

22nd July 2001 The True and First Disciple

Song of Solomon 3: 1-4; 2 Corinthians 5: 14-17; John 20: 1-2; 11-18.

Today, the 22nd of July, is the Feast of Mary Magdalene, the woman called Mary who came from the town of Magdala. What do we know of this woman, and how do, or should, her statements and actions as related in the Gospels affect our lives today?

The man in the street, if asked what he knew about her, might, a little irreverently, describe her as “the tart with a heart” – a fair summary, for it is commonly agreed that, at least at the beginning, she was a prostitute who subsequently mended her ways. Her story is a wonderful theological reflection on the issue of discipleship

From the earliest times she was identified with the “woman which was a sinner” who anointed Christ’s feet in Simon’s house, as well as with Mary, the sister of Martha of Bethany, who also anointed him. These facts have been maintained in her traditional cult and also over the centuries by the many artists who depicted her.

Mary’s feast has been kept in the West from the 8th century. She was perennially popular in mediaeval art and calendars, where she was always depicted with a pot of ointment, as well as in gospel scenes of the Passion and Resurrection. She gave her name to colleges at both Oxford and Cambridge, and no fewer than 187 English mediaeval churches were dedicated to her.

What do the gospels tell us about her? Such is her importance that she appears in all four of them, a fact unusual and noteworthy in itself. After having seven devils cast out of her she became a follower of Christ and later ministered to him in Galilee. She was present at the crucifixion, standing by the cross, watched the burial, and sat by the tomb afterwards. On the following morning, the first Easter Day, she came with two other women, preparing to anoint the body of the dead Christ with spices, and discovered the empty tomb, this story being related by all four of the Evangelists, and in much greater detail by St John, and where in fact much of the narrative is unique to him. Lastly, and perhaps most important of all, she was the first person to witness the risen Christ.

She is exemplified by Luke as the repentant sinner. Jesus was eating at the house of Simon the Pharisee when Mary, *a sinner*, learnt of His presence and brought an alabaster box of ointment. Weeping, she washed His feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, and then kissed and anointed His feet with her ointment. Head anointing was a courtesy given generally to any guest, but feet anointing most exceptional, and doubly so when undertaken by a sinner : Mary is a penitent believer – she stands for sinful penitent humanity, the outcast who accepts Jesus, her hope lying in the worship of Him who is the resurrection and the life. Simon watches in amazement, on the verge of believing that Jesus can be a prophet even though He is allowing a sinner to touch Him. But Jesus rebukes him, saying that Simon gave Him no water to wash in when He arrived, yet Mary has washed His feet with her own tears and wiped them with her own hair; nor did Simon kiss or anoint his Lord when He arrived, but Mary kissed His feet and anointed them. Jesus silences Simon, saying: *“Her sins which are many are forgiven, for she loved much; but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.”* And then, whilst bystanders wonder who it is who can even forgive sins, he says to Mary: *“Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.”* She has expressed devotion and is forgiven – faith is the response to forgiveness; Mary stands as a supreme example of God’s unconditional love for those who repent of their sins and turn to Christ.

John (12, 1-8) gives us another account of Mary anointing her Lord, but the implications of this anointing are very different. Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany to the house where Lazarus had been raised from the dead. He sat eating, and Mary took a pound of costly spikenard and anointed His feet, as well as wiping His feet with her hair. Simon the Pharisee’s son, Judas Iscariot, a thief, and the future betrayer, deceitfully asks why such costly ointment cannot be sold for 300 pence and the proceeds given to the poor, knowing that as he held the moneybag he could steal the money rather than disburse it. Jesus rebukes him, saying that Mary is to be allowed to keep the ointment for the day of His burial, *“For the poor ye have always with you; but Me ye have not always.”* This has always proved a difficult passage for commentators, but let us remember that Mary’s last words in the narrative were to say to Jesus that if He had been present, her brother Lazarus would not have died. Up until this point she had not yet confessed that Jesus was the resurrection and

the life, but now proposes to enact upon His living body a process proper only to a corpse, surely symbolic of Mary's realization of Jesus's unique relationship to life and death; and so it is as natural to anoint His living body, for He is even now the resurrection, as it would be later on to anoint his dead body. In her act of confession of belief, Mary is seen to accept not only His impending death, but also an assurance of His resurrection.

