

Remembering Well: the role of forgiveness in remembrance

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Abstract

It is twenty years since the horrendous genocide in Rwanda. This article reflects on the nature of forgiveness by a person who experienced terrible personal tragedy as her husband was killed in the genocide. Lesley reflects on what it means for her to remember well and to remember rightly. She reflects on what it means now to practice forgiveness and draws on the gospels for some helpful and potentially surprising insights. She concludes by affirming that we can find healing and wholeness through our participation in the dis-membering and re-membering of the eucharist.

Remembrance Then

In some ways it seems like yesterday; in other ways like a lifetime ago. I was sitting in a hotel room in Mombasa on the Kenyan coast, totally preoccupied with my sister's sudden illness. Sue had come to join me for a short holiday and on the second day had picked up a very unpleasant virus. The doctor reassured me she would soon recover, and as he packed his bags ready to leave he casually asked us where we had come from. When I mentioned I was on holiday from Rwanda he looked shocked, and told me that the President had just been killed and that that country was in the grip of widespread violence.

It was 7th April 1994. I realized that because of my worries about Sue's illness, I had not heard the news for over 24 hours. So as soon as the doctor left I switched on the BBC World Service and listened with horror. The Presidents of both Rwanda and Burundi had been killed, and their deaths seemed to have sparked a wave of violence and killing that was spreading rapidly throughout the country.

Over the coming days I heard of the murder of prominent politicians, Belgian United Nations peace-keepers, and hundreds, then thousands of civilians rounded up and massacred in broad daylight. I heard too of the untimely deaths of a number of friends and colleagues. Road-blocks had sprung up throughout the country, guarded by militia armed with clubs, machetes, spears and sticks. As the weeks went by the violence intensified and spread – and all this in the country that over the previous five years had become my home, and where my husband Charles, his family and many of my friends still were.

I returned to Scotland and could only follow the news reports hour by hour, day by day, scanning the images for a glimpse of Charles, desperate for news and yet at the same time dreading the worst. After six agonising months of waiting, hearing rumour and counter-rumour of his possible fate, my worst suspicions were confirmed. Charles had been taken by the military in mid-April and had not been seen since. His sister, who remarkably had

survived with her 7 children, had no doubt in her mind that his complete disappearance without any trace signified that he had been killed.

Remembrance Now

This year marks twenty years since these appalling events took place – the violent deaths of between eight hundred thousand and one million ethnic Tutsis and moderate Hutus. There have been remarkable developments in Rwanda over that period of time, but the memory of those one hundred days of slaughter remains very strong, both in the hearts of individual Rwandans and also enshrined into the nation's memory. Today Rwanda has many genocide memorial sites, ranging from simple concrete pillars to buildings still containing clothing remnants and human remains as they lay, to the modern, state-of-the-art Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre. Each year the country marks one hundred days of remembrance, from 7th April to 6th July – the period corresponding to the genocide. During this period there are large gatherings in football stadia at which survivors share their testimonies, and there are marches of remembrance.

How a nation remembers its tragic past will impact its capacity to reconcile and move forward. My focus for this article, however, is not on national remembrance, but on personal remembrance. Twenty years on from the most traumatic experiences of my life, what have I learned of the processes of remembering and reconciling and are there lessons that might be applied in a wider context?

I am deeply conscious that my own experiences were extremely light compared to those who witnessed the brutal death of their loved ones, who were hideously maimed or raped, or who lived in utter terror for months. Being out of the country I was spared the trauma of witnessing the genocide first hand, and have reliably been told that had I been in the country at the time it is highly likely that I too would have been killed. Nonetheless those of us looking on from the sidelines experienced our own traumas – for me, the disappearance of my husband and the agonizing six-month wait for news which, even when it came, left me with many unanswered questions; the deaths of some of his family members and of a number of close friends; and the abrupt ending of the Community Health Programme I had been directing, as most of my co-workers were either killed or fled as refugees to neighbouring Tanzania.

