

A woman, pushing on in years, boasted to her pastor that she did not have an enemy in the world. He was very impressed. What a wonderful thing to be able to say after all those years! And then she added: 'I have outlived them all'. I suppose if we live long enough we will also be able to make the same statement.

Today's gospel is familiar to us. It includes the question: "How often must I forgive?" For many years I have spoken about this gospel telling people they need to forgive. But the more I think about it, who am I to tell a woman whose father abused her or a mother whose daughter has been raped that she must forgive? I think a different approach is warranted. Instead of speaking about forgiveness as an imperative, I want this time around to speak about forgiveness in a different way. I want to briefly reflect on the question "Why forgive?" The reason is that I believe in understanding the effects of forgiveness we can be better motivated to let go of the things that burden us.

I can only say: 'However much we have been wronged, however justified our hatred, if we cherish it, it will poison us. We must pray for the power to forgive, for it is in forgiving that we are healed'. Nelson Mandela continually reminded his fellow prisoners in South Africa that unless they let go of their hurts they would remain in the grip of their abusers.

We have all been hurt in some way or other in the journey of life—made fun of in school by a teacher or other students, not invited to the wedding, didn't get the job I thought I should have got, or at a more serious level, betrayed by someone you trusted, abused physically or sexually and so on.

Sheila Cassidy, who was herself tortured in South America, had this to say: 'I would never say to someone 'you must forgive'. I would not dare. By failing to forgive, we hurt ourselves more than anyone else. Surely this is what Jesus had in mind when he told how the merciless servant was cast into prison when he refused to forgive his fellow servant. I don't think he was suggesting that God would cancel his mercy. He is simply saying that an unforgiving spirit creates a prison of its own. It builds up walls of bitterness and resentment and there is no escape until we come to forgive.

Forgiving and letting go is not easy, especially when the wound is very deep. This is why I call forgiveness the 'F' word because it's not to be used lightly. Forgiveness is a choice and often involves a three-stage process: (1) I will never forgive that person (2) I

can't forgive (forgiveness seen as a good thing, but the hurt is too great) (3) I want to forgive and let go with God's help. Also we must learn to forgive ourselves.

Imagine you are responsible for something very serious. You are driving a car after drinking alcohol and smoking pot. There is an accident and a young person is killed. That life cannot be brought back. For more and more people there is something in the background, some skeleton in the closet - some kind of serious mistake. And for many of us we do not believe that there is another chance much less a seven times seventy chances. This is not the teaching of Jesus. God does not just give us another chance, but every time we close a door God gives us a way forward.

The Lord challenges us not to make serious damaging mistakes, but he also tells us that our mistakes are not forever—they are not even for a life time—and that time and grace wash clean, that nothing is unredeemable.

Why forgive? Because it is a part of the paschal mystery - to truly experience new life we need to die to the bitterness and resentment that come with maintaining the status quo. . May all of us find the way to peace that Jesus teaches comes to us through forgiveness. And if you want to turn a few heads, tell someone, "I am a Christian and I use the "F" word when needed". Maybe that will be an introduction to a conversation about why we forgive, to share with others Jesus' marvellous way of living human life to the fullest. So be it.