

Forgiveness

“Father forgive”. We will be using those words later, as we do at most services in this church, in the Coventry Litany of Reconciliation. And they are inscribed on the floor in front of our St Martin window. In our Bible reading just now (Matthew 6.9-15) we heard the version of the Lord’s Prayer in St Matthew’s Gospel where Jesus emphasizes the need to forgive. For only if we forgive others will God forgive us.

So many people in our world are affected by acts of violence against themselves and against loved ones. The obvious human reaction against those who kill, injure or traumatize others is often to seek revenge, to harbour hatred and resentment.

Such feelings are natural. And yet they can be destructive both to the victims themselves and to those close to the victims. Over the years they can fester rather than abate. Which is why justice is necessary. In some cases any form of justice can take years. Just this week there were further developments in the trials relating to the Hillsborough tragedy of thirty years ago. That disaster was of course not a deliberate act of violence but caused by human misjudgement. Yet it was no less traumatic for those affected.

For many people forgiveness is difficult if not well nigh impossible. How can they forgive those who have caused so much lasting pain and distress? And we cannot blame people in that position who feel unable to forgive. In those circumstances we might well react in the same way.

And yet forgiveness can lead to healing. It can lift burdens. It can give inner strength and peace. For Christians the supreme example is our Lord himself on the cross who cries out: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23.34). At that most intense time of suffering and humiliation Jesus was able to reach out in love and forgiveness to those who inflicted the cruel pain and injustice on him.

Forgiveness together with repentance and justice is one of the important ingredients in the process of peace and reconciliation. It can enable dialogue and mutual understanding. Yet we cannot of course underestimate the challenge that poses.

In our own country at present there is much bitter division. There will need to be a lot of reconciliation, not to say forgiveness, if people in our country are going to live with one another peacefully and working together for the common good. As Christians, we believe that with God’s help that is possible.

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