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Forgiveness

by Pauline Grimshaw

READINGS:

GENESIS 45 1-15

LUKE 15 11-32

TCR 539

During the past three or so weeks we have seen so many horrific scenes of violence, bloodshed and death on television. We have seen so many scenes of fleeing families that both horrify us, but also emotionally move us. Yet, sooner or later, there must be some sort of resolution to the situation in Ukraine and ultimately some form of healing. One of the questions that comes to my mind is 'How will healing and forgiveness ever be possible both at a personal and at a national level?' This is certainly not any easy question to answer and the process particularly between countries can take many years.

'Forgive and forget' is a well-known saying but as in so many situations in life both these things seem practically impossible. Turning the other cheek

conflicts almost invariably with the desire for 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' Trying to extend forgiveness to people who have hurt us, or those close to us, can cause much anguished heart and conscience searching. The process of reconciliation and forgiveness can take many years. Can there be forgiveness for suicide bombers, for brutal murderers, for destroyers of homes and families either in this world or in the spiritual world? It is a question to which there are no easy or trite answers.

Even in our own lives it can require a great deal of effort to forgive even comparatively trivial things. We all know that from time-to-time people say or do hurtful and unkind things to us, either intentionally or unintentionally. In the heat of the moment, we ourselves may decide never to speak to that person again, or we may try to get even with them or hurt them. Society is the sum of individuals who constantly upset or offend others, perhaps through ignorance, perhaps through selfishness or pride, or perhaps from political or religious conviction. The consequences of some acts inflicted on individuals, societies and nations extend even to 'third and fourth generations.'

Can, or perhaps, should, forgiveness be extended unconditionally. Biblical stories dealing with forgiveness - such as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and the story of Joseph and his brothers - suggest that forgiveness is a two-way street. The son had to see the foolishness of his ways and return to the father whilst the brothers had to show contrition before being reconciled to Joseph. In both cases the wrongdoer had to show evidence of a desire to recognise that wrong had been done, mistakes had been made and that reconciliation was possible. Perhaps only then might true forgiveness be possible. Perhaps there has to be a measure of true repentance which forgiveness recognises.

Our ability as human beings to offer forgiveness is a Divine quality that is given to us when we strive to follow the pattern set by the Lord who constantly forgives us all our debts. We often say 'Forgive us our debts' in the Lord's prayer but perhaps very seldom think about the use of the word 'debts' - a word that these days has come very much to mean 'cash owed.' To acknowledge that everything good that we are blessed with comes from the Lord is a very humbling thing indeed. To forgive is truly a quality of the Divine.

The Writings of our church as we read in TCR suggest that only the Lord himself can truly forgive or remit sin. We read that the Lord forgives all sins but that even when sins or wrong actions are remitted they are not wiped out. The person instead is withheld from the evils committed, and if that person is truly penitent, then new life flows in from the Divine. Forgiveness or the remission of sins does not necessarily mean that the wrong-doer should escape the consequences of an action, but rather is a recognition that repentance and change can take place within that sinner.

The acceptance of forgiveness from others is not an easy thing. To feel indebted to others can in itself cause resentment, particularly if the act of forgiveness is given with

emotional strings attached. To truly receive forgiveness means acknowledging a genuine desire to change.

Do we ourselves ever forget things that hurt us? I would suggest not, for what is in the memory cannot be wiped out. What is important in our own lives, is that we do not brood on past hurts and bear grudges in a negative way. To do this ultimately corrodes and embitters our own soul and prevents us from developing spiritually. It is far better to try to learn from the past and to focus on helping others, and in so doing prevent further distressing situations. For example, many people remember the 'Holocaust' of the last World War and through that remembrance try to put aside racial and religious hatreds and prejudices.

To be truly able to forgive others we have to come to see and then try to put things right in our own lives. The Writings of our church stress the individual's own responsibility to seek out and rectify the wrong things in our own lives. In order to grow spiritually we need to examine ourselves carefully and accept responsibility for the wrong choices that we have made in our own lives and refrain from that course of behaviour in the future. Then the Lord can extend forgiveness to us, for the Divine alone knows the motives and reasons within our inner lives and the extent and desire of our wish to change. We as individuals can only change our own lives, but by our actions we can influence others; by our repentance we can show others how to repent; by our ability to forgive we show others the way of forgiveness and by our wish to reconcile we can help others to be reconciled.