

To forgive is to bless

Love your enemies... it'll drive them crazy!

I'm not sure that's entirely what Jesus had in mind when he preached those game-changing words.

Love your enemies; it's got to be up there with the hardest things he ever said. It must have bewildered and offended much of his audience at the time and centuries later it still offends our sense of justice and fair-play. Some people don't deserve our love.

When we begin to look at how Jesus himself lived out his radical command, we see that, for him, it didn't mean excusing the actions of an enemy. In most cases he confronts them; spells out his grievances, challenges their behaviour. And yet never, never does he hold on to anger; never does he continue to live with resentment.

A question for us then, is who are *our* enemies; those past or present who we refuse to or struggle to forgive, personally, politically, nationally?

And what does it mean to *love* them?

For example, what does it mean to love ISIS bride Shamima Begum?

This, of course, is where it gets hard because there are principles at stake. What if the 'enemy' has no remorse? Why would Jesus expect us, command us to love someone who has intentionally hurt us?

I was listening to a radio programme a few months ago where several religious leaders from N Ireland were sharing their insights into the nature of forgiveness. Each one of the clerics had been on the coalface of the conflict we call the Troubles, and one of the ministers who had too often sat with those caught up in the tit-for-tat atrocity, said something that took me by surprise - no-one, he said, has the right to expect or insist that someone else forgives. I guess I've always seen it as a mandate, a command from the top, but actually, he's right, it's not ours to enforce. The desire and motivation to forgive always has to come from within the person wronged. And there are some things that for some of us are beyond forgiving. The tragic truth, of course, is that unforgiveness always imprisons both parties. As the late great Nelson Mandela, who had more reason than many to hate his enemies, said upon his release, 'As I walked out of the door towards the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew that if I didn't leave the bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison'

Forgiveness is about choosing to absorb the bitterness and hatred rather than inflict it. And that's hard and costly.

It's important, however, to say that forgiveness isn't always reconciliation. We may never get that apology, we may never be friends; in this life at least.

The work of forgiveness always begins with me. Before God, I have to examine my own story and my own part in this making of enemies. I must ask hard questions of myself - is there something in my unresolved past, in my prejudice, my selfishness, my fragile ego which has led to or fuelled this situation and its resulting anger? Too often I resort to playing the victim; to consciously or unconsciously enjoy that sense of being wronged; I can too easily nurse the pain and nurture the anger. Until I let go of that need and right to revenge, however, I won't ever find my way through forgiveness.

So, it starts with me. The next step, I think, is to ask God for insight into the life and mindset of my 'enemy'; for empathy; to try to understand the 'why' behind their actions. Hurt people, after all, are often very good at hurting.

We must remember that forgiveness has its own timescale. It can't be rushed or prematurely resolved because broken trust takes its time to grieve and mend; because often that journey towards and through teaches us some of the deepest lessons and truths about ourselves. Time, it's true, can be a healer; with God's help it can dilute our hurt and distance us from our anger. And, sometimes, forgiving is a life's work; a constant, ongoing, moment-by-moment, day-by-day choice to keep on choosing to forgive.

In his letter to the early house churches of Rome, the apostle Paul, in the spirit of Jesus, encourages the Christians there to bless their enemies; 'bless and not to curse those who persecute you'. Hard words to a congregation where some had previously been expelled from Rome under the Emperor Claudius, and who, within a few years of receiving this letter, would suffer terribly at the hands of Nero.

Bless and do not curse. And Paul outlines some of the ways they can bless; don't take revenge, feed your enemy if they're hungry, give them a drink if they're thirsty. And then he ends that bit of his letter by saying, 'In doing this, you will heap burning coals on (your enemy's) head'. Sounds painful, but I think what he's saying is you will awake their conscience, their compassion.

Meeting hatred with love always wrongfoots an enemy. It's not natural but it's actually very powerful.

When we are hurt or angry, we can so easily dehumanise our 'enemy'; they become an object, a thing to despise. And when that happens within tribes and nations, of course, it always leads to tyranny and phobia and war. It's what fundamentalism and extremism feed upon.

To forgive we must look for the human face of our enemy.

Over my life I'd had several painful struggles with forgiveness. I've tried at times to imagine my resentment as a balloon which I surrender over and over, or as a paper boat released out into the sea of God's forgiveness, but often within minutes it's back clawing at my throat once again. It's only lately that I discovered the power of those words of Paul – Bless and do not curse.

So, every day when I walked the dog, I decided at that moment when I unhooked her lead would be my cue to bless. I'd pray, 'Bless this person, Lord, may their day be filled with love and light, may they be surrounded by kindness and joy. Lord, may they know a deep and lasting peace.'

And, to begin with, I blessed through gritted teeth. But, slowly, and to my surprise, with time my feelings began to change until one day finally I found myself meaning those words. No longer did I need an apology, no longer did I feel that grudge punishing me. Blessing became a key to my own freedom.

And, actually, it's given me an insight, I think, into the heart of the God who, as Jesus said, causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous'. God's blessing has no boundaries and when we bless we become a tiny yet significant part of it.

The gift of forgiving others is also a gift to ourselves. When we forgive, we free two people, them and us.

Poet priest John O'Donoghue once wrote:

'When a blessing is invoked, it changes the atmosphere. Some of the plentitude flows into our hearts from the invisible neighbourhood of loving kindness. In a dead wall, a new window opens; in dense darkness a path starts to glimmer and into a broken heart healing falls like morning dew. Whenever you give a blessing, a blessing returns to enfold you... So, may we realise our power to bless, heal and renew each other.'