



Tuesday 19th April 2011

Condemnation and Forgiveness

STARTING OUT

A young woman went to the pub after work for a quick drink before going home. She met some friends and soon she had had several drinks, and then several more. She left the pub much later than she intended, got into her car and was immediately stopped and breathalysed by the police. At first, she shrugged it off as bad luck, or 'just one of those things'. But as a result of being severely over the limit she lost her licence. Unfortunately, her job involved driving and she was sacked. She was unable to find another job and this meant she and her partner had to sell their house. Her partner's family blamed her for her stupidity and after a while her partner left. Later, she described her life as a 'sea of condemnation' – blamed by legal authorities for breaking the law, blamed by her friends for getting caught, blamed by her partner for losing her job and their house, and a huge amount of self-blame for the place in which she found herself.

This story shows that it is easy for people to find themselves on the slippery slope that leads to condemnation, and often acknowledgement of fault and seeing clearly where things have gone wrong is swamped by blame and feelings of victimisation. In those circumstances, forgiveness, renewed self-worth and peace are difficult to come by. Some people find themselves condemned simply because they look or speak differently or have different beliefs. Others are condemned for their actions and behaviour. Some Christians also sometimes find that they are condemned by fellow Christians because of life events which have happened to them, choices they have made or because of their sexual orientation or lifestyle. People who experience feelings of condemnation can become Unreconciled, alienated from good and productive relationships with those who condemn them and this can lead to feelings of isolation, and low self-esteem.

Forgiveness is an important concept in Christian faith, and a powerful mediator in reconciliation, but how and when it is offered and how it is received is trickier. The need to blame and find fault can be a powerful driver, and coming to terms with events and making sense of them, dealing with memories and getting past them can take a long time.

Reflection

Think of a time in your life when you were upset by someone. What did it feel like and what did it take to overcome those feelings? What does it feel like to make up with someone? What can we do about experiences which remain unresolved?





What do you make of advertisements which encourage people to sue when they have accidents to get the compensation they 'deserve'? Should there be a place for forgiveness in those situations or is 'compensation' always necessary? Do you think those advertisements reinforce a victim culture?

Going deeper

Forgiveness is not only an important matter in reconciliation between individuals but also between human beings and God. When Jesus taught people how to pray in the Lord's Prayer, he included words asking the Father to forgive sins just as we forgive others who wrong us. So being sorry and asking for forgiveness is an essential part of our spiritual life and growth, but it is also related to the way we learn to deal with hurt and to forgive other people. The ability to forgive enables us to create and sustain relationships and to mend them when they go wrong. Jesus tells his disciples that the capacity for forgiveness should ideally be limitless and that we should always show compassion and mercy. That does not mean that we should criticise people who find it harder to forgive, because those people may need more help themselves to deal with whatever has happened to them and have yet to find the freedom which would enable them to forgive those who have wronged them. Nor does it mean that we should simply turn a blind eye to offences, because justice is important when an offence is committed and something may have to happen to show that justice and/or restitution has taken place. But it is also important to offer the chance of a new start to people who need it. We see this when Jesus stops the people from stoning to death the woman taken in adultery (John 8.3-11). He tells her that he does not condemn her either, but reminds her that her freedom means she must make sure she changes her life.

Activity

Have a look at the stories section of the Forgiveness Project (<http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/>) or have a look at a 'problem page' in a newspaper or magazine. What do those stories tell you about the complexity of condemnation and forgiveness? Rather than look at the 'answer' to the problems, think about anybody who might need to say sorry or to be forgiven in the 'problem'. How might being sorry and being forgiven make a difference?

Celebrating the Bible - I

John 12:20 -36

KJV

²⁰And there were certain Greeks among them that came up to worship at the feast:

²¹The same came therefore to Philip, which was of Bethsaida of Galilee, and desired him, saying, Sir, we would see Jesus.

NRSV

²⁰Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then



**(KJV continued)**

²²Philip cometh and telleth Andrew: and again Andrew and Philip tell Jesus.

²³And Jesus answered them, saying, The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified.

²⁴Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.

²⁵He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.

²⁶If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honour.

²⁷Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour.

²⁸Father, glorify thy name. Then came there a voice from heaven, saying, I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again.

²⁹The people therefore, that stood by, and heard it, said that it thundered: others said, An angel spake to him.

³⁰Jesus answered and said, This voice came not because of me, but for your sakes.

³¹Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out.

³²And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.

³³This he said, signifying what death he should die.

³⁴The people answered him, We have heard out of the law that Christ abideth for ever: and how sayest thou, The Son of man must be

**(NRSV continued)**

Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³

Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

²⁷'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' ³⁰Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. ³⁴The crowd answered him, 'We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains for ever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is





lifted up? who is this Son of man?

³⁵Then Jesus said unto them, Yet a little while is the light with you. Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you: for he that walketh in darkness knoweth not whither he goeth.

³⁶While ye have light, believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light. These things spake Jesus, and departed, and did hide himself from them.

this Son of Man?' ³⁵Jesus said to them, 'The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. ³⁶While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.'

After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.