In 2004, having spent ten years trying to come to terms with the past and live with the lack of clarity, I returned to Rwanda with a film company, invited to participate in the making of a documentary. The directors wanted to help me discover the truth of what had happened to Charles and if possible meet those responsible for his death. Our research took us to one of the country's prisons to meet some of those accused of crimes of genocide, and in particular those believed to have been involved in Charles' abduction and death. They denied any part in it. One was an ordained priest of the Episcopal Church of Rwanda, the other a Second Lieutenant in the army. The former was charming and almost believable – had it not been

for the evidence of others we spoke to outside prison, who testified to his direct involvement with the militia. The latter was particularly unpleasant, sneering, condescending and threatening. The month in Rwanda re-awakened in me the deep distress I had experienced ten years previously, and despite our best efforts, produced no definitive information.

Over the following months I was plagued by memories. At any moment of the day something could trigger my thoughts, and in an instant I found myself back in the oppressive heat of the tiny, musty office where I conducted the interviews. Accompanying these memories were the familiar feelings of nausea, fear and despair in the pit of my stomach, such as I had also felt during the genocide itself ten years previously. It felt that I had no control over these memories, that I was trapped, stuck in time, vulnerable to being taken over by a wave of hopelessness without any warning.

Combined with this was a sense of revulsion towards the two prisoners I had met, towards those responsible for Charles' death, and indeed towards all those who had participated in the genocide. The atrocities committed during those months were some of the most brutal and despicable imaginable. It was hard to believe any human being could behave with such utter cruelty.

So I had a dilemma. The memory remained strong and would be impossible to annihilate so I had to accept that these experiences would always be a part of me. Nonetheless the trauma associated with the memories was debilitating and was preventing me from getting on with the rest of my life. So somehow I would have to find a way of living with the memories of the past without allowing them to control me.

In addition, these were people I believed were made in the image of God, people for whom Christ died, people I was called to love. How could it ever be possible to love them, given the atrocities they had committed and the pain they had caused? Perhaps the way ahead would be forgiveness. I had often heard the phrase 'forgive and forget' so perhaps if I could find some way of forgiving them, then the memory of the hurt would go.

But when an action has more deep-rooted consequences it may be impossible to forget entirely: the Rwandan genocide widows, bereft of the family bread-winner, no longer able to afford school fees or medical treatment for their children; those who were maimed, disfigured, or who lost limbs – all live with the constant reminder of the wrong committed against them. It is impossible for them to forget.

So if remembering is inevitable, perhaps the more important issue is *how* we remember – finding some way of remembering without the sting – or, as Miroslav Volf¹ describes it,

¹ Volf, M. (2006). *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, title page.

Remembering Rightly. “Personal healing,” Volf writes, “happens not so much by remembering traumatic events and their accompanying emotions, but by *interpreting* memories and *inscribing* them into a larger pattern of meaning – stitching them into the patchwork quilt of one’s identity, as it were.”²

Over the past twenty years I have sought to do just that – to seek to understand my experiences in the wider context of my own life, as well as seeking to understand what it reveals to me about the nature of human beings, suffering, prayer, God, and much, much more. In fact, I often think that I have learned more through these, wrestling with the meaning of *painful* experiences than I would have done had life been much more plain-sailing.

I suggested earlier that perhaps the key way to ‘remember rightly’ without bitterness or resentment is through the practice of forgiveness. The experience of being forgiven and the call to forgive are at the heart of the Christian faith, and in recent years forgiveness has also become an important focus of some psychological therapies as a means of working towards emotional health. But in many ways it still remains a mystery.

For the past twenty years I have felt challenged to practise forgiveness in relation to those who have wronged me, and yet have struggled to understand how to do so. As I struggled, so many questions came to my mind:

- Is it my place to forgive what had been done to someone else?
- Does forgiveness involve an inner change or attitude or an outward relational change, and if the latter, how could I forgive when I did not even know who I was forgiving (as Charles’ killer has, to my knowledge, not yet been identified).
- Could I forgive if the person or people responsible for his death had not acknowledged any wrong?
- Would forgiveness be something I decided in my head or something I felt in my heart?
- Would it be a one-off action or a long-term process?
- Forgiveness is a slippery topic. Each and every person has his or her own individual opinion on what it means and how it should be practised because most, if not all of us have experienced what it is to wrong another and to be wronged, to forgive (or withhold forgiveness) and to be forgiven.

