

In my previous life as a painter I remember one man I worked with who when I became a Christian started to bully me a bit. It stemmed from me being the van driver and deciding not to leave site early because I felt it was stealing and I felt convicted that this was wrong. He would do silly little things like say, "throw another christian on the barbie", with reference to Christians being burnt in Roman arenas. He made a cross and put a child's toy on it and left it on my chair - little things like that. Little things but they mounted up and it all became very stressful. Of course my instinct was to get him back, but I knew I also had to be forgiving. I decided, as he was a keen gardener, to buy him a plant and take it round to his house. He couldn't believe that I came and voiced that out loud. He then, proudly showed us around his garden.

I would like to say things got better, but when I was given the job of the foreman, no one would work weekend overtime with me and the bullying didn't really stop.

I tell you this story, not because I found it easy to forgive that man, but rather, I had to forgive him more than once and my forgiveness did not necessarily make a difference to his life, though I hoped it would.

Forgiveness is hard. We see this from the conversation Peter has with Jesus. He thinks forgiving 7 times is enough, which was the perfect number. It meant completeness, like the seventh day of creation, when all the work was done and finished. That was generous from a human standard. But Jesus being Jesus pushes it further. Not 7 times, not even 7x7 but 70x7 which is 490. Not only do you need to be merciful but you need to be good at Maths too.

That's a lot isn't it? Forgiving one person 490 times. I wonder what you would do when you got to the 491st time - "right that's it I have forgiven you the right amount of times that Jesus said, now it's payback time, I'm coming for you". Perhaps you would even be

longing for the 491st time, just so you could enact your vengeance. Making a tally and checking it for the big day.

Of course that would make a mockery of the whole forgiveness thing wouldn't it. Because forgiveness is an act of the heart, not a counting game. Jesus went beyond 7 times because forgiveness is a way of life. And God always gives and forgives abundantly.

Which is shown in the story of the king and his servant.

The servant owes an amount of money so big that it would take him forever to pay back - we're not told how he accumulated such a large amount, just the size of the debt. Rightly, the king wants his debt paid - in full. So callously calls for the man, his family and all that he owns to be sold to pay it off.

Terrified the servant does the only thing he can do and appeals to the king for mercy, begging for more time so he could pay it back. The king takes pity on the poor man, cancels the debt and lets him go.

Can you imagine the relief. What a weight has been lifted off his shoulders. He must have felt a new sense of freedom. And you would hope that the mercy shown to him would have rubbed off a little. He now knew what it felt like to be released from such a crushing debt, and he could pass this gift on to others.

But he doesn't. It's as though he has completely forgotten what a mess he was in. The forgiveness bestowed on him, has made no impact at all upon his heart and he seeks violent retribution on his fellow servant. And even when that servant begs like he did, he does not relent but throws him in jail.

When finding out, the king calls it as it is "You wicked servant, "I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to.

Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

Is this the right outcome? Should the king not have continued to forgive the servant even if he didn't forgive his own servant? Shouldn't the king be following Jesus' own words of forgiving 70x7? Especially as he began the parable by saying "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like".

Forgiveness it seems is conditional. That grates on me a little, putting conditions on forgiveness. But we say it every Sunday, "Forgive us our sins (or debts) as we forgive those who sin against us." AS WE FORGIVE... It's there in the most famous prayer of all.

In a God-shaped world receiving and giving are tied together, like a baton in a relay race. Forgiveness is received as it is passed on. Tom Wright suggests it is like air in your lungs, you can't take anymore in until you have breathed out a little. Forgiveness out - forgiveness in - forgiveness out - forgiveness in.

If we withhold forgiveness it is like holding a gift in our hands - we cannot then receive the gift of forgiveness of God as our hands are full - passing it on to another person, will release us and enable us to receive God's forgiveness.

The unforgiving servant failed to understand this principle. He only knew the principle of revenge, which in turn was what he received.

As I said at the beginning, forgiveness is hard. Some of us have had unspeakable things done against us and from a cursory glance at the news we see what might be described as unforgivable things happening in our world today. I get that. I also understand why people choose not to forgive. Not forgiving can feel like a way of honouring a memory, or getting some justice. Why should people

be forgiven - it feels like letting them off the hook. It is not always an easy process.

Forgiveness does not mean we let people walk over us, or accept bad behaviour, or that actions will not have consequences. It is not forgetting something has happened and brushing it under the carpet.

Forgiveness is not something others deserve but a gift we offer.

In the end though, and I think we know this, un-forgiveness becomes a prison of our own making. It makes it hard to move on even when the other person has.

And haven't we been forgiven much by God. The countless thoughts, words and actions that have hurt others, our world, ourselves and our Lord. We receive that gift week by week as we offer our confession and as we go out into the world it is a gift that we need to pass on, even if it takes time to do so.

At the beginning I told you a personal story of mine about forgiving another person. I wonder what your forgiveness story would look like? Is there an action you need to take in showing forgiveness to another person?

Whatever you need to do may you know the presence of God go with you, helping you to both give and receive forgiveness. Amen