

The Lord's Prayer: Address 3: Forgiveness and Temptation

"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who are indebted to us," says Luke, where Matthew neatens it up debts and debtors.

The South African writer, Lorens Van der Post, was interred as a Japanese prisoner of War, and almost died. Later, he described how War Crimes officers, who had *not* suffered in the same way, were, he said, 'more revengeful and bitter about our treatment than we were ourselves.' He went on to say,

'I have so often noticed that the suffering which is most difficult, if not impossible, to forgive is unreal, imagined suffering. There is no power on earth like imagination, and the worst most obstinate grievances are imagined ones.'

And he speaks of people – and nations – who build up *mental* pictures of the suffering of others, which then actually allow them to focus *not* so much on what the feelings of those who actually suffer really are, but on their *own* sense of self importance in what they would like to do about it. The suffering of others, transferred into the imagination, then becomes a source of personal pride that allows us to avoid seeing or addressing the fact that we are all bound up together in the burdens of life.

It's a powerful message from someone who's been there. Our politicians might do well to note such words of experience, when we, who for years on end are happy to support and sell arms to dictators, then wish to distance ourselves and take the moral high ground, sending in our bombers to root them out as stereotypes of evil – when it suits us.

Jesus wasn't immune to these kind of dilemmas. When he fed the crowds with the loaves and fishes, they wanted him to take him as their king and for him to rid them of their Roman oppressors. But his path and solution was quite the opposite: to confront the *inner* realities of evil that exist in all of us, placing himself in a position of vulnerability and personal sacrifice at Calvary, for the sin of the world.

When Jesus gave this Prayer to his disciples, how big a step was he asking them – and us – to take here?

It's clear that forgiveness and reconciliation were of the utmost importance to Jesus, signs of God's kingdom. Forgiveness lies at the heart of family life and Christian community. We need one another, we need to be accepted by one another; but we can only be fully accepted if and when we are truly honest about who we really are – and that, it has to be acknowledged, is a challenge. Most of us are not that honest about ourselves.

And if we take the tone of the Lord's Prayer, as I've been speaking of it, as wanting that vision of the Kingdom of God to be made real in our life today, then we might accept the importance of being prepared to forgive others today so that we may ultimately stand forgiven in the sight of God ourselves, and be welcomed in.

But it's tough, this forgiveness bit. If it came to it, how many of us would really expect to be there with Jesus saying, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!'

Some commentators encourage us to translate these words of Jesus in a way that allows for a *promise*. It is possible to translate, 'Forgive us our debts, as we *herewith* forgive our debtors'. It can be said as a prayer of *intention*, though the intention should come from the heart. And that perhaps is the key: getting in touch with the heart.

You'll notice I'm using the word 'debts' more than sins or trespasses. One up for the Church of Scotland! The Aramaic behind the original Greek can apparently mean both sins and debts; they were closely related in Hebrew too. It's sometimes quipped that Presbyterians are more interested in debts than sins, while Episcopalians, attracting a number of land-owners, were more interested in trespassing...

But go back to the language of the Prayer Book – “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done” – then things left undone are ‘debts’ and things which should not have been done are ‘trespasses’, and it is clear we need to hold both together.

For ‘sin’ is not just a matter of what we *do*; it is also a matter of what we *don't do*. You know the saying: ‘All it takes for evil to conquer is for good people to do nothing’.

But ‘doing’ – our response to what we may call ‘evil’ – that does not come from a loving heart can also lead to further hurt; in Christian terms, action should always be tempered by forgiveness. When the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation was set up in South Africa, it held this truth at its core. For seeking justice with bitterness in the heart will lead to further injustice. Seeking justice through truthful confrontation, with a view to reconciliation, will drain much of the anger and bitterness and make way for a lasting justice that brings the possibility of true peace, if people will but embrace it.

So in Libya, when we try to ‘take out’ (a horrible, dreadfully cold phrase) Gadaffi's forces with missiles, rather than truthful confrontation, forgetting that each of his troops has an extended family who will harbour the grief and pain of their loss, probably for generations, and that in itself will generate further bitterness and hatred for generations to come, the possibility of genuine resolution *from the heart* is lost; what is left is only a quick fix of convenience or expediency, a reversal of dominance.

Now given what so many there have suffered, most of us might applaud that reversal of fortune. But let us not kid ourselves that it has anything remotely to do with the ways of Christ. He had those choices to make for himself. Rather than simply succumbing to the crowd's wish for him to take power over the rulers of the land, and start ‘fixing’ things – without needing an inner response and change in us – he chose to attack the forces of the human heart, to take on the human condition and bring healing from the *inside*.

‘Lord, let me remove the plank from my own eye before trying to remove the spec from my neighbour's.’

And is it not true, in a sense, that it is easier to think about forgiving others than it is to think about forgiving – or being forgiven – ourselves? The theologian Stanley Hauerwas suggests it's much easier to forgive than be forgiven, because being forgiven demands an openness to face up to who we truly are – people who fall far short of the image we like to project of ourselves most of the time to other people. Most of us are not that honest.

I've always liked the form of Confession used in the Iona Community that is reciprocal. The person leading the service first confesses: “I confess to my brokenness, to the ways I wound my life, the lives of others and the life of the world... and the congregation respond with words of forgiveness: “May God forgive you, Christ renew you, and the Spirit enable you to grow in love.” And then the process is reversed, with the congregation confessing and the leader giving words of absolution.

In the end of the day, we are all in it together, all saints and sinners, trying to follow but falling short of what God wishes of us. So the challenges will be there from within as well as from without. But unless the inner challenges are addressed, the external challenges will remain more complex and insoluble.

What we then understand by the petition not to be lead into temptation is clearer I think in the modern version of the prayer: 'do not bring us to the time of trial.' Temptation, testing, trial and tribulation, these are all closely related. Scripture has plenty of reference to God testing in order to 'prove' and to develop character (cf., NT Reading Rms 5: 1-11)

The Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness and God permits him to be tested there. The 'temptations' are fundamental: not to doubt God's willingness to sustain him in his need for bread; not to put God to the test; and not to compromise with the powers and forces of the world.

But perhaps the truest meaning of these words is to be found in Gethsemane and at Golgotha, where again Jesus proves he is the only one able to withstand the pressures of the forces stacked against him, though some of his disciples wished to drink of that cup with him.

The events around Jesus' death replay the great test presented to God's people in former days: choose God and choose life; or reject God and choose death. This day let us choose life, though it mean following to Calvary; let us not fall away at Gethsemane and succumb to the temptation of choosing ultimate death.

And it is that goal of choosing life beyond the normal realities of daily living, which perhaps rightly summarises this Prayer of our Lord: beginning from addressing the Father, *Abba*, who draws us all together, and whose very presence demands respect for holiness and relativises all of our seemingly irreconcilable differences; proclaiming God's kingdom and the call both to trust in God to provide and for us to respond in sharing the bread of the heavenly banquet; being honest about ourselves and open to growing in and through our need of one another in community; and recognising that there are many dangers around us, but God's love will draw us ever closer, even though we be tested, if we lay our trust in him.

In taking human form and taking on the mess and pain of this world and bearing that suffering in the ultimate test of faith at Gethsemane and Calvary, Christ has opened up the way for us to pray, with him, *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name!*