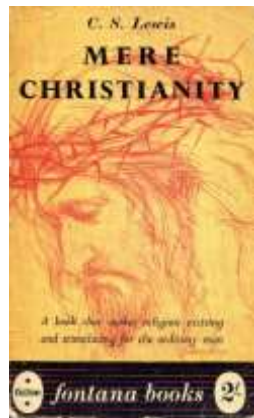


## SERMON FOR TRINITY 14 | 13.09.2020

Genesis 50: 15-21; Romans 14: 1-12; St Matthew 18: 21-35



I have no idea how long this book has sat on my shelves. It is dated 1955, has very yellow pages and really faint print, and I am sure I didn't buy it new. But for however long, it has just sat there on my study shelves, waiting for me to take it up today to read.

The name CS Lewis will, for most of us, take us to the Narnia books like *The Lion, the witch and the wardrobe*, the fantasy novel first published in 1950 which is currently being revived at the Bridge Theatre. Others may have dipped into *The Screwtape letters* or into *Surprised by Joy*. All of these books were part of Lewis' attempt to make Christianity credible to non-believers after the second world war when so many found faith almost impossible.

One of the reasons for returning to CS Lewis is because he one of the few writers to really work at our theme for today which is 'forgiveness'. *Mere Christianity* has a chapter devoted to it and he wrote a further essay on Forgiveness in 1960 for an American audience. And the key idea that he shares with us is the difference between 'forgiving' and 'excusing'. Too often he says, we allow ourselves to muddle these up.

Jesus' telling of the story of the man who owed ten thousand talents is done with typical gross exaggeration. We miss the point when we stick to talents as the value of the money involved. To give you an idea, it would take 20 years for a daily labourer like the one in the story to pay off one talent so it was clearly ridiculous for him to say he would pay the debt: he would have to have been working for 200,000 years do that!

The real lesson that Jesus is teaching is that this man had a debt he could never pay off. Yet, as the story says, *out of pity, the Lord released him and forgave him the whole debt.* Debt was no laughing matter in the ancient world as we saw: it involved selling not only all the man possessed but his wife and children too.

Of course, as the story goes on, the maths are far less important than the hypocritical way in which the man goes on to treat someone else who owed him relatively little. Having been released from so great a burden, how could he even think of behaving like this to someone else?

Amateur psychologists as all of us are, we tend to start trying to find explanations and excuses for the bad things that people do. Let's start with ourselves. We have done something we know to be wrong, what then? Our natural instinct is to go looking for extenuating circumstances. *It was the way we were brought up; we were tired and not feeling well; we didn't have all the information we needed ... or whatever.* If we go on like this for long enough, we can almost explain the whole fault away. Yes, *it was wrong*, we say, but these are the reasons why at least half the sin can be explained away. And that makes us feel better. We are only half as guilty as we first thought.

Sadly we might not be as accommodating when looking at the errors of other people. We look at excuses for them, at their extenuating circumstances, and suddenly the bar of proof gets a good deal higher! *Their upbringing wasn't that bad; they weren't that poorly and they should have known the details!* Excuses for them seem a good deal more flimsy than ones for us!

And then, just when we have finished all this 'rationalisation' Jesus comes back into view and says: *don't you think I know better than you every reason, every excuse, for your bad behaviour?! If there are extenuating circumstances, then I know about them already – which reasons stand up and which ones don't.*

*But what I am interested in, Jesus says, is the rest: what is inexcusable. I can't forgive what isn't your fault; there is nothing to forgive. What I have come to do is to forgive what is absolutely your fault.*

**Because forgiveness is about all the rest, the stuff for which we are fully to blame. To find excuses for bad things that have happened is not Christian love; it is human justice. If we go away satisfied that our excuses have stood up, that is not forgiveness. What we are talking about is different.**

**To mirror God's forgiveness for someone who has hurt us we have to look at the fault in all its ugliness and horror – in all its full inexcusability – and still say to the person: you are forgiven. No hiding behind excuses or justifications. Just a complete writing off of whatever injustice was done to us. And that is tough, especially if the action is not just a 'one-off' but a regular, incessant, pattern of bad behaviour.**

**I have often wondered why the Creed obliges us to say each week, we believe in the forgiveness of sins, and in the Lord's Prayer, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us. Surely as Christians we know this already? But these phrases are there because forgiveness, real forgiveness, is such a test of our faith. As the Gospel story shows, God can't - and won't - forgive us unless we forgive, from the bottom of our hearts all who have sinned against us. It is as clear as it could be. No ifs, no buts.**

**As Lewis says in his rather 1950s language: He doesn't say that we are to forgive other people's sins provided they are not too frightful or provided there are extenuating circumstances, or anything else of that sort. We are to forgive them all, however spiteful, however mean, however often they are repeated. If we don't, we shall be forgiven none of our own. We are offered forgiveness on no other terms. To refuse it is to refuse God's mercy for ourselves. There are no hints or exceptions and God means what he says...**

**CS Lewis finishes his chapter in *Mere Christianity* like this: always, he wrote, our aim is to see those who sin against us as we feel about ourselves: to wish that they were not bad, to hope that, in some way they could be turned around and made whole again. That is what the Bible means by loving our neighbour; wishing them good, not out of a fondness that is misplaced or pretending that they are nice when they are not. What is asked of us is that we love them and forgive them like God loves and forgives us, not for any nice attractive qualities they may or may not have but because that is what they are due as children of God. Forgiving and being forgiven: that is our calling.**