

When the Gospel writer named John wrote his account of Jesus, he included the following phrase:

Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

It's a big call, isn't it? *Even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.* Even allowing for John's somewhat narrow view of just how big the world really is. That's still a lot of books.

Well, the Gospel writer's dilemma is the preacher's dilemma too. How to say a few things, when there is so much to say?

Last year, on Fathers' Day actually, I was asked to preach a sermon on the parable of the Prodigal son. I felt a bit overwhelmed, so I decided just to preach on the father. Only the father. Since it was Fathers' Day, I felt permitted to narrow the focus down to just one character in the story. Even so, I found there was no shortage of things to discover, and to share.

Man, I thought, you could preach a whole series just on this one guy.

Well, knock me over with a feather, but Ken decided, independently of any thoughts I had, that we should have a *series* on the Father of the Prodigal Son. And so far you've heard a bunch of fine preachers say inspirational and memorable things about just a few aspects of the character that is the father of the lost son. And now, having depleted all their wisdom, you are stuck with me.

Well, I am tasked with looking at this one small aspect of the Father's character, namely, his forgiving nature. The Father, quite clearly, FORGIVES the son. But, and I think this is both interesting and instructive, the word FORGIVENESS appears nowhere in the story as told by Jesus. But more about that later.

In case you've been living under a rock and missed the story, let me recap.

The son asks for an early bird release of his inheritance. He wants the money BEFORE the old man carks it. That'd be bad form in our culture, but it is unbelievably bad form in Palestine. As someone said earlier in this series, it's like telling your old man that you wish he were dead.

Despite the insult, the father agrees, and divides up his wealth to his two sons. The one who triggered the division goes off and wastes the money on wine, women and song. The money runs out and he ends up looking after pigs. Remember, pigs aren't really popular animals in most Middle Eastern cultures. Looking after pigs in these societies would be like looking after maggots in ours. Not real nice.

Finally, the son is starving to death and comes to his senses. Nothing like a gun to the head to clarify the mind. He realises that his Dad's hired hands are better off than he is. So he decides to go home and ask his old man to employ him as a hired hand.

But, well we all know the story, when he gets within sight of home, the father has no thought for his own dignity or pride or position. He runs and hugs his son, oblivious to the tutt-tutting of all the neighbours. It's such a terrible lack of decorum for a man to run in that culture.

If you've got your Bible's open at Luke 15 verse 21 you will see something interesting. The son never gets to ask his father for a job. What happens here? Does his Dad cut him off? Does he interrupt him before he gets out his request? His request to work off his debt by being a paid worker?

The son says he has sinned and isn't worthy to be called "son" anymore. You imagine he's about to say "Let me be your hired hand" but he never gets it out because the Father is all of a sudden ordering robes, rings, sandals and the slaughter of fatted calves.

That is certainly one interpretation. But it's not the best one. Something else happens here, in this very moment, that changes the son's mind.

I'm going to talk about that later.

Actually, if I had a lot of time this morning, and if I thought I could keep you awake longer, I'd love to talk about the beauty of the literary form we have here. The Bible, in its original written down form is actually a work of literary art. Just like Shakespeare's plays, the Bible is made up of quite distinct literary structures. We don't notice them usually, but the way stories are told fit around literary structures that work at a subconscious level to add beauty and power to the stories. This story about the Lost Son is written as a kind of poem. It uses 12 stanzas in a form called inverted parallelism.

It's all very fascinating to a bent mind like mine. If you want to know more, there's a wonderful book by Kenneth E. Bailey called "Poet and Peasant: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke." I know others have read this book because I've heard it quoted from this lectern, sometimes without attribution (which is a bit naughty – but forgivable).

And it is FORGIVENESS, that I really want to talk about today. Because it's quite clear that the father forgives the son. But, it's interesting that you don't find the word forgiveness anywhere in the story. And there's a reason for that. The reason is that the father had already forgiven the son, even before he needed forgiveness. He was forgiven, in advance. He was pre-forgiven.

Forgiveness is both an action and an aspect of character. We can forgive someone. And we can have a forgiving nature.

It was in the character of the father to BE forgiving. He had a forgiving nature. When his son insulted him, he was already prepared in his heart, to forgive him any sin.

It's pretty clear that the son doesn't see this in his father's character. He doesn't see it, because he isn't looking for it. He is so arrogant in his request to have his share of the inheritance that he doesn't think he's doing anything that requires forgiveness. He is oblivious to his own sin.

