Forgiven 2.

Forgiven and Unforgiven

Simon Wiesenthal couldn't, Corrie Ten Boom could. Both concentration camp survivors, they reacted very differently to requests for forgiveness from their Nazi persecutors.

The requests came in very different circumstances although the two men seeking forgiveness appear to have been genuinely repentant for what they had personally done.

This week, in the second of our four-week series on forgiveness, we are looking at the negative side of the coin as well as the positive side.

The question of unforgiveness is a fraught one. Are some things so awful they are unforgiveable either by God or by us? I'll return to that later.

But I want to start by taking a look at our Genesis reading where Joseph's brothers are living with what is for them a real and deep fear that he will not forgive them for what they had done to him many years previously.

The Joseph story starts 14 chapters earlier when we learn that his brothers hate him because he is so obviously his father's favourite – a scenario that has been lived out in many families down the ages. That only got worse when he tells them of his dream that in the future they would bow down to him.

Eventually they plot to kill him and claim he'd been killed by wild animals. They back off that idea and instead sell him off to the Ishmaelites and split the 20 pieces of silver between themselves, return home and manipulate their father into believing that Joseph had indeed been killed by a wild animal.

It's just shocking isn't it and hard to stomach. Fast forward years later to chapter 45 where Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and basically says what they did was ok because it was part of God's plan.

He gets all his brothers, their families and his father, all 70 of them, to come to Egypt where there is enough food for everyone, unlike in Israel where there is a severe famine.

17 years later Jacob dies and still Joseph's brothers are petrified deep down that Joseph hasn't really forgiven them and will pay them back for what they had done to him. So they lie again, saying their father had told them to ask Joseph for forgiveness.

Joseph's reply is short and to the point. Am I in the place of God? But what I think is important is that Joseph doesn't brush over the seriousness of what they did all those years ago when he was a callow teenager. Only after he reminds them of what they had planned does he tell them what he had told them when they first met up again – that his ending up in Egypt was all part of God's greater plan.

In many ways, this story plays into some of our own deepest fears, in particular that sometimes we find it harder to forgive ourselves for what we have done wrong than it is for others to forgive us for the same offence.

We can feel such a sense of shame and embarrassment when we recall some of the things we said and did when we were younger that we find it not only almost impossible to forgive ourselves but also to believe that God has forgiven us or the people we have hurt have forgiven us.

Yet that is why exactly Jesus went to the cross. He died so that our sins can be forgiven when we repent of them. And the Bible tells us quite clearly that when we repent and start again in a better direction – repenting means more than saying sorry and carrying on as before – we are forgiven and what's more God doesn't remember our sins anymore and the slate is wiped clean .

As we get older we complain/acknowledge that our memory isn't as good as it used to be. We should be really, really grateful that God appears to have a very limited memory. It's almost as if it's too good to be true.

I pray that if any of us is burdened by an inability to forgive ourselves for something we did in the past that we would be set free by accepting in our hearts that God has truly forgiven – and forgotten.

When Satan tries to entrap us by allowing those thoughts to pop up again, each time we need to remind ourselves that we are forgiven.

And it works the other way too. Amy Orr-Ewing, a public theologian, reproduces in her latest book, called Forgiveness, the testimony of an American

Army officer who was physically and emotionally abused by his peers when he was a boy soldier. Worse, nothing was done about it when he reported it to people who should have known better.

The only way he coped, he said, was by holding on to his belief that God is good. Over time he has learned to forgive his tormentors. BUT, and it is a big but, every time unwanted memories and flashbacks come into his head, he has to forgive the particular individual, individuals all over again. It can be a never-ending process. And often we need help to learn how to forgive someone who has caused us life-altering harm.

Let me now turn to the Gospel. It starts with Peter asking how many times he should forgive. He suggests seven times, which was more than twice the Jewish tradition.

No says Jesus, in the kingdom forgiveness is generous beyond measure, in other words forgiveness should be our default. Why? Because we are a forgiven people, as I suggested earlier.

Jesus then goes on to tell the parable of the unforgiving servant. The servant in question owes his master 10,000 talents. At the time talent was the biggest monetary unit and 10,000 was basically the largest number used.

So we are talking a vast sum of money, Millions at a minimum, maybe billions. Quite how a servant should accumulate such a vast debt is never explained, but then Jesus was never one to bother about exaggerating if it helped make a point.

Unsurprisingly, the servant doesn't have that sort of money to hand so his master orders him, his family and his possessions to be sold to get a fraction of his money back.

