

Forgive Us Our Tresspasses

Healing Political Wounds in Northern Ireland - 14th June, 2006

Introduction

There is constant talk about the need for reconciliation in Northern Ireland and various documents, including those of government, have highlighted the term. The Mitchell Commission emphasised the issue of trust, and the breakdown of the IRA ceasefire gave this a particular focus. Others have talked about the need for forgiveness and apology. Others, again, have concentrated on the goal of justice. This pamphlet seeks to explore what we mean by concepts such as reconciliation, forgiveness, apology, justice and trust when applied to the public, communal and political realms. Our title alludes to the Christian context in which this pamphlet is written and this is made explicit at the end.

The Present Context

The possibility of reconciliation in Northern Ireland exists within a context where:

- The British and Irish Governments work increasingly together; the historic antipathy between Britain and Ireland has faded to a shadow at government level;
- Mainstream nationalist opinion accepts that there can be no change in the constitutional position of Northern Ireland without majority consent;
- There will be no united Ireland for the foreseeable future;
- The British Government has accepted that it has no "selfish strategic or economic interest" in Northern Ireland;
- Violence has been rejected by an overwhelming majority on the island;
- It is clear that the Provisional IRA "war" could not and cannot be won;
- The position of the nationalist community in Northern Ireland has improved and there is no conceivable possibility that this will be reversed;
- Neither community can be enticed, persuaded or coerced into abandoning its historic identity or allegiance;
- Majority rule in Northern Ireland is not a viable option;
- It is clear that there is both a British and Irish identity in Northern Ireland and political arrangements must reflect this fact;
- Erosion of national sovereignty is occurring all over Western Europe. The nation state is no longer what it was;
- The religious reality of Ireland is changing, and in particular, Irish Catholicism is changing rapidly. Greater distinctions are being made between religious and political allegiances by many Churches and Christians. Increasing secularisation affects how Churches relate to each other and to society, and what influence and power they have.

All of these form the context for the possibility of reconciliation in Northern Ireland. They are not going to go away, whether there is an IRA ceasefire or not. In fact, it was this matrix of circumstances which helped to create the ceasefire in the first place.

There is, of course, no guarantee that reconciliation will be the outcome. There are deep and dark intractabilities in the Northern Ireland situation. The politics of siege and insecurity - intensified over the last 25 years - meet the politics of grievance and historic resentment - also intensified over the last 25 years.

Nevertheless, we have an historic opportunity - what the New Testament calls a *kairos* moment. We should be clear about the consequences of failing to use it.

As we said in *Breaking Down the Enmity*:

"We should, however, be fully aware of the likely consequences of failing to find reconciliation, such as repartition, considerable violence, and the spilling of the conflict over into the Republic and Great Britain. The potential for such an outcome should make us all cautious and should make us realise that the politics of reconciliation is the only realistic one, the only one that will give all of us in Northern Ireland a future" (p.134).

Thus we face the question: Do we want to be healed?

Reconciliation

In *Breaking Down the Enmity* we set down our understanding of reconciliation as follows:

"It means people finding a way of living together in difference. It means the restoration of broken relationships. It means wanting the other to be with us and not wanting to destroy, dominate or separate from them. It means being able to take the other community into account and sharing power, responsibility and resources. It means going beyond the 'right' and 'wrong' of the conflict - the vicious circle of action and reaction - to create new and creative relationships" (p.17).

Reconciliation is not just about an accommodation of various interests and aspirations (a political settlement). It is also dealing with the hurts, resentments and enmities that exist (the task of repair and healing). Of course, there is a relationship between the two. As *Breaking Down the Enmity* says:

"At the same time political frameworks and devices, while necessary to provide the essential stability for the situation, will not endure if hatred and antagonism persist in large sections of the Northern Ireland community. No solution can be imposed from outside. The enmity must be broken and a process created which leads to an increase of internal agreement" (p.135).

The German philosopher Hannah Arendt was clear that there were two primary requirements for people to live together: (1) the willingness of people to make promises and agreements, and to keep them; and (2) the willingness to set aside the past - its enmities and the vicious circle of action and reaction - and start anew.

