

### ***Bicycle theology and the journey of forgiveness***

Michael Lapsley is a South African Anglican priest who was injured by a parcel bomb which was sent to him by his country's police force.

**M**ANY PREACHERS speak as if forgiveness is something glib and cheap and easy. For most human beings forgiveness is something costly, painful and difficult. In South Africa, as the apartheid years came to a close, how to deal with the past became a pressing issue. Many of the beneficiaries of the old order wanted us to move on as if the past had not happened. Survivors and victims began to speak of the importance of reparation and restitution. Some Christian students began to speak of bicycle theology.

Bicycle theology is when I come and steal your bicycle. Six months later I come back to you and admit that I am the one who stole your bike. *"I am very sorry I stole your bike, please will you forgive me?"* Because you are a Christian, you say: *"Yes, I do forgive you."* Of course, I keep the bike. Sometimes we reduce forgiveness to simply saying sorry. Forgiveness involves returning the bike.

The New Testament records the story of the encounter between Zaccheus and Jesus in Luke 19. Zaccheus recognises that he has been robbing people. He announces that he will return what has been wrongfully taken and compensate those who have been wronged four times over. The bicycle is returned with new tyres and a bell, if not transformed into a Harley Davidson motorcycle. The journey of forgiveness includes restitution and reparation as integral parts of the package.

Over the last few years in South Africa, workshops dealing with the past have been taking place all over the country. At these workshops people are free to raise whatever is in their hearts. Without fail, participants raise questions about forgiveness. How do we forgive? What is forgiveness? Forgiveness is not possible. I want to forgive, but I don't know who to forgive.

**the command to forgive is sometimes experienced by people as a weapon used against them**

In my case no-one has acknowledged responsibility for the letter bomb which destroyed both my hands and an eye. At this stage forgiveness is not 'on the table'. Perhaps when I return home today I will find someone at my front door. *"I am the one who sent you a letter bomb. Please will you forgive me?"* I don't know how I would react. I might ask: *"What do you do for a living? Do you still make letter bombs?"* *"No, actually I am a paramedic because I want to be part of healing the nation."* Yes of course I forgive you. And I would prefer that you spend the next fifty years working as a paramedic rather than locked up in prison. That is because I believe in restorative justice rather than retributive justice.

After we had tea, I might say to the person I had forgiven, *"As you see I have no hands and only one eye as a result of the bomb which you sent me. Because of my injuries, I will always need to employ someone to assist me. You cannot give me back my missing limbs but you could help me to pay my assistant for the rest of my life."* That would not be retribution or revenge but rather reparation and restitution in the ways that are possible.

Sometimes it may be possible for reconciliation to take place between a perpetrator and a victim. Sometimes there may be the possibility of forgiveness. Always there is the issue of how we deal with the effect on us of what we have experienced. Healing of memories is always 'on the table'.

Forgiveness is a choice. Within faith communities, the command to forgive is sometimes experienced by people as a weapon which is used against them. I remember meeting a woman who had been sexually abused by her father. Her faith community told her she had to forgive him. She felt she could not. She approached another church to help her with her anxiety. She wanted to know if she would go to hell should she be run over by a bus. The woman wanted us to listen to her story. She wanted her story to be acknowledged and revered and recognized. She wanted to hear that what had been done to her was wrong.

I spoke to her about my understanding of a compassionate God. I couldn't help wondering if her father himself had been abused. How far back did the cycle stretch? Had the victim become the victimizer? The woman needed to be listened to, not preached at. Sometimes in the faith community we tend to be over-developed as preachers and under-developed as listeners. In the context of being supported and listened to, she might one day make the choice to begin the journey of forgiveness. Sadly her faith community had increased rather than relieved her burdens.

In reality the initiative to forgive can come from either the victim or the perpetrator. I listened to a Rwandese woman speak of her journey of forgiveness. Her parents were killed during the genocide. She knew the murderer who still lived in her community. She went to his house to tell him that she forgave him. Soon after, not by her doing, the murderer was arrested by the police. The murderer's family believed that the woman had been responsible for their father's death and sought to kill her. Her own faith and need for peace of mind required this Rwandese woman to forgive her parent's murderer.

Forgiveness is costly, painful and difficult. Somebody once told me that the Greek word for forgiveness in the New Testament is the same word for untying a knot. That makes sense. Where forgiveness does not take place there is a negative sense in which the two parties are locked together: one the prisoner of the other, both remaining with unfinished business. Where the journey of forgiveness is taking place, both parties are freed to live their lives.

*Fr Michael Lapsley, SSM is Director of the Institute for Healing of Memories in Cape Town, South Africa. He gave this talk at Corrymeela, in Ireland in June 2000. Michael now works full time enabling those who have suffered trauma to move beyond victim-hood through his "Healing the Memories" workshops.*

[www.healingofmemories.co.za](http://www.healingofmemories.co.za)