The servant promises to repay the debt if only he can have some time. Rather than giving him time, the Lord/the master gives him a get out of jail free card by cancelling the entire debt. Talk about forgiveness beyond our understanding.

And then Jesus turns the parable on its head and our jaws drop at the extent of the unforgiveness shown by the servant towards a fellow slave who owes him a minute fraction of the debt that has just been wiped out.

And the point – don't expect to be forgiven by God if we do not forgive our brother and sister from our hearts.

It's an echo of the Lord's Prayer where we ask God to forgive our debts/sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Indeed every week in our Sunday service we specifically ask three times for forgiveness for the things we have done wrong.

And the cross tells us that the answer is yes, we will be forgiven – on one condition. That we too are willing to forgive.

That's true, but forgiveness can't be cheap grace as it's sometimes called. In other words it isn't pretending that wounds don't hurt or that being a Christian just requires us to let bygones be bygones.

Forgiveness doesn't mean nothing needs to change. Rather, its starting point is the acknowledgement of real harm. Forgiveness isn't a sticking plaster. It goes hand-in-hand with repentance and transformation.

Nor is it synonymous with healing or reconciliation. We can forgive someone but sometimes we need to sever our ties with the offender even after we've forgiven them. And only rarely is it quick and easy.

The thing is, we cannot take forgiveness for granted. Forgiveness, as the word suggests, is a gift from the person who has been harmed to the person who has harmed them. We have no right to demand forgiveness and no right to assume we will be forgiven just because we have said sorry and asked to be forgiven.

Forgiving doesn't mean forgetting, but it does mean letting go of those resentments, those little flashes of anger that suddenly spring unwanted into our minds. And letting go can be hard, really hard, because of course we know that we were right and justified.

As someone once said unforgiveness is like drinking rat poison and expecting the other person to die. Waiting for an apology that never comes is very stressful. Research has shown that forgiveness is actually good for both our mental and physical wellbeing

I said at the start that I would return to the issue of whether some things are unforgiveable.

Earlier this year Nick was telling Chris, Joy and myself about a new book by Stephen Cherry titled Unforgiveable? Stephen was Sue Crosfield's son-in-law and the recently retired Dean of King's College Cambridge.

In it Cherry argues that there are some sins that are unforgivable, citing child abuse as a prime example. I can see what he is getting at, but I have a problem with his thesis.

Jesus tells us there is only one unforgivable sin and that is blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. What Cherry seems to be saying that there are other sins that are unforgivable – at least in human terms. But where does one draw the line?

Take just one example: King David – a murderer and an adulterer. But while he was forgiven by God and became Israel's greatest king, he didn't get off scot-free. God's sense of justice is even sharper than ours and David paid a heavy price for his failings. Should he have remained unforgiven? God clearly didn't think so.

The reason David was forgiven was because he genuinely repented of what he had done. One only has to read the psalms to see that.

Simon Wiesenthal, an Austrian Jew who survived the concentration camps and who was most famous for tracking down Nazi war criminals, wrote a book on the possibilities and limits of forgiveness called The Sunflower.

In it he writes of a time when he was still in the concentration camp and asked to go to the deathbed of a young Nazi, a Catholic, who wanted absolution from a Jew for an appalling crime he had committed against Jews trapped in a house. Wiesenthal walked out without saying a word.

Yet he wondered for years whether he had done the right thing. His book delves into the dilemma by asking people, many of them well known, to reflect in writing on his decision and as you might expect there was a wide spectrum of opinion.

Corrie Ten Boom's case was different. Sent to Ravensbrück concentration camp for hiding Jews in her home in Holland, she returned to Germany in 1947 to

preach a message of forgiveness. After her talk a former prison guard at the camp – who by the way did not recognise her – came up to her afterwards and held out his hand asking for forgiveness.

She knew she had to shake his hand and forgive him. In her book No Hiding Place she said it was the hardest thing she ever had to do, but she did it, principally on the basis that she knew God forgives us to the extent that we forgive others. All she could do, she wrote, was lift her hand and ask Jesus to provide the necessary feeling – which he did.

She also reflected that those Dutch victims of Nazi cruelty who had managed to find forgiveness in their hearts had managed to rebuild their lives no matter their physical scars. Those who hadn't managed to find forgiveness had remained invalids, she wrote.

I know that I have found it hard, very hard at times, to forgive those people who have harmed me in life-altering ways in the past. Yet I hope I have finally learned that while forgiving them has been costly, not forgiving them has been even more costly.

I pray for those of you who might feel trapped in a cycle of unforgiveness that the Holy Spirit will remind you of how much you have been forgiven and set you free.