

The injunction to love those who harm us is one of the evangelical counsels, a group of very demanding principles which we all break every day, but which we keep sacred; the only possibility of sincerity that is left to us is frequently to repent of the way we are, so as not to be hypocritical. We must leave room in our lives for the evangelical counsels to be fulfilled; and every so often they are, and a saint appears in the world. People had read *sell all you have, give to the poor, and have treasure in heaven* for hundreds of years; then one day Francis of Assisi read it, and did it; and the world was changed.

We will all remember Gordon Wilson, who was buried in rubble with his daughter Marie by the IRA bomb blast at Enniskillen. He held his daughter's hand and spoke to her as she died from loss of blood. Their words of love to each other enabled him to pardon her killers, in an unforgettable outpouring of reconciling love, which is stronger than all the hatred which marks the history of Northern Ireland.

It has often been said that no-one has the right to forgive harm done to another; only those who suffer have the right to pardon. It is often concluded that no-one has the right to enjoin forgiveness on others. But this is not the Christian position at all.

We are bound for divine life; and our hope for this gift enjoins upon us all the qualities of God. If you want to live for eternity, and share the joy of God, don't refuse to inherit the true likeness of God.

We must *always* be on the side of life, not death.

We must *always* be for the truth and extirpate falsehood.

We must *always* do what is generous and refuse to do what proceeds from selfishness.

To behave otherwise will only lengthen the suffering of the world, and further postpone the coming of the Kingdom for which we pray in the Lord's Prayer. Every refusal to forgive is a particular act of frustration of the will of God. Where we have suffered, even from heinous and disgusting acts of human cruelty and indifference, we are being invited to carry the cross with Jesus. We must do this like the repentant criminal, and not like the one who mocked and derided Jesus in his own agony. The luxurious sort of forgiveness which makes us feel good and costs us nothing is not forgiveness at all. Only when we feel the entry of the nails into our hands as we forgive can we talk about Christian forgiveness.

This is the evangelical counsel of forgiveness. We are used to saying that it is beyond us to fulfil. But let us leave open the possibility that we might rise to such goodness. To hope for it is as essential as the saying of the Creed and the receiving of the Sacraments.