

CHRISTIAN CHARACTER AND THE AFTERMATH OF HARM

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The question of what it means to be a Christian can be answered in a number of ways. You can be quite objective and factual and ask whether or not someone is baptized; in some situations you might want to be more specific, and it's not unheard of for some job advertisements to call for a 'communicant Anglican' or a 'full member of a church in communion with the Church of England'. In some parts of the world the question might actually be considered as even more deeply part of your identity than that - you are a Christian if you are member of a certain family or ethnic group. But these are obviously not the only ways in which people characterize themselves as Christian. For some, the questions of doctrine and belief are uppermost. You are Christian if you can say the Apostles Creed 'without crossing your fingers'. For others belief in the virgin birth and bodily resurrection are the most fundamental Christian beliefs and so assent or not to these propositions will determine whether or not a person really is Christian. For others it will be the way in which you think about the atonement that matters - in particular whether or not you subscribe to the doctrine called 'penal substitution'.

But alongside these three ways of thinking about whether or not someone is a Christian - the sacramental, the ethnic, and the doctrinal is a fourth way. The question here is that of character. You may be from a good Christian family, you may be baptized and confirmed and regularly at Holy Communion, and you may be a card-carrying believer in the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed and indeed penal substitution - but is your character Christian? Is your life operated on the basis of Christian principles? Do Christian values inform or even determine your decisions and your lifestyle? Are you a person in whom the Christian virtues are manifest and strong?

CHRISTIAN CHARACTER – CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

I want to make a connection with this question of Christian character and a word that has become much more important over the last decade or so 'discipleship'. 'Discipleship' and 'Christian character' are not quite the same ideas, but they do overlap significantly. Discipleship maybe has something more of a directed sense. Some Christian traditions use the verb 'to disciple' meaning to educate or train people in the practices, disciplines and virtues of Christianity. There are several, perhaps many, 'discipleship courses' used today and typically they cover several areas - say doctrine, ethics and spirituality, though perhaps not using those words.

We would not expect to find a course on 'Christian character', however, as we expect character to be something that unfolds from the personality in the course of a person's life. Nonetheless, there are institutions that are intentional about shaping someone's character, the armed forces perhaps, and those branches of the church that are more comfortable with the language of 'formation' than 'discipleship' will be concerned to inculcate habits, practices and virtues that they deem to be appropriate and fitting. The model here is perhaps monasticism. Benedict talks of the monastery as a school of the Lord's service and it is that word 'school' that can be a bridge back to the idea of discipleship. A disciple is basically a learner or pupil; one who looks to another to show them how to live well. Certainly we tend

to think of disciple as a 'follower', but in the ancient world, from which the notions of both discipleship and character come, teachers tended to be peripatetic and so if you wanted to be in their 'school' you had no choice but to follow them around. The 'following' aspect of discipleship is functional. The important point is to be close enough to learn, but if the teacher moves on you have to follow them. The disciple needs to be close enough to learn not only at the intellectual level but also at the level of ethics and spirituality too. To use a rather vogue word you might say that discipleship is properly understood 'holistically' and that therefore it is a matter of character formation as much as it is of any other kind of learning.

Interesting and important at any time, the question of Christian character is even more interesting and important as our world becomes more obviously plural. There is pressure on all people to know what their religion stands for and means. Clergy and laity alike are expected to intentional and deliberate and self-aware and informed as they practice their faith. But the question of character goes deeper than that, especially if it involves, and for a Christian I believe it must, virtues like humility, gentleness and generosity.

Christian character it seems to me cannot be quite the real deal if it involves too much overt premeditation. Another way of saying it is that our character reflects both our thought-through decisions and our unreflective habits, our attitudes and dispositions. Also, as I hinted earlier, what people think of as their character is a product of many influences and factors, among them our personality, our circumstances in life, our family experiences, and the cultural assumptions of our society. And this suggests to me that there is no such thing as the perfect or ideal Christian character; rather that there are millions of Christian characters, all of whom are different. Nonetheless it is reasonable to assume that even if we take this view of Christian character (and we might call the 'Heinz cubed' model - ie that there are $99 \times 99 \times 99$ varieties of Christian character), we might also expect to find that in the international and historical community of people who call themselves Christian we tend to find that certain qualities, traits, attributes and virtues are predominant and that these bear some relationship to the sort of stories, theories and instructions we read in the New Testament.