The third story relates how Mary went early in the morning on that first Easter Day, before dawn, and came across the deeply disturbing sight of the empty tomb, revealed by the rolling away of the great stone which would have sealed it. In a state of panic she runs off, comes across Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved and exclaims: "*They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre and we do not know where they have laid Him.*" These words seem to imply that Mary had already made an inspection of the tomb, and that she is therefore the first witness to this momentous discovery, but she has not yet believed – she merely assumes that someone else has taken away the body for anointing and a final resting place. The two men return and Peter looks but does not comprehend the significance of what he sees; the other disciple "*saw and believed.*" That is, he understood that the one who could be free of death must be what he had been claiming to be – the very son of God.

Here we have a sort of very short historical interlude. The crucifixion had removed Jesus from the world of visible persons. Now his enemies could think that if he could not be seen, nobody would believe in him. How could such preposterous claims of immortality survive invisibility? However, to those who did believe, in this short time that Jesus was removed from them in sight, he was not removed in spirit. Now was the transition from his earthly ministry to the glorified Lord of the church's life.

Shortly afterwards, the story returns to Mary who, having been the first witness to the empty tomb, and so by implication to the resurrection, will now be the first living person to whom the risen Christ appears. Now left alone, two angels appear to Mary, and only to her, from within the tomb and ask why she weeps – for clearly she has not yet understood. (Does anyone here recall those wonderful words of Luke's angels in the parallel passage at this point "*Why seek ye the living among the dead?*"). Again, she says "*They have taken away my Lord and I know not where they have laid him.*"

She turns around, as if to leave the garden for the last time, and sees Jesus without recognising him. Jesus calls her by name and repeats the angels' question about why is she weeping, but adds, "*Whom do you seek?*" **WHOM** *do you seek?* implying that the answer must be a *living* person. Mary is indeed looking for a living person, but the nuance is lost on her: she asks Him, with supreme dramatic irony, whether He is responsible for the removal of the body to its final resting place. As she departs, Jesus' single word of reply is "*Mary!*", and by that single word, like a sheep to its shepherd, she turns and recognises her Master by His voice, but still not by His appearance. Mary's exclamation of "*Rabboni!*" is a word used characteristically of the deity, and it is not difficult to imagine how she must have fallen and clasped the feet of Christ in adoration.

What is Jesus' response?

"*Cease from clinging to me, for I am not yet ascended to my Father.*" John seems to make clear here that it is only with the risen and glorified Christ that men will have communion through the eucharist. Mary is to let go of Jesus because the new relationship between Lord and worshipper will not be one of physical contact, although it most certainly will be a real personal relationship. We are to give up a fleshly life for an abiding spiritual one. Jesus has appeared to Mary in a form which is clearly quite different from the one He took in the days of His flesh but is still sufficiently distinctive to allow Mary to satisfy herself, and also to persuade others, of His identity, that is, of the Man who was, and would be for evermore. The meeting with Mary marks this exact transition. And so Mary goes out, but before she can give the Lord's message to the disciples with any hope of acceptance, she has to tell them that she has seen Him - seen Him, and, by every inference, believed in Him. *Many see but few believe*: when the Son of God was on earth, all saw Him in His flesh, but of all those who saw Him, how many saw who and what He was? Faith rests upon the historical testimony of those who saw and bore witness – those who saw Him in his earthly ministry, and maintained that belief along with the impossibility of seeing Him again in this life.

Mary shows a complete pattern of coming from apostasy to faith and exercising discipleship. She is faithful right up to the end in coming to the tomb, and moves from little to complete understanding and faith. She responds to the voice of the shepherd

and goes out to confess Jesus to others. The description of “Apostle to the Apostles” is probably a very fair one. Her story and actions are entirely consistent with the lowliness and humility of Jesus, and as St Paul says “not many wise, not many powerful, not many of noble birth² were among those called by God into the church.

