

## Things to Consider

- ▶ For numbers of reasons arriving at that point where we can truly forgive can take a shorter or longer time depending on the circumstances. Like the ocean lapping at the shore, we may find ourselves going back and forth, as we struggle to come to terms with what has happened. It is perfectly normal.
- ▶ In their book *The Book of Forgiving: The fourfold Path for healing ourselves and our world* Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho tell us that on the basis of their research that it is a fourfold Path. I think their choice of the word *path* is important and a reminder to us that this is a journey of one step at a time:
  - 1) Telling the Story
  - 2) Naming the Hurt
  - 3) Granting Forgiveness (Recognising our Shared Humanity)
  - 4) Renewing or Releasing the Relationship.
- ▶ **Telling the Story** enables us to put the pieces of the jigsaw together, while naming the hurt in the process. Fred Luskin in his book *Forgive for Good* reminds us that it is important not to become so trapped that it becomes a grievance story. He says, we know this has happened, when we can recite the story almost without thinking about it.
- ▶ **Naming the Hurt** enables us to move out of denial because we are now acknowledging how we actually feel. In her book *Dignity*, Donna Hicks tells us that neuroscientists have shown that a psychological wound stimulates the same part of our brain as does a physical wound; that is, we feel the pain in the same way. No feeling is bad, even anger, and grief has a role to play.
- ▶ **Granting Forgiveness** enables us to begin telling a new story. It is not to deny what has happened, or our feelings. Our feelings will not go away simply because they have been named. It is very important to realise this. However, we are recognising our common humanity – that we all fail, and at times need forgiveness offered to us.
- ▶ **Renewing or Releasing the Relationship** is the final step and having forgiven we are free to decide. In renewing, it may take time to rebuild trust, particularly where betrayal has been involved. It is important to realise that renewing a relationship does not mean that we forget what has happened. In forgiving, we are remembering our shared humanity and that all of us have a brokenness about us.

AtG/B12/MBH

# Attending to God

## 'To Seek to Forgive'



**There is not one person** among us who over the course of life has not needed to be forgiven for something that we have said, done, or left undone; something that was wrong. We all know that sense of freedom and release that comes when we have been forgiven by another person. Yet, there are times when we can find it very difficult to forgive others.

**We may almost think** of it as an unnatural act and the world would certainly agree. Think for example, following a terrible and even horrific tragedy, forgiveness is offered to the perpetrator or person held responsible and people seem amazed by this. It is a reminder that such an action is not very common. Someone's ability to do this can also intrigue us: To forgive rather than seek revenge.

**People who intentionally do terrible things** to others are not born that way. There is a dimension of innocence in us all as newborn babies and small children. It is only as the years go by and as in response to life that we become otherwise. To label someone a monster is to somehow try and set them apart and deny them the ability to be responsible and possibly to change. Who are we to decide that they cannot possibly change?

**We may not have committed terrible deeds**, but we all are at least faintly aware of that deep division within us and how we struggle with it. Think of those famous words of St Paul: 'For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do' (Romans 7.19).

**At the heart of the Christian faith** lies forgiveness and reconciliation. God has reached out to each of us in Jesus Christ and offered forgiveness, reconciliation, and new life: 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself' (2 Corinthians 5.19)

**Nevertheless, there is a catch.** As the Lord's Prayer reminds us, we are 'Forgive(n) (us) our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us'. Only as we forgive others will we find forgiveness from God for ourselves. The parable of the Unforgiving Servant makes this very clear (Matthew 18.21-35).

**This seems almost too much**, and yes, it is! This is not something that we can achieve in our own strength, but only in the strength of Jesus Christ. In saying this, I am not thinking so much of the ordinary everyday little hurts of life, but of those things directed at us that are malicious and meant to harm. How can we forgive these? Or for that matter, how can we even forgive the little hurts directed at us whether intentional or unintentional?

**Nelson Mandela responded** to a question from President Bill Clinton concerning his invitation to his former jailers to attend his inauguration as President of South Africa. He said that yes, he had felt angry all over

again. 'But,' he said, 'when I felt that anger well up inside of me I realised that if I hated them after I got outside that gate, then they would still have me. I wanted to be free so I let it go.'

**In this, there is an important point.** Forgiveness is not so much for the other person but for ourselves. Otherwise, we carry a heavy burden around on our shoulders, never putting it down. That person, and what they did to us, is always there with us, like a ball and chain that we heave around wherever we go. Surely, that is not what we want! As research has shown, an unwillingness to forgive puts added pressures on our body leading to stress-related illnesses.

**In response to our offering forgiveness**, we might be mocked as Jesus was mocked on the Cross, but in forgiving, we are taking back control of our life rather than letting this other person continue to control our thoughts and feelings. We consciously choose not to see ourselves as a victim. And, when it is not possible, for whatever reason, to say something? For example, if the person is dead, we can still take the important step of forgiving in our heart.

**On the other hand**, forgiveness may be the very thing this other person is desperately seeking from us and perhaps does not know where to begin or how to find. It is something that we can offer them, but not as a means of reversing that sense of power, empowering us while disempowering them. That would not be to offer true and unconditional forgiveness. The forgiveness we must offer, even if unspoken, must be genuine and from the core of our being. This is radical and can only happen in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is God who helps us, but we must be willing – and maybe it will take longer than this life of ours when terrible things have happened, but God seeks our willingness to begin this journey as the first step.

**Beyond forgiveness** there may or may not be reconciliation. The two are not the same and there may be circumstances where we would not feel comfortable in an ongoing reconciled relationship. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we have been unable to forgive them.

**And, when reconciliation is possible** that relationship is not the same as it was before. We cannot pretend nothing has happened. It is a new relationship that has been transformed through the fire of our experience of being hurt and then forgiving.

**Every life has its pain and sorrow**, even for those people from whom we may feel alienated because of what they have done to us. Our offering of forgiveness may just ease their burden and in the process also ease our own.