

In the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit,
Amen.

I want to speak on the theme of forgiveness, which would seem to me to be at the heart of any service of healing and reconciliation. What do you think of this quote from George MacDonald? "It may be infinitely worse to refuse to forgive than to murder, because the latter may be an impulse of a moment of heat, whereas the former is a cold and deliberate choice of the heart." Forgiveness is an unnatural act. It's always a scandal. I had a vicar once who loved to talk about the scandal of forgiveness. It's scandalous because there's always a sense of somebody getting away with it. If they're forgiven, they're off scot-free, they don't get what they deserve, and so forgiveness goes against the grain.

There was an old man lying on his deathbed, and he was deeply troubled by a longstanding feud he had with a neighbor, so he called the neighbor in, and he made overtures of peace. Then the two men shook hands, and as the visitor left the room, the old man roused himself from his bed and said, "Remember, if I get better, this quarrel still stands." The natural thing to do is not to forgive. That's an extreme example, but ... And I'm not sure is true, but there is a story that's true; it must be true because I read it in an English newspaper. It was about two sisters, and they lived together, and they fell out, and one of the sisters took a piece of chalk and drew a line down the middle of the house, and they lived for years on either side of that piece of chalk.

Frank Reed, I don't know if you know who he is. He was an American, he was held hostage in Beirut with Terry Waite many years ago, who was ... Worked on behalf of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and you may remember they were taken hostage. And Frank Reed said that there were several months when he didn't speak to one of the other hostages because of a minor falling-out. They didn't speak for months. Even though they were actually chained together for that time, they still didn't speak. The natural way of unforgiveness causes cracks to open between mother and daughter, father and son, sister and sister, prisoners, tribes,

nations. Left alone, cracks, and the resulting chasms of ungrace which they give rise to, get wider and wider. And there's only one remedy: the frail rope bridge of forgiveness.

We know we all want forgiveness, but it's still very, very hard to forgive. There's a story told of a Spanish father who fell out with his teenage son, and the son had run away from home, and the father began to search for him. And finally, in one last desperate attempt to be reconciled, he put an ad in the paper which read this: "Dear Paco, meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon. All is forgiven. I love you. Your father." And the next day at noon, there were 250 Pacos waiting outside the newspaper office, all seeking the forgiveness and love of their father.

We know we should forgive, but it's still hard, it's unnatural. As Auden said, "I and the public know what all schoolchildren learn: Those to whom evil is done do evil in return." That's the way of the world. The law of nature admits no forgiveness. Do squirrels forgive cats for chasing them up trees? Do dolphins forgive sharks for eating their playmates? Of course not. It's a dog-eat-dog world, not a dog-forgive-dog world.

So when Peter saunters up to Jesus and says, "So, how many times should I forgive my brother," he adds in a loud voice so everyone can hear, "seven times?" He thinks he's being ... Making some grand gesture, because there's a verse in the Old Testament that says you should forgive people three times. So Peter's done the math, he's doubled that and added one, so he's saying, "Seven times?" as if that's a very noble thing to do. But Jesus bursts his bubble, brings him back down to earth, and says, "No, not seven times, 77 times," which of course is meant to be an enormous number, speaking of infinity, i.e., you go on forgiving. You can't put a limit on forgiveness.

And it might be said that Jesus' teaching on forgiveness is perhaps the most radical element of his teaching. Perhaps. It's certainly one of the most demanding. As I say, it's an unforgiving world full of ungrace. Jesus requires, demands a response of forgiveness, that we go against the grain. So urgent

is the need for forgiveness that it takes precedence, according to Jesus, over religious duties. He says, "If you're offering a gift at the altar, and there remember your brother has something against you, leave your gift in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother or your sister, then come and offer your gift." That's how important it is. Then there's that really heavy bit at the end of the parable: "This is how my Heavenly Father will treat you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Now, the question I'd ask you to consider today is this: Is Jesus just an impractical idealist, or does his teaching on forgiveness actually work? Does it make sense? I'm not interested so much in how we should forgive, but why. That's the question I want to leave you with. Why? Why should we forgive? It's such a difficult, unnatural thing to do; why should we bother? And I've got three reasons, three reasons why we should forgive.

Number one: We forgive because we ourselves are forgiven. As Christians, we're a forgiven and a forgiving people, and I'm mindful of standing in front of a cross, which of course is the center of our attention this week. And the heart of our thinking about the cross is that it's there that we're reconciled to God, that whatever it was that held us back, which separated us from God, is dealt with on the cross. Through the cross, we are reconciled to God.

There was a Catholic priest in the Philippines. He was much loved, and his parishioners wouldn't believe that he carried around, deep within his heart, the guilt of a sin that he'd committed a long time previously. And there was a woman in the church who had visions, and actually, to be honest, he found her quite irritating, because she'd always come up to him with images that she'd seen, her visions. Now, one day, in a moment of irritability, he said, "Look, if you really think you get these visions from God, ask God to give you a vision of the sin I committed in seminary." She said, "Okay." So a few weeks later, he saw the woman, and he said, "Did you ask God what the sin was?" She said, "Yes." He said, "Well, did you get a vision? What did He say?" And she said, "God said, 'I don't

remember,'" which I think is something true of all of us. We carry around guilt which actually, God forgave, forgot long ago.

