



## The Cross and Forgiveness

Mark Edgecombe  
Good Friday 2012

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

*Romans 5:6-8*

If you read the account of the Fall in Genesis chapter 3, it is easy to come away from it with quite a caricatured picture of the God that Jews and Christians worship. For starters, this God, like some cosmic proto-psychologist running a cunning experiment, sets up a tree in the middle of the Garden of Eden from which Adam and Eve must not eat. Then, surprise, surprise, Adam and Eve, like a pair of three year-olds, pick the fruit and eat. Everything we know or think we know about human psychology suggests that Adam and Eve were on a hiding to nothing. When an authority figure tells you not to do something, you do it, right? You test the boundaries. And yet in the Genesis account, God punishes them severely for their disobedience – Eve is consigned to pain in childbearing; Adam is given over to toil and sweat. Both will die. It seems kind of harsh.

It strikes me as ironic and odd that it's often people who don't believe in God who, when defending that stance, appeal to caricatured notions of Him: God the humourless schoolmaster; God the mirthless tyrant; God who will not abide a bit of harmless fun; God who will not love the lovable rogue. When people start to be truly open to God and to genuinely entertain the possibility that He exists and may in fact be revealed to us in the Bible, they also start to see nuances in the way he is presented to us in narratives such as the one at the start of Genesis.

Is God, like Shakespeare's Prospero, a petulant despot who simply cannot handle our juvenile jandal? Or, does the picture of God reacting severely to Adam's and Eve's sin illustrate an immutable truth about the universe? That sin is serious and that it leads to death? To put it in quasi-Newtonian terms, is sin an action whose natural and inescapable reaction is death?

My rhetorical questions clearly imply what I think is the case: that God's apparently arbitrary decision to curse Adam and Eve in the garden is actually an eloquent and pictorial way of presenting to us the inherent nature of the universe we inhabit. When humans, endowed as they are with free will by God, use that free will to oppose Him, the natural outcome is death and decay – just as pouring poison over your vegetables makes the vegetables die.

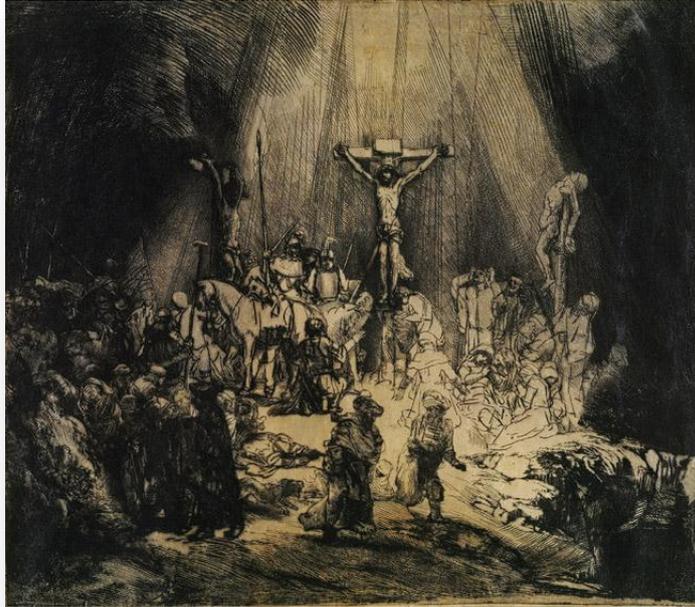
God's response following Adam and Eve's sin stops being petulant when you consider that the picking of the fruit is shorthand for sin in all its shades and guises: child abuse; bullying; human trafficking; fraud. The thing about sin is that it changes the nature of relationships. Relationships are not mended by pretending nothing's wrong. They're mended through hard and often uncomfortable work. The American poet Robert Frost wrote that "the best way out is always through". Good Friday reminds us that God thinks so too.



