

**May I speak in the name of the living  
God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

I would like you to imagine a wall. A very tall and very thick wall. There is no way round it, and no way over it. There isn't even a gate through it.

The wall is built of large blocks of stone – each one weighing a tonne – I'm not sure what that would be in killogrammes... but suffice to say, each block on its own would be immovable.

Walls are used to mark boundaries, they are used to keep people in or keep people out. Walls can provide security, or they can create a barrier.

Sadly, we can often build walls that divide us in our relationships with each other and with God.

One of the biggest and most solid walls can be the inability to either give or receive forgiveness. In place of the blocks of stone are all the different feelings and emotions that go to make up that wall:

Anger, hatred, fear, guilt, shame, grief, are just some of the feelings and emotions that can make it difficult for forgiveness.

Like the large blocks of stone in our imagined wall, each one is heavy and immovable in our own strength.

In our relationships with each other, the pain caused by words and actions can wound us so deeply that it is hard for us to let go and find it in our hearts to either give or receive forgiveness. Unless we do this, we can never move forward, and we can never feel the healing power of God's grace.

Forgiveness isn't easy.

It is hard to admit that we are wrong, and to say we are sorry.

If we are the one that has been wronged, all those feelings of anger, loss, and injustice can be very big barriers to making things up.

All those feelings of guilt, or shame can make it very hard to forgive ourselves.

The wall is indeed solid and high.

But, walls can come down...

Think about the Berlin wall, which for so long divided families and friends, who by fate happened to be living in either east or west Berlin when the different political ideologies built a very real and physical wall between themselves. After many painful year, that wall fell, opening up the path to freedom and so many new possibilities.

Think of the wall of Apartheid, which for so many years divided the people of a nation on the basis of the colour of their skin. After years of persistently chipping away at the false foundations of that wall, change came, with free elections and the gradual establishment of peace and reconciliation within South Africa.

In our Bible reading this morning, Jesus urges us to have forgiving hearts. Just as God forgives us, we are called to forgive each other, when one has wronged the other. Jesus calls us to remove the walls that divide us, when we refuse to give or receive forgiveness.

In the parable that Jesus tells, the king forgives his servant when he comes to him and asks for mercy. However, the very same servant goes out and demands to be repaid by a fellow servant. When he is unable to do so, the servant has him thrown in prison.

What a contrast to the love and mercy shown by the king! The story highlights how difficult we find it as human beings to forgive one another. God's capacity to love and forgive, is so much greater than ours!

This can be true in our individual relationships. It is also so often true of relationships between communities. Past wrongs can make it very difficult for us to show love and compassion to those from a different community. The barriers go up, because of fear and suspicion.

However, we don't have to allow ourselves to be imprisoned by this way of behaving. If we allow our hearts to be touched by God's love and forgiveness, we can learn to show love in our relationships...

*I'd like to share a story about a wonderful Palestinian man living in Hebron, the southernmost city in the West Bank. His name is Mohammed and he tells of how one day he passed an Israeli car that had broken down.*

*He stopped to ask if he could help and the driver asked if he could give them a lift to the next Israeli town where he could get some help.*

*Mohammed described how he looked into the car and saw this man had his wife and children with him and felt sorry for them all. He said to the man, 'if you can trust me, I will take you all to my house and my neighbour will repair your car. Can you trust me?'*

*The man agreed and the whole family squeezed into Mohammed's car. Once back at his house his wife welcomed the family.*

*It took three days to repair the car. For three days and three nights the Israeli family stayed with Mohammed's family.*

*When they parted, Mohammed said he told his new friend 'we are brothers now'. They kept in contact and Mohammed's new friend made him promise to visit him.*

*After a few weeks he set out to his friend's house. On entering the Israeli town, he realised he had forgotten to bring the address and phone number. Feeling quite nervous he wound down the window to ask for directions. The old man he asked was quite suspicious to start with and asked why he wanted to find this man. Mohammed told him the story of how he had helped his family when he had broken down.*