There's something there about needing to forgive ourselves, and we'll come later in this service to the cross, and we can claim there that promise of forgiveness that Jesus has won for us. We need to let guilt go, confident in what Jesus has done for us on the cross. And as we know ourselves to be forgiven, so sometimes it's easier to forgive others. In the parable that we heard Jesus say today, "God is the merciful king who forgives at great cost to himself. "That's the image of the cross. Our forgiveness is won at the cost of Jesus's self-sacrifice. And he taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

And there's one more thing we learn from God's act of forgiveness. It's that He took the initiative. God made the first move. It says in Paul that "whilst we were still sinners, God died for us in Christ." That's why we baptize infants. We don't wait for them to achieve a certain level of understanding or holiness; in our tradition, we baptize them when they're babies, before they've done anything to deserve God's favor, because we think that grace is such that God reaches out to us. He takes the initiative. His gift, or the offer of His gift, is always there before us. God is a God of grace who breaks the cycle of unforgiveness by making the first move.

You won't know this, but there was an Irish football manager called Mick McCarthy. In fact, I have to translate this story; you don't even understand what I mean by "football." Soccer. He fell out spectacularly at the World Cup with his captain, which ...much to the amusement of all the English soccer fans. And a few weeks later, Mick McCarthy said, "I'll speak to Roy" — this is in response to a journalist — "I'll speak to Roy, so long as he makes the first move." That isn't forgiveness. Forgiveness is making the first move, taking the initiative, being the one to say, "I forgive." Forgiving someone means taking the initiative.

The second reason to forgive is this: If we don't forgive, we're enslaving ourselves. There's an old

Chinese proverb, "Whoever opts for revenge should dig two graves." It's better to forgive and smile than remember and be sad. There was a Dutch woman who you might have heard of called Corrie ten Boom, a great writer, and she lived through the Second World War. She actually went into the concentration camps, and they were a great help to the Jews who were trying to escape.

And I want to read something that she wrote when, some years after the war, she came face to face with one of the guards who had actually been in the concentration camp where she'd been, and mistreated her. And she wrote this, on seeing this guard, former guard: "I stood there with coldness clutching at my heart, but I know that the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. I prayed, 'Jesus, help me.' Woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me and I experienced an incredible thing. The current started in my shoulder, raced down into my arms and sprang into our clasped hands. Then this warm reconciliation seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. 'I forgive you, brother,' I cried with my whole heart. For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard, the former prisoner. I have never known the love of God so intensely as I did in that moment."

To forgive is to set a prisoner free, and to discover the prisoner was you. In A Christmas Carol, Marley's ghost says to Scrooge, "We mustn't drag the chain of the past with us wherever we go." Forgiveness, forgiving someone, breaks that chain. Forgiveness is liberating not just for those we forgive, but primarily for us who do the forgiving. Too many people are eaten up by bitterness, and the message of Jesus is "let it go."

When I was writing this talk a few weeks ago, I went round to a parishioner's house, and they were someone who lives a long, long way away — I think they must have the record for living furthest away — and there was a ... One of his friends was around the table, and ... Who doesn't come to church and lives a long way away, and she asked me what I did, and so I told her, and then she said, "Well, what do you do all day?" as people often ask

me, and I said, "Oh, well, you know, I'm working on a talk on forgiveness at the moment." And she said, "Ah, forgiveness, that's an important topic." And she went on — and I'm not joking — for 20 minutes, listing the terrible things that her brother had done to her, telling me why it was impossible, and no one would even suggest that it would be right for her to forgive her brother, because that would be clearly ridiculous, because he'd been so bad to her.

And this diatribe went on for 20 minutes. I felt like saying, "Well, you should come to hear my talk. It's for people like you." But it reminded me that forgiveness is a real issue. All of us have issues with forgiveness, either receiving forgiveness or being forgiven. When Leo Tolstoy married his wife Sonya, he rather foolishly confessed to her ... He confessed too many details of his sexual past. He said far too much, and Sonya could forgive his adolescent flings, but not his affair with Axinya, a peasant woman who continued to work on the Tolstoy estate.

And Tolstoy's wife wrote this in her diary for January the 14th, 1909: "He" — Tolstoy" — "relishes that peasant wench with her strong female body and her sunburnt legs, she allures him just as powerfully now as she did all those years ago." Sonya wrote those words of Axinya when she was a woman of 80. She'd carried that burden all those years. That jealousy had eaten her up for decades. We don't need to be like that. Those words were written by a woman whose marriage was ruined by years of resentment. Her habit of bitterness had taken its toll. Let's look to break the habit we all have of not forgiving.

Finally, most briefly, the third reason that we should forgive is actually the one I find most compelling: We should forgive, because what's the alternative? The truth is that unforgiveness is less preferable to forgiving. That came across to me very powerfully recently when I heard two men speak, and you may well have heard these men. They're two older gentlemen. One lost a son, who was at college, and when he was at college, he was delivering pizzas as a holiday job, and he was shot and killed by a gang who had as a rite of initiation

you had to kill somebody, so they called up a pizza delivery company and just shot him when he came to the door. And the other man ... Well, one man was the father of the one who'd been shot, and the other man was the father of the boy who'd shot him. So one had been murdered, and the other one was a murderer, and in a sense, they'd both lost their sons, because the murderer was in prison for decades.

And these two men, they're from San Diego, and they've become friends, and they've set up a charity, and they go round speaking about the dangers of being in gangs to young people, and the dangers of violence. And that's a ... I mean, to hear them talk is an amazing story and example of forgiveness, and they go around changing young lives. But what's the alternative? They could have spent years consumed by bitterness and darkness and negativity, but they chose the hard path of forgiveness, which surely is a better option than the alternative. So yes, talking of forgiveness can sound schmaltzy and hopelessly idealistic, but really, what's the alternative to forgiving? Show me a better way that doesn't involve a large element of forgiveness.

So I'll leave it there. Three reasons to forgive: We ourselves are forgiven, forgiveness frees us from being slave to past hurts, and there's no better alternative.