

Forgiveness

The joy of being forgiven is a very special kind of relief, and it is only granted to one sort of person: the sort that knows the horrors of having offended.

To my mind this whole discourse of sin and forgiveness demands a kind of maturity and a kind of intimacy which are both becoming more rare in our society. Their absence is not something we can ignore without pain.

I remember my own home, and the way in which my parents established a fairly clear moral tone. Like all children, we learned our morality against the register of our parents'. What wasn't acceptable to them was soon felt to be unacceptable by us. All children have to have the experience of offending. Do you remember the first time you tried a serious lie to get out of trouble? I can. I can't remember the age I was, but I remember quite vividly the experience of trying to put one past my parents. I'm not very good at it, and I suppose it poned like a goat, and I knew that they knew, and they knew that I knew that they knew, but having painted myself into the corner I found it very hard to abandon the spot. They were charitable, and didn't smoke me out, but they left me in no doubt. I found it impossible to find any peace, and I knew what it was like to be in the wrong. I tried to move forward without apology, and it was like an arrow between the shoulder-blades. I learned the irreplaceability of forgiveness. It was a hard lesson. The only factor which could make it a positive experience was the kindness with which forgiveness came. I didn't want this to happen again, but I knew that it was an essential path for integrity, for personal wholeness.

What I find hard is to imagine what it is like to be brought up in a home where lies are commonplace, and where there is little intimacy to be offended by a lie, where no-one cares whether or not the truth is told and shared. But that's the atmosphere of much of the world we're living in. We are well-used to being lied to in the public arena. For many of us, I now know, deceit is a whole climate of personal life, reigning even within our own hearts. We are invited to abandon even the need to be honest with ourselves, and live in a sustained atmosphere of self-deception. We must industriously collaborate, to create a façade for others, behind which to conceal an unexplored chaos of mental and emotional mess, out of which come the tumultuous impulses and urges that actually write the story of our lives.

When we read the newspapers, and try to imagine for ourselves what the chaotic lives they pillory for us are like to live, it may give us a cheap feeling of moral superiority. That's a sign of how we are all caught up in the same awful tendency - to deceive ourselves. We do not trust others to forgive us: with good reason. Other people dine out on our failings, and pretend their own sinlessness as a good excuse for refusing pardon. We are therefore forbidden to have failings. We must appear perfect, lest we become the carrion of this horrible cannibal economy. It is an orphaned world, clinging to a sad and ragged respectability, terrified of the truth. We cannot want to be a part of it.

The woman in the Gospel today is a known sinner who has somehow learned that Jesus is the place of God's pardon. How, we aren't told; she must have heard him speak, and he opened her eyes and her heart. She has discovered the re-alignment of her life, and it has opened the fountain of grief and gratitude which belongs only to forgiveness. The tears, the exotic and extravagant affection, and the fragrance speak of the intimacy and the selfless truthfulness of the experience. Simon, allegedly the Lord's host, is completely excluded from all of this, and is secretly ridiculing it and his guest for putting up with it. Let us not dare to sit at the Lord's table without divesting ourselves of this fake respectability. Let us seek for the grace to weep, to come to Christ, and to break out the ointment of forgiveness, until its fragrance fills the whole house where we are trying to live.