**FORGIVENESS & RECONCILIATION**

**Rom 5:7-8** No one is really willing to die for an honest person, though someone might be willing to die for a truly good person. But God showed how much he loved us by having Christ die for us, even though we were sinful.

During the last couple of weeks, I believe the Spirit of God has been much at work in our midst. From a couple of different avenues, it has begun to emerge that there is a real need for some work to be done amongst us in the areas of forgiveness and reconciliation.

As this has become a topic of conversation over coffees and during walks, various people have shared some of their struggles in this area. One person said that they knew that they were supposed to forgive, but couldn’t see how could you do it when the pain was so great; this person had tried and tried to forgive, yet *years* down the track, was still finding it really difficult. They just couldn’t let go of a particular memory. Another person said they just couldn’t forgive, period. It was just too hard. It was much easier to just forget about it and avoid the person concerned.

I’ve had my own struggles with forgiveness. I’m sure you have too. In fact, I think that any human being who engages with other human beings, will find themselves hurt at some time, and in some way. It’s just part of living in the human landscape. Sometimes this pain can be inflicted by another person deliberately. Sometimes it’s inadvertently. Sometimes it can be a result of another person’s emotional baggage – and we get caught in the fallout. But however we sustain this type of pain – it is something that we have to continue to deal with.

I think that is why, when the apostle Peter asked Jesus, “Lord, how many times should I forgive someone – 7 times?” Jesus responded, “No Peter – 70 times 7!” That was Jesus’ way of saying there was no end date!

It seems Peter had an issue with forgiveness. Reading between the lines, we can assume that someone had hurt or let Peter down on more than one occasion. Being the enthusiastic follower of Jesus that he was, he had dutifully tried to forgive – several times! But it seems he was feeling enough was enough! There had to come a point at which he was off the hook... Hence the question.

In Jesus’ very simple answer, he reveals a timeless truth about forgiveness. That is, you need to keep working on it. You need to keep working on it for two reasons. One is that people will keep letting you down – it’s part of them and you being human. And two, healing from a hurt someone has inflicted upon you takes time to heal. The length of time I guess depends on the depth of the pain. But we need to keep working at it.

When we sustain a significant physical injury – say we break a leg – one visit to the doctor is not going to fix it! The doctor will reveal what needs to be done to bring about healing, and we will (usually) agree and embark on treatment. We’ll get x rays. We’ll accept a plaster cast. We’ll keep off it if necessary. We’ll do the physio if that’s called for. At least, we will if we want the leg to heal. And if we do – it does. God has programmed our physical bodies to heal. It’s natural. Doctors would never attempt surgery if this were not the case, would they? The medical profession simply provides the optimum conditions for healing to take place, and God’s divine engineering does the real work.

So it is with inner healing. If we are suffering from spiritual, mental or emotional wound as a result of a tangle with another imperfect human being, healing can and will take place if we provide the right conditions.

So what are the right conditions?

If we stick with the broken leg metaphor, it may help.

1. **Diagnosis.** With a broken leg, the break needs to be identified before it can be treated. With an inner wound, the same thing applies. We need to become aware that it’s there. We need to be able to look within, and recognise that we are carrying around an unresolved hurt. We need to be able to name it so we can face it. It may mean identifying an incident – or series of incidents – which has caused our suffering. It may mean identifying a person or persons whom we feel is responsible.
2. **Get help if necessary.** With a broken leg, we would definitely need help. We’d see a doctor. With an inner wound, it can be just as helpful to find someone who can assist us to find healing. This can simply be a mate or friend we respect who can support and guide us, or we could talk to a minister or a counsellor.
3. **Follow the prescribed treatment**. If with our broken leg, the doctor said to keep the cast on for 8 weeks, we’d be foolish to take if off after only two weeks, no matter how frustrated we might be with our progress.

With inner and emotional wounds, The Scriptures have prescribed a very definite treatment. We find it in Col 3:13 where Paul says, “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

This is such foundational teaching in the New Testament. Time and again, Jesus told his followers they needed to forgive. We need to forgive, because forgiveness is at the very ROOT of the Easter message. Jesus gave his life for us on the cross so that WE could be forgiven; and as we are forgiven, so we are to extend that same forgiveness to others.