The willingness of people to make promises and agreements, and to keep them, is necessary for order in human life. But the imperfection and sinfulness of people mean that we frequently fail to keep promises and agreements. Therefore, we have to find some way of setting aside the past with its failures and enmities in order to keep human life going in a

satisfactory way. Our very imperfection and sinfulness make this hard to do - particularly in our communal life.

Looking For Some Other Way

- When we begin to suspect that conflict or the present situation cannot give us what we need or hope for, then we are open to the possibility of looking for some other way. The Ceasefires in Northern Ireland seemed to represent a realisation by the paramilitaries that a different way had to be found.

Grieving

- We may need to grieve for what has been lost and done, and acknowledge anger, bitterness, resentment, loss of identity and uncertainty.

Facing Reality

- We have to face the reality of the other and their differences from us: that they are British, Irish, whatever.
- It means a recognition of, and a coming to terms with, what has occurred over the last 25 years, and even longer.

Acknowledging What Has Happened

- We have to take what has happened seriously. Wrongs and wrongdoers have to be named. And we will have to say: "Enough: Let us break the endless round of action and reaction; let us move away from the abyss".

Acceptance

- We have to recognise the humanity of the other; they suffered too. It means some level of acceptance; they belong here too.

Responsibility

- We need to accept our particular responsibility for what has happened and cease "what-about-ery" and only blaming the other side.
- We need also to accept responsibility for creating a new and common future.

Justice

- We have to take issues of justice seriously. Injustices are corrected to the extent that this is possible. Wrongs are reckoned with - but with forbearance, rather than punitively. Justice in a situation of communal breakdown is a search - a search that takes what has happened seriously and looks for the good of the whole community and not only our own. It seeks to include and bring back people into relationship. Issues relating to the release of politically motivated prisoners need to be seen in this light (see our discussion in `Liberty to the Captives?').
- We seek to deal with the wounds that people have suffered.

Letting Go

- We need to let go of how we have acted in the past and seek to act differently towards the other community (taking into account their fears, interests, and aspirations, establishing a new justice). It may mean being prepared to apologise.
- We have to give up moral superiority and allow others to change.

New Relationships

- We should seek a new relationship with the other community which involves justice.
- Such a process involves aspects of forgiveness and repentance - understood in a communal and political way. It can be difficult, long delayed and forever imperfect. It involves the negotiation of difficult terrain through mutual respect. The hoped for outcomes are trustworthy relations and a properly functioning polity bound by promises and agreements - where people are prepared to cooperate with each other on a fair basis.
- Such a process is political: it requires people to vote in such a way that will promote accommodation, justice, tolerance and agreement, and it requires politicians who will act in such a way. But it is not only political; a profound communal change is required and this does not come easily. Change often occurs through experience, when we come in touch with a different reality and discover the possibility of new relationships. This is the importance of worthwhile cross-community activity: through it we can learn that things really could be different in Northern Ireland.
- It is hard to break out of the politics of antagonism. In such a context politicians are very vulnerable to their electorates. Others may be able to take the first steps which will open up space for action by politicians. Churches and Church groups can enable honest discussion about the realities of the situation to take place, a task which sometimes cannot easily be done by politicians. For instance, it is clear that the main Protestant denomination in Germany, the Evangelical Church (the EKD), played an important role in German reconciliation with its neighbours. The EKD Memorandum of Eastern Europe in 1965 helped open the way for Chancellor Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik.

Forgiveness

One of the main reasons why violence was not much greater over the past twenty-five years has been the way that Christians and their Churches have chosen consistently to seek to cut cycles of vengeance by calling for, and practising, non-retaliation and forgiveness. Forgiveness is a central aspect of the Gospel (see our discussion at the end of the pamphlet). It has significantly penetrated Irish life and its practice - particularly by many victims and their families - has had social and political effects.

However, the victims of violence or their families cannot be burdened with the demand that they forgive those that have perpetrated crimes against them. That is something they may, or may not, be able to do. None of the rest of us can sit in judgment on them. Nor can we put the burden of responsibility for progress in a peace process on them either, although they may have strong views and ideas about the process of peace and its outcome. Victims have their particular needs: for justice, for the seriousness of the harm to be acknowledged, for compensation, for apology and repentance from those who have done them wrong, for their stories to be heard. All this needs to be acknowledged, as does the fact that many victims of

violence have been able to act in reconciling ways even if they have not (yet) been able to forgive the particular wrongdoer(s).