My son William was born in September last year. Thanks to Eve's activities in the garden, Sarah (my wife) suffered upwards of ten hours of labour, and several weeks after that of recovery from the trauma of the childbirth. So far, William's life has been fairly straightforward, or so it has seemed to me. He grizzles when he's hungry. He screeches when he's hurting. He sleeps when he's tired, and he giggles when you poke your nose into his chest. So far, he doesn't seem to have committed any obvious sin, as far as I can tell. I suppose he may have sinned in ignorance or weakness, but there hasn't been a whole lot of deliberate fault up till now. In fact, a few weeks back, while we were having dinner at my parents' place, Sarah said that she couldn't bear the thought of him ever being naughty. My father Ken, who edits an on-line magazine for the Brethren church in New Zealand called *Treasury*, devoted an entire editorial to this very utterance. He suggested that it wasn't out of a despotic urge for control that Sarah shrank from the thought of William ever being naughty. Rather, it was the thought of rupture in her relationship with this perfect and responsive little being that upset her. And given that he was writing an editorial for a Brethren magazine, Dad went on to draw parallels with God. He suggested that:

"...the real thing about sin is not so much that it breaks God's law as that it breaks God's heart... If I could gain a genuine vision of the God of the universe really caring that my desires are less than noble, that my sordid preoccupation with myself limits my potential as well as my usefulness, that those things turn my thinking into less than he dreamed for it, perhaps I could be channelled into higher things. If that were so, then of course I would benefit, but so would everyone else."

I guess Dad was suggesting that those who have known what it is to love a small child might gain an insight into God's attitude towards humanity. We have upset and angered God, not simply for the way we have related to Him, but also for the corruption we have inflicted upon ourselves. Sin alters us and it alters our relationships with one another and with God.



Today, Good Friday, we consider this cross, erected here to remind us of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ on a hill called Golgotha, outside the gates of Jerusalem some 2000 years ago. On a day like this one, the man we identify with God himself, Jesus, was publicly executed by Roman authorities, in the manner in which they commonly executed criminals, bandits, would-be revolutionaries, riff-raff. Yet Christians interpret this event – this weird, gruesome and deeply shameful event – as being not only the means by which Rome dealt with a supposed revolutionary, but the means by which God dealt with sin. We’ve all heard the verse from John: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

If we have a caricatured God in our heads – the kind of God Tom Scott might present to us on the opinion page of the *Dominion Post* – then we might come away from the events of Easter with an understanding as follows: God (the cosmic psychologist) sets up a slightly sadistic experiment. Adam and Eve flunk it. God punishes them (and us) by introducing labour in childbirth, toil in working the land, and death. BUT, eventually, he decides to grant us a reprieve, issuing us with a pardon on the proviso that someone perfect be prepared to take the rap on our behalf. Enter Jesus. Then, in a weird if slightly unrealistic and embarrassing post-script, there’s a resurrection. As if God didn’t quite realise where to end what would otherwise have been a perfectly balanced story.

But that’s not quite what’s going on Good Friday. There are elements of that caricatured version that may be true, and elements that chime with Scripture. But God, though He looks gravely upon sin, is not a despot, nor a sadist, nor one who gets a kick out of sacrifice. God is a realist.

Until I started to really think about it this last week, I've always generally understood the crucifixion of Jesus as being the means by which God offers us forgiveness: Jesus died so that God could forgive us. As I've read passages of Scripture this last week, it has seemed to me that that they suggest that God had forgiven us *before* the crucifixion happened. It was while *we were yet sinners* that Christ died for us. Like the parent of the small child – even the naughty small child – God desires to be close to his children. Weirdly, he craves intimacy with us. At the same time, his long view affords him a far more accurate understanding of where our sin leads, and what the exact consequences of it are. I think God came to earth in the person of Jesus and was crucified not *so that* he could forgive us, but because *he had already* forgiven us. The crucifixion is, as Māmari will speak to us about a little later on, the means by which God then *reconciles* his creation to himself. In the first instance, God shows his *openness* to us by forgiving us; next, He shows the *depth of his commitment* to us through the crucifixion, this event which, though a brutal example of dying, exhausts death because it culminates in resurrection.