Like many Christians I was brought up to believe that the Bible teaches us always to forgive those who wrong us. But what does this mean in practice? Does it apply to all people, in all circumstances, at all times, regardless of whether or not it leads to human flourishing? And what does the Bible actually teach concerning forgiveness?

² Volf, M. (2006). *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 28.

Forgiveness in the Gospels

Although there are remarkably few mentions of the word ‘forgive’ in the New Testament, nonetheless there is much that can be gleaned from the parables and teaching of Jesus, and from the way he responds to those who have wronged him personally, even if the actual word is not used. In fact an exploration of the nature of forgiveness as *lived* rather than simply as spoken might offer a helpful challenge to those of us who risk talking about forgiveness rather glibly without taking time to wrestle with what it means in practice.

Zacchaeus the tax collector (Luke 19:1-10) is despised and shunned by the crowds waiting to see Jesus. Forgiveness is not mentioned in this story, but Zacchaeus’ response demonstrates that he recognises the wrong he has done and is keen to make amends. He does not promise restitution in order to gain Jesus’ attention, nor is he responding to any request from Jesus to repent. Jesus takes the initiative, treating him with dignity and compassion, and Zacchaeus simply responds – but he does so because his life has been transformed through meeting with Jesus.

The woman who anoints Jesus with expensive perfume is mentioned in all four gospels but Luke (7:36-50) is unique in describing her as ‘a sinful woman’, drawing attention to the outcast and focusing on her actions as those of extravagantly generous hospitality in contrast to the miserly lack of hospitality by her host, Simon. Luke is the only one to record Jesus’ telling her that her sins had been forgiven, although like Zacchaeus she clearly does not give in order to have her sins forgiven, but rather in response – her copious tears probably being those of deep gratitude. In this story Luke portrays Jesus’ interacting with someone on the edge of society, not with the disdain and rejection with which she was familiar, but with dignity, restoring the humanity that society – and in particular the religious leaders – had taken from her.

Time after time, in the final days of Jesus’ life, we read in the Gospel narratives of his experience of betrayal, abandonment, physical and mental abuse and torture, denial, mockery, and gross injustice. How does Jesus respond to this? Nowhere do we read of him pronouncing forgiveness on those who wrong him but what we do see repeatedly is his refusal to retaliate, either physically or verbally. He does not return insult for insult, mocking for mocking, evil for evil because to do so would have been to stoop to the level of his persecutors. ‘Whoever fights monsters,’ warned Nietzsche (quoted in Wink 1992)³, ‘should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster.’

It has been suggested that Jesus modelled forgiveness in his refusal to be vengeful, angry or defiant in the face of unjust and brutal suffering, and that his own forgiveness is implicit in his request to his Father to forgive his executioners, as recorded uniquely by Luke. But is resisting vengeance the same as or only a part of forgiveness? Does Jesus actually model

³ Wink, W. (1992). *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 197.

forgiveness in the midst of the abuse or is he calling on his Father to forgive because in his humanity he is acknowledging that he is at the limit of his own resources and needs the help of someone greater than him?

Cherry⁴ writes that to forgive in the midst of abuse would be 'absurd [for] as long as the harm is being committed the priority must be to stop it. When it is stopped the primary concerns are grief and justice.' Forgiveness, if it is to happen at all, may not be considered for some time after the event. Referring to the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18, Collicutt⁵ writes, 'It makes no sense to forgive in the midst of the offence. Forgiveness is something that happens when the offence has been completed and we have had time to reflect on it and recognise that an interpersonal debt exists.'

If then Jesus probably does not actively forgive in the face of abuse and torture, it is worth noting how he does respond. Thorne⁶ argues movingly that Jesus was able to see beyond the roles in which his persecutors found themselves trapped, and to connect with the human beings inside. Those in apparent positions of power over Jesus (the religious leaders, political leaders and soldiers) were in fact powerless in the face of one whose authority was derived from his inner strength and calm, from his clear sense of identity which remained unshaken even in the midst of the most intense internal suffering, and which enabled him to reach out to others, even from the cross.

