

Forgiveness



No, these little 4 week old New Hampshire chickens are not dead or unable to walk, they are in the middle of something enjoyable and important for them—a dust bath! They may not know the old adage, “Cleanliness is next to godliness”, but they do know about scratching the soft dirt through their new feathers to clean out any muck or mites. When finished they stand up and shake themselves, sending dirt flying in all directions!

Sometimes we feel we need a good clean to deal with things that are troubling us, such as messy events we might be brooding over in our minds. This can involve asking others to forgive us, or forgiving others who have hurt us.

Each time we Christians attend the Eucharist or Morning Prayer, we bring before God our sins and failures, and receive God’s forgiveness in a general way. When worrying over a particular wrongdoing, it can help to discuss it with God and ask for God’s forgiveness. But something more may be necessary. We might need to say we are sorry to those we have hurt or offended. If this is not possible, we can still say sorry to God, perhaps in front of a suitable outsider.

It is hard sometimes to say sorry, and we can find ourselves making excuses for what we have done, even arguing that it is the other person's fault and that they should apologise and ask to be forgiven by us! We off-load our guilt on to another.

At present our diocese is asking for forgiveness by saying sorry and paying compensation for past failures and hurts done by members of the church family to others. Can we, as part of the body of Christ, accept and share in the pain, anger, shame and guilt of all concerned? It is not easy.

When we turn to our country, some of us feel ashamed because of the pain we are causing refugees who came by boats to Australia seeking safety and protection but have been kept for years in detention centres. Already hurt and traumatised, these people are being punished to deter others from coming by boat. How can we ask for forgiveness from them and God?

When as Christians we are called to forgive another who has hurt us, the way Jesus forgave shows us how readily God loves and forgives us, *and* the person we find it so hard to forgive. Jesus forgave others, even those who did not show sorrow or ask for forgiveness. The woman taken in adultery in John 8 and dragged before him for condemnation, had suffered enough. She was forgiven and freed. In Luke 23, Jesus asked his Father to forgive the soldiers at the cross who were thoughtlessly following orders.

Some years ago, a youth driving a car side-swiped our letter box, made especially for us, and broke it. I was angry and told his parents, who immediately offered to repair the box. I refused the offer, and mended it myself. Although this was a relatively unimportant incident, I had trouble forgiving. I wanted the youth to face me and be sorry for what he had done.

Perhaps we can love and forgive people who have hurt us, even 70 times 7 as in Matthew 18, but what about when members of our family or friends have been hurt by others?

We see their pain and suffering and want to rage against those who caused it. It may have been deliberate, the result of alcohol, drugs, a loss of temper or an accident. "They must pay", we shriek, "Make them suffer!" But does this change the situation, restore health, or give life back to a dead person?

It is sometimes said that the way of true forgiveness is to forgive and forget. But is it? It is almost impossible to forget when someone has badly treated us or our loved ones, and can trivialise the whole horrible event. Rather, I think we need to change the way we remember it, and our feelings of resentment and hate. Can we somehow share the pain of the perpetrator's guilt, see and feel what has happened from their perspective, begin to love them? On the cross, Jesus, who did not commit sin, in love for us shared the solitary painful place where we often find ourselves, both needing to forgive others who have hurt us, and knowing that we too, need to be forgiven.

Jesus must have felt deeply his betrayal by Judas, denial by Peter, and the desertion of his close friends at the time of his capture. But there were no words of enmity or bitterness from Jesus on the cross. After the resurrection, at the risen Jesus' first meeting with his friends, he greeted them in John 20 with, "Peace be with you", and gave them the gift of the Spirit to forgive and cleanse. Later, in John 21, Jesus and Peter, walking together on the beach, painfully dealt with Peter's denials. Forgiveness was shared, and love and trust between them was restored and deepened.

Every time we recite the Lord's Prayer we are reminded that forgiveness involves forgiving and being forgiven. Aware of our own guilt, we may need to draw on the power of the Holy Spirit to love and forgive fellow sinners if we are to obtain forgiveness - from God, others *and* ourselves.

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