

## Forgiveness – *Just Do It*

A sermon preached by Andrew Knowles at St George's Church, Kendal, on Sunday 17 September 2017

Readings: *Genesis 50:15-21; Psalm 103.1-13; Romans 14.1-12; Matthew 18.21-35.*

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*Then his lord summoned [his servant] and said, "You wicked slave!*

*I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.*

*Should you have not had mercy on your fellow slave*

*as I had mercy on you?"*

*Matthew 18.34*

In 1988 Nike, a little-known American sports-shoe company, adopted the strap-line '*Just Do It*' – and in no time were requiring new warehouses to cope with their expanding business.

'*Just Do It*' appeals to those of any age who want to get fit, improve their health, and live longer.

When it comes to 'Forgiveness', I think that Jesus would express the same sentiment: 'What is it we don't understand about forgiveness? *Just Do It*'.

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We can't read the Bible for very long without noticing there's an awful lot of falling out.

The first man and woman fall out with each other, because they've first fallen out with God.

The first brothers fall out over their differing life-styles and one murders the other.

Jacob and Esau, twins, fall out over their birthright and father's blessing.

The first king, Saul, is murderously jealous of the young, charismatic, David.

The disciples of Jesus fall out over who's to be greatest in the coming reign of God.

And the first apostles fall out over missionary strategy – Peter and Paul – and Paul and Barnabas . . .

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The Bible isn't only the story of God. It's also the story of our human nature – our self-seeking, jealousy, anger and pride; our desire to have our own way; our capacity to harbour grudges and to seek revenge.

Once we recognise this all-pervading 'human condition' (to which we're often blind – or unquestioningly accustomed), we realise how much of the Bible is dedicated to *dealing with it*.

God and his people work hard at 'atonement': getting people back together again, forgiving sins, reconciling enemies and rehabilitating offenders.

The whole business of the temple and priesthood and sacrifice was to *deal with sin* and to reconcile people once again, with God and with each other.

And the cost of it was there for all to see, in the smoke rising from the sacrifices, morning and evening and at other times during the day, and massively at major times of repentance or festival.

Sin was endemic, all-pervasive: a disease, a scourge. It had to be disposed-of, destroyed, *put somewhere*. It was scape-goated onto animals: bulls and calves, sheep and lambs, goats and kids, doves and pigeons – lives offered, blood shed, to 'atone' for sin, to paint it out, to pay for its costly damage, so that the person or people offering the sacrifices might walk free: 'ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven' – which is the greatest sense of being in the world and the most wonderful feeling.

Sometimes, for us, of a Sunday morning, praying the prayer of confession and receiving the priestly words of absolution, forgiveness and atonement has become a light and easy thing – a repeat prescription worth hardly a thought.

Sometimes we've got so used to the grievances we nurse, the low-grade simmering anger in a relationship, the jealousies, resentments and unspoken reproaches among colleagues – we don't even make the connection that this is exactly what repentance, confession, absolution and reconciliation are all about.

We've split off the core business of the Church from the wounded heart; the labouring, spluttering, pain-filled engine of our daily lives.

We need forgiveness – we *crave* forgiveness with the whole of our being – but the penny simply hasn't dropped that *'this is it'* and *'here it is'!*

We need to stop, look and reconnect.

The long story of Joseph and his brothers, is in the Book of Genesis:

Joseph's boasting as a child of his special status and supremacy;  
the damaging favouritism of Jacob for Joseph over his brothers;  
their revenge in feigning his death and selling him into slavery in Egypt -  
and how Joseph rose from prison to become Prime Minister,  
to mastermind the survival of the Egyptians through famine and, incidentally,  
save the lives of his own family . . .

All climaxes in our first reading this morning, in which Joseph *forgives* that terrible, *unforgivable* betrayal, cruelty and hurt of the years, *absolves* his brothers of their crippling guilt and *assuages* their fear of his rightful revenge.

It's a high point of the Old Testament story and a foreshadowing of the appearing of the Risen Jesus to the friends who had betrayed and abandoned him in his hour of need.

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Forgiveness is one of the Bible's most important themes. All our relationships, at every level, most urgently require it if our lives are to be liberated, joyous and whole.

There is no other remedy for the human condition than that we realise how completely God has forgiven and forgives us, and that we, in turn, are free and enabled to forgive one another.

It's the hardest lesson we've never learned: *to forgive* – perhaps because we find it impossible to forgive ourselves – and that skews and scars our other relationships.

And then we don't allow ourselves to believe that *to forgive* is possible – even in our family, even among our rivals and competitors, even for our enemies, even in church . . .

A distinguished Scottish theologian, PT Forsyth, once said:

'Our churches are full of the nicest, kindest people,  
who have never known the despair of guilt  
or the breathless wonder of forgiveness'

*Peter Taylor Forsyth (1848-1921)*

In the very short prayer Jesus gave us, prime space was given to:

*'Forgive us our sins – as we forgive those who sin against us'*

It's a priority – and in Matthew's gospel, a prerequisite:

'If you do not forgive others *their* trespasses,  
neither will your Father forgive *your* trespasses'

*Matthew 6.15*

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus puts it even more strongly::

'When you are offering your gift at the altar' –

(when you're on your annual pilgrimage and at the very point of presenting your sacrifice)

*'if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you,  
leave your gift there before the altar; first be reconciled to your brother or sister,  
and then come and offer your gift'*

*Matthew 5.24*

That's the origin of 'Exchanging the Peace' in our Communion service: not dashing around shaking as many hands as possible, but going to the person with whom you're at odds:

'We got across each other at the recent PCC – are we okay?' And there are sometimes issues going back a lot further than that!

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Like the Temple of old, but in a new and exciting way, our churches should be pumping out reconciliation in the form of forgiven and forgiving lives - into our families, communities, nation and world.

Forgiveness has been called 'the Christian contagion' (Gavin Reid) – the world should be catching it from us.

We know this – don't we? By heart, probably.

What's missing, so often, is to realise just how forgiven we are and at what cost – not the blood of animals and birds, but the absolute self-offering of God himself through Jesus on the cross.

There, for all to see, was the ultimate scapegoating: the product and consequence of all our vicious and spiteful attitudes, tendencies and deeds . . .

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It was on the cross that Jesus prayed, 'Father, forgive them'.

Even as nails were driven into his hands and feet, his body subjected to excruciating pain and his soul to extreme rejection, abandonment and alienation, he prayed 'Father, forgive'.

Someone suggested to me that there are certain sins that *only* God can forgive and perhaps we need to appropriate that for ourselves, when, for years, decades, we've harboured an issue, or issues, as unforgiveable and refused to forgive.

But we can ask God to forgive where we can't.

There is a place, a Person, to whom we can come. There is help and healing for even the worst and most difficult cases.

That's why Jesus came – that's why he died and was raised to life –

That's how we can know, live, and share, 'the breathless wonder of forgiveness'.

As the Dismissal from our service says: 'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord'

Or, as Nike would urge us: '*Just Do It*'.