We can read how Jesus responded to his persecutors in the midst of the abuse, but we have no record of any encounter Jesus had with them after his resurrection. However the Gospels do record how Jesus interacted with his friends in his first encounters with them after they had failed him, denied him and deserted him in the final days of his life. Of particular note is the account of Jesus' conversation with Peter. The setting by the charcoal fire and the three-fold question and commission to Peter must have left Peter in no doubt of Jesus' referral back to the three-fold denial by the charcoal fire in the courtyard.

Interestingly there is no record of Jesus' making any reference to forgiveness, and yet his interaction with Peter served not only to restore their relationship, but also to re-establish trust as Jesus entrusted the care of his 'lambs' to Peter.

There seems to be a similarity to the way Jesus challenges Saul on the road to Damascus. Once again although Jesus confronts Saul about his murderous behaviour ('Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?') he does not mention forgiveness. Instead he confronts him, allows him time to face up to the wrong he has done, and then commissions him to a new task.

⁴ Cherry, S. (2012). *Healing Agony: Reimagining Forgiveness*. London: Continuum, 65

⁵ Collicutt, J. (2013). *When you pray: daily Bible reflections for Lent and Easter on the Lord's prayer*. Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship, 175

⁶ Thorne, B. (2006). *Behold the Man*. London: DLT.

In these examples Jesus remembered the wrong done to him and indeed made oblique reference to it. So he did not ignore the reality of what has happened, but neither did he harbour bitterness or any desire for revenge. Instead he redeemed the situation, bringing new purpose out of despair and trust from betrayal. Perhaps he is showing us what it means to 'remember rightly'.

I said earlier that 'remembering rightly' is at the heart of the practice of forgiveness but I am a very pragmatic person, and so I still need to clarify in my own mind what I actually mean when I say I forgive someone. One of the difficulties with the term 'forgiveness' is the multiplicity of contexts in which it is used. There is a wide range of situations in which people talk of forgiving one another, ranging from the casual misdemeanour (I'm sorry I got impatient when you were late - please forgive me) to the severe trauma of rape, murder or torture. It seems strange that we use the same word to apply to such widely differing situations, but this may partly explain why there is so much misunderstanding over its meaning.

I wonder if it is possible to arrive at a definition of forgiveness that covers all situations and is acceptable to all or might there in fact be different definitions or even different words that could be used? It may be that the word forgiveness has been over-used with the result that its meaning has been watered down. In addition, for some who have experienced extreme violence, perhaps especially in countries like Northern Ireland, South Africa or Rwanda, terms like forgiveness and reconciliation have been politicised and therefore lost something of their value.

Putting pressure on a person or community to forgive prematurely removes the essential element of choice and is more likely to result in suppression of anger and an unhealthy harbouring of painful memories. Instead, forgiveness should be seen as a matter of free choice, or indeed choices. In my search to understand forgiveness and describe the practice without using any element of the word 'forgive', I would like to suggest a series of four choices that could lead one from deep hurt and anger to a place of freedom.

The first choice relates to the need to acknowledge the reality and horror of what has happened and to own the strength of our feelings in response. Trying to deny or forget our anger and pain will not diminish them but rather suppress them, storing them up inside to surface again at some later date – even years later – at a time we least expect it. It is far better to be honest about the strength of our feelings. However, acknowledging such feelings towards those who have wronged us does not mean we need to act on those feelings. Much as I might want to retaliate and cause suffering in return, I need to recognize that taking such action will benefit no-one. 'Whoever fights monsters,' warned Nietzsche, 'should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster.' So my second choice is not to take action to revenge or retaliate for what has been done to me.

One of the most difficult aspects of the genocide for me to comprehend was the double life practised by so many who participated in the killing. Through the day they went 'to work' (as the RTLM radio station described the killing of Tutsis and moderate Hutus) whilst at the same time many were sheltering other Tutsis and moderate Hutus in their homes. It would be easier and more comfortable perhaps to think of those who committed the atrocities as being totally evil, whilst those who were the victims were all entirely innocent. The reality is all of us have within us the capacity for both good and evil. How might I have behaved had I been brought up in other circumstances or faced the pressures and indoctrination they faced? I like to think I would have resisted the pressure to participate but I cannot know. If I also have within me the capacity to cause great harm, then I must recognize that those who did cause great harm have also been created with the capacity for goodness and kindness. That is part of the common humanity we all share as those who are made in the image of God.