The question is, When? When does the son realise that he is forgiven?

Stick around and I'll tell you.

But first, another story.

As I was thinking about this topic, it wasn't hard for me to think of all the places I have seen forgiveness at work. People who have been grievously wronged, who nevertheless set aside the desire for revenge or something called justice, and instead choose to forgive and move on.

I was very blessed to work for World Vision for 24 years. The job took me to many places where people's lives had been turned upside down by violence and disaster. The most difficult places were always those places of man-made violence. War. But without fail, at least by the time I got to those places, which was nearly always after the fighting had died down, invariably I found people who had broken the pattern of violence and retribution by the simple, but really quite difficult, act of forgiveness.

Thirty years ago, in 1979, I entered Uganda two days after Tanzanian troops had driven the dictator, Idi Amin, out of the country. It's a long while ago, and there have been many murderous dictators since, but his regime was the first I had encountered. It was half a lifetime ago for me, but I can still remember the visit to the room where he had people slaughtered. You don't forget accidentally resting your hand on the wall and realising it is caked in dried blood.

They made a film about Idi Amin in 2006 called "The Last King of Scotland." I didn't see it. Didn't really want to see it.

Idi Amin was a lunatic. Paranoid to a murderous extent. I met an Anglican priest whose liberation from murder had only be made possible because the Tanzanian troops arrived a few hours before he was to go to the slaughter house. I asked him if he knew why he had been selected for arrest and murder.

One night he drove his car to a function where Idi Amin was also a guest. He was looking for a parking spot and was surprised to find one right close to the door, right next to a big limousine. So he parked in it and thought nothing more about it.

But smarter people knew that Idi Amin was so crazed with fear that someone would do him in (maybe not without reason, I suppose) that anyone who parked their car next to his was automatically murdered. Just to be safe.

Unfortunately, the Anglican priest, unlike many of the others who parked there that night, didn't know the story.

About a year before Idi Amin was driven out, I was at a conference in the United States and happened to be sitting next to Bishop Festo Kivengere. He was the Anglican archbishop in Uganda, although for his own security, he was living out of the country.

We naturally talked about the situation in Uganda. The conversation got around to Idi Amin himself.

I asked Festo what he would do if he found himself with a gun in his hand and alone with Idi Amin. He thought about it for a moment and then said, "I think I would give him the gun and say 'This is not my weapon. It is yours.'"

I said that Idi Amin might shoot him.

Festo said, "I could forgive him for that too."

Wow. Forgiveness.

Festo had another saying that I remember to this day. He used to say "Wrap your rocks in soft cotton." He had learned how to say harsh things in a nice way. Or, as the Scriptures say, to tell the truth in love.

I was impressed that this man who had suffered personally at the hands of Idi Amin, and who had lost friends and relatives because of the dictator's lunatic ways, that he could forgive Idi Amin even while that dictator was still going about his murderous ways.

But then, Festo Kivengere, had a forgiving nature. And forgiveness can be very powerful.

Back at the ranch, the son is coming home and sees his father rushing up to him. The son is ready to admit that he has sinned against God and his Father. He thinks he should ask for a job so that somehow he can work off his moral debt.

But something amazing happens.

I reckon what happens here is that the son sees forgiveness in the actions and the face of the father. The father doesn't have to say "I forgive you" because as far as the father is concerned, the son is forgiven in advance. The father forgave him ages ago.

Just like Festo Kivengere could forgive Idi Amin long before anything that resembles justice had happened to Amin. The Father forgives his son.

And I reckon the son sees it and this become his true moment of repentance.

You see, he only came home because he'd run out of money. Not because he repented. He ran out of money and his solution was to go home and try to earn some more money.

But when he sees the face of his father, coming towards him, full of love and unmerited forgiveness, I think this is the moment he realises that he is the cause of his father's suffering, and more profound and shocking, he realises his father has forgiven him. This is his moment of genuine repentance.

And repentance has some obligations for him, of course. Maybe more severe obligations than if he just became a hired hand. He'll be subject to his father's house again. He'll exist alongside a brother who now owns and runs everything that remains of the estate.

But that's the power of forgiveness. It makes people change. The son repents fully. And is restored into the family.

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Forgiveness is much more powerful than revenge.

I always feel sad for relatives of the victims who turn up at the trials of murderers. Or someone is killed in a car accident, and the family of the victim campaigns to make sure that the person who caused the accident "gets justice."

