

Rev John Henson
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Catching the Bug

Readings: Isaiah 55: 6 – 8; Matthew (6: 7 – 14 pattern prayer in
Gems Reset) 18: 21 – end. [Luke 23: 32 – 34 & 39 – 43])

Pa Dduw sy'n maddau fel tydi,
Yn rhad, ein holl bechodau ni?

'Suffice it if – my good and ill unreckoned,
And both forgive through Thy abounding grace –
I find myself by hands familiar beckoned
Unto my fitting place,'
(J.G. Whittier)

Forgiveness has always been one of God's specialities. Even in those parts of scripture where God is portrayed as being angry and fierce, God can suddenly change and have mercy on offenders. One of the most famous passages on forgiveness in the Hebrew scriptures is Isaiah 55: 6 – 8.

'Let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return that God may have mercy on them, for God will abundantly pardon'
(NRSV alt)

God will 'abundantly' pardon, that is wipe that slate clean. But notice there is a condition. The wicked have to return to God first. They have to ask for forgiveness.

Jesus in his teaching has a different programme for forgiveness. Often in his ministry he demonstrated the loving forgiveness of God before the sinner has so much as opened her or his mouth (the paralysed man Mk.2; the adulteress woman Jn.8; Zachaeus Lk 19; the gate-crashing prostitute Luke 7:36 ff). But then, strangely, after the forgiveness has been given, Jesus adds a condition. This condition is quite different from the one in Isaiah or elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures. "Forgive us for wounding you while we forgive those who wound us." It's as if Dr. Jesus gives us, free of charge, a bottle of medicine marked 'forgiveness', but warns that the medicine will not work if we do not also at the same time perform some healthy exercises.

Jesus illustrates his scheme of things in a story he tells in Matthew 18. A creditor forgives a man a huge, crippling debt unconditionally. But the debt is not cancelled because the debtor does not do the same for someone who owes him money. This means that forgiveness is a package deal. You don't have to pay anything for it. You don't even have to say sorry or be grateful – though that is only right and proper. All you have to do is to do as you have been done by. If the healing, cleansing forgiveness of God is to work in your life, it can only do so as you practice regularly and persistently in respect to others – and not just to some others but to all others, including people we really don't like at all and who, although we may not use the word, we sense emotionally and psychologically are our enemies.

What is forgiveness? Is it forgetting? Letting somebody off? Pretending something didn't happen? That's all very negative. When the father embraced his son who returned home after making a mess of his life, what had happened didn't even come into it. The father wasn't interested. The other son was. he was quick to point out that his younger brother had spent all his money on prostitutes. The father simply smothered his son with love – he ordered the fattened calf to be prepared for the feast; he put a new robe on the boy's back and a ring on his finger; he ordered a group of the finest musicians to provide the music for the dance. That's forgiveness. And that's why forgiveness comes as a package. Because if you haven't that generous spirit towards others, you will not be able to imagine or believe in God's love for you. In your experience it will be outside the bounds of possibility. If you can imagine forgiveness on that scale, how can you possibly accept it into your own life? The person you dislike will be a reflection of your own dislike for yourself; the person you fail to accept will mirror your unwillingness to accept yourself and to be accepted by God. Unless we know that we are all loved and accepted and forgiven by God, and unless we are quite happy about it – the acceptance of others as well as our own acceptance – then we, because of our own choice and attitude, put ourselves outside the whole process of forgiveness.

The film 'The Last Temptation' is a very controversial film, but I gained a few new insights from it. One was when Jesus visited Mary of Magdala's brothel. He visited not to make use of her services, like the other visitors. His intentions, you might say were pure – such that the Pharisees might approve of. But in a quiet moment, he, the pure Son of God, asked Mary for her forgiveness. Why? We weren't told exactly. But it seemed to me recognition by Jesus that goodness can wound as

well as badness. Jesus' good and proper behaviour, despite being good and proper behaviour, might have been experienced by Mary as rejection. If we wound someone, even if we do so innocently with no guilt attached to ourselves, we are in need of that person's forgiveness. For me the film brought the revelation that God gets involved in the business of forgiveness both ways round. God wants to experience the whole package as we are meant to experience it, giving forgiveness and accepting it. It explains perhaps why Jesus insisted on a baptism which had to do with repentance and forgiveness. John the Dipper thought it inappropriate. Jesus disagreed. Jesus was determined to identify himself with the whole process of forgiveness which begins with a soaking in the love of God. Only by experiencing that forgiveness and acceptance, would he be able to pass it on.

This is where our traditional form of the Lord's Prayer lets us down because the old words no longer mean what they are supposed to mean. We use the word 'trespasses' though few of us have entered somebody else's back garden without permission; or in Welsh we talk about 'dyledion' (debts) though the prayer has nothing to do with what we owe on our little plastic cards. Jesus was referring to personal relationships and the way we wound one another and tear one another apart! The prayer is about WOUNDS! What does this mean? It does not just mean some saying, "We've been wounded, we must forgive" or "We have wounded, we must say 'sorry'". We must all, like Jesus, be on both sides of the experience of forgiveness, forgiving and being forgiven, we must all together concentrate on the process of healing. Only in healing are we healed; only in allowing ourselves to be healed do we heal. That's why Jesus, in spite of his wounds and pain was the most healthy person at his crucifixion! Let us, at his body, become a healed and healing people, all at the same time, in one loving motion!

There is an unbroken thread from the baptism of Jesus, which was a baptism for repentance for the forgiveness of sins to the last dying moments of Jesus on the cross when he prayed "Father forgive them, they don't know what they are doing." His whole life was the practice and advocacy of forgiveness as a means of experiencing the love of God. On the cross Jesus demonstrates God's unconditional love for the world. No-one is called to repent, no-one is obliged to say 'sorry', no-one has to do penance, or wallow in guilt. (To do that is to refuse God's free gift.) Pilate is forgiven, Caiaphas is forgiven, Judas is forgiven, the Roman soldiers who knock in the nails are forgiven, the criminal who stands up for him and the criminal who shouts abuse at him, the disciples who let him down, Barabbas who goes scot-free.

Jesus had the forgiveness bug. He caught it from God, his Parent. If we want to be like him, we must catch the forgiveness bug too.

I need to add a post script to all this. Some people have suffered so badly at the hands of others, or worse, those they loved have suffered, that they feel the call to forgiveness to be lacking in understanding, heartless and unjust. It is asking the impossible, and that is cruel. It has to be said, cruel though it is, that if you cannot forgive you are doomed to suffer the wounds twice over, the second time in bitterness. However, the grace of God is infinite. 'Plenteous grace with thee is found, grace to cover ALL my sin', and that includes the sin of being unable to forgive. Jesus when he was on the cross was in a forgiving spirit, and in view of what he was going through in body and mind, that is very difficult for us to understand, but Jesus did not shout down from the cross, "Listen up, everybody. I forgive you all, all of you who have anything to do with this injustice." No he said, "Father forgive them." He handed over the task of forgiveness to the eternal, loving God. So perhaps, following Jesus' example, if we can find we really can't forgive, even if we have tried, we can pray, "God I'm sorry, I can't forgive so and so. Please forgive them for me."