

## Forgiveness

*Sermon preached by Anthony Freeman at Holy Cross, Crediton, 11th September 2011*

On this tenth anniversary of Al-Qaeda's attack on New York and the USA's subsequent declaration of a "War on Terror", it is fitting that the theme of our prayers and readings should be forgiveness. Forgiveness is commonly linked with forgetting — as in the saying, "forgive and forget" — but I want to suggest that the forgiveness of past wrongs in fact necessitates a particular kind of remembering, which is what we do on anniversaries.

Our Gospel parable (Matthew 18.21–end ) related to financial debts, but the teaching that Jesus draws out of it indicates a somewhat different kind of forgiveness: "So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother."

What are we to understand by "forgiveness from the heart"? This is not to do with cancelling financial debt (at least, if it is, that is co-incidental). It is about our inward disposition towards someone who has wronged us. But how in practice would we set about forgiving such a person? And how would we know if we had succeeded? Saying the words is not enough; it must be "from the heart". What does that actually mean?

I believe it is linked to another teaching of Jesus, where he says, "Judge not, that ye be not judged" (Matt. 7.1). The teaching on judgement and the teaching on forgiveness both concern a reciprocal relation between how we act and we are to be treated: If we forgive others, we shall be forgiven; if we don't, we shan't. And if we judge and condemn others, then we shall be judged and condemned; but if we don't, then we shan't. (The message is "Do as you would be done by" — as in the Sermon on the Mount: Matthew 7.12.)

The underlying theme here is a warning against finding culprits and laying blame when things go wrong. Instead, we should just accept that bad things do sometimes happen. And rather than be obsessed with whose fault it is, we should do our best to see that we ourselves are not the cause of further bad things. From this perspective, the evidence that we have "forgiven from our heart" might be this: our ability to remember past wrongs but without bitterness. And the way to achieve this might be to cultivate the ability to remember past events in a non-judgemental way.

This does not mean forgetting bad happenings from the past; much less does it mean denying them. Least of all does it mean taking a totally detached emotionless view of them. What it does mean is seeing them from everyone's point of view and not just our own, and feeling their impact with everyone's feelings and not just our own. That is God's way. Atheists mock the way that all participants in an armed conflict will claim that that God is on their side. But it is true. If there is indeed one loving God then he is going to be on everyone's side. And we who claim him for our Father must follow his example, and avoid the temptation to be one-sided.

We have an example of this non-judgemental God's-view attitude to past wrongs in today's Old Testament lesson (Genesis 50.15–21). Joseph, the spoilt boy of a doting father, certainly had much to forgive his brothers. They had after all sold him as a slave into Egypt. But years later, as Prime Minister of his adopted country, Joseph was in a position to save his father and all his family from a seven-year famine. This morning's lesson was the last chapter of the story: their old father has just died, and his sons are terrified that their powerful younger brother will now turn on them, and without his father's restraining hand take vengeance for their persecution of him in his youth. But Joseph does the opposite. He looks back on the wrong done to him from God's perspective: *You intended to do harm to me, but God intended it for good ... so have no fear; I will look after you and your little ones* (Genesis 50.20–21). And he is as good as his word.

All well and good, you say, but what does this have to do with the way we look back on 9/11 ten years on? What does it mean for us now to take the “God’s-eye view” of that appalling event, and of the even more appalling events (as it seems to some of us) that followed in its wake upon the international stage?

With respect to what happened on this day in 2001, it is not for us to focus directly on forgiveness (unless unknown to me someone here in this church was directly harmed by the attack on the twin towers), because only the person who has suffered a wrong has the authority to forgive the perpetrator. The demand on us — which is just as costly — is to remember without judging, lest we ourselves be judged. That is the challenge to us of Jesus’ teaching: are we able to look back ten years without judging and without condemning anyone involved?

I doubt we can do that yet. Certainly I should find it hard to say to the Al-Qaeda leadership, as Joseph said to his brothers: *You intended to do harm ..., but God intended it for good*. However, on this anniversary, the “God’s-eye view” must surely — at the very least — include as open and honest a look as we can take at the behaviour of the Christian West in the second half of the twentieth century as it must have looked to the Islamic world at the turn of the millennium. So paradoxically, it may be that before we can truly look back on past events in a Godlike non-judgemental way, we first have to subject ourselves and our nation and its allies to closer judgement.

I began by saying that Jesus’ teaching on judgement and his teaching on forgiveness are closely linked because both concern a reciprocal relation between how we act and we are to be treated. We now see that there is also an important distinction between them: forgiveness is a personal transaction between the one harmed and the perpetrator, whereas a non-judgemental way of looking at things is something to which we can all aspire in all circumstances. But the wheel comes full circle, because only when we have a sufficiently full and rounded vision to be able to view events non-judgementally, shall we be in a position to forgive “from our hearts”.