

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity – 13<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

**Service at All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

All our readings this morning, one way or another, are about forgiveness. As Jane Quarmby pointed out in her recent reflection on the story of Joseph, his forgiveness of his brothers at the end of the Book of Genesis breaks the cycles of violence that have gone before – those stories of sibling rivalry which dominate the opening book of the Bible, reflecting much that is deep rooted in human behaviour: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Esau and Jacob, Joseph and his brothers. The repeating cycles in which people compete for what they fear are finite resources, missing the point that their lives are blessed with God's abundance.

Despite the apparent restoration of relationship between Joseph and his brothers, when their father dies the brothers worry that this will be the moment Joseph seeks revenge for what they did to him. As ever, their reaction is to invent a story to protect themselves. But Joseph does something else. He shows them the extent of his vulnerability and, from that position, assures them of his forgiveness, pointing out that God's vision is greater than all of theirs.

As Christians, forgiveness is foundational to our faith. It's no accident that the central line in the Lord's Prayer is about it. And it's a good thing that clergy have to commit to saying it twice a day: 'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.' Jesus's parable in our Gospel this morning is an extended meditation on that verse, using exaggerated examples to bring home his point. All of us have had the experience of being forgiven – in small ways, more significant ways, sometimes life-changing ways. From the point of view of our faith, the ultimate forgiveness we receive is on the Cross. And it has already happened, so now it is up to us how we use it.

There's a scene in *Howard's End*, the novel by E M Forster set at the turn of the twentieth century of which a Merchant-Ivory film was made, in which the idealistic Margaret Schlegel (played by Emma Thompson in the film) confronts her husband to be, the widower Henry Wilcox (played by Anthony Hopkins). It has just been discovered that Margaret's unmarried sister Helen is pregnant, and Henry is refusing to allow her to stay a night at Howard's End, citing family values: 'I have my children and the memory of my dear wife to consider.' Margaret asks him: 'Tonight she asks to sleep in your empty house... Will you give my sister leave? Will you forgive her as you hope to be forgiven, and as you have actually been forgiven?' He blusters, and she then confronts him: "'Not any more of this!" she cried. "You shall see the connection if it kills you, Henry! You have had a mistress - I forgave you. My sister has a lover - you drive her from the house. Do you see the connection? ... Men like you use repentance as a blind, so don't repent. Only say to yourself, "What Helen has done, I've done."' ' Needless to say, Henry doesn't see it that way, though Margaret does succeed in changing his way of thinking by the end of the novel.

There are two basic ways in which we can respond to receiving mercy. We can feel relieved that we have got off lightly and go on with our lives feeling a bit more defensive and a bit more mistrustful of others. Or we can look around and realise that other people are like us, that they will get things wrong too and need to be forgiven, and that we would do better to show to them the mercy we have experienced ourselves. For deep down we know that feeling resentment, bitterness and anxiety in response to the wrong that is done to us becomes, in the end, a lonely place. Feeling mercy, on the other hand, is a liberation.

I do not for one moment wish to suggest that this is a quick or an easy process. Some hurts are so devastating that they can take a lifetime to come to terms with, and even then be left unresolved. It would be profoundly insensitive (not to say hypocritical) for the church to suggest otherwise. And, of course, it is more complex than these few minutes of reflection can possibly allow. As an example of such complexity, two years ago the parents of Stephen Lawrence - the black teenager murdered in a racially motivated killing at a bus stop in South London in 1993 - were interviewed twenty-five years after his death. Stephen's father, Neville, found it hard to put into words the devastation caused to the family by the act of murder, but he said that after twenty-five years he had decided to take the hardest decision of his life, 'in order to be a Christian', and to forgive his son's killers.

Stephen's mother, Baroness Doreen Lawrence, expressed a different view. She said: 'It's very difficult to forgive somebody who's never admitted they've done anything wrong.' Baroness Lawrence commands huge respect (and I count myself as one of her admirers) for all she has done to combat racism in the United Kingdom since Stephen's death. Both parents have shown a courage and

a determination to change things for the better that will leave a lasting legacy. But, on the basis of what they each said in 2018, they had reached different places on the issue of forgiveness. It was a poignant reminder of how mercy has to go hand in hand with justice, and that justice had so often been lacking for Stephen.

But once justice has been pronounced, what then? Beyond justice lies mercy. Just as beyond forgiveness, we may also find reconciliation. Forgiveness and reconciliation are different, though closely related. In one corner of the church where I used to at in London there is a war memorial to Far Eastern Prisoners of War. In its glass case are two small blocks of wood from the Burma-Siam railway. During the War, Allied servicemen were put to work on the construction of the railway in sub-human conditions. Many died in the process, and it became known as 'Death Railway'. At a service in the church in the 1990s, fifty years on, one of the veterans commented that the time had come to let the bitterness go, as the only people it was damaging was themselves.

That is one truth about forgiveness. We get to it when we get to the point of saying: 'Am I going to let this thing dominate the rest of my life? I don't want to live like this anymore.' And when we manage that, something changes. We feel released from a burden we have been carrying without realising. At the same time, we become better able to understand the times we ourselves have been forgiven, before we became so enmeshed in our sense of being wronged.

Reconciliation is different. To forgive is to reach the point of being able to say of another person: 'I no longer want to live a life in which you take up the whole of my consciousness with how bad you were, regardless of whether or not you

say you are sorry.’ To be reconciled with someone is to reach the point of being able to say: ‘I am glad to have you in my life now, even though I am sorry about the way it began.’ The journey between the two is enormous, and often it is unrealistic even to attempt it.

One person who did attempt it was Eric Lomax, a former prisoner of war who worked on the Burma-Siam Railway. His book, *The Railway Man*, tells the story of the psychological damage he suffered, and of how long after the War he made contact with one of his interrogators, received counselling to control his urge to hunt him down and attack him, before discovering that the man had spent his own life trying to make amends for his actions during the war by speaking out against militarism. Lomax eventually went to Thailand to visit the area of the camps where he was a prisoner and meet his interrogator. He found that he was able to forgive him, and the men became friends until their deaths in 2011 and 2012. It is a remarkable story.

Recently I came across a quotation which sums up some of what I have been trying to say: ‘Forgiveness feels pain but doesn't hoard it; it allows tomorrow to break free of yesterday. It is always hard, sometimes foolish and, at its heart, God-like.’

And so let us pray:

Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And help us, Lord, when we struggle to do it.

Amen.