What is required is that the community at large - battered, hurt and damaged by what has happened over the last 25 years - be prepared to enter into a more general process of being able to set aside the past - with all its enmities and demands for revenge - and start anew. This is something in the nature of forgiveness. As the former Zambian President, Kenneth Kaunda, said forgiveness is not so much an isolation act but "a constant willingness to live in a new day without looking back and ransacking the memory for occasions of bitterness and resentment". The ceasefires gave the opportunity for such a process to be initiated.

Such a process of communal forgiveness takes what happened seriously and, yet, in its course some victims may be left unrequited and some perpetrators unrepentant. Nevertheless, it is politically and socially indispensable for the healing of the wounds of a damaged community.

Forgiveness is easier where there is some trust, or, at least, the beginning of trust. It is much more difficult where fear and distrust rule and where violence is present or a lurking threat.

If we fail to forgive we will hand on our bitterness to the next generation. The conflict in the former Yugoslavia is an example where bitterness was handed down; not only from memories of atrocities committed during the Nazi period, but going back generations before that, even to the wars between Christian and Turk. And, if the politics of grievance is not given up, the past keeps everyone in its grip. Either we find ways to forgive or else we separate from, or seek to destroy each other. Thus forgiveness is a practical necessity for continuing to live together.

Repentance and Apology

We are where we are because great wrongs have been done - both in our own and in past generations. All these wrongs do not lie on one side. But do they not have to be named and apologies given (or at the very least regret expressed)? Otherwise, do we not remain imprisoned in the past? We can too easily seek to move on, but if we do the past repressed returns to haunt the living and future generations.

Repentance means facing the reality of what we have done, turning round and following a new path. Apology to those who have been injured and wronged may be part of repentance. Apology opens up the possibility of reconnection with the other. For instance, the Stuttgart Confession of Guilt in 1945 recognised the Evangelical Church in Germany's share of the responsibility for the terrible things done during the Third Reich. It paved the way for an honest approach to what had happened and for that Church's re-entry into the ecumenical community.

Apology - clearly and publicly expressed - is one way of convincing people that a clear break with the past has been made. Of course, apology has to be followed by, or linked to, an attempt to undo wrongs and act differently - to establish a new justice and a new relationship. This is what repentance means.

In the public realm, for apology to have power it must be done by leaders who have credibility and a capacity to be considered representative, both by the group they are apologising on behalf of, and by the community to whom they are apologising. Timing is

important: there are particular moments when words of apology speak. Too soon and often the apology is not believed: the pain, hurt and anger of the victims appear not to have been taken seriously. Place is important, as is an audience willing to respect and hear the speaker. Apology also needs to be set in the context of a process of establishing a new relationship. *And* the words chosen are important. For apology to have power it should be about specifics, where possible, and not just generalities.

Demands for apology are often part of a claim for justice and respect. An acknowledgement that a wrong has been done is important. But demands for apology are often counter-productive and can feed resentment. They are frequently seen as an attempt to humiliate the other. Apologies best arise out of a process of free, honest and authentic reflection, and not from moral blackmail. Apologies - even murmurs of regret - should be received in a forgiving spirit with a lack of self righteousness by a community. After all everyone is a sinner, all groups have committed wrongs in their history. The aim should be new relationships, not moral (or other) victories.

The following are a few examples which show that apologies can make a serious impact on political relationships:

"As President of Russia, and on behalf of the Russian people and the Government. I would like to express my apology for these inhuman acts", (the Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, on internment of Japanese POWs after the second world war, October 12, 1993).

"I took this opportunity to express my deep remorse as well as to apologise for the fact that Japan's past actions had inflicted deep wounds on many people, including the former prisoners of war", (the Japanese Prime Minister, Morihiro Hosokawa, after meeting with John Major, September 20, 1993).

"If I could do anything about it, I would have liked to have avoided it. Yes, we say we are sorry", (President F. W. de Klerk on apartheid, April 29, 1993).