What then are the sorts of words that we might expect to find coming to the surface if we did an extensive sociological, anthropological and historical survey of the Christian character? One place to start might be the list of fruits of the spirit in Galatians 5. 22, 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.'

Another place that we might look is Colossians 3. 12-17.

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

An extremely interesting exercise would be to go through this passage clause by clause and ask what these words might mean in practice in the sorts of situations in which we might find

ourselves today. You could do it across the life-cycle, beginning with NCT classes or the maternity ward and ending up in the hospice and en route taking in the spheres of education, paid employment, public service, our relationship with the law, financial activity, civic responsibility, international travel, reading habits, leisure activities and so on. In fact all the different areas of life in which our character will be both shaped and become evident.

I say the exercise would be extremely interesting but it would also be rather time-consuming - an activity for a retreat or lengthy series of sermons rather than a lecture. But there is one area or aspect of life where I think there is an expectation that our Christian character will shine through in a particularly impressive and evident way. We hope to see someone's Christian character as especially evident when they have been hurt or harmed by someone else.

In the rest of this lecture I intend to take the question of how we think about what we could and should do in the aftermath of being hurt as a case study for the whole question of Christian character. In particular I am going to focus my attention on what it means to be a forgiving person.

FORGIVING OTHERS

Although the capacity to forgive is not listed as a fruit of the spirit in Galatians, it is clear from what Paul wrote to the Colossians that he expected them to be forgiving. Indeed the whole tone of those verses from chapter three suggests a peaceful attitude towards oneself and others. The ideal Christian here is someone who isn't easily ruffled, but if they are ruffled is someone who soon manages to get un-ruffled. If you are characteristically compassionate, kind, humble and patient, and generally inclined to be loving towards others and thankful with regard to God; and if you are supported by wise companions and regularly involved in wholesome worship, we might well expect you to be an equilibrious and fulfilled person who would be able to take all manner of challenge in your stride. And given the emphasis on forgiving each other (v 13) we should perhaps expect this to include the occasions when you are treated unfairly or when some hurt or harm is inflicted on you by another person. And we should also expect this to be the case whether this comes from negligence or ignorance or is an unseen consequence of a beneficent action or if it is the intentional product of competition, disrespect or even hatred. (That's a long but not exhaustive list - to make the point in passing that many different motives lie behind harmful actions.)

There is, one might say, a default setting of Christian character that is to be forgiving. We are taught to pray 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us' and in Matthew's gospel Jesus follows this up with the teaching that unless we forgive others our heavenly father will not forgive us. This is further reinforced in Matthew 18 when Peter asks how often he should forgive - and suggests that maybe seven times would be about right, indicating, we suspect, his personal idea of what a generously forgiving person should be able to manage. Jesus famously answers 'seventy seven times' or 'seventy times seven', which, as any attentive chorister will tell you, is 490. However the point of the number is that this is not about numbers. You just need to keep forgiving again and again, and if things are still not clear Jesus then tells the parable of the unforgiving slave who, having been forgiven a huge debt himself, is quite merciless towards a poor person who owes him a trifling amount. This man certainly receives no mercy from the one who was earlier so forgiving ...

'And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt.³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.' (Matt 18. 34-35)

Luke version of the Lord's Prayer is not followed by threats concerning the consequences of not forgiving. Luke also has stories such as the prodigal son, the woman who anointed Jesus feet and Zacchaeus all of which have strong forgiveness themes. It also has those famous words from the cross 'Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing'.

Mark's gospel doesn't have the Lord's Prayer but does connect forgiveness and prayer in chapter 11 after Jesus has entered Jerusalem and cursed the fruitless fig-tree. 'Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.' (Mark 11.25)

John's gospel doesn't have the Lord's Prayer either but there we find the story of the woman taken in adultery and Jesus saying that the one who is without sin should throw the first stone. More significantly it is John who has the encounter between Jesus and Peter after the resurrection in which Jesus seems to take Peter through a process of reconnection, the result of which is that Peter is forgiven his threefold denial and restored to the leadership role for which he had always been destined.

The capacity and the tendency to forgive would therefore seem to be a good contender for a quality that we should expect to find in a Christian character profile. Moreover if you think about one of the most famous interventions that a religious leader has made in political affairs in the last generation or so you will very likely think of Desmond Tutu's role as chair of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in which the role of forgiveness was extremely significant, '[There is] No future without Forgiveness' was his slogan as well as the title of his book. And, following the lead of psychologists who have discovered that when people forgive their blood pressure goes down, their life expectancy increases and so on, he told people that to forgive is the most enlightened form of self-interest.