In each of the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – Jesus speaks cryptically about the futility of pouring new wine into old wineskins. Some interpret this, plausibly, as being Jesus' way of saying that he would not fit the Jewish mould of what a Messiah would look like. I wonder if we could apply this saying to what was happening at the crucifixion too. The powers of death sought to pour Jesus into their mould. To fit him within their tomb. But this new wine was never going to be contained by that old wineskin. Easter Sunday makes Good Friday good.

But we can celebrate that on Sunday. For now, I want to try and tease out some implications of this idea that the cross is not the grounds for God's forgiveness, but that God's forgiveness is the grounds for the cross. What might this mean for us? How might this transfer to the humdrum reality of our everyday lives?



On Monday, the billboards outside dairies around Wellington advertising the *Dominion Post* were emblazoned with the headline “I will never forgive”, or something of that sort. When I looked up the article later on *Stuff*, it turned out that the quote was from a woman whose brother had been tragically killed by a careless driver on the motorway north of Johnsonville. Presumably the woman’s utterance about not being able to forgive was one of many things she said in the hearing of journalists, yet this was the quote that made it onto the billboards. If nothing else, it tells us that forgiveness remains a newsworthy topic. It’s a topic which, quite literally, makes headlines. In fact, forgiveness makes the headlines when it’s withheld, as in this case, and equally, it makes the headlines when it’s offered, as in a number of famous cases in South Africa following the end of apartheid.

It seems that forgiveness is a highly emotive commodity. When it’s withheld, there’s something visceral within us which goes, “Yeah, fair enough. Why *should* she forgive her brother’s killer?” Yet when it’s offered, there’s some other part of us – a humbler part – that thinks, “Gosh, that’s amazing! I wonder if I could do that, faced with the same situation?”

Forgiveness opens the way for reconciliation. In dealing with very little children, as I’ve already implied, it’s absolutely essential. We understand this implicitly. An adult who nurses a grudge against a child for the bite marks on the piano or drawings on the bedroom wall needs, clearly, to get with the programme. The programme is forgiveness.

Similarly, it’s common in my profession to hear teachers talk about the importance of letting go of grudges, beginning each day by offering students a clean slate, hoping for the best from them, even if each previous experience with that student has been negative.

Forgiveness, when offered by a teacher, opens the way for students to re-invent

themselves. Teachers who do bear grudges are rightly seen as churlish. In fact, they're jeopardising their ability to do their job well – their job being to help students grow.

But these are small-fry scenarios. Forgiveness is just as important for dealing with difficult sin – deep offence, preference shown for others over ourselves, contempt, physical violence, emotional tyranny. Today, Good Friday, reminds us that forgiveness, if allowed to really take root within us, can lead to radical and transformative acts. Acts of reconciliation. Bizarre things like dying on a cross and unmasking the power of sin in order to reverse the action and reaction instituted in the Garden of Eden. The crucifixion is not a blueprint for us to follow, but liberation from sin. When we refuse to forgive, we negate the effect of that liberation.

In serious cases, forgiveness is not easy. I once belonged to a home group which included an elderly Dutchman who had been imprisoned by Japanese during World War II in Indonesia. Without going into details about what he had been subjected to, he used to say that he just couldn't find it within him to forgive those who'd persecuted him, his brother, and his mother. He wanted to, he knew he should, but he didn't know how. It is of course easy for me, who have never been imprisoned or rounded up or tortured or singled out, to spout the virtues of forgiveness. But it *is* part of the Christian mentality, the Christian way of facing the world: we are called to maintain an unwavering belief in the rightness of forgiveness, to take every opportunity to practise it, and to hope and pray for the ability to offer it when everything within us longs to nourish bitterness.

If prayer is openness to God, I guess forgiveness is openness to one another. This cross reminds us of the greatness to which forgiveness still gives rise.