"We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We committed the murders. It was our ignorance and prejudice and failure to imagine these things done to us", (the Australian Prime Minister, Paul Keating, on the Aborigines, December 1992).

"I wanted on behalf of our people to ask for pardon for the terrible crime that was carried out in Germany's misused name", (the West German Chancellor, Willy Brandt, after kneeling before the memorial to the dead of the Warsaw ghetto, December 4, 1970).

Who could apologise in Northern Ireland? A few suggestions:

- Republican and loyalist paramilitaries for what they have done;
- The Unionist Parties for what happened in Northern between 1920 and 1969;
- The Protestant Churches for their complicity in anti-Catholic sectarianism and failure to raise their voices against sectarianism;
- The Catholic Church for what its regulations on mixed marriages did to the Protestant community;

- The main political parties in the Republic for their effective abandonment of the North up to 1969;
- The British Government for unjust actions by the security forces, for example, Bloody Sunday.

As individuals we are not guilty of acts we have not done or in which we have not been directly implicated. At the same time we belong to groups, communities and nations that have done things that were wrong, in the distant or more immediate past. Our history has imposed suffering on others and often brought benefits to ourselves. We cannot run away from this history and its consequences, for we are caught up in them, even if we are not personally guilty. The past affects present realities and relationships. Thus there is a solidarity in sin which involves the living and the dead This is the context for apology.

Apologies by leaders of nations or groups seek to acknowledge wrongs done. The importance of this acknowledgement is that it represents some sort of collective facing of the reality of what a particular community or nation has done. If the reality of what has been done is not faced we remain in a sense in a prison of our own making and cannot move forward. Our acknowledgement of what has happened, our sense of regret and our disapproval of past actions by our community enables us to conduct our relationships in the present in a more generous and just way.

Loyalist paramilitaries at the time of the loyalist ceasefire expressed "abject and sincere remorse" to the families of "innocent victims" for what they did. Cardinal Cahal Daly apologised to the British people in Canterbury Cathedral for the hurt inflicted on them by the Irish in response to an earlier initiative when the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, came to Christchurch Cathedral in Dublin to ask forgiveness of the Irish. These apologies were not without their controversies - about their credibility, about who is entitled to speak for whom, and so on. Nevertheless, they are important acknowledgements which signal new possibilities.

Justice

Justice is not only concerned with how we are treated but also with how others are treated. A true justice is grounded in respect for the other and in mutual responsibility. This justice seeks to take the other into account - their needs, identity, values.

Justice in society is achieved only as some decent balance or sharing of power is achieved. Such an order is normally only achieved with pressure and conflict. It often involves anger, defiance and repudiation. Struggles for justice are usually met with resistance. The way in which struggles for justice are carried out and how they are responded to are issues of critical importance, and determine whether spirals of violence are created or not. This is why active non-violence is to be preferred. It reduces hatred and bitterness, takes the opponent into account and allows for creativity in the struggle.

Power in the public arena relates to: political decision making, economics and cultural and national expression. In Northern Ireland issues such as power-sharing, fair employment and parity of esteem are of major importance. So is the issue of taking responsibility for the working and well being of the whole Northern Irish society, its policing, the agencies of the State, etc. That, too, is part of justice.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are no substitutes for justice. We can never seek for less than a justice that treats us properly. But justice without forgiveness and reconciliation will not enable us to emerge from the dark shadows of injustice and past wrongs. And justice is always imperfect and fragile.

Trust

Paragraph 14 of the Mitchell Commission Report referring to the resolution of the decommissioning issue makes it clear that the key problem is the absence of trust. The Report says:

"Common to many of our meetings were arguments, steeped in history as to why the other side cannot be trusted. As a consequence, even well-intentioned acts are often viewed with suspicion and hostility". Northern Irish society is pervaded by distrust and as we say in *Breaking Down the Enmity*:

"Fear, enmity, resentment and insecurity are at the heart of inter-communal relationships. We carry resentment from our experience of being a victim and we also have the fear of becoming a victim. Identity and internal cohesion have come from the enemies that have surrounded us. As long as we remain afraid of each other we arm ourselves and live defensive lives. Resentment leads to thoughts of revenge. The other dominates our lives. Whenever fear, enmity, resentment, and insecurity are rampant there is division, and this leads to hatred, violence, destruction and war" (p.141).

