

**Sermon delivered 19 February 2006 by Revd Susanna Pain
Holy Covenant Anglican Church, Cook**

“Your sins are forgiven.” What a strange surprising thing to say when faced with dust and debris and a man on a stretcher!

“Your sins are forgiven...” What is going on here?

Jesus has been out of town for a bit after the incident with the leper – when Jesus healing and pronouncing him clean – challenged the religious rules and regulations. Now here he is back again – back in town; teaching the people, no doubt repeating his message, ‘repent and believe the good news, God’s way is very close...’

These four friends wanted to hear and wanted to share the experience with their mate who couldn’t walk. They went above and beyond the call of duty to get close... digging down from the roof. Jesus notes their zeal, their faith. All five of them – saying “your sins are forgiven”.

What’s that got to do with anything? If he’s sick, obviously he’s done something wrong they thought... they believe...and that belief still creeps in now, ‘what have I done to deserve this?’ [people ask]. Again there were proper channels to make reparation. Jesus cuts through the red tape yet again and brings this man into community. He’s relentless, much to the annoyance of the gate keeper. Only God can forgive sins. This is blasphemy – Jesus is equating himself with God – how dare he! He should be stoned! (And this accusation sticks – blasphemy – that’s what they get him for in the end.)

Jesus knows what’s in their hearts; he sees their disbelief and incredulity – ‘which is easier – to say your sins are forgiven or take up your bed and walk?’ he muses. I can do that too... ‘Take up your bed and walk!’ The crowd are amazed. Wouldn’t you be? But the doubter filed it away for next time.

“Your sins are forgiven...” Such a sticky issue. Do we believe in sins? Sin, as I understand it, is anything that gets in the way of our relationship with God, with others, with ourselves.

There are the classical ones of lust, sloth, covetousness, greed, envy, murder; but there are also overwork, not getting enough rest, neglecting primary relationships, being hard on ourselves and others, unethical behaviour, not speaking up against injustice, neglecting the environment. This is sin, and it is connected with dis-ease; but perhaps not in the same way as first century Palestinians understood. Choices which lead away from wholeness affect our whole wellbeing and that of our environment.

Jesus pronounced “your sins are forgiven”. I forgive the debt. Relationship is restored. And this is what God is doing in Isaiah ‘I am He who blots out your transgression for my own sake and I will not remember your sins’.

If we are to follow this example we have work to do. Forgiveness is not an easy journey though it is rewarding. We / I mostly prefer to hold on to grudges sometimes for many, many years.

[relationship with friends example]

So how do we do this – forgive others and forgive ourselves? I would suggest that the first step is to bring our hurts and our pains, our anger, hatred, regret, before God. Tell God about it with words or images or movement. Confess. And if you have offended, when you are able, make reparation. Say sorry. Always ask for forgiveness knowing that forgiveness is not easily given.

If others have offended you, again bring them before God. Hold them before God. Pray for them. If you can't forgive them, ask God to, and ask God to help you to forgive.

Don't forgive lightly – rather continually for days, for weeks even. Pray. Hold them in the presence of God with all your anger, disappointment, rage and fear. Work at it. Hold them before God until you change and can open your wounded heart a little again. Jesus said, 'your sins are forgiven'. His only concern was to love – tough love – which at the same time meant both restoring outsiders to community – bringing them in to the inner circle – and also challenging anything that separated people from God.

He did it tough, and he paid for it. But his mission, as we've heard over the past few weeks, is to bring people back to God – back to the centre.

Are there those you haven't forgiven? (How do you forgive the unforgivable?) Begin today to pray for them and act lovingly towards them. Notice any changes over the next month. Expect nothing of them. Hope for change in yourself. You might be surprised.

Is there someone who hasn't forgiven you? Say sorry. Ask forgiveness. Act lovingly toward them. As the bumper sticker says 'practise random acts of kindness'.

Your sins are forgiven.

Nothing can separate you from the love of God in Jesus. Healing; restoration is possible...

[I would like to share an extract from Richard Holloway's book called 'On Forgiveness':]

“The most tragic example of the failure of a great nation to practise magnanimity or political forgiveness towards its defeated enemy, and thereby release the rough beast of history, is found in William Manchester's biography of Winston Churchill. He quotes Churchill's own words the day the Great War ended:

It was a few minutes before the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. I stood at the window of my room looking up Northumberland Avenue to Trafalgar Square, waiting for Big Ben to tell that the War was over.

Manchester says that, when Big Ben struck, Churchill could hear the baying of the crowds, but felt no jubilation. Since 1914 Britain had suffered 908,371 dead, 2,090,212 wounded, and 191,652 missing. Victory had been 'bought so dear as to be indistinguishable from defeat'. Churchill's wife proposed that they go to Downing Street and congratulate Lloyd George, the Prime Minister. Those already present when Churchill arrived were discussing the advantage of calling a general election. Churchill interrupted to point out that the 'fallen foe' was close to starvation. He proposed rushing 'a dozen great warships crammed with provisions' to Hamburg, but his proposal was coldly rejected. Manchester tells us that, while Churchill's suggestion was being rebuffed by his unforgiving colleagues, a twice-decorated German non-commissioned despatch runner, who had been temporarily blinded during a heavy gas attack on the night of October 13, sat in a Pomeranian military hospital and learnt of Germany's plight from a sobbing pastor. Six years later the soldier set down a description of his reaction to the event:

I knew that all was lost. Only fools, liars and criminals could hope for mercy from the enemy. In these nights hatred grew in me, hatred for those responsible for this deed... The more I tried to achieve clarity on the monstrous events in this hour, the more the shame of indignation and disgrace burned my brow. What was all the pain in my eyes compared to this misery? In the days that followed, my own fate became known to me... I resolved to go into politics.¹

The soldier's name was Adolf Hitler.

¹ William Manchester, *The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill, Visions of Glory 1874–1932*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1983, pp.650-651.