

No Peace without Forgiveness

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on April 11th 2021 – John 20:19-31)

On Easter Day over lunch, I was watching a 18th month old learn about forgiveness. He had thrown something at his Pa and was being told to say sorry. Forgiveness was waiting for him once he apologised.

Sometimes it takes a lifetime to learn about forgiveness, both the giving of and the receiving. I worked with a client once who spent most of his life unable to forgive and forget what he saw during his war service. He blamed God for the atrocities as much as those fighting in the war and himself. It was only after a conversation about how it was okay to be angry at God, that with God's grace, he was able to sort out his feelings and get to a place where he could both forgive God and himself and, have, for the first time a sense of peace, he died shortly after that experience. I worked with a young offender who was doing really well until, when he was out of the training centre, he stole a car and crashed it killing a couple of people – for months he refused to see me as he couldn't forgive himself and didn't think anybody else would forgive him (please don't misunderstand me I am not condoning his actions) – forgiveness is very difficult to accept. On the day my Dad died he felt the need to apologise for all he had done in the previous 60 plus years. He and I had had a tricky relationship when I was younger, but in that instant where he apologised it was far easier than I thought to offer him forgiveness – he died peacefully and I think I have been able to own the forgiveness I offered him that day.

Forgiveness – it is powerful, it is difficult, it is just as hard to receive as it is to give. Did Jesus know that when, after his resurrection, he appeared to his disciples and gave them this commission – to forgive?

In John's gospel we are told of several of Jesus' resurrection appearances. They all demonstrate his ability to forgive. Appearing to a fearful group, he gifts them the Holy Spirit and commissions them to go about the business of forgiveness. On the cross he has asked God to forgive those who had played a role in putting him there. By meeting with the fearful disciples, he has put behind him their denials, their betrayals, in essence forgiven them. By meeting with Thomas, whilst he thinks it would be better that Thomas not need such specific proof, nonetheless he offers such. Proof that it turns out is not required by Thomas. Thomas' questions, doubts and cynicism are forgiven.

Forgiveness is powerful, it changes things, it frees people. Our story today also reminds us that it is also a responsibility.

Just a word about what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting. Forgiveness is not about being a 'doormat'. Forgiveness doesn't mean condoning particular behaviours. Forgiveness does mean we should own our failures and shortcomings. Forgiveness for it to work requires people to be genuinely sorry. Forgiveness is not just a word - we have to mean it and live up to it, if we hang onto past hurts, we haven't really forgiven. Forgiveness needs us to accept it. That is when it has its power.

Think of the places where we need forgiveness. Think of wars and conflicts, conflicts that have gone on for so many generations that no one can even remember why they started in the first place. How different would our world be if people learnt to forgive? I

think of the family fights and estrangements I have seen in my own family – how different would it have been if we had learnt to forgive (myself included).

When I think about forgiveness my mind turns immediately to the time in South Africa just after apartheid ended and to the work of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. Two leaders who can teach us much about the importance and power of forgiveness.

Desmond Tutu in an article 'I Am Sorry – the three hardest words to say' says

“Forgiveness is not dependent on the actions of others. Yes, it is certainly easier to offer forgiveness when the perpetrator expresses remorse and offers some sort of reparation or restitution. ... This is the most familiar pattern of forgiveness. We don't forgive to help the other person. We don't forgive for others. We forgive for ourselves. ... Forgiveness takes practice, honesty, open-mindedness and a willingness (even if it is a weary willingness) to try. It isn't easy. Perhaps you have already tried to forgive someone and just couldn't do it. Perhaps you have forgiven and the person did not show remorse or change his or her behaviour or own up to his or her offences – and you find yourself unforgiving all over again. It is perfectly normal to want to hurt back when you have been hurt. But hurting back rarely satisfies. We think it will, but it doesn't. If I slap you after you slap me, it does not lessen the sting I feel on my own face, nor does it diminish my sadness over the fact that you have struck me. Retaliation gives, at best, only momentary respite from our pain. The only way to experience healing and peace is to forgive. Until we can forgive, we remain locked in our pain and locked out of the possibility of experiencing healing and freedom, locked out of the possibility of being at peace.”ⁱ

Mandela in a symbolic act of forgiveness, after he became president met with the widow of a former prime minister who had been the architect of apartheid and had a cup of tea. To do this, he entered a white's only community. It is acts like this that enabled him to say “Forgiveness liberates the soul, it removes fear. That's why it is such a powerful weapon.”

Jesus knew the power of forgiveness.

Imagine the results if we learnt to both give and accept forgiveness. This resurrection experience and commissioning them for God's work in the world (forgiveness) changed that little group of scared disciples, they left that place changed and started a worldwide movement which continues today and involves us.

Forgiveness will:

- a) lead to action
- b) lead to doing things differently
- c) begin the journey to reconciliation
- d) lead to peace – inward peace and outward peace
- e) lead to life, life in abundance which is what Jesus in John 10 says he has come to bring.

May you hear the words of Jesus – peace by with you. Amen.

ⁱ Desmond Tutu: 'I am sorry' – the three hardest words to say <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/mar/22/archbishop-desmond-tutu-sorry-hard-to-say> Accessed 10th April, 2021