

True forgiveness: 7

The heart of the matter

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"It's God they ought to crucify, instead of you and me", said one of the two thieves to Jesus, according to Sydney Carter's poem. In saying this the thief spoke truer than he knew, and his involuntary insight touches the heart of the cosmic reconciliation in which we share.

The ceremonies of Good Friday and Easter Sunday enact the ultimate conflict: between death and life, despair and hope, darkness and light. At the centre stands an event of cosmic reconciliation. "In Christ", Paul tells us, "God reconciled the world to himself." God brought this about by uniting opposites. "For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we (sinners) might become God's holiness." Paul then pleads (2 Cor. 5:19-21): "I appeal to you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God!"

The root of all forgiveness lies in this mutual act of reconciliation. It has to be *mutual*. God offers reconciliation by forgiving us and by extending his love. We, on our side, also need to "forgive" God and accept his love. Incredible though it may seem, there is a forgiving and giving on our side too.

Friedrich Nietzsche, the outspoken atheist who voiced many of the *Übermensch* principles that sustained German Nazi policies, accused the traditional God of incompetence and cruelty. "If God were to exist," he stated, "I would never forgive him for the chaos and carnage he has caused." He was neither the first nor the last to blame God for suffering and evil. A much more respectful Job is quoted in Scripture as saying his complaint is not against human beings, but against God himself (Job 21:4). "You have cast me into the mud. I have become like dust and ashes. I cry to you and you do not answer me. I stand before you, but you pay no heed" (Job 30:19-20). By allowing us to suffer pain, loss or a crippling disability, God seems to be doing us an injustice. "I can never forgive God for having made me a woman", an old lady once confided to me. It was said in jest; but there was a deep sadness and genuine resentment too.

During my college days I read a French autobiography which made a lasting impression on me. The author, whose name I have forgotten, described the excruciating misery and poverty of his early years in the slums of post-war Marseilles. Like the Preacher (Eccl. 4:2-3), he envied his brothers and sisters who died early or still-born. He blamed his habitually drunken parents and God for giving him life. The title of the book was: *I did not ask to be born*. It was written in bitterness by a man who spent much of his life in prison. He

might well have echoed Sydney Carter's famous lyric: "It's God they ought to crucify instead of you and me". I said to the carpenter hanging on the tree.

The question is not, I believe, whether God is actually guilty or can be held accountable. It is easy to argue by reason that God is omnipotent and can do what he likes. It is obvious that in a created world such as ours, the very limitations to which we are subject imply suffering and death. We can even maintain, as preachers so glibly do, that God administers pain as a doctor does medicine, dispensing bitter pills for our good; so that pain, if we only knew it, leads us to joy. Such thoughts, however rational and convincing, cannot undo the real *injury* inflicted by suffering. Damage and humiliation devastate us, whatever the intention of their author. And it is not only guilt that needs to be forgiven, but damage and injury as well.

Our representative

If a playful child has run out into the path of a car and been killed, the driver may be guiltless. Yet he has caused unspeakable grief and loss. Instinctively he will seek reconciliation with the parents and tell them, "I regret what has happened. I am very, very sorry"; not because he admits legal liability, but because of the real injury he has caused. The parents will need to forgive him, and forgive God who created a world in which fatal accidents can happen. The question is: could God or would God ever say: "I am sorry"?

Most of us have such a rigid image of God as the self-righteous Parent that the thought may seem preposterous. But that image is flawed. It is theologically totally inadequate, as scores of classic studies have shown. God is as much the Mother, through whom we participate in all reality (Is. 46:3-4; 49:15), as the Father, the Thou, who challenges us and guides us. God is our deepest Self, the spiritual Adult in us, from whom we derive the creative energies that drive us (Gen. 2:7; J1. 2:28). God is the Child in us, who plays and dances and creates with us (Prov. 8:30-31) and weeps in us when we cry with pain (Wis. 11:24-12:1).