Where possible forgiveness needs to lead to reconciliation – which is where the two parties concerned work at repairing their broken relationship. It is something of a cop-out to declare that we have forgiven someone, when we still actively shut them out of our lives. In Matthew 18:15, Jesus teaches that if someone sins against us, we should go to them and seek to sort it out with them. He’s encouraging not just forgiveness, but reconciliation.

Often though, we can actually impair inner healing by providing the wrong conditions.

There are things which actually impede or impair our recovery from an emotional wound.

1. **Laying blame!**

This is quite a significant one. It happens when someone lets us down, or hurts us, or betrays us and we know that *they are at fault.* We know we are the innocent party, and we’re convinced that we don’t need to forgive – we just need to close the door. And so we cut this person out of our life. Or we step away from the service club where we were insulted, or we quit the sports club we were in because we were passed over for a committee position, or we leave the church where someone offended us…and so it goes on.

We’ll never know the freedom of being healed of our emotional wounds if we insist on laying blame. We need to just let it go and forgive.

1. **They don’t deserve to be forgiven!**

When we feel that we have been wronged, we can sometimes resist forgiving the other person, because we don’t think they deserve to be forgiven. We know they are SO wrong. If this is part of our thinking, it may help to meditate on Romans 5:7-8, which again is a truth which is at the centre of our faith: No one is really willing to die for an honest person, though someone might be willing to die for a truly good person. But God showed how much he loved us by having Christ die for us, even though we were sinful.

When Jesus gave his life for us – we were in the worst possible position. We had offended God, we were guilty of sin, and we were actually seen as his enemies! They’re strong words. While we were in this helpless state, totally undeserving of anything from God, Jesus laid down his life for us.

That is the ultimate goal that God holds before us. Forgive as you have been forgiven. So even if Aunty Evelyn doesn’t deserve to be forgiven for what she did to you – you should still forgive her – for that is how Christ forgave us.

And when we forgive – we are healed and we are set free. To hold onto our pain and our anger is to keep ourselves chained up. It keeps our emotions stunted, and it really narrows our experience of God.

Embracing forgiveness is not easy – but forgiving someone who has wronged us is not only a gift for that person, it is the best possible gift we can give ourselves.

This is not a calling we are asked to embrace on our own. The Holy Spirit lives within us. Forgiveness is at the very heart of God. If we ask his help to forgive – he will give it to us!

As I’ve said, it sometimes it helps to have someone come alongside us as we struggle with forgiveness. If we want to be free – we shouldn’t be be afraid to seek it. We’re not embarrassed about seeing a doctor, are we? Neither should we be embarrassed about seeking help to be healed emotionally.

In a few weeks’ time – the 29th April – we will be holding our quarterly healing service in the parish. Bishop Ian Lambert will be our speaker. On that Sunday, we will be focussing on inner healing and there will be an opportunity at that service to receive prayer for healing if anyone would like to. Perhaps give that some thought and prayer. All of us at some point, have ‘work to do’ in the area of forgiveness and reconciliation. It’s good to know that there is prayer support available if we’d like it.

Right now, though, we have an opportunity to so something sacramental in relation to forgiveness. To do something sacramental simply means doing something concrete and physical that we can see that is a sign of something that is happening inwardly which we can’t see.

I’m going to hand out some pens and paper, and then allow a time for some prayer and reflection while some quiet music plays. Perhaps as I’ve been speaking, you’ve become aware of someone you need to forgive. During the silence, take the opportunity to respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit within you. If there is someone you need to forgive, write that person’s name on the piece of paper. And then write ‘I forgive you’. Or, if you don’t feel you can quite do that yet, write, “Lord help me to forgive this person.’ Then when you’re ready fold up your paper so the writing can’t be seen and place it in the bowl on the altar. In a little while we’ll put a match to the papers. As they burn, it will be another sign for us that God has taken those burdens from us and will help us deal with them. The flames will also be a sign that our resentment and anger towards this person will be no more, as we reach out to them in forgiveness.

Let’s pray…