What is Required to Create Trust?

In our context some of the factors required to create trust are:

- A willingness not to destroy the other (essential to this is the decision not to use violence);
- A willingness to understand the fears and sense of threat that the other community has of us and to seek to take them into account, even if they are thought to be groundless;
- A willingness to seek to do things that will reduce fear and threat;
- Showing by signs, words and actions that we want the situation to change;
- A willingness to treat the other side with respect and to avoid humiliating them;
- A willingness to meet, to listen, to talk;
- A willingness to be bound by promises and agreements (implicit and explicit) which we will seek to keep. We have obligations towards the other community and we need to show there is reliability in the keeping of promises and agreements. It seems to us that commitment to the Mitchell Commission's Six Principles of Democracy and Non-Violence is a necessary basis for developing trust in Northern Ireland politics;
- A willingness to take the interests and identities of the other community into account;
- Some shared ground or togetherness that will enable conflict and differences to be dealt with;
- A willingness to develop a relationship with other groups, parties and individuals and to cooperate where possible (e.g. in local Councils).

Trust is often tentative and it grows only gradually. It is usually imperfect which is why groups require protection and external guarantors. Trust is a risk. Completely satisfactory guarantees can never be obtained that the other group and their leaders are trustworthy. Political agreements always involve risk and uncertainty.

Confidence-Building Measures

Confidence-building is a precursor to the development of trust. It offers the possibility of trust growing. The Mitchell Commission suggested confidence-building measures in relation to:

- The decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, some of which, it was suggested, could take place on a step by step basis during the process of all-party negotiations;
- The early termination of paramilitary activities, including surveillance, targeting and "punishment" beatings and killings;
- The provision of information on the status of missing persons and the lifting of threats against those who have been forced to leave their communities;
- Continued action by the Governments on prisoners;
- A review of the situation regarding legally registered weapons;
- Continued progress towards more balanced representation in the police force;
- An "elective process" which was broadly acceptable and "with an appropriate mandate and within the three strand structure";
- An early implementation of the proposed review of emergency legislation;
- Social and economic progress.

The Mitchell Commission's suggestions were presented in the context of loyalist and republican ceasefires. They highlight what is required to develop a situation of ceasefire.

Other issues that remain of particular importance in developing confidence are:

- A Bill of Rights and other means of securing the protection of the interests and identities of minorities and individuals;
- A reformulation of Articles II and III of the Republic's Constitution. This would help reduce Unionist fears, as would the development of greater pluralism in Southern society;
- Measures to allow Nationalists to express their Irish identity in ways that do not conflict with the status of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom. Both communities need to give thought to what this might mean in practice;
- Policing, especially its ethos, structures and accountability.

Trust in the Community

Because this is a low trust society events like the Canary Wharf bombing are all the more devastating. We had dared to hope that things might be different. It makes acts of trust and risk-taking all the more difficult in future.

As a community in Northern Ireland we need situations and places where we can experience trust with people of the other community. In a trusting relationship we experience a new reality. Without some personal experience of trust, it is difficult to believe talk about the possibility of trust and new relationships at the community level.

There has been a growth in recent years of places and opportunity where trust can develop, created and sustained by the many reconciliation groups recorded in the directory of the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council. The results of this work blossomed when many lost some of their fear after the loyalist and republican ceasefires.

Political Realities

Forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation are not words that are normally on the lips of politicians. Politics is concerned with power and who exercised it over whom. Often it is about mobilising support to gain victories over opponents. Politics is usually about building up strengths, applying pressure and minimising vulnerabilities and weaknesses. The skills required in this sort of politics are calculation, stamina and the capacity to wait for opportunity.

Very often politicians see a need to obscure or conceal important changes in direction and policy. "Let your yea be yea and your nay be nay" is rarely seen as a political virtue. Obscuring important changes in political direction may be seen as necessary to allow a politician to retain credibility with the people he or she represents. Fudging, or the creative avoidance of particular issues, may also be seen as important in moving situations on and of enabling significant groups to be brought into the political process. One example of this in Irish politics is Fianna Fail's "taking" of the Oath of Allegiance to the Constitution in 1927 which allowed it admittance to the Dail. Through this "fudge" Fianna Fail came ultimately to accept its full share of responsibility for the maintenance of the State.