Mary of Magdalene: the woman of the humblest origins who was cured of demonic possession, and by her actions helped those standing around to recognise Jesus not only as a great prophet, but one who would also forgive sin, on the understanding that a change of heart and true belief would lead to God’s unconditional and permanent love. Subsequently, her intense desire to worship Jesus by anointing him when alive led her to accept not only His impending death but also the assurance that the resurrection must inevitably follow. Mary’s last and wondrous actions are to be the first living person, the first witness, to see the risen Lord, recognise Him, acknowledge Him, and believe in Him.

She exemplifies for us two of the greatest and most fundamental truths: the love of God, and belief in His Son, the Risen Christ. She is the true disciple to our faith community which must believe without seeing. When Mary saw the Lord it had to burst from her lips and her heart before she could be that apostle to the apostles.

TRAINING FOR THE READERSHIP

I joined the congregation of St Peter's, Whitstable, some twelve years ago, and quite soon afterwards felt that I should move towards being confirmed. I therefore spent about a year under the tutelage of the Rev'd David Flewker, and was confirmed just after my fortieth birthday.

Since then I have taken an increasingly active part in the life and worship of St Peter's. I have now served regularly for a number of years. Three years ago I was drawn to being more involved, feeling that some form of ministry might be suitable for me. This had led to ongoing discussions with my parish priest and a certain amount of more active ministry: I now undertake regular visiting and home communions, and, having completed the lay chaplaincy course at Kent and Canterbury Hospital, now visit there on a weekly basis. Eighteen months ago I was elected DCC Secretary for St Peter's, but will have to sacrifice the tenure in order to release space for further studies.

My interests are both academic and pastoral. I see myself leading Sunday Evensong, doing occasional preaching, and perhaps some bible study classes, combined with visiting and chaplaincy work. I feel particularly drawn to pastoral work, especially as a listener. I have regular meetings with a spiritual director, and hope that this and future training will continue to bring about increasing discernment in my spiritual and other lives.

The Supper at Emmaus Reading: Luke 24: 13-35

Seasalter sermon, 24th July 2005

We meet in the risen Christ – may I speak in his name.

Unless you keep a close eye on the lectionary and the weekly notices, you may not have noticed that I have departed from the regular cycle of readings for the subject of the sermon today. But there's no need to feel the least bit guilty, because that means you are completely unaware of what I am about to bring up for our contemplation and reflection. I'm a great believer in chance finds in life – something I come across which may completely bowl me over because it's entirely new and never been previously thought about, or, equally, it may be something I know very well, but is suddenly thrown into a fresh light because it appears in a new context and therefore gives me the opportunity to compare it with its new neighbours.

Well, there's probably not enough there for you to work out my subject – it might be a piece of music, or literature, a well-known view, or even a person I have seen recently; in fact, it could be almost anything at all in the vast field of daily life, visible or invisible.

Well, a picture is worth a 1000 words, and I have a picture for you to look at, although I shall keep on talking as you look at it.

PICTURE TO GO ROUND.....AND KEEP CIRCULATING

A few weeks ago the National Gallery staged an exhibition on the 16th century Italian painter Caravaggio, or at least on the last few years of his short life. His turbulent but brilliant career was cut short by his murdering

a man, and he himself was found dead soon afterwards. In the field of painting he is acknowledged as the founder and greatest exponent of chiaroscuro, where deep divisive shadows throw penetrating psychological light across his canvasses. (You can easily see that from the painting being passed round.) He is equally famous for, as it were, repainting hallowed biblical subjects and literally bringing them down to street level. Anyone, even The Virgin Mary herself, might appear dressed in the rags of the lowest orders of society, more or less in the role of a prostitute, and thus give us a chance to reflect on even the Mother of God herself.

If we were taken out of our homely situation and shorn of our comfortable daily accoutrements, what might show through to reveal what sort of person we were – something physical, or something more intangible – something from the heart, perhaps?

