

The bishop I used to work for, who was from Belfast, used to do a brilliant impersonation of the Queen Mother doing an impersonation of Ian Paisley, all to illustrate a story the Queen Mother told him once. But I won't try to do an impression of the Bishop of Southwell doing an impression of the Queen Mother doing an impression of Ian Paisley. You'll just have to imagine it.

Much of the reporting and reflecting on Ian Paisley's death has been about the change from his utter condemnation of his opponents to his effective working with them. Having said the word 'never', and the phrase 'no surrender' so often, he eventually qualified that stance, and was able to work alongside his former enemy, Martin McGuinness, so that they were eventually called the Chuckle Brothers, and described each other as friends. Where there had been enmity and utter hatred, these were laid down, so that there was the opportunity for joint working, a common cause, and perhaps even reconciliation. Who knows, there may also have been forgiveness.

When in Matthew 18, our Gospel Reading today, Peter asks how often forgiveness should be offered, and starts, at seven times, with a higher number than any of the contemporary rule books of his day, it's not just about not putting the top on the toothpaste or parking in the wrong place. This is a question about the heart of human relationships, the people we find most difficult, those who have wronged us, taken us for a ride, who are in debt to us and will not repay. Peter's is a serious question, and it becomes the jumping off point for plumbing the depths of the love of God. How many times can someone wrong us before we spilt with them irrevocably?

Peter has been long enough with Jesus, and is such a faithful observer of the law that he takes the offering of forgiveness for granted, but thinks there must be a limit. The answer he gets is that you forgive as often as you are wronged. I find this hard. Once maybe, but when people wrong you again and again...well, that's tough. After this answer there is no reply from Peter, just the Bible's silence. Is it because he is too incredulous to speak? Perhaps the expression on his face was enough.

Matthew then links the episode with one of Jesus's exaggerated stories – when Matthew uses the word 'therefore' it's like a hook, attaching one thing to another. Jesus loves exaggeration – an extreme case to make a point you cannot escape. This time it's about someone who owes not just any amount of money, but the equivalent of 100 million day's wages. It is the GDP of a small nation, it would get you in the top 10 of the world's richest people, and it's beyond even a Euromillions rollover. For 'then thousand talents' read 'a billion pounds'.

All the man can do is ask for time. But there's no amount of time in the world which could see that debt repaid. The King, says Matthew, has compassion on the debtor. It's the same word used of Jesus when he sees the hungry crowds, or people in need of healing. And that compassion leads to not just patience, which is what the debtor asks for, but forgiveness. The debt is written off, as if it has never been.

You assume that this forgiveness will change the man's heart – but it is often harder to forgive than be forgiven, and I wonder if this is because he doesn't really accept what his

forgiveness means. So, when someone owes him just a few pounds – the tiniest fragment of what he's just been let off – he won't budge. To be forgiven by God is to be given a fresh start, new life, friendship with the Almighty and the knowledge of God in our lives through Jesus our brother. The servant can't accept this, and acts as if he were not forgiven and needed the money from his debtor.

It might be that he was just not a nice man, that he didn't have warm feelings for people. The story makes clear that the compassion shown by the King was not just a warm feeling. It was a complete gift, an act of sacrifice and love towards the servant. The duty of the forgiven servant to forgive the debts he is owed doesn't arise from the lovely feeling he's got of being forgiven. It arises from a recognition that he has been forgiven everything, and that he has no choice but to forgive others, whether he likes it or not.

When we are forgiven all, then we can forgive. Here we reach the heart – the human heart. Again, here Jesus is not speaking about an emotional push to do something, but an act of determination and commitment, an act of will. Repentance starts with accepting you have done wrong and receiving forgiveness, and has to continue with turning round and doing things differently. It is about changing your motivation, because your heart has changed.

Once we were dead. Once we were blind. Once we were condemned and on the road to nowhere. We had no resources to make that better, no pot of money to pay our debts, no healing powers to bind up what was broken. Just like the servant who owed a billion, there was nothing we could do. Now, because Jesus has died, we are on the road to glory, our debt has been paid, our brokenness on the way to complete healing, our dying turned to life.

It is not because we feel good that we can therefore forgive others, because we are still in this old body and have the reflexes and reactions of unforgiven and broken people. It's all still being worked out, and we are not floating six inches above the ground in a haze of religious fluffiness. Someone is going to drive badly near us, possibly this afternoon, and we going to get cross with them. Life is like that. It is not because of our feelings, but of what we know God has done for us. In Christ we are given everything, forgiven everything. And that means living in that knowledge, becoming what we are, and showing that by offering the same privileges to others as we have received. We can be generous, with the generosity of God.

Perhaps Ian Paisley, and the people of Northern Ireland, were some way along that road. Because we live in a world which remains complicated and subject to sin, and injustice, the full reality of complete and mutual forgiveness is yet to be revealed. Acknowledgement of past wrongs needs to be open, and the requirements of justice worked out. But the cycle of sinfulness and retribution has to be broken, in our own behaviour, and in the affairs of nations. Such forgiveness is dangerous and life changing, and the only thing that will change the world. It starts with us – acknowledging our need, and offering forgiveness to others. For Jesus's sake. Amen.