It may be that a measure of healing is possible in society without apology. Nelson Mandela, for instance, never disavowed what the armed wing of the ANC did in the freedom struggle. What happened may still be seen as a regrettable "necessity" but there is now, for a variety of reasons, a new situation with new possibilities. Nevertheless, it is vital that organisations that have been involved in violence or close to those involved show by their words and deeds that they are making a decisive change in direction and pursuing a democratic and non-violent way forward. That is what is required for inclusion in the political process. There can be no ultimate fudging and evasion of this issue. An example of such a change might be the end of punishment beatings. Not least this would free up more resources for research into pain control, thereby helping to ease the sufferings of some victims of violence.

Politicians represent communities, with all their concerns, hurts, fears, enmities and aspirations. There is a necessary self-interest in the need to get elected. It is not natural to take other communities and their interests into account. Politics involves competition, rivalry and conflict. Politicians operate in a hard world where fear and the self interest of communities are the primary motivations, rather than altruism or visions of a different society. Yet, politics can only work when politicians use power forbearingly, where they sustain the fabric of the community and allow a place for opponents; and where electorates give room to their politicians to give leadership, recognise the burdens which responsible politicians carry and the forgiveness they require. This is why we pray for them.

Politicians are representative figures. At its best this can mean a politician accepting responsibility for the well-being of a community with a focus on "the future and the responsibility towards the future" (the German sociologist Max Weber in his essay 'Politics as a Vocation'). In the same essay Weber speaks of politicians requiring above all "trained relentlessness in viewing the realities of life, and the ability to face such realities and to measure up to them inwardly". This facing of reality and acceptance of responsibility for a community's future can mean reassessing where a community is and seeking to find new ways forward, leading to new political agreements. In this process, aspects of forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation can have a political reality. Paul Taylor, correspondent for the Washington Post in South Africa during the first national election said "I happened to cover a

society at a big time with figures that rose to the occasion. They exerted moral leadership and brought frightened people across a great divide. They saw the possibilities of the human spirit".

African culture in South Africa had a strong capacity to forgive. It also has strong political leadership. In Northern Ireland we have had individuals with quite astonishing capacity to forgive. But we have had communities marked by bitterness, resentment and enmity. This has fed into our politics. We need not only strong political leadership but a profound change of heart and mind within our communities which will enable us to start anew.

The Churches

Those of us who belong to Churches are challenged to bow our heads in acknowledgement of the substantial contribution our Churches have made to the conflict. Over many years we have fed sectarianism by defining our own denomination's identity primarily in opposition to the other tradition. Given this history we in the Churches are therefore obliged today to lead in the practice of forgiveness, repentance, justice and reconciliation.

But our Churches will have no credibility in the field of reconciliation in so far as they regard the call to seek healing of their own divisions as an optional extra. While differences will remain, what is important is that they are contained in a relationship of love and respect, believing that we do indeed belong together. The integrity of each tradition has to be taken seriously as well as the need for all traditions to be renewed and transformed by the Holy Spirit. But to refuse to meet together is to remain captive to sectarianism. Even where there are deep theological differences human meeting and friendship are possible. All Churches need to ask what proportion of their time and resources they give to building relationships with other traditions. Then they will see their own level of commitment to Christ's call to reconciliation.

It is vital that Churches give constructive support to politicians and develop communication and discussion so that the common good of the whole of society is promoted and not just the particular concerns of one community. They can also affirm accommodations reached, e.g. over marches and processions.

In *Breaking Down the Enmity* we issued the following challenges, which are still relevant:

- It would help if the Catholic Church took more seriously the deep-seated distrust among Protestants of Catholic ecclesiastical power. Changes along the lines suggest in *Towards an Island that Works* such as offering communion to inter-church couples when requested, or not putting obstacles in the way of those who wish to give experiments in integrated education a fair trial, or altering some of the rules for mixed marriages, would be helpful;
- There is a need for Protestant Churches to examine honestly their anti-Catholic bias and to show some understanding of the sense of grievance and injustice of many Catholics. Support for the security forces should be balanced by concern for those occasions when there are abuses by them;
- The Gospel makes it a priority to seek reconciliation with our enemies and reach out to people who are not like us. What does this say about our various activities and practices in all our churches and how we approach and maintain particular doctrines and views of truth? (p.136).