Tutu's line here is a popular one today, and it is a very positive thing in my view that psychologists now recognise that it can be therapeutic for people to let go of feelings and memories that are undermining their health and wellbeing.

Eva Moses Kor, who died in July aged 85, lost no fewer than 49 relatives in the holocaust and with her identical sister was subject to inhumane experimentation by the infamous Dr Mengele. In the 1990s Eva made contact with one of Mengele's associates, Hans Munch. This led to her writing him a letter of forgiveness. She said that it was 'empowering' to forgive and that led to her 'forgiving all the Nazis'. In Eva Kor's understanding forgiveness is very different to reconciliation because 'it has nothing to do with the perpetrator'. Speaking perhaps to those fellow victims who were angered by her public forgiveness, she also said that 'forgiveness is the best revenge'.

These very brief accounts of Desmond Tutu's approach to forgiveness and Eva Kor's reveal several things. First, that if forgiveness is a Christian virtue it is not a distinctively Christian virtue. Tutu's argument for it is psychological, pragmatic and indeed political, and Eva Kor comes to it from outside the Christian faith. In a recent book called 'Forgiveness and Love' Glen Pettigrove tells the story of a person who is friendly warm and welcoming but is unable to sustain relationships because he lacks the ability to forgive Therefore as soon as anything

goes wrong in a relationship he is indignant, resentful and angry and has no ability to overcome those feelings. That's perhaps why he is so welcoming to new people. He likes everyone until they make a mistake or let him down - but when they do, its curtains.

We can see then that forgiveness is good thing leading to positive outcomes and when we add to that the idea put forward by Hannah Arendt that Jesus 'discovered the role of forgiveness in human affairs', we should perhaps be proud to see the inclination and ability to forgive or 'forgivingness' as a central aspect of Christian character. Indeed we might go so far as to want to suggest that Christian formational programs, confirmation preparation and discipleship classes have a module about forgiveness which helps those setting out of their Christian journey, or seeking to renew it. to become more forgiving people.

If we were to do that with seriousness of purpose we might however begin to get into some rather difficult territory. This is because while forgiveness can be wonderful and forgivingness is an admirable trait or virtue, there are a number of difficulties with forgiveness.

TEN DIFFICULTIES WITH FORGIVENESS

The first difficulty with forgiveness is the shadow side of the very positive thing that forgiveness is necessary for relationships and society – and politics. The fact that forgiveness is necessary, however, doesn't mean that forgiveness is always appropriate or even possible. The first difficulty with forgiveness is that it's good, but that it's not always appropriate, not always 'the answer'. There are limits to forgiveness.

This simple point is something that the very good press that forgiveness has had in recent years has sometimes obscured. Forgiveness is the giving up of resentment, and resentment - especially if it turns to bitterness - can mess your life up physically as well as psychologically. It is this understanding that has led psychologists to develop therapeutic programmes to help people to forgive. The difficulty here is *not* that people who are harming themselves by their reaction to an earlier harm might be freed from the toxic form of resentment, but that forgiveness has been 'boosted' to such a degree that we have forgotten that sometimes even forgiveness has its limits.

I think it's helpful to say that there is a subtle relationship between forgiveness and time. I was once asked by the mother of a murdered child if she had to forgive the murderers. This was very soon after the child's death and I found myself somewhat tongue-tied. After a pause I said, 'it's not yet time for forgiveness'. I have written more about this in my book 'Healing Agony – Reimagining Forgiveness'. This question of time and timing is also a reason for writing a book on the subject – and indeed I hope to write another before long. The great thing with a book rather than a course or lecture about forgiveness is that people can encounter the material in private, at a time that works for them and work through it at their own pace. This is necessary for true forgiveness at the human level and a reason why it doesn't always fit nicely into any timetable other than its own. This then would be the second difficulty with forgiveness which is that it may not yet be time to forgive – for a wide variety of reasons.

The third difficulty is also connected to the nature of resentment that we give up when we forgive. Sometimes the people who are most enthusiastic forgiveness forget that while resentment is an uncomfortable and undignified emotion and that it can be bad for your health, does actually serve a positive purpose. Primarily, resentment is an emotion of self-respect. We feel indignation or resentment when we realize that what we have experienced has harmed and damaged us. Such feelings do not always come to the surface immediately. We might be hurt, but at the time think that it's okay to be hurt as it was all in a good cause, or harmless fun, or part of our obedience or duty or whatever. But later we might see it differently. Resentment, and indeed anger, are not necessarily quick emotions, and while painful and difficult, they do warrant being attended to and shared. This is one aspect of #Metoo. So the third difficulty is that forgiveness involves giving up on an *appropriate* response. It follows that those who promote and encourage forgiveness need to be clear about why it is right, timely or prudent to give up on the feeling that is part and parcel of our self-respect.