Precisely because God is not an aloof and overpowering Force, but life-engendering Love, he started the process

of reconciliation in Christ. "In this is love, not that we loved God. Rather he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins" (1 Jn. 4:10). Or, as Paul put it, "for our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin so that we might in him become God's holiness" (2 Cor. 5:21). By saying: "God made him to be sin", Paul meant not only that Christ became "an offering for sin"; he meant that Christ carried in himself all the pain, weakness and suffering of our human sinfulness. In Christ God prepared us for reconciliation by doing much more than saying: "I am sorry". In Christ he *shared* our suffering.

Our belief in the Incarnation should not make us overlook the reality of Jesus' humiliation and confusion as a human being. He was hounded to death by the bigotry of Jerusalem's religious leaders. He was unjustly condemned to crucifixion because it suited the political game of Pilate and Herod Antipas. Jesus felt all the pain, the anger, the outrage that any one of us would feel.

Christ represented us when he pleaded (Lk. 20:42): "Let this chalice be taken away!" Christ spoke with all who suffer when he cried out on the cross (Mt. 27:46): "God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And Christ forgave the Father on our behalf when he surrendered himself to him in trust (Lk. 23:46): "Into your hands, Father, I commit my spirit!" In Christ God himself, who knows no sin, assumed all the fragility inherent in our created and wounded human nature and so became "sin" with us. By voluntarily accepting his death on our behalf and by rising to new life he transformed our human reality from within.

Jesus Christ "forgave" the Father by surrendering himself totally to God's love in spite of his utter desolation. That was the supreme moment of true humility, of worship in spirit and truth, of genuine sacrifice. "Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death. He was heard because he was humble and devout. Though he was God's Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered" (Heb. 5:7-8).

Forgiveness rests on reconciliation and completes it. Jesus could forgive his executioners (Lk. 23:34), because he was at peace with himself and with his Father. We will be able to forgive others the wrongs they do us when we can "forgive" God and ourselves for what we are. It demands



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spiritual realism, acceptance, humility. It also demands the creative gift of love.

Forgiveness springs from the frame of mind which was in Christ Jesus. "Though he was in the form of God, he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave, being born in our human likeness" (Phil. 2:5-7). To get rid of all the inner cobwebs we may have accumulated over months and years, we need to enact a proper "spring cleaning" of the heart from time to time. A retreat or a holiday, while we walk in a forest or lie on a beach, may provide the right setting. But from a liturgical point of view we cannot choose a better moment for this process of inner reconciliation than Holy Week and Easter.

The Easter joy

Let us consider our relationship to God. There may be much for which we have to ask his forgiveness. There may also be unspoken conflicts and grudges against him which we have not properly resolved. When we discuss this with God in our prayer, we could move from truth (admitting we are creatures and owe everything to him) and openness (voicing our confusion and search) to love (responding to his goodness to us and generously offering our love in return). The Easter ceremonies can be so full of meaning here, as we choose the light of Christ to dispel night and darkness, celebrate creation and rebirth with the newly baptised, and join Jesus' trustful surrender to God in the sacrifice of Easter Mass.

We should also, in the silence of our heart, redress our hostility to others. We may need to forgive our parents, teachers and other authority figures in our past for harm they may knowingly or unknowingly have done to us. It is amazing how many unresolved grudges we harbour in our memories. We may need to extend forgiveness to family members or people we work with. If we are upset by what is happening in the Church, we may need to forgive those we disagree with, retaining the right to our own honest opinion, yet sincerely allowing others to be different and wishing them well. Why not fill our "exchange of peace" at our Masses in Eastertime with this depth of meaning?

We must not forget to forgive ourselves. I do not mean merely that we should endorse the pardon God and others give us for our mistakes and faults. We should wholeheartedly subscribe to who we are and what we are, warts and all. We cannot love God and other people if we do not like ourselves. When we dress in festive colours for Easter, why not make it a statement of our joy at being who we are?

When we thus make peace with God, our neighbours and ourselves, we are, in fact, engaged in what used to be known as the preparation for a good death. That is what Holy Week and Easter are all about. If with Christ we have cleared the decks so that we could face death at any time, we can resume living with new zest as a vital part of his new creation. We know God will be with us, and we will be with God, all the way.