So my third choice involves a recognition of the common humanity that I share with the one who has wronged me, trying to walk with empathy in his or her shoes, and having the humility to admit that in other circumstances I too could have trodden his or her path. But although we all have the capacity for evil as well as good, God is in the business of transformation and so for my fourth choice I choose to see the offender as a child of God, made in the image of God, and therefore capable of goodness and kindness, and I choose to pray that he or she would accept God's help to turn their life around and live for peace. Taken together, perhaps these choices could enable a person to 'remember rightly' the trauma of the past, neither to dismiss it on the one hand, nor to wallow in it on the other hand, but rather to search deep inside oneself, and with God's help to find a new way of being that deepens and expands our humanity through insight, empathy and courage.

The 'Re-membering' of the Eucharist

Each time we celebrate the Eucharist together as God's people we not only remember all that Jesus has done for us, in the sense of recalling the events of his passion, his death and resurrection, but we also 're-member' in the sense of re-enacting. As the bread is broken, so we recall Christ's body broken for us, a reminder of our own brokenness both as individuals and as a community – the dis-membering of the body. In Anglican liturgy as the priest breaks the bread he or she says, "'break this bread to share in the body of Christ,' and the congregation responds, 'though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread.' We are broken, and we are made one. We dis-member, and we re-member.

As we share this meal together, the Holy Spirit works in and amongst us to bring healing and wholeness – the re-membering – repairing the brokenness in our relationship with God, with one another and within ourselves.

Brokenness is part of who we still are. When Jesus appeared again to his disciples he showed them his nail-pierced hands – still carrying the scars as part of who he was. He was

not suddenly miraculously healed as if nothing had happened in the past. Rather, the past was a part of who he had become, and indeed he was who he was *because* of the past.

Sometimes the memories of the past and my close associations with the tragedy in Rwanda feel almost too much to bear and it is tempting to push away that part of my life as if it had never happened. But it is part of what makes me who I am now. Those experiences, and the years of agonizing over them, reflecting on them with others who share similar experiences, wrestling with God over them, have taken me to a very different place than I was twenty years ago. I see mirrored in my own life – in all of our lives – the message of the Gospel, the message of redemption, that God brings life out of death, light out of darkness, hope out of despair. This is the truth that we celebrate and remember each time we share in the Eucharist together.

As I write this, I have recently been ordained as priest in the Church of England. I strongly suspect I would not have come to this point in my journey of faith had it not been for the life-changing experiences of twenty years ago, and the lessons I have been learning in subsequent years, and continue to learn now.

In conclusion I offer (with permission) a reflection from Paula Gooder⁷ in which she expresses beautifully something of the theme of remembering:

On Remembering

We remember, and as we remember
we place ourselves in the great chain of history,
receiving, accepting and cherishing the history of God's own people
and becoming a people called to a life of freedom.

We remember, and as we remember
we place ourselves in the great chain of history
looking forwards to the glorious feasting of the Messianic banquet
and becoming a people shaped by the celebration of God's kingdom.

We remember, and as we remember
we place ourselves in the great chain of history
savouring the present in which past and future combine
and becoming a people whose song is forever Hallelujah.

We remember, and as we remember
we shatter the chain of history and step into God's eternity

⁷ Gooder, P. (2014). *Journey to the Empty Tom*. Norwich: Canterbury Press, 63.

In which there is no past, no present, no future
No beginning and no end
only God and never-ending praise.

The **Revd Lesley Bilinda** was an ordinand here in Cuddesdon from 2011-2013 and is now in her second year of curacy at St Andrew's Fulham Fields, London. She brings a rich variety of experiences prior to ordination, including running a community health programme with Tearfund in rural Rwanda, teaching pastoral studies at All Nations College (an interdenominational inter-cultural mission training college in Hertfordshire), and facilitating a mediation process between victims and offenders in Northern Ireland with Archbishop Desmond Tutu. She's a great advocate of the ministry of the parish dog, having recently acquired a rescue greyhound, Josie!