You see these people after the trials. They never look happy to me. They never look satisfied to me. Because revenge is not sweet. It is hollow. Whereas forgiveness is really sweet and satisfying, and it transforms people.

I want to show you a bridge.

Anyone recognise it?

It's called the old bridge. In Serbo-Croatian, a language I do not speak, I believe it is called *stari most* which I am told means *old bridge*. The old bridge, the *stari most*, is in Mostar. The town is in Bosnia.

The town of Mostar, like many towns in Bosnia, comprises a multi-cultural community that has lived in relative peace and harmony for centuries. Until the 1990s anyway.

Mostar has two main cultures. Croats and Bosniaks. There are Slovenes and Serbs there too, but not so many. Some people suggest that the cultures are divided by religion, since Croats are mostly Catholic and Bosniaks mostly Muslim. But that's simplistic. The cultures are quite distinct, but religion is only a little part of it.

During the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, the people of Mostar suffered ethnic cleansing. Attempts were made to drive the two cultures apart. To move Bosniaks to one side of the town and Croats to the other. Women were raped. People were murdered. Walking the streets put anyone in danger of sniper fire. Many relocated out of fear and intimidation. Mostar was one of many places in Bosnia like this. During those few years in the 1990s 200,000 Bosniaks would be killed. More than two million people of various cultures would be expelled from their homes. Many others would be killed, raped or tortured because of their ethnicity.

Today if you walk through the cemeteries of Mostar you'll find lots of tombstones for people who died between 1993 and 1995. Too many people.

The old bridge spans the river. It's a narrow bridge suitable only for walking across. It was built from stone in 1566 by the Turks who occupied the area at the time. When it was built, and for many years afterwards, it was the largest single stone span in the world. As a bridge it worked to join two sides of the town, the old and the new sides, although for the most part there never was much difference in the two sides. But now, in the 1990s, the town was being segregated.

On Tuesday 9th November 1993 at 10.15 am the old bridge was destroyed. For generations this bridge, joining the old town to the new town, was a symbol of unity between cultures. Muslims, Jews, Catholics, Orthodox. Bosnians, Slovenes, Croats, Serbs.

The symbol of unity was destroyed just as surely as the unity itself was destroyed.

Finally the war came to an end. But Mostar was still in many ways a divided city. But remaining in the town there were people who did not want revenge, they did not seek any more eye-for-an-eye justice. They were prepared to forgive.

Events were organised to restore relationships. People began to reconnect with neighbours with whom they had been literally at war.

Finally, enough people wanted the bridge to be rebuilt.

Today, the bridge is back.

In many ways, Mostar is still a divided community. Because forgiveness does not mean forgetfulness. But there are wonderful signs of hope.

Earlier this year, around 70 enthusiastic young people from 20 nationalities, about half of them from Mostar itself, gathered together for the Mostar International Model United Nations. Many thought it was still impossible 15 years after the war ended, but it turned out to be a positive event. One of the organisers said, "It's about meeting new people and acquiring new ideas. It's about those things you will not get when you don't explore, when you do not go beyond your daily tasks and when you only drink coffee." Coffee drinking in Bosnia is elevated to a cultural activity.

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The father in the story of the lost son is meant to say something to us about the nature of God. And one of those things is that God is a forgiving person. And not only that, he forgives us in advance.

I met Walter Sisulu once. He was gaoled with Nelson Mandela at Robbin Island for 26 years for his role in opposition to apartheid in South Africa. I met him a couple of years after his release. In his home in Soweto.

I can't remember what words passed between us now. But I remember being astounded at how little sense of revenge or anger there was in him. Locked away for perhaps the most productive

years of his life. Clearly, he had forgiven his captors long before he was released. Such is the nature of true forgiveness. Unmerited, gracious forgiveness. The kind of forgiveness that has helped to transform a nation.

The apostle we know as St Paul is another who experienced pre-forgiveness. If the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus was a Bruce Willis film, God would have stopped Saul with a blinding light and then lasered him into ash, clapped his hands in pleasure and said "One less bad guy."

But God isn't like Bruce Willis. And vice versa too, I guess. God has forgiven Saul for murdering Christians, even while he was still a murderer. And his forgiveness transforms Saul, the murderer, into Paul, the great Christian Missionary.

It is in the nature of God to be forgiving. As he hangs on the cross, innocent of any crime, unjustly arrested, wrongly convicted, Jesus says "Father forgive them." I imagine God responds with satisfaction that his son has inherited such good values from his old man.