*The old man said to him, 'I will tell you where he lives, but first you must come back to my home and meet my wife and drink tea with us.' Mohammed was surprised but didn't want to offend him. Later, when they said goodbye, the old man said to him, 'that man you rescued and looked after is my son'!*

This moving story is a great example of someone who was able to love his so-called enemies. Both he and his Israeli friend had to make themselves vulnerable and trust in the humanity of the other and that made a beautiful transformation possible. It is not just the actions or words that inspire, but the complete refusal to build a wall of hatred and bitterness.

I am sure that we are all familiar with another parable Jesus told. The Parable of the prodigal son. The story Jesus tells of the young man who thought that he would do things his own way, made a complete mess of his life and then, realising his mistake resolved to return to his father's house, not as a son, but as a servant. As he is approaching the house, his father is looking out for him, and runs to embrace him. A party is arranged to celebrate the return of his son, much to the distain of the older son, who has remained faithfully at home.

This is sometimes described as the best short story ever told, because all of us can probably relate to each of the characters in the story at some point in our lives.

We see all the human feelings of guilt, shame, fear, anger, grief and loss, that we thought about earlier.

However, they are not allowed to build a wall to divide the family for evermore, because of the father's willingness to forgive and embrace his younger son with his love.

Jesus uses these and other parables to teach us about God's relationship with us and our relationships with each other. The parable of the prodigal son takes us right to the heart of the Gospel message. However far we might stray in our lives from his ways; however much of a mess we might make of our lives, God, like the Father in the story is always looking out for us, always willing to accept us back into his presence and embrace us in his love again.

There is nothing that we can do to separate us from his love.

Jesus encourages us to model this pattern of love and forgiveness in our relationships with each other.

Forgiveness is difficult, but it is something we need to work at if we really want our lives to be different.

To an extent, it depends on the size of the wrong.

- If someone has said something unfair about us, it might be easy for us to accept that it was said in the heat of the moment, or through a misunderstanding, and that no hurt was really intended.

- However, if someone has been repeatedly bullying us, making every day a living hell – that is much more difficult to forgive.

I would like to share with you another true story that speaks to me of God's power to help us remove the barriers and mend our broken lives in a broken world.

Corrie Ten Boom was a Dutch woman who suffered under the Nazis in Ravensbruck Concentration Camp during the Second World War. She witnessed many of her friends and family being taken into the gas chambers.

One day after the war an ex-guard turned up at a church service where Corrie was preaching.

With his hand stretched out and tears streaming down his face, he asked her to forgive him for all the murders that he had committed.

It is difficult for us to imagine, how Corrie must have felt at that moment.

This is what she wrote:

**“I stood there – I whose sins had been forgiven by God – and I could not forgive. I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart.**

**“Jesus help me!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand - you supply the feeling.”**

**And so I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me.**

**And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm and this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being. I have never known God's love so intensely as I did then."**

Through the power of God's Holy Spirit, Corrie found the power to forgive.

In the moment of that handshake, both Corrie and the former prison guard were saved.

Corrie was released from the feelings of anger and hatred that she could so easily have held onto.

The former guard was freed from the overpowering guilt, sorrow and shame that would otherwise have blighted the rest of his life.

In that moment, God's healing power transformed both their lives forever.

Forgiveness is hard, but it can be done.

There are just 2 things that are needed:

And open admission of the wrong that has been done, with a genuine expression of sorrow or regret for what has been done.

*AND*

A willingness to forgive.

We all do things that we know are wrong. We all fall short of the way of love that Jesus calls us to live. We all stand in need of forgiveness.

We can allow guilt, shame, fear, anger, grief and loss, to build a wall between us and each other, and a wall between us and God.

Or we can allow God through his grace, to gently remove each one of those heavy blocks and allow his love, light and forgiveness into our lives again.

Amen.