he denies it, with an oath: *'I don't know the man.'* A little while later, others standing about go up to him and say, *'Surely you are one of them, your accent gives it away.'* And Peter starts to lose it, calling down curses on himself, but swears to them, *'I don't know the man.'* At that moment, the rooster crows, heralding the return of daylight, and Jesus turns and looks straight at Peter, and Peter remembers Jesus' words from that earlier conversation, where Peter, full of confidence in his support of Jesus, is told *'before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me'*.

What a monumental failure. Miles away from the man that Jesus (in Matthew 16) says, *'And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.'* Peter couldn't have got it more wrong. *'I don't know the man'* he protested. The rooster crows, Jesus looks him straight in the eye, and Peter's first response is to weep,

to weep bitterly. What would become of this broken man at daybreak? What would he do? Where would he go?

In Mark's account of the resurrection, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome go to the tomb early in the morning, bringing with them spices with which to anoint Jesus' body. They find the stone rolled away, and inside is a young man dressed in white – an angel – who tells them the wonderful news that Jesus is risen. And he gives them a job to do: *'Go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'* And if we look back at the passage where Jesus predicted Peter's betrayal, that is exactly what he'd said, *'But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.'*

'Go, tell his disciples and Peter.' On hearing this, how might Peter have felt in being specifically named? What was Peter expecting Jesus to say to him? Dreading what he might say to him?

So, to Galilee they go. And Peter decides to go fishing. Maybe he's thinking, *'Well, at least this is something I know how to do, something I can get right.'* But we read that they caught nothing until someone from the shore calls, *'Throw your nets on the right side of the boat and you will find some.'* And when they did, they were unable to haul the net in because there were so many fish. In this moment, John recognises the stranger on the shore as Jesus, and Peter can wait no longer. He wraps his coat around himself and jumps in the water, anxious to get to Jesus first.

As they landed the boat, the beach fire that Jesus had started must have been a welcome sight. The warmth of it beckoning the weary but exhilarated disciples, the smell of barbecued fish wafting across the beach. As they reached the shore, they realised that Jesus had been busy while waiting for them: breakfast was almost ready. But look again at that fire. I'm sure Peter did. A fire not dissimilar to the one he had stood around just days earlier where he'd denied even knowing Jesus. The fire, a reminder of Peter's failure, but built on this occasion to bring healing and forgiveness, not torment.

Jesus holds Peter through their first conversation after the crucifixion and resurrection in such a way that he is blessed. We cannot tell whether the conversation is full of half-smiles and warmth, or has awkward pauses and a sense of the relationship on a precipice. Is there a struggle between them as they seek a way forward, or does it flow like a dance? Jesus mirrors Peter's

three denials by asking three times, *'Do you love me more than these?'* We don't know whether the question asks Peter if he loves Jesus more than the other disciples love him, more than he loves the other disciples, or more than fishing. Jesus does not humiliate Peter. He crafts what he says in such a way that Peter apologises in his threefold response, by telling Jesus that he knows everything. Though not explicit, there is a sense that Peter has shown that he understands exactly what Jesus has forgiven him of, and that it is good between them.

Jesus' ability to bring about reconciliation doesn't leave Peter and Jesus in the place where they left off. It is a transformative experience for Peter to fall and then to find that Jesus' response is one of forgiveness and faithfulness. Jesus doesn't just indicate that there are no hard feelings. Peter, restored by Jesus, is recalled to follow and is given a new role, to feed Christ's sheep and tend his lambs. I have often thought that one of the reasons that Peter spoke so passionately, and so effectively, on the Day of Pentecost, was because he was aware of having been forgiven. Totally forgiven.

But forgiving ourselves is often not that easy. But the reasons for forgiving ourselves are the same as for forgiving others. It is how we become free of the past. It is how we heal and grow. It is how we make meaning out of our suffering, restore our self-esteem, and tell a new story of who we are. If forgiving others leads to external peace, then forgiving ourselves leads to an internal peace.

In the same way that forgiving others *isn't* about condoning, excusing, justifying, ignoring, or forgetting what the other person did; neither is forgiving *yourself* about letting yourself off the hook for what you've done. To truly forgive ourselves, we cannot skip over an honest attempt to admit our wrongs, confront the consequences of our hurtful actions, apologise, ask for forgiveness and make amends. True self-forgiveness comes only with an honest, searching look at ourselves, our actions and the consequences of our actions. People who genuinely seek to forgive themselves are people who want to change. They don't want to repeat the mistakes of the past. If we are deeply affected by guilt, shame, regret or remorse, then the only way to heal and break free is by engaging in a process of forgiving ourselves. And the process is the same as Lottie described in her sermon: by understanding God's forgiveness, that through Jesus' death on the cross, the consequences of sin are dealt with once and for all. Everything we have ever done, or will ever do,

will be forgiven through Jesus. In not forgiving ourselves, are we in fact asking for more? In being honest with ourselves, in choosing to forgive ourselves, in bringing it to Jesus and accepting the peace that he gives, and in being prepared to do it again, and again and again.

In the same way that refusing to forgive others affects every area of our life, so does our inability to forgive ourselves – affecting our health, careers, relationships, parenting, and our general happiness and well-being. When we are unforgiving of ourselves, we experience the same harmful emotional and physical effects as when we are unforgiving of others. Holding onto self-blame keeps us stuck in a prison of the past and stops us enjoying the present. We can so easily make ourselves victims of our own thoughts and feelings of guilt and shame for what we have done. It's not that we're not accountable for our actions – we are; but when we stay stuck in the unhappy story of what we have done – when we make an identity out of our past actions – we deny ourselves the gift of transformation, the truth that life *can* be different.

Peter let Jesus down in a huge way. There was no mistaking his failures. Jesus didn't pretend that they hadn't happened, or that he wasn't hurt by them, but simply forgave. A forgiveness that enabled Peter to forgive himself. A forgiveness that prevented Peter from thereafter wallowing in the awfulness of what he'd done, but one which transformed him for better things to come. We can all learn lessons from the past, but learning from the past is not the same as being held hostage by what we have done. At some stage, we have to let go of the past and begin again. Jesus says that no-one is undeserving of forgiveness, and that includes every one of us.

But it can still be difficult to offer ourselves the forgiveness we can freely give to others. Maybe we hold ourselves to a higher standard than the standard to which we hold other people. If we think carefully, this double standard can be quite arrogant. Do we really think that we are better than A or B, so we should behave better? Perhaps we feel we haven't truly paid for what we've done. Perhaps guilt and shame are keeping us from feeling we deserve another chance.

But none of us is defined by what we have done, because as children of God, our worth has nothing to do with our performance, good or bad, and *everything* to do with our relationship with our creator. None of us is perfect. We are all flawed and fragile humans who get it wrong from time to time, with varying degrees of seriousness and consequences. But we all have the

potential to change, to learn from our mistakes and to forgive ourselves. That is how we grow in Christ, and reach a place of self-acceptance.

But your heart might be saying something different, as reflected in the words of this poem from Desmond and Mpho Tutu's book: *The Art of Forgiving*. And if it is, and you want to talk it through with someone, then prayer will be available during communion, or let's arrange a time to talk outside of the service. But this is the poem:

I am generous to you
and miserly to me.
I can banish the harm you caused me
from the smallest corners of my heart.
It has no root or residence in me.
But the deed I have done
fills me with shame and pain.
I cannot make myself whole again.
I cannot forgive myself.
If my tender heart is truly there for you,
it must be tender for me too.
Soft and yielding,
kind and forgiving.
I must allow myself to come face-to-face
with my own humanity.
I can break free.