As the caption to the picture tells us, Caravaggio painted *The Supper at Emmaus* when he was about 30 – a profound masterpiece for someone so young. Even a quick glance must unsettle us. Christ is beardless, even slightly feminine, and looks barely out of his teens. There is no sign here of the dark-haired short-statured Jew that he must have been. He is strongly highlighted by light falling from the left, as he raises his hand to bless the food on the table. He is a brilliant light in the middle of gloomy darkness, but who is he to those around him?

The light of Christ.

Luke alone gives us the dramatically composed story of the supper at Emmaus. *And when he had sat down with them at table, he took bread*

and said the blessing; he broke the bread and offered it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognised him. Sometimes, as here, seeing **is** believing; Christ castigated the foolish whose ears would not hear and whose eyes would not see what the prophets had so clearly predicted, saying *Was the Messiah not bound to suffer thus before entering upon his glory?* Caravaggio depicts the great turning point in the interpretation of the Old Testament – Christians interpret scripture and see the suffering of Christ. Are we unreasonable in thinking that it originated in the mind of Christ himself?

Caravaggio draws a contrast. Where do we stand in relation to these people here? The innkeeper is dull and uncomprehending, looking more across Christ than at him, perhaps concerned more with a full table than a full mind. For the other two pilgrims it is the split second of true revelation. The man on the right has flung his arms apart, one towards Christ and the other right into our faces, almost as if he were on the cross. He only just fails to form a physical connection between us and the Saviour, with the outstretched hand of each of them in a mirror reflection. His pilgrim's badge of a cockle shell seems almost suspended in mid-air – perhaps also in mid-belief as the great truth is revealed.

The light of Christ.

The man on the left grips his seat as his mind turns from darkness to light. He is just about to stand up and topple his chair backwards, nearly poking us in the eye with his elbow, and with his eyes absolutely transfixed on the face of Christ. The tumult is completed by the basket of fruit, just about to fall off the edge of the table, and with one apple prominently pock-marked with the visible signs of decay and death as a reminder of

what Christ has suffered for us. How very calm is our Lord, and how great is the mental uproar in front of him!

Let's think again for a moment: where do we stand at this table? Are we in a position to look at ourselves as others might see us, and dare we do this? Are you the innkeeper, more or less in shadow, just getting on with your daily business, and looking no further than what will satisfy you for today? If you are, as he is here, you are the shadow behind Christ where he cannot see you. Or has the light of Christ touched you? The man to the left has it across his back, but not quite yet across his face; the man to the right is positively floodlit and offering submission to it – his arms are stretched as far as they can possibly go in complete acceptance. Are you hesitant, perhaps scared to suddenly stand up and fling away some comfortable support and let the light flood over you? Or are you the man on the right, who is throwing away all earthly things and has no block between him and Christ?

Every Sunday we break bread, as Christ commanded, and in that breaking we have the revelation of the message. Caravaggio shows us the solemn pledge of the Last Supper enacted now for the first time after the Resurrection, the continuity from Christ's earthly life to his heavenly one. We too must leave this earthly life and travel onwards towards the light and in the light.

The light of Christ.

Astonishingly, and intriguingly for us, just a few years later, Caravaggio painted the same picture again, and here for me at the exhibition was a true revelation. For the first time ever, the two paintings were hanging

side by side in the National Gallery, the London version and the second painting, on temporary loan from an Italian gallery. The second version shows exactly the same scene, but perhaps half an hour later. What has changed? There are still four figures around a table, and Christ is still central, in the act of breaking bread. To his right is the same innkeeper, still uncomprehending and looking passively across Christ and not at him. For this man there has been no revelation – *he who has eyes to see, let him see!* There are still two pilgrims at either side – so what is different? The light of Christ. Now we have no contrasts of darkness and brilliance; the entire scene is bathed, almost suffused in an all-pervading, calm, even light. A divine aura has come down across the group of men. It almost looks as if Caravaggio himself has been converted and changed his distinctive style to reflect it. We cannot be certain whether the two pilgrims are the same men or two others, but that is not the point. Whoever they are, they have seen the light. They sit calmly and quietly, aware of what has happened to them and in whose divine presence they now are. Caravaggio draws a new contrast – some may never see the message, even when it is in front of their eyes, but others can and will: *he who has eyes to see, let him see!*

We all have eyes to see, but do we also have the mind and the heart to see? Luke describes the pilgrims after Christ has left them: *Did we not feel our hearts on fire as he talked with us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?* Caravaggio cannot depict the mental processes leading to revelation, but he can depict the life-transforming result, doubly effective for the spectator when there are two pictures to enjoy – a before and after, as it were.

