

“Be Holy, for I, the Lord Your God Am Holy”

Just before ten to nine on Thursday July 7th, 2005, twenty-four year old Jenny Nicholson ended her phone call to her boyfriend as the eastbound Circle Line train pulled into Paddington Underground station. Seconds later she was dead, killed by a bomb blast in a series of simultaneous explosions across the London underground system that claimed the lives of fifty other people as part of a concerted terrorist attack.

Some months later Jenny’s mother, Julie, an Anglican Vicar, stepped down from her post as priest of the parish of St Aidan with St George in Bristol. She said that she had been unable to forgive her daughter’s killer and could, therefore, no longer uphold the Christian precept to love your enemies and forgive those who have hurt you and could not, in conscience, therefore, preach forgiveness. This made her position as a priest untenable and hypocritical. Rev. Nicholson said:

It’s very difficult for me to stand behind an altar and celebrate the Eucharist...and lead people in words of peace and reconciliation and forgiveness when I feel very far from that myself. So for the time being, that wound in me is having to heal...for me that's about integrity.

I’m sure we can all understand her position and sympathise absolutely with her.

Jesus’ call to forgive is at the heart of today’s Gospel:

You have learnt how it was said: You must love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say this to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; in this way you will be [children] of your Father in heaven.

That is a very, very difficult teaching and it’s all very well for me, as a priest, to stand here and say we should all be prepared to forgive those who have hurt us ‘as many a seventy times seven times’, as Jesus tells Peter, but it is only those who have suffered great loss, hurt, reputational damage, violence or injury who have the right and the experience to speak about forgiveness and the massive cost of forgiving.

The readings today are all about holiness and God's call for us who are His children to grow in holiness. The passages we have here make quite clear that at the heart of holiness is how we treat and relate to other people. We read in the text from Leviticus:

“Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy. You must not bear hatred for your brother in your heart... You must not exact vengeance, nor must you bear a grudge against the children of your people. You must love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord.”

The second reading tells us that we are all ‘Temples of the Holy Spirit’ and, therefore, every person is sacred - even our enemies. Elsewhere Jesus teaches us that whatever we do to the least of our brethren we do unto him. St John tells us that we cannot claim to love God if we hate our brother, and so on. There can be no growth in holiness without love not just of our neighbour, but of our enemies and those who hate us.

Forgiveness is the acid test of love of neighbour and one has to admire the Rev Nicholson's integrity in standing down because she simply cannot forgive the killer of her daughter. I suspect that I might feel the same because I can't help feeling that to forgive the bomber would be somehow to betray her dead daughter and dishonour her young, promising life so cruelly cut short. Yet Jesus' teaching is clear and I can only believe that the Lord has a very special place in his heart for those who want to forgive but can't because the cost of forgiveness is simply too high.

However, it is a cost that some do find the grace, the strength and the courage to pay. Here is another true story:

One evening in July 2005, black teenager Anthony Walker was walking through a park in Huyton, Liverpool, with his girlfriend when they were racially abused by a group of young whites. They ignored the taunts and walked on. Moments later one of the thugs drove an axe into Anthony's skull in an unprovoked attack. He died instantly.

After the trial of the killers, who were sentenced to life, Anthony's mother, Dr Gee Walker, a committed Christian, told assembled reporters,

Do I forgive them? At the point of death Jesus said 'I forgive them because they don't know what they did'. I've got to forgive them. I still forgive them. My family and I still stand by what we believe: forgiveness.

Heaven forfend that we should ever find ourselves in such a situation as Julie Nicholson or Gee Walker but let us pray continually for the grace and the power to forgive all those who hurt us in small or greater ways - and, indeed, to ask forgiveness from those whom we have harmed for this is how we grow in holiness and become ever more like the Lord we love and serve who, while hanging on the cross prayed for those who crucified him: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do”.