**FORGIVENESS**

*Forgiving and remembering*

By Sarah Hills

Forgiveness is to do with all of us: there are times when we need to be forgiven, and times when we are asked to forgive. But forgiving and forgiveness are not straightforward, and are not easy to do. There are many questions that forgiveness raises. Sometimes it seems that we are told we must forgive - I have heard people say, 'It is your duty as a Christian to forgive the person who hurt you'. But no one should be forced to forgive. Sometimes it is even hard to accept that we ourselves are forgiven by God. And are personal and political forgiveness the same? So what is forgiveness? It is helpful in answering these questions to look at forgiveness from two perspectives: what forgiveness is, and what it is not.

Forgiveness is:

* letting go: the word often used in the New Testament for forgiveness is *apheimi*, meaning 'letting go'. Letting go of vengeance, of hatred, of resentment, can help us to be free.
* a gift: the other word in the New Testament used is *charizomai*, meaning grace or gift. Forgiveness means giving of ourselves, in grace-filled and generous ways. Crucially, the victim of wrongdoing has the choice to offer this gift of forgiveness, and the perpetrator does not have the right to expect it.
* costly: this giving of forgiveness can be hard, and can take a long time.
* firstly from God: we are forgiven through Jesus' death on the cross. The Lord's Prayer asks us to forgive others, as we have been forgiven by God. We are helped to become more forgiving of others if we first believe we are forgiven by God.
* a journey: becoming more forgiving takes time and energy, seldom a 'one off' moment.
* about recognising that we are all human together: today I am the victim, tomorrow I might be the perpetrator. We are connected through our being human together, and our need for restored relationships.
* healing: both being forgiven, and forgiving, help us to become more whole.

Forgiveness is not:

* forgetting: we must re-member the past hurts, in order to move forwards in our journey of forgiveness. Forgiving does not mean having to forget; rather, it takes very seriously the wrongs done and seeks to address them.
* easy: it takes courage and soul searching.
* instead of justice: forgiveness and justice are inextricably linked, and together lead towards the possibility of restoration rather than vengeance.
* always a response to repentance: it is possible to forgive a perpetrator without their repentance. However, while this can help the victim to heal, it will not restore relationships or lead to reconciliation.
* the same as reconciliation: other factors are necessary in the reconciliation journey. For instance, in political reconciliation, peace and socioeconomic justice may play a larger role, while between individuals, forgiveness may be more crucial.

*The Rev Dr Sarah Hills is the Canon Reconciliation at Coventry Cathedral, Coventry and a qualified Psychiatrist*