God's light and its daily reappearance on the earth is one of the few absolute certainties in our lives. We see and easily appreciate its physical life-giving qualities. Mediaeval man developed the theory of the light flooding into our minds as well as our eyes, when he rebuilt mediaeval churches with enormous windows for that very purpose.

Let us pray as we go about our daily lives and on our daily faith journey that our hearts and minds may be moved by God's wonderful light.

AMEN.

The Parable of Forgiveness – Matthew 18, 21-35.

Preached at Seasalter, Sunday 11th September, 2005

We remember the fourth anniversary of 9/11.

We meet in the risen Christ – may I speak in His name.

To err is human, to forgive divine. Well, even after just one reading of today's gospel passage from Matthew – the parable on forgiveness – those words of Alexander Pope jumped into my mind, and perhaps they did into yours as well. It's one of those much-quoted passages you will find in the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, and I would guess that as often as not it's trotted out without too much thought as to the real implications of what it is saying and what it means, although of course Pope, as an 18th century Catholic, would have known precisely the significance of his words.

Perhaps he was also thinking of another line which we all know even better than his one: *Forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.* That petition is just one small part of the Lord's Prayer – but, oh, how vast and unique is the subject matter! I say unique because, like speech and writing and thought and reason, forgiveness is a divine gift given to us as human beings, but not to other members of the animal kingdom. To forgive is to be merciful, and sure enough, the bible concordance reveals a vast number of entries under both forgiveness and mercy. So what exactly do we do, or think we do, or hope to do, when we forgive somebody?

Matthew wants to tell us that forgiveness knows no bounds or end. It can never be over and done with in our imperfect human lives; it goes on for

ever; it is forgiveness to the utmost. And so when Peter asks our Lord how often he is to forgive his brother, he receives a forcible answer: we do not forgive just seven times or seventy times seven, but really must keep on doing it for as long as we draw breath. The lives of the disciples place the accent on relationships between us brother Christians here on earth before we get anywhere near entering heaven; and not on general human behaviour but rather on the debts and obligations between fellow Christians.

As God has freely forgiven the disciples their many sins, so at the last judgment he can equally easily revoke that forgiveness if they have not done likewise to each other. Forgiveness and mercy are not to come just as mere words; they must come from the heart in absolute reality and sincerity. How easy it is to say something, but do we really mean it? Might it be better to sometimes keep silent if we cannot speak truly from the heart? Matthew alludes to this point earlier in his gospel at chapter 15, verse 8, where he recalls Isaiah lamenting that *this people honours me with lips but their heart is far from me.*

We must all settle our accounts (and so perhaps also, as my grandmother always told me, never let the sun go down on our anger). Matthew likens the kingdom of Heaven to the settling of accounts – the judgment we shall undergo before we can enter is like the settling of accounts. The man who comes up before the king is *enormously* in debt to him – he is the governor of the province, responsible for the payment of his country's taxes, but equally he could be any one of us in a position of financial or some other indebtedness to a friend or employer or spouse or business partner. Clearly he has sinned in straying from what he ought to have done and now has absolutely no chance of repaying the financial or moral

debt. The master's initial response is to order him and his wife and children and all his possessions to be sold, not to achieve the impossible of paying off an unpayable debt, but rather as a punishment.

The debtor has no hope of settling his account – he blurts out that he needs time and patience to repay, when he really knows that he can't - he is trapped by his sin against God, a debt which he cannot wipe out and which will put him into eternal bondage. There can be only one remedy to a predicament which has no remedy – forgiveness. The king is moved to compassion and does not take up the promise of repayment. He cancels the debt completely, and shows pity and compassion in that forgiveness.

