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How often should I forgive?



Then Peter came to Jesus and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Forgiveness: a kind of behaviour which we have to learn as children very early on in life; a concept

which is absolutely fundamental to the Christian faith and Christian life. Very basic, very simple in theory, but putting it into practice in real life often turns out to be really difficult and complicated.

As Christians, we know that we ought to be forgiving people. Our salvation depends on God's forgiveness that comes to us through the immense self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ. So, as we have known forgiveness in our own lives, we are bound to show forgiveness to others.

Sometimes it is made to sound easy. "Forgive and forget," we are told. Just kiss and make up, and everything will be all right. Well, that may work in the minor everyday upsets of human relationships, but when we come to more serious hurts, more deep-rooted wounds, forgiveness is anything but easy.

Sometimes Christians feel guilty when they find it hard to forgive. Surely as Christians we are meant to be nice to people, and if we find it difficult to love people who have hurt us we feel that we have let the side down.

But no: where the hurt runs deep, forgiveness

is hard work; it is not a quick “forgive and forget” but a painful and demanding process which takes time, perhaps even a lifetime.

I sometimes find myself wondering: what is forgiveness like in contemporary culture? Do we live in a forgiving age or an unforgiving age? In the so-called permissive society, in which it may seem that anything goes, it might appear that we live in a very forgiving culture. But I’m not so sure about that; actually it seems to me that our culture is often very unforgiving. When something goes wrong all the emphasis is on finding out who is the guilty party, who can be made to carry the can. It all seems to be about the blame game, naming and shaming; forgiveness doesn’t seem to come into it.

And sometimes we see another very unattractive behaviour. I’m thinking of those times when a politician or a church leader who is found to have fallen from grace makes a public apology – and then expects to be forgiven, almost as if they consider that they now have the right to be forgiven, and that we are being unreasonable if we do not immediately agree to overlook the matter and “move on”. But of course forgiveness, human

or divine, is never a right; it can only ever be a grace.

Justin Welby, speaking in Accra at the opening of the recent meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council, said something interesting about forgiveness: Modern European global north morality ...is a morality that does not believe in human sinfulness and failure. It does not believe in forgiveness. It does not believe in hope.

Yes indeed, forgiveness and hope go together. Forgiveness offers us an escape from the trap of sin; it opens up the possibility of new life. But it is never easy; it has a cost. Our forgiveness cost Jesus his life.

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