The fourth difficulty is that forgiveness is understood in several ways. For some people forgiveness is an appropriate response to someone who has not only harmed you but also shown that they regret it, promised not to do it again and done what they can to help you cope with the damage they inflicted. That is, forgiveness is something that happens not after harm *per se* but after repentance after harm. For other people forgiveness is something that happens after harm because it is a good thing or even a duty to forgive. I am going to call

forgiveness after repentance 'classic forgiveness' and forgiveness in advance of repentance 'unconditional forgiveness'.¹

The fifth difficulty with forgiveness is that it is such a high-octane word in Christianity. Ours is a religion of salvation that is based on the belief that God has overcome the negativity of injustice and pain and inaugurated a new kingdom. The gateway to that kingdom can be called 'forgiveness'. This causes a number of difficulties. One is that it can make us complacent about ongoing injustice and dull our sensitivity and compassion with regard to those who are harmed by others. Christians are too inclined to take what they believe to be a divine / forgiving perspective, and also far too inclined to think that because God in Christ forgives, and we are meant to be Christ-like, that we can forgive on demand. It's worth remembering that although we believe God to be excellent at forgiveness, we are not God. There are several aspects to this simple but profoundly important theological point. Among them is the truth that when sin happens, and when harm is inflicted, the consequences for human victims and for God are quite different. We say that God forgives, but human forgiveness is not the same as divine forgiveness. Far too little effort has been made to understand or explain this.

Another difficulty (the sixth) is that we often conflate forgiveness and reconciliation. This is a bad mistake in situation where the harm has been inflicted is traumatizing, but it can be very problematic with even with non-traumatizing harm, for instance some forms of domestic violence. To conflate forgiveness and reconciliation is especially common in Christian thinking. Sometimes forgiveness may Only be possible if the person who inflicted the harm promises (or is required) to keep away.

This returns us to the question of pressure to forgive that is put upon people by well-meaning pastors. We have already mentioned the all know the texts that matter - the story of the unforgiving slave, the clause in the Lord's Prayer and Jesus' words from the cross, 'Father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing'. Taken together and read naively, these texts have I believe, formed in many Christians an unhealthy attitude that I am beginning to call, 'forgiveness anxiety'. The worry is that if you don't forgive immediately and completely God will never forgive you. People worry about this for themselves and they worry about it for others. Like all anxiety it can cause havoc and multiply suffering. The truth is that there are situations in which, should we fail to forgive, we will have revealed ourselves to be hard-hearted and locked into such a mean mindset that it is impenetrable even by the grace of God. However, there are other situations where we do not forgive because to do so would be emotionally dishonest, would fly in the face of justice, would prevent the truth coming out, and might place others in danger. Forgiveness anxiety – our seventh difficulty – is the problem that people think that forgiveness is always a good thing and they do all that they can to persuade others to forgive. Paradoxically, I believe that forgiveness anxiety can make false forgiveness more likely and true forgiveness less likely. Sometimes this unhealthy desire to forgive or to persuade others to forgive (aka forgiveness anxiety) is so strong that it leads to 'spiritual abuse'. I put it like that to make it quite clear that certain forms of 'pastoral care' are experienced as re-abuse because that is precisely what they are.

This brings us on to another difficulty with forgiveness, (the eighth) which is that most harming action will probably harm more than one person and that different people will be harmed by the same action in different ways. Many occasions of harm, and this is evidently true of abuse

¹ Some writers have used the word phrase 'invitatory forgiveness' to describe forgiveness that is offered in advance of repentance in the hope that it might elicit repentance. Such forgiveness may of course be tentative of conditional on a receiving an appropriate response.

when it involves abuse of positional power, are the product not only of an individual's bad actions but also of a context created by institutional shortcomings. And not only that, the responses of individuals and institutions which are themselves responsible for the harm that is inflicted on the vulnerable, may, if they are not compassionate, honest and wise, actually compound the initial hurt and insult. I hope that when I put it like this you can begin to see that a naive model of letting go of resentment either because resentment is bad for your health, or because God doesn't want you to harbor resentment, can be both inadequate and harmful.