That man had great debts, but what about the small ones? The principle is just the same. As he goes on his way, completely forgiven, he meets a fellow-servant who owes him a few pounds. He grabs him roughly and demands the repayment of this small sum. As he himself had begged, so now the second debtor begs for some time in which to repay the money, but he is hard-hearted and throws the fellow into prison. The story gets back to the master, and his response at verse 33 is one for all of us to consider: *I remitted the whole of your debt when you appealed to me; were you not bound to show your fellow-servant the same pity as I showed to you?* Such was the master's anger that the man was thrown into prison to be tortured until the debt was repaid in full – however, as we know already, the sum was so large that he had no possible hope of raising it, so his imprisonment, both a physical and a moral one, was for ever. Without forgiveness, there can be no release to freedom, and eternal bondage must follow.

Almost every day occasions arise when some sort of pardon or instant forgetting will arise. Some are quite trivial, often accidental in their nature: I might knock someone's bunch of keys off a table, quickly bend down and restore them to their resting place, mutter a quick *sorry* and then think no more of it. We would not describe this as an event requiring any more than that brief apology, and neither side would be harmed or expect further action. In the mere act of walking about all of us from time to time brush against or bump into other people, and again, no harm is done and a quick word of apology is all that is required, although it is perhaps curious that we sometimes feel the need to express some kind of regret for actually just touching another human being.

So, clearly, this huge subject of forgiveness does not really relate to the sort of trivial incidents I have just described. We are concerned much more with human thoughts and feelings and how they may be hurt by other people, or, in their own turn, hurt other people. These woundings (perhaps sins is a better word) may arise accidentally or deliberately, but it is up to us to be able to forgive freely – and then forget – what has been committed against us. And how very important is the forgetting: we can say *I forgive you* – those are the mere words from the lips – but the great thing is to then forget the matter in question, and for your aggressor to know that you mean it. Remember again Isaiah: *this people honours me with their lips but their heart is far from me*. As God has forgiven us our sins, so we must forgive the sins of others.

Without forgiveness there can be no reconciliation, and without reconciliation no progress or development among a community. We shall remain trapped and isolated, incapable of moving on - yes, even we Christians will be trapped and incapable of furthering our aim of the

heavenly kingdom here on earth if there is no communication, but only rancour and bitterness between ourselves because of grudges held and debts not repaid. The act of forgiveness is as beneficial for the giver as the receiver, and neither party will be well unless each sees and understands the other's feelings and response.

Some years ago, the IRA murdered a teenage girl, just one of so many pointless murders, but this murder survived the instant headlines because her elderly father publicly declared that he forgave them his daughter's murder and bore them no ill-will or grudge, and that he would live out the rest of his life in a spirit of forgiveness and forgetfulness of the atrocity. We have no way of telling how much that remarkable declaration influenced the subsequent actions of the IRA, but how many other ordinary people must surely have been shaken out of their usual blunted reaction to so much daily bad news and seen that it is possible to forgive even in the most harrowing circumstances. By his act of forgiveness that father was instantly free from the bondage of evil imposed upon him by his dreadful and unexpected loss. To forgive and forget is to set us free.

We live in an age of compensation where no acts of God are now tolerated – perhaps not surprising in a society where most people do not believe in God – but where everything has a value set upon it – even human life. It's rather like a health insurance contract where the loss of an eye will pay you £1,000 and the loss of both legs £50,000, but what will you be paid if you lose your life? What price a human life? The incessant chase for financial reward after an accident, even if it is absolutely nobody's fault, shows that many people are not prepared to forgive and forget, but need tangible evidence that the matter is now closed; but does

that sum of money truly help a so-called victim to feel and become a better and more loving person?

