

So You Can't Forgive?

'Forgiving is a journey. It is wrong to say that Christian forgiving is only about loving our enemies. It is about more than that. It is also about challenging the wrongdoers, and about separation.' Brian Lennon SJ.

'Were you ever treated really unjustly in your family, or at work, or elsewhere?

If you were, do you remember your anger, the fire in your belly, the tension in your whole body, the things you wanted to do to the people who had hurt you? Did you want to punish them? To get them to recognise the harm they had done? To force them to admit they were wrong?

When you were really angry did anyone say to you 'This is no way to be going on. We should forgive and love one another.' Did that make you even more angry?

In Northern Ireland, during the Troubles, people whose loved one had just been murdered were often asked by the media 'Do you forgive the murderers?'

A friend of mine, who works as a counsellor with people caught up in family rows - some have been sexually abused - once said to me that those with no religion seem to make more progress than those with religion, because they have less guilt.

There's something wrong about that. Our faith is supposed to help us, not hinder us.

If someone does something really bad to you, not only is it understandable that you are angry, it is right that you are angry. Accepting this is one thing we can do to help ourselves.

A second way is to get away from those who hurt us. This can sometimes, but not always, mean physical separation. But whether it is physical or not it needs to be done psychologically.

The alternative is to spend our whole life thinking about those who have hurt us. In Northern Ireland I know many who spend more time thinking about the wrongdoers than they do about the loved one they have lost. If we get the wrongdoers out of our heads, then we can have time and space to start living our lives again.

Of course it's easy to say that. It's much harder to do it. But the ideas we have in our head can help or hinder our journey. If we are told to love our enemies, that can help to keep them in our heads. If we can separate ourselves from them, then we will see things differently.

But is all this not against the teaching of Our Lord? Did Our Lord not say 'Love your enemies?' Of course he did, but the Scriptures also tell us other things.

In the Old Testament we are told that when Abraham left Egypt he went to a place called Bethel. By this stage the people had grown so numerous that there were too many of them for the land, and they started fighting among themselves. So Abraham told his nephew Lot to choose the land either to the East or to the West and to take his people there. Lot chose the East, so Abraham went his separate way to the West.

When Jesus was travelling to Jerusalem he wanted to stay in a Samaritan village. But the Samaritans were enemies of the Jews and would not receive him. So he went on to another village. He did not try to change their minds.

He told his disciples if a village would not welcome them to 'shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them' (Lk.9:5). He constantly challenged the Pharisees because of the burdens they put on people's shoulders, and he walked away from them.

When he went into the Temple he was filled with rage because they had turned his Father's house into a market place.

Many who have been hurt think Our Lord tells them to leave their gift at the altar and first be reconciled with the wrongdoer. In fact the text (Matt.5:24) says that it is the wrongdoer who should leave their gift at the altar and seek reconciliation, not the person wronged.

Anger against wrong-doing and separation was very much part of Our Lord's life and teaching. Yet, because of a misunderstanding of what is involved in forgiving, many feel guilty at their anger and at their desire to separate themselves from those who hurt them.

Forgiving is a journey, and dealing with anger and separation is two stages in it.

That, however, is not the whole story. Our Lord not only did not give up on those who harmed him, he died for them. His anger against people was never of the destructive kind. He always wanted the best for people. And, yes, he does call on us to love our enemies.

Yet it is wrong to say that Christian forgiving is only about loving our enemies. It is about more than that. It is also about challenging wrongdoers and separation.

The journey is also difficult. But remember that Our Lord calls us only to do our best - no more and no less. What that involves will be different for each of us.

I will never be able to climb Mount Everest, but I can walk a mile or two. So let's do what we can on the journey of separating ourselves in our heads and hearts from those who wrong us.

Having done that we may eventually be able to make some moves towards wishing them well.'

(Taken from a recent edition of the Catholic Messenger)