

A Reflection on Forgiveness
Chapter Three of "Being Disciples" by Rowan Williams

To know that we are seen and heard as we are is the most fundamental of needs for all of us. During this time of pandemic this is perhaps one of the things I miss the most – to stand in the presence of another and be recognised and acknowledged for who I am. Those moments of personal connection are vitally important to me and my wellbeing, for my sense of being in community and for my life as a follower of Christ. The loss is very real.

In the third chapter of his book "Being Disciples" Rowan Williams highlights this acknowledgement, describing it as the recognition of dignity in the other and ourselves. He acknowledges this deep need and talks to us about the nourishment that such a connection gives us:

"We feed each other by honouring the truth of the divine image in each other."

Throughout this chapter Williams links our desire - no, our need to be fed with this truth to the words of the Lord's Prayer. We have to be willing to be vulnerable, to realise that we are not able to do everything in our own strength and to admit to our fundamental need for God. It is incredibly hard, as we all want to feel like we are in control but we are assured that by our willingness to step into the difficult space that our own helplessness can lead us to a deeper understanding of our value to God. And to each other.

It is from that same place of vulnerability and willingness we step into the space where forgiveness and healing can begin. But it can be very hard and we are only human. That is why we pray the Lord's Prayer (among many, many others) asking God to forgive us our sins so that we may in turn approach God and others with open hands.

Williams shows us how both parties must be willing to meet in the middle, and affirms how forgiveness is one of the most radical ways in which we are able to nourish one another's humanity. Both sides have to be ready to let go and come back into community with the other.

We cannot forgive without recognising something of the humanity of the other, or be forgiven without acknowledging our own. Whether we are the one asking or the one offering, forgiveness is always about relationship and Christ is always at the centre. Sometimes we can be both (as often the one we find the most difficult to forgive can be ourselves) but the relationship is always with Christ. He is our place of community and so our vulnerability is in fact supported, as we are not alone in it but rather partnered by Christ through it.

But it is hard, and God understands just how hard it is for us. It is important to emphasise that no one should ever be pushed into forgiveness and we can only give it (or receive it) when and if we are ready.

That being said, over the years I have heard some extraordinary stories of forgiveness. As a volunteer chaplain with the Sycamore Tree programme at Wayland Prison I witnessed first hand the healing and rebuilding effect it can have on both sides.

But it is hard. Some instances are easier to forgive than others and each situation is unique. Our response to the invitation from God to cast ourselves aside and share in the powerlessness is also individual. We are no less loved by God if we admit to ourselves that we are not ready: that truth and awareness of just where we are with it is just as important. It is a place to start. And we are no

less Christian if we admit to just how hard it is. That in itself can be freeing. The important thing is that we are talking it through with God, that we choose to remain in relationship with him. He knows our hearts.

The whole chapter of the book is littered with the language of relationship and truth. Rowan Williams brings us (the reader) back time and again to the Lord's Prayer as the framework for this relationship and a reminder of the importance of our need to pray it.

As Christians we understand that Christ's example of how to live our lives is counter-cultural and forgiving someone who has wronged us also goes against the grain of society norms where rejection and even revenge is almost expected. Williams suggests that there is a close connection between forgiveness and this prayer in particular. He tells us it is a prayer that "looks beyond" the now and invites us to step into a freer future by our asking for the coming of Spirit – "Thy kingdom come" we pray in hope. It is not, therefore, prescriptive, but instead is an invitation from a loving and caring God who hopes to be with us in relationship and calls us (gently) back into community. Please note: This does not mean that in certain circumstances we should be expected to maintain connections that are damaging.

Whatever our situation, forgiveness is always a big step, and requires both sides to become that bread of life for each other and be willing to cast aside the preconceptions we have of the other or even of ourselves.

Williams ends the chapter linking the Lord's Prayer and our petition to God to give us our daily bread with the sacrament of Holy Communion. It is the symbol of God fully answering our prayers, Williams tells us, and by praying it together we are brought back both individually and collectively into relationship with the who loves us.

"God feeding his people through the death and resurrection of Jesus, which establishes that new community of the Spirit in which forgiveness is the common currency."