Human relationships can too often be fragile things, the unwitting and helpless victims of weak and fragile human people. There are lesser things like rudeness or spite or jealousy which can so easily lead to hate and bitterness, and perhaps then to a permanent breakdown in communication, even divorce, if people harbour such feelings and will not let them go by the acts of forgiveness and forgetting. There are much worse things, too, especially aggravated or deliberate acts of evil, culminating in the probable ultimate of murder where forgiveness can be sought from God, but not from the victim. We must all remember that we are none of us perfect and have unconsciously and through no fault of our own inherited traits and characteristics from our childhood which may now be irritating or worse to those around us. Is the murderer to be condemned for all time by a single dreadful act; or is the paedophile to be shunned by the whole of humankind for a failing he may hate himself but has no control over? These are highly emotive and controversial issues, especially in a society where protective measures for children have reached extraordinary levels, but both of those offenders deserve our compassion and understanding, and a very real impression from us that, perhaps in conjunction with expert professional help, we are at least prepared to forgive them their sins, and, with the evidence of a true willingness on their part to show remorse and a desire for change, to forget what has happened in order that they may be able to renew their lives and start again. As the king does in the gospel, so must we be merciful by forgiving and forgetting.

Six weeks ago, I was grievously insulted in public by a friend of 25 years' standing. I did not see him again before I went on holiday, and so have had several weeks to think on the matter. My friend is inclined to occasional bursts of temper, and I am long used to them, but the shock here was that it was directed at me and not somebody else. When I see that friend again, I fear it will be slightly difficult for me but I shall harbour him no grudge and be quite happy to forget the incident and carry on as normal, as it would be lunacy to let a friendship of half a lifetime be destroyed by one outburst, and I would then be trapped by my own making if I severed the relationship. It will surely be better to try and gently discover his opinion of the incident and how I felt at the time, and for me to reflect on what made him do it – perhaps some internal crisis in his life which he cannot yet bring himself to express other than by a violent and sudden outburst. In forgiveness there may come understanding on my part and resolution on his.

I want to bring in one more example. I confess that I have no answers and that there may not be any easy answers, and that even raising the questions is difficult and painful, but I believe the implications are profound for the future of the human race and may stand as the ultimate example of forgiveness. The parable of forgiveness is centred on the new and developing early Christian community, not on human behaviour in general, but specifically on the debts and obligations between fellow Christians: 2000 years later, can we and should we extend forgiveness to other peoples and religions?

Four years ago today several thousand people's lives were instantly terminated when the World Trade Centre in New York was attacked.

Today, many more thousands of people, related and unrelated to those who died, have spent four years trying to come to terms with the suddenness and devastating results of that attack, and the loss of countless friends, colleagues, husbands and wives. For many, those four years of adjustment will have been the most difficult of their lives, and the idea of forgiveness will be quite alien to their thinking. They might have prayed for the victims and for themselves time and time again, but a direct appeal for the welfare of the perpetrators will be for almost all of them quite impossible.

And yet those bombers were human beings like ourselves, and adherents to a monotheistic religion like ourselves. As Christians we should wish nobody dead, not even the perpetrators of the vilest crimes against our common humanity; talk of revenge or of out and out war can serve no useful purpose, and will lead only to the loss of yet more lives. Pope John Paul II said more than once that the history of many countries around the world is drenched with human blood. Our Lord said some very difficult things in his teaching – so difficult that they upturned the accepted customs of the society of his day, and still remain huge stumbling blocks for some believers today, even though if they were put into universal practice, human society and the planet would be changed out of all recognition. Can you imagine a world with no lying or theft or murder or revenge, and one where all sins were forgiven and forgotten? It is almost beyond our wildest dreams, but if it came to pass, how we should all be changed! How worthy we should all then be of the promises of Christ!

And so we come back to our parable. We have seen how both the Heavenly Father and the king are severe in their judgment; and by implication the church herself, although always ready to forgive, is forced

to judge harshly those who jeopardise the brotherhood of its community. At the last judgment God will revoke his supreme act of forgiveness – the remission of sins – in the case of those who have not forgiven one another.

Are we prepared to just be, or to be and do something? A philosopher once wrote that it only needs good men to do nothing for evil to flourish. There is a long and wise Chinese proverb, rather akin to our *charity begins at home*, which ends by saying that there can be no peace in the world until we have peace in our own hearts. The partner of peace is freedom – physical freedom, yes – but far more importantly the freedom of a calm and forgiving mind. We cannot afford to be chained and stifled by grudges which will suffocate our spiritual progress and development – we shall grow by the supreme acts of forgiving and forgetting.

Amen