In this passage the global impact of the Gospel is glimpsed in the present as some 'Greeks' ask to see Jesus and this prompts Jesus to talk about his future and that of his disciples; how his purpose, resulting in the spread of faith to the whole world, is to come about. Jesus talks about the need for a 'seed' to die before the astonishing miracle of new growth and harvest can happen. Jesus shows an acute sense that God's judgement lies on the world and that his Father's desire is to purge the world of its evil. He is aware of the destructive nature of sin and injustice in all its intensity, darkness and maliciousness. Because the evil of the world has been condemned by God, Jesus implies that he is the seed which must die in order to conquer that evil and draw people everywhere towards him in a harvest of faith. Though God's condemnation lies on the world, through Jesus people can be forgiven and restored.

Some questions to think about:

- Do you think that forgiveness can ever be cost free?
- In John's account, Jesus uses images of a seed producing new growth and light keeping back the darkness. How else might you want to describe new hope and the overcoming of evil and how might you explain what Jesus says in this passage to a non-Christian friend or neighbour?
- Imagine you were a person in the crowd hearing the voice of God/thunder. How would you have felt about the experience and what questions might you have wanted to ask Jesus.





Celebrating the Bible - II

(This is the same reading as for the Daily Service for today on Radio 4)

Luke 23.32-35; 39-43

KJV

³²And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death.

³³And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.

³⁴Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots.

³⁵And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God.

Luke 23.39-43

³⁹And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.

⁴⁰But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?

⁴¹And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.

⁴²And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.

⁴³And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.

NRSV

³²Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

³⁴Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!'

Luke 23.39-43

³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'

⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?' ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' ⁴²Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' ⁴³He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

Some questions to think about:

- Imagine you were one of people nailing Jesus to the cross, what would Jesus' words of forgiveness mean to you?
- Imagine you are the repentant criminal. What have you come to understand about condemnation and forgiveness?
- Why do you think Jesus talks about salvation in terms of forgiveness and not salvation through power like everyone else calls for in the passage?





Following Jesus

Another perspective on the atonement, and highlighted by the passage from Luke above, is to think of what Jesus did in terms of our theme of condemnation and forgiveness. One strand of Christian tradition saw Jesus's condemnation by the authorities and death at their hands as a price or 'ransom' paid to the principle of evil or 'ruler' of the world (see the John Passage above). You can hear this in the hymn which begins 'There is a green hill far away...' which contains the words 'there is no other good enough to pay the price of sin...') Because we go wrong, we end up Unreconciled and separated from God and in that sense we 'belong' to the powers of evil. It is easy to see how that happens when people are eaten up by greed, jealousy, selfishness, anger and hatred for example. But some people also end up caught up in evil through no fault of their own. So the evil which ruins lives is condemned, a 'ransom' is paid through Jesus' death and we are freed to be forgiven by God for the ways in which we have failed to be the people we were meant to be. So Jesus talks about the importance of seeking forgiveness and of offering forgiveness to others.

Another way of understanding the Cross as a place of condemnation followed by forgiveness and liberation, is to link it with the idea of healing. Jesus makes this link himself when he heals a sick person, by saying 'your sins are forgiven': our physical, mental and spiritual health are all connected. The events of the crucifixion are told (in different ways) by all the Gospel writers, so we can get a vivid picture of the condemnation of Jesus and its physical, mental and spiritual toll. He was vilified, humiliated, mocked, abandoned, tortured and finally died of his terrible wounds. The suffering endured by Jesus, and his physical wounds are like representations of the state we all get into so that God cannot recognise his image in us. Yet 'by his stripes we are healed': the resurrection shows us that we can be 'ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven' and so become fit for Heaven and life with God in whose image we were made.

Activity

Think about the last time you spring-cleaned or decorated the place where you live. What has happened to the paint or wallpaper since then? What clean surfaces are now dirty, scratched or worn? How will you feel if or when you have cleaned and decorated again? What effort and energy does it/would it take to restore your house to its most pristine condition? Is it even possible for you? Why would you want to do it anyway? If a living space needs so much effort to become habitable, what do you think it might take to make a person fit for life with God?

What do you think about the 'problem' of evil and the state the world is in? Does thinking about Jesus' crucifixion, death and resurrection in terms of forgiveness, ransom and/or healing get to the heart of the matter or do you think there should be more to it than that?



Theological Reflection and Prayer

Lord,
 When we stand together,
 Murmuring at another
 Holding our stones,
 Feeling them cool and hard in our hands,
 Cool the righteous anger in our hearts,
 Take the stones from our hand
 The planks from our eyes
 And let us see you,
 Offering your forgiveness
 So that we, too, forgive. Amen

What is going to change?

You can use this section to gather your thoughts and to plan out any future projects on this theme.

- **Where is the seed of new life?** What gifts has God given us to offer and receive forgiveness in our own situation?
- **How will we carry it?** What resources will we need to reach out to enable and equip people to journey towards forgiveness in their own lives?
- **Where can it be born?** Identify one reconciling action we can commit to which will help Unreconciled people make sense of forgiveness.
- **How can we nurture it?** How can we support that reconciling action and make sure it follows through?
- **What will we hope to see?** What will be changed at the end of this process and what difference should it have made?

Going further

Matthew Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn and Dennis Linn, *Don't Forgive Too Soon*, (Paulist Press 1997)

Robert D Enright and Joanna North, *Exploring Forgiveness*, (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press 1998)

<http://theforgivenessproject.com/>

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Photo of *The Unreconciled* (The Cross and broken glass): CTBI / Vicki & Chuck Rogers / Phil Dragash 