

Forgiveness

A sermon preached by Revd Charles Draper on Sunday 17 September 2017 in St Peter's Wolvercote.

Refs: Genesis 50, 15-21; Matthew 18, 21-35

Today we baptise Ella with her parents and godparents gathered around. You don't need a church for a baptism, you don't need candles, you don't even need a Vicar. But you do need water.

Why do we need water? The simplest reason is that water washes us clean, a symbol of God offering us forgiveness. Forgiveness is not a very popular idea at present. When we hear of yet another terrorist attack in London, thankfully unsuccessful although still with the intent to kill, it doesn't make us feel forgiving - rather the opposite. And when we look wider at all that's going on in the world, it may make us realise how much the human race is in need of forgiveness.

We've had a run of terrible news coming in from all over the world recently. Harrowing reports of famine, starvation and cholera in Yemen, missile and nuclear tests in North Korea. And then Hurricane Harvey, an earthquake in Mexico, and then Hurricane Irma. Worse still, we've seen hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims fleeing to Bangladesh from the violence of the Burmese army. What is shocking is just how many of these disasters are manmade. Whether it's famine in Yemen as a result of civil war and bombing, or violence and ethnic cleansing in Myanmar – or even those hurricanes which fit a pattern of more deadly and frequent hurricanes said to be the result of global warming and rising sea temperatures. So much suffering that is manmade. No wonder the message of the Bible from beginning to end is that the first need of human beings is for forgiveness.

And it's not just out there in the world. Forgiveness is something we all need. We've all done things or said things that we are deeply ashamed of. And all of us have that sense that we don't quite manage to live up to our aspirations – we know what we want to be and how we want to live – our intentions are good – but we don't quite manage it in practice.

And the consequences of that can be really quite damaging. We suffer from guilt, a deeply negative and harmful emotion, and we don't know what to do with it. And because we don't want to feel guilt, we worry about things we've done, we worry about whether we did the right thing or not. Worse still, we avoid that guilt and worry by self-justification. We justify ourselves and blame others because blaming others makes us feel better. Have you noticed how often some of the newspapers do this? Find someone else to blame and then we don't have to feel bad. It's a good way to sell newspapers.

The blame game was strong in Jesus' day. Everyone looked for someone to blame – whether it was the Romans or the sinners or the tax collectors. Most people were quick to find someone else to blame for what was wrong with the world.

But Jesus brought a radical new and different message. The message of Jesus was forgiveness – a radical message of a loving forgiving God who longs for us to return to him and to receive the gift of forgiveness he wants to give us.

Jesus' message of forgiveness cut through all the worry, the guilt and the blaming that everyone was playing. And it is still radical and profoundly liberating today.

Firstly because forgiveness liberates us from guilt. Once we know God has forgiven us, then we don't need to feel guilty any more. Once when I was on retreat, I was invited to imagine my life as a big house with

different rooms representing different parts of my life – my marriage, my family, my work and so on – and then to go into my house and explore it. I imagined having an attic where I put all the stuff I wanted to get rid of – the bad things that I was ashamed of. So I went to look in this attic expecting it to be a dark smelly horrible place full of horrible things. But instead when I opened the door I found it was completely empty – all clean bare floorboards. And I felt God was saying: You are forgiven – it is all gone.

Once you are released from guilt, you no longer have to worry about things in your past life – did I do the right thing – did I do as well as I could? And you're free to say, "no, I may not have managed to do the right thing actually, and I definitely didn't do as well as I could, but it's all right, because I have been forgiven". Of course I do need to take responsibility for the consequences of my actions, but at the same time I can move on and learn from them.

Soon after my Parkinson's diagnosis I was referred to a very good Mindfulness Course. I filled in a questionnaire for the course leader, and I remember him saying to me "I'm glad you don't suffer from feelings of worthlessness!" and I thought "no, I'm glad my faith doesn't give me feelings of worthlessness. In fact it's the opposite. If you are forgiven and loved by God how can you ever feel worthless?"

Perhaps most importantly, knowing you are forgiven, being released from guilt and worry about what you have done, releases us from self-justification. If you are loved and forgiven and accepted by God, you have no need to justify yourself. And therefore there is no longer any need to blame others in order to make yourself feel better.

We don't have to play the blame game anymore. Once you are released from blame yourself, you don't need to blame others to make yourself feel better. This can even be a way to understand the Cross. That in Jesus on the Cross, God chooses to take the blame on himself, rather than putting the blame on us.

Jesus puts it more strongly than this. He says because God has forgiven us and doesn't blame us, so we must forgive others and not put the blame on others. And that is what our Gospel reading today is saying. Because God has forgiven us, and doesn't put the blame on us, so we must stop going around putting the blame on others. And that releases us from the whole culture of blame, and makes it possible to start to bring reconciliation and peace in the world around us.

Our first reading is a beautiful little example of this – a conversation between Joseph and his brothers. Joseph's brothers had treated him abominably when he was young. Now he is in a position of power they are scared that he will get his revenge. Instead he speaks words of love and kindness, and says he no longer blames them and they mustn't blame themselves.

So in a few moments, as we come to baptise Ella, the water of Baptism reminds us of the message of forgiveness. Water which washes us clean is a powerful symbol of God forgiving us so that we can start all over again. Of course, Ella doesn't need that yet! But it's a promise for her for the future, and a promise for all of us too. It reminds us that it's never too late to start again. Whatever state we are in, whatever messes we may get into in life, it's never too late to make a fresh new start – to start all over again.

God invites us all to come back to him, and Jesus has promised that when we do so, God will forgive us - and wash us clean, so we can start all over again.