But the situation can be worse than this because in the immediate aftermath of harm the already hurting and vulnerable person is often treated with less respect and compassion precisely because of what they have experienced. This is a compounding of hurt and insult and, if it so happens that what the abused person experiences in this phase is fueled by forgiveness anxiety and extends to spiritual abuse, then the whole question becomes deeply entangled because the person in the middle of it all has been hurt through two connected but distinct episodes (each of which is not only harmful but also complicated). The first is the abuse the second is the pressure to forgive coming from an individual or an institution that is anxious but insensitive. Much more can and should be said about this, the ninth difficulty.

The tenth difficulty with forgiveness is that most models of forgiveness make the assumption that the relationship before the harming event was good. This, however, is manifestly not always the case. Where there is disrespect or the desire of one person to use, manipulate or control the other or where one person actively hates the other the question of forgiveness is clearly difficult because not only is there the actual harming action to consider but the attitude that lies behind it. This is an issue that those who have studied forgiveness are only just beginning to explore.

And yet, the gospel of forgiveness will not go away. We all need to be forgiving people and to hope that in the fullness of time all will be forgiven. However, and this is massively significant point, getting to the end point of forgiveness is not the sole or primary responsibility of those who have been hurt or harmed, injured, offended against, violated or abused or put on the receiving end of hatred. It is appropriate and kind to help people avoid self-destructive and toxic emotional responses, together with vengeful attitudes and stark hatred. Psychologists, pastors and good friends may be able to help with that. But the church in general, and pastors in particular, should not be so fixated in forgiveness that they turn a blind eye to the demands of justice and truth and the need for people and institutions to find meaningful forms of repentance and change, and in particular to manifest the qualities of respectful engagement and relating that might restore some of the dignity and self-respect that has been eroded by harmful and abusive treatment.

LEARNING HOW TO REPENT

I mentioned above that Christians often conflate forgiveness and reconciliation, so much so that the two words can run together, 'forgiveness-n-reconciliation'. I also explained why this can be problematic. However recent attention to forgiveness has not always been as positive or nuanced as it might have been about a different word beginning with 'R' 'repentance'. If another lecture were to follow this one it might be that the best focus for it would be 'repentance' as an aspect of Christian character that is relevant in the aftermath of harm. But just to say this begins to change the frame of our discussion, for we have been considering up to now the way in which our Christian character should shape our responses when we have

been hurt or harmed. But what about the opposite? What about the situation where it is the Christian character who has hurt or harmed another person. What can or should they do? How should repentance *vis a vis* those we have harmed feature in our Christian discipleship?

There are as many things to say about inter-personal 'repentance' as there are about inter-personal forgiveness and while I can't go into the subject in much detail now let me offer three thoughts.

The first is that when people do 'repent' after a serious harm their repentance is never going to be enough to undo the damage or to put the person who has been harmed in the position where they have a moral duty to forgive. Forgiveness after very serious harm is always going to be generous and undeserved and those who have done serious harm need to recognize that as they seek to repent.

My second point here is that in many cases where trust has been broken, power abused or feelings manipulated it is quite likely that at least some perpetrators will use the language of apology, regret and sorrow in such an insincere and manipulative way that it is abusive. This is a huge difficulty and it needs to be taken into account and discussed more fully. Just to mention it now reinforces the point that there are many ways of talking about forgiveness, especially in the aftermath of abuse, that can make matters worse.

The third point is one that was brought my attention when I spoke about forgiveness in Jacksonville Florida in April. The location is not just a name-drop it matters as the context was the south of America where the legacy of slavery and segregation is still keenly felt, at least in some communities. One of the questions after my talk was 'why don't some people seek forgiveness?' The question spoke of an absence, a gap, a 'repentance gap' perhaps. But it also spoke of an unrequited desire. The desire I think was to forgive, but how are we to forgive when injustice persists, when the truth has not been told and when attitudes fall short of full respect?

I make no apology for ending this lecture with more questions than answers. My intention has not been to persuade you that I have got this collection of issues sorted but to convince you that these matters need significantly more thought than the normally get not only because of the importance and sensitivity of the issues, but also because the way in which we think about them impacts hugely on our understanding of what Christian discipleship involves and the overlapping question of what it means to develop and form in others the qualities of a Christian character.

We can all be good Christians on a good day – what matters more is whether and how our Christian character shines through when we have been harmed - or when, indeed, we have harmed others.