Sermon given at Isham & GH **Forgiveness (1)** 10.4.16

Readings: OT/Epistle Romans 12: 5-19

 Gospel Matthew 5: 38-42

In 2014 Desmond Tutu published a book he’d written with his daughter Mpho – it’s called The Book of Forgiving. Desmond Tutu was instrumental in setting up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that has done so much to prevent tit-for-tat violence in South Africa so I thought that of all people Desmond must know a thing or two about the process of forgiveness.

This sermon series owes much to his book – and when our benefice preaching team met in the autumn we thought that as the Easter Story has such a large focus on forgiveness the period after Easter would be the best time for a sermon series on this issue. We’re all aware that grief has a process that everyone has to pass through – but not so much has been said about the process of forgiveness.

However, the last decade has seen an increase in research about forgiveness – psychologists, physicians and even neuroscientists are all currently conducting research into this area. As scientists document the healing power of forgiveness they also look at the mentally and physically corrosive effects of not forgiving – a person holding on to anger and resentment has an increased risk of anxiety, depression and insomnia, high blood pressure, ulcers, migraines, backaches, heart attack and even cancer.

But health benefits are only the beginning – to forgive is also to release yourself from whatever trauma and hardship you have experienced and to reclaim your life as your own.

So I want to start by looking at the real meaning of Jesus’ words in today’s gospel reading. So let’s start with a story. Nine-year old Mark’s parents had saved for a long time to buy him his first new bicycle. One evening the bicycle was stolen. Mark said, “I hate what Jesus says about also giving away your cloak as well as your coat. It sounds as if I can’t even try to find the guy who stole my bike and get it back.”

That, I think, is how most people have understood Jesus’s words. But recent research has shown that Jesus’s words probably mean the opposite – he’s inviting us to a forgiveness that is non-violent but actively resists evil, maintains our dignity and invites the person who hurt us to recall his or her own dignity. Let’s start with Jesus’ first example – why did Jesus specify the RIGHT cheek?

In Jesus’ time the left hand was used only for unclean tasks so you could only use your right hand for other tasks, including hitting someone. If you’re facing someone you hit their right cheek with the back of your right hand – that had a specific meaning – it was used to humiliate people. Masters would backhand slaves, Romans would backhand Jews, husbands would backhand wives, parents would backhand children. The message was ‘Remember your place … beneath me’.

If you do as Jesus says and turn your other cheek, your left cheek, the person hitting you will have to use his fist – and that was a gesture used only between equals. So, by turning your other cheek you have reclaimed your dignity and communicated that you refuse to be humiliated. You have also invited the abuser to reflect on whether one person is really better than another – and thus to reclaim his true dignity. And you’ve done all this non-violently, without striking back.

The context for Jesus’s words about giving up your coat as well as your cloak is this – wealthy landowners used high interest rates for loans to force poor people into defaulting and losing their land. For those who’d already lost everything, all they had left to give as collateral for loans was their outer garment.

People only wore two garments, and outer and an under garment which you could wear on its own without embarrassment. Giving away your undergarment would leave you naked – but it was not so scandalous to be naked yourself as it was to look another person naked. Giving away your undergarment to someone sueing you would turn the tables and leave them humiliated – and make them reflect on what the effects of their practices.

Jesus’ third bit of advice has the same effect. Roman soldiers were allowed by law to force local people to carry heavy packs but to avoid causing riots they were only allowed to ask them to carry packs for one mile. The roads were all marked so anyone could tell how far they’d walked – if a local came to the mile marker and cheerfully carried on carrying the pack the Roman soldier would be thoroughly confused and worried about being punished himself! The local has refused to behave as a victim but without violence or retaliation!

Jesus does tell us that we must forgive people and in quoting the ‘eye for an eye’ bit from the OT he is reminding us of God’s insistence that we must not take revenge ourselves but leave all that to him. But he is NOT telling us we must passively accept abuse and wrongdoing – we have to find non-violent ways of not co-operating with everything humiliating because that’s the way we can make someone hurting us stop and think about what they’re doing!

Desmond Tutu describes the process of healing through forgiveness as a 4 step process – and each of these steps will form the basis of our sermons for the next 4 weeks. Learning to forgive yourself has the same 4 steps – so if the talk about forgiving others, remember that the same advice applies to forgiving yourself.