

127 Forgiving one another

This week Prince Charles has visited the Irish Republic. Normally such a visit would not greatly feature in the headline news, but this visit was different. In August 1979 Lord Louis Mountbatten, cousin of the Queen and godfather and confidant of the young Prince Charles, was murdered, with three others, when his fishing boat was blown up by an IRA bomb, and Prince Charles, not surprisingly, was devastated.

Thirty-six years later the Prince has now shaken hands and spoken privately with Gerry Adams, who spent many years in leadership in the IRA. For both men this was a significant event, and there was talk of mutual regret, and, rather vaguely, of forgiveness too.

This incident raises the thorny old question of forgiveness, over which a good number of Christian people seem to be very muddled.

Of course many times in Scripture the Lord tells us to forgive one another. The best-known example is, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Matthew 6.12), with the warning by the Lord (verses 14-15), that the Father's forgiveness of us is dependent on our forgiveness of one another.

But then the mistake creeps in, which goes like this: whatever unpleasant deed is done to us, by whoever, the Christian, drawing on the God-given instruction to forgive, is to respond with - "That's quite alright, I forgive you". In one sense, to say such a thing is very noble, and is obviously sincerely meant, as an act of obedience to the Lord.

Yet that is not at all what the Lord has told us to do - AT THAT STAGE! The trouble with such forgiveness, given instantly and unconditionally, is that the reality of the wrong that has been done is never addressed. That reality is not dealt with - it is simply shuffled under the carpet by the one who has been wronged, and the perpetrator of the wrong has done nothing at all to put things right. Seen like this, the whole process feels wrong and odd - because it is!

The key to this question lies in how we are forgiven by God the Father. Think about it. I rob a bank, bashing a clerk over the head with an iron bar and running off with a bag of money. Does God really turn round and say to me, "That's OK

son, a bit naughty but I forgive you"? Of course He doesn't! What sort of God would He be if He did?

Instead, His forgiveness waits to flow. At appalling cost to Himself in Christ Jesus His Son on Golgotha, He has made His forgiveness of our wrongdoings possible. He CAN forgive us now, because Christ has already paid the price for our sins, by standing in for us. (Incidentally, Jesus' words on the cross, "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23.34) is a different matter entirely, which we will hope to consider next time).

But nothing happens between the wrong deed and the gift of God's forgiveness, until that wrong deed has been repented of and acknowledged, with forgiveness sought from the victim of the wrong by the doer of the wrong. THEN, forgiveness can flow and is to flow, immediately and unreservedly - THAT is when our obligation to forgive "kicks in". In this way, wrongs really are addressed and put right, and damaged relationships really can start to be healed.

Over my bank robbery, I am to repent and ask for forgiveness from all concerned, notably from the Lord and the bank clerk, and then try to put things right by returning the money and accepting my punishment. Do all that and I can then be forgiven, because my wrong deed has been properly acknowledged and dealt with.

Look at Luke 17.3-4, where we see the crucial words "if he repent", with the obligation to keep forgiving if he keeps repenting - not easy! But that is precisely what the Lord does with us. Look at Matthew 18.21-35. Mercy flowed for the first man because he asked for it, but then mercy was asked from him - and he refused it.

Forgiveness is precious, vertically and horizontally, to maintain relationships in their proper state. But it has to be a two-stage process - a seeking, and a giving, in that order. If we overlook that seeking stage - despite our well-meant intentions - we do no-one any good at all.