

We have several times met the Lenten theme that we have before us a massively simple choice between life and death, blessing or curse. Nowhere is this clearer than in the choice between forgiveness, and its punishing, damning refusal.

One reason why decent people find forgiveness so problematic stems from the knowledge they have that goodness is hard-won. If someone else is so careless of how he lives, or careless of the effects of her carelessness on other people, why should someone who *does* take care of these things have to bear the hardship caused by others' carelessness?

It's quite enough, we say, that we're obliged to be positive about people who are so naturally clumsy and insensitive that they can't *help* the damage and waste they cause. When someone we think should know better, someone we have trusted and allowed into our hearts, offends us badly, we feel cheated and dishonoured: we trusted unwisely, we judged wrongly, we are partly to blame for the hurt, and angry not only with the offender, but with ourselves.

Although it's a bit self-righteous and superior, I think there is great goodness in this response, because it's a response that tries to take life seriously, and to recognise that our deeds are important, that our lives deserve to be lived carefully. This valuing of life is already good, and is what God wants us to do. It's the acquiring of the taste for goodness, which leads us to love humanity at its best, and to be moved and to feel blessed when people are gracious and kind to us.

We must come to know the bitter truth that the correct valuing of goodness involves experiencing the opposite, and coming to understand the shadow-world of evil and loss, damage and death. But if what we've learned about goodness is real, it will lead us on to know that evil is *not* real. Goodness is full of life, and reflects accurately the One who is good, who makes and sustains all that exists. Evil is empty, meaningless, and insignificant of anything. Those who have come closest to evil learn this. They know that monsters of depravity are basically empty vessels: not reservoirs of power, but of weakness. When we call evil deeds and evil people by *negative* terms, we come closest to the truth: they are senseless, heartless, faithless, hopeless, loveless. It is these emptinesses that make room for the deformed and destructive way of living that we call sin.

Forgiveness is therefore not an act of weakness, conceding power to the sinner and to Satan. It is the ultimate response of strength, and it makes of our offended, damaged lives a unsealed fountain of life, allowing meaning, heart, faith, hope, and love to flow from us, transfusing into meaningless life the meanings of God. If we expect this to come easily, look at the Cross, which is God doing it. If the Almighty can find no easier way than this, how much less can we? Meditation on the Cross must be our lesson in proportion. If forgiveness is tough for us to do, let us not think it unaccountable. As Jesus said at the Last Supper,

*There is no greater love than the laying-down of our lives.*