

Forbear and Forgive

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 14 September 2014, by David Gill. The readings were Exodus 14:19-31, Romans 14:1-12 and St Matthew 18:21-35.

Some years ago, an unusual church service took place in the Netherlands. It was held in a Roman Catholic church, and one reason it was unusual was the fact that the barking of dogs almost drowned out the prayers of the priest.

As reported by Ecumenical News International, the event marked World Animal Day as well as the feast of St Francis of Assisi. People had come to church bringing their dogs, cats, rabbits, mice, rats, birds and fish ("in bowls," explained the report reassuringly), as well as toy animals.

The liturgy featured plenty of unscripted congregational participation – particularly, it seems, from the canine choir. But not everyone was happy. According to the report, some cat owners complained about the number of dogs present, and said they would probably stay away next year.

You have to sympathise with those cats. Who wants to be involved in the Church if it means mixing with unpleasant, loudmouthed, bellicose types you spend the rest of the week trying to avoid?

Of course, one doesn't need four feet and a tail to qualify as difficult to get on with. We bipeds can be pretty unpleasant to each other too. I've seen more snarling and scratching in church meetings of one kind or another than you'd get in whole cathedrals full of dogs and cats.

Humanity's capacity for nastiness appears in organisations of all kinds, but two of the worst are universities and religious bodies. Universities, because the people there are smarter than the rest of us, so they tend to be unusually clever in the way they knife each other. And the churches, because there is nothing in this world more intractable, or more scary, than religious types who are passionately convinced that they have full, flawless and exclusive grasp of the mind of God.

Yet most relationship problems in the church are not sparked by big issues. They stem from small issues we don't cope with very well. Like a memorable fist fight I witnessed in my church in Hong Kong.

It was a wedding, with all the usual trappings. Leading the bridal party were two small children: a flower girl and a boy ring-bearer. The kids set out, hand in

hand, down the aisle. But at different speeds, and therein lay the problem. He thought she was walking too slowly, so he pulled. She, a liberated young lady, objected to being pushed around, so she pulled back. He tugged again, more strongly. She clouted him with her flower basket. He then slugged her, and the punch-up was on with a vengeance.

The congregation was enjoying this immensely, thinking aren't they cute. Meanwhile, the bride was processing down the aisle towards the battle zone with the majestic unstoppable of an ocean liner. The minister was trying to look unflappable while wondering what on earth to do. And the groom, he told me later, was rapidly rethinking his enthusiasm for matrimony.

That's life in the Church! Minor issues that become major ones, and before you know it -- conflict. Why does the Church have so many of these hassles? Because it is not made up of angels. It consists of very human people. Like us, right?

No wonder the early Christian writings go out of their way to talk about the quality of relationships that should be found among the followers of Jesus.

We heard from those writings a few minutes ago: Paul urging the church in Rome to practise mutual forbearance: why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister, or even despise your brother or sister? We will all stand before the judgement seat of God. Make sure you deal with one another accordingly.

And Jesus telling his friends to be ready to forgive -- not once, or seven times, but times without limit. Why? Because forgiveness is the name of the game. It's how God treats us. We had better do our damndest to make sure it's how we treat one another.

Forbearance and forgiveness. They sound wonderful. They *are* wonderful. But they're not easy to put into practice.

The birth of the Uniting Church meant we all had to learn some new lessons in forbearance. Totally abstaining ex-Methodists had to endure fellow Christians talking about their preferences in whisky and the wine they enjoyed at dinner last night. Pew-sitting ex-Presbyterians found themselves dragged screaming from their seats to receive holy communion at the front of the church. Free-wheeling ex-Congregationalists had to cope with strange things like creeds, presbyteries and church regulations.

Since union, there have been other stresses and strains. How do we stand up for peace and justice, for the rights of indigenous people, for the dignity of gay and lesbian people, for asylum seekers caught in the calculated cruelty that is Australia's way of stopping the boats? On such issues and many more, there are differences among us.

Differences, as such, are not the problem. It is no sin to think for yourself. It's not a hanging offence to disagree with the preacher – unfortunately! You're free to dissent from decisions by the councils of the Uniting Church. Contrasting opinions are what make horse races interesting. They also enlarge our understanding of the Christian faith and energise the Church.

Everything hinges on how we deal with such differences. Forbearance, or rush to judgement? Mutual respect, or hasty rejection? Assertive talk, or careful listening? Assuming that "I know it all," or recognising with St Paul that we're all poor frail mortals destined to stand before the judgement seat of God?

Forbearance asks a lot of us. Forgiveness, however, asks even more. It runs counter to two things that are very deep in human nature. Namely, our proclivity for anger and our yearning for revenge.

You hear it, globally, in the war rhetoric of governments, and of groups that would like to become governments, as they incite people to acquiesce in supposedly just outbursts of officially-authorized slaughter. There's nothing like anger and vengeance to stifle humanity's better instincts, block the possibility of reconciliation and set whole countries at each other's throats. Witness Israel/Palestine.

You hear the same vengefulness, here in Sydney, every time law-and-order hits the headlines. Some crime is committed, pictures appear on TV, commentators and radio shock-jocks stir the pot, and parliamentarians find themselves under immense pressure to "do something!" The cry is not for measures that might deter offenders, much less rehabilitate them. It is for harsher punishments, retribution.

Amid the clamour, you even hear people who would see themselves as good Christians advocating an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth – something Jesus explicitly condemned. As Gandhi would remark wisely twenty centuries later, an eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind.

Sometimes you even hear it in the Church, as much in what we don't say as in what we do. Our silences, sometimes, speak loud and clear.

A current example. At this moment, much publicity is being given to child sexual abuse in institutions, including the churches. Curiously, there have been few references to the institution that in this matter is culpable above all others, namely the family. For the moment, however, let that pass.

The revelations regarding religious organisations have produced shock, a lot of anger and widespread calls for punishment reaching out in various directions towards those who might be held to be in some way responsible. That reaction is understandable. But in the outcry I have not heard many voices, even within the churches, speaking of understanding, mercy, forgiveness and the ever-present possibility of making a new start. On those things, we seem to have gone silent.

Perhaps people are afraid that any talk of forgiveness might sound like approval, any plea for mercy like indifference, any call for understanding like insensitivity to the pain that some victims continue to bear.

Or could it be that we Christians are in danger of forgetting our gospel?

Forgiveness – how many times: seven? Seventy? No, seventy times seven! - lies at the heart of the Christian faith. Whether the world likes it or not, whether the media is likely to misrepresent it or not, we dare not go silent about the promise, and the practice, of forgiveness.

For that is how God has dealt with us. Forbearance and forgiveness: they're difficult, they're costly, they may be controversial, they may even involve a cross. But they're God's way, and they must be our way too.

Go back for a moment to that World Animal Day service in the Netherlands. I never did discover whether the cats returned to church the following year. I rather hope they did. They might have discovered that even dogs can be lovable. If you work at it.

So can people. But you have to work at that too.

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