Forgiveness 3 – 25th October 2026
Genesis 50:15-21. Romans 12:9-21. Matthew 6:9-15.

Which is easier to say to the paralytic Your sins are forgiven or pick up your mat and walk? That's Jesus' direct challenge to the Pharisees, who he knows are thinking that he has been blaspheming by telling the man that his sins are forgiven, when forgiveness of sins definitely was the domain of God and God alone.

We are now in the third week of our study on forgiveness and this week we are looking at its various dimensions. I think this parable has important things to teach us.

Jesus is at home in Capernaum teaching the crowds, including clearly some Pharisees, about the kingdom of God. It wasn't even intended to be a healing session.

I find it fascinating that even at the start of his ministry before he had made much of a name for himself, the Pharisees were hanging around Jesus. Were they prompted by the Holy Spirit? Did they think he had anything to teach them, or did they see him as a threat, even at that stage, to their hold over the people?

Anyway we read about this paralytic and his four friends, who clearly have heard great things about Jesus making ill people well and take their friend on some form of stretcher to see Jesus. Undeterred by the throng of people, they just knock a hole in the clay roof so they can lower him down. I can't imagine any of us being thrilled if someone knocked a hole in our roof rather than knock on the front door as a means of coming in. Perhaps it was easier to find a roofer in those doors.

If it wasn't for the fact that Jesus was involved, you would expect the immediate point of focus to be the man's paralysis and all the social and economic implications of that.

The man was an outsider with no means of supporting himself. In the culture of those times many people would have assumed that his paralysis was the consequence of some terrible sin.

Now we know from the Gospels that Jesus was hot on forgiveness and hot on healing. So I think we have to regard it as hugely significant that here Jesus prioritises forgiveness over healing and that tells us a huge amount about God's overall priorities.

I should say that I have used the word healing rather loosely. Jesus cured the man of his paralysis. Healing has much broader connotations than curing. Healing can often take somewhat longer than the cure, because it's more holistic, it's also about our emotional and spiritual wellbeing as well as our physical health.

One can understand why the Pharisees might have been shocked when Jesus told the paralytic that his sins had been forgiven – that was God's work.

And of course saying it is one thing but proving it quite another. Which is why Jesus asks the question he does. Clearly telling the man to get up, take his mat and walk is far riskier, it's binary. Either he can or he can't. And of course he can and he does – which makes Jesus a miracle worker in the eyes of the onlookers at the very least, someone certainly anointed by God.

What we know from the Gospels in particular, and the New Testament generally, is that everyone who turns to God as their saviour is forgiven. Because forgiveness is the only way we can be reconciled to God.

What we also know is that even some of the holiest people we know are not always healed and can die relatively young. Healing is not a given, much as we would like it to be.

Well if forgiveness is God's top priority, then what does that mean for us.? Well, as we've seen over the last couple of weeks, forgiveness needs to be at or near the top of our list of priorities as well.

But not any old forgiveness. As I said a couple of weeks ago, the Church has a bad record in some ways. Too often it has pressured those who have been harmed to forgive those who have harmed them because it's 'the Christian thing' to do.

Too often people are expected to do that without any sign or acknowledgement from the person who has done the harm that they have done anything wrong or that they are willing to change. That's cheap grace, and generally does more harm than good.

Or people are willing to offer transactional forgiveness. In other words the person who has done harm has to earn forgiveness. But as the word forgiveness implies, forgiveness is a gift, not something that expects a return. If you like the return – the genuine repentance, the transformation, the acknowledgement of the harm done – begets the gift.

Making it transactional is an unattractive way of demonstrating moral superiority, which is a bit rich given we are all sinners in need of God's forgiveness, and that is something we can never earn.

Worst of all is refusing to forgive when the person who needs to be forgiven has shown genuine remorse and shows clear evidence of having changed their ways.

Refusing to forgive in the face of genuine redemption becomes a form of retribution, a form of revenge. But as I said a couple of weeks ago, allowing ourselves to hold on to anger and bitterness can be very bad for our physical and mental wellbeing.

As Paul says so so clearly in verse 19 of our Romans reading, "Beloved never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

In the cancel culture we sadly live in today, there is almost a presumption against forgiveness in any circumstances. It's as if people are saying that the people they cancel never deserve to be forgiven. That cannot be good for them or for society.

Funnily enough I was talking about our Genesis reading last week at St Mungo's where it speaks of the great fear of Joseph's brothers that he hasn't forgiven them for what they had done to him 30 plus years earlier, a fear so great that they lied to him about what Jacob had said on his deathbed.

Luckily for them Joseph had forgiven them because he could see the bigger picture – that God had used the harm they had done for the good of hundreds of thousands of people. But Joseph doesn't let them completely off the hook. He doesn't minimise the evil they did

That passage speaks to one of our greatest fears doesn't it – the fear that we will not be forgiven.

From our own perspective there are times when we may need to forgive someone for own wellbeing, at the same time as acknowledging that there can be no reconciliation, at least in the short term, because of the painful memories it would resurrect.

When we lived in Dolphinton we used to have a poster on the fridge that said Justice is when you get what you deserve, mercy is when you don't get what you deserve and grace is when you get what you don't deserve.

Mercy and grace both speak in to forgiveness. Forgiveness without justice is, not surprisingly, hard for many people. Sometimes it is the

right thing to do, but that is not necessarily always the case, because justice generally speaks in to accountability. Without accountability forgiveness becomes much harder – and much costlier.

Yet it may be absolutely necessary for the person doing the forgiving – to enable them to let go of hurts and grievances that have dogged them for years if not decades. And how do you forgive someone who has long since died but who you have held a grudge against for far too long once?

In that sort of circumstance you may need to talk to someone. I ended up doing that once many years ago and was encouraged to let go of my anger by beating the living daylights out of a cushion!

I talked earlier about transactional forgiveness, in other words can you earn forgiveness? Perhaps earn is the wrong word, but one can perhaps demonstrate by one's life that you have genuinely changed – and that alters the equation.

A couple of weeks ago I know some of you watched The Shack. The sequel, Return to the Shack, has just been published. Interestingly its subtitle is A journey to Redemption, and is based on the author's experiences of meeting, and making friends with, some men on death row in a prison in Tennessee. Some of them have worked towards reconciliation with the families they have harmed and have genuinely changed. From the reviews it sounds like a book well worth reading.

When Nick circulates this sermon and puts it on the website I'm going to ask him to include the link to an article written by the son of an IRA bomber on the death of Norman Tebbit last year. I know Norman Tebbit wasn't everyone's cup of tea, but this article is really worth reading, at least in my opinion.

As I'm sure you remember Lord Tebbit, a long-standing Christian, refused to forgive the IRA bombers who killed five people, badly injured him and left his wife paralysed for 30 years in the Brighton bomb in 1984.

He once told the BBC that he hoped that a particularly hot part of hell would be reserved for them where they could repent at leisure. His refusal to forgive was based on the lack of remorse and no evidence that anything had really changed.

Yet Lord Tebbit had quite a good relationship with another IRA bomber who had turned himself in in 1988 out of shame for his past.

His crimes had been so serious that he was sentenced to a total of 539 years in prison, even though he had tipped off the authorities the year before the Brighton attack about a bomb plot aimed at Prince Charles and Princess Diana, as they then were.

The article is really worth reading because it too speaks so much about redemption and forgiveness and how it can be so difficult even for Christians to follow the call of Jesus to forgive behaviour that to us seem simply unforgivable and, quite frankly, too costly.

https://spectator.com/article/norman-tebbit-forgiveness-and-my-father-the-ira-bomber/?most-popular=2