A Christian Perspective

Central to the Gospel was Christ's teaching on unconditional forgiveness. Modern scholars agree that in relation to forgiveness Jesus only departed from the practice of his time in one aspect: he forgave unconditionally. The Dutch Dominican theologian, Andre Lascaris says:

"When Jesus started his public life, he only brought about a seemingly minimal change: he accepted people into his company who were sinners and were not able to fulfil the demands of the Torah. He forgave unconditionally. He offered communication to people without asking anything from them beforehand. He transcended the fundamental law of justice, the law of reciprocity. According to St Luke Jesus forgave his enemies on the cross 'for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34). This same power to forgive unconditionally he gave to his disciples (John 20:23)".

This change is at the heart of Christianity. Jesus offered a way back into the community for people who had no way back because they could not fulfil the demands of the Law. He did this through offering unconditional forgiveness.

The phrase from the Lord's Prayer "forgive us our trespasses..." meant originally "forgive us our financial debts". In Jesus' time there was huge improvement because of debt. The remission of debt offered a way back into the community for people who were being crushed by it. The demands of the Law and the demands of debt were major oppressive realities at the time of Jesus, and they seemed to be linked in Jesus' mind.

Clearly a legal or a banking system cannot be run successfully if people always know that they will get off or avoid paying their debts. But if we do not allow people a way back when the legal or financial system is oppressing them we are in essence saying that we prefer them to be destroyed.

The God revealed in Scripture wishes to offer people a way back to Him. He seeks to provide a new future and a way forward for people dominated by the past and its consequences. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the sign and promise of this. When the divine reality of forgiveness and new life is given, experienced, grasped or even glimpsed we have the possibility of forgiving others. We are able to be forgiving because we ourselves have been forgiven.

This is why forgiveness has the priority, why there is always inclusion before exclusion, and acceptance and grace before judgment. Because of the undeserved gratuity of God we dare not ask God for what we deserve. The Lord's Prayer asks us to ask forgiveness of God only to the extent that we are willing to offer it to others. Therefore we must act mercifully and forgivingly to others. (We have discussed the subject of forgiveness at greater length in 'Burying Our Dead').

There is a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness is our side of the process: we forgive someone who has injured us. Only we can forgive; no-one can do it on our behalf. It may and often does lead to reconciliation. But not always. Why? Because the other party may not say "sorry", may not repent, or is not willing to accept our forgiveness.

Repentance requires change. The person who commits wrong has to do more than say "sorry". He or she has to turn towards the person they have wronged and try to make amends. That is what the Bible means by repentance. It involves a willingness to enter into new and just relationships. Reconciliation only happens when both aspects - forgiveness and repentance - come together in a new and more just relationship.

We move by means of analogy from the inter-personal - where forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation are normally located - to the societal where we speak of the social embodiment of forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation. Such a movement is valid and, nevertheless, there are limits to the scope of the analogy. Individuals cannot be compelled to forgive or repent or be reconciled with their enemies, even if there is a communal disposition towards forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation and a political settlement broadly acceptable to a large majority of people. These may facilitate interpersonal forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation, but they do not guarantee it. Some may not repent and others may not be able to forgive. Coercion may have to be applied on minorities who will not accept a political settlement which a significant majority willingly accepts. There is a limit to what communal effort and politics can achieve. There always remains an area of transcendent activity and concern which takes us beyond what politics can achieve. This is particularly applicable in the case of forgiveness.

The presence of forgiveness points to the transcendent concern and activity of God. It shows us the world on the "far side of revenge". Forgiveness is indispensable as we seek to deal with the hurts and enmities that have been generated over the years. Similarly, we are required to face the reality of what we have done and seek to act differently so that trustworthy relationships and a new justice are established.

Therefore,

"In the deserts of the heart.

Let the healing fountain start". (W. H. Auden, *In Memory of W. B. Yeats*).