



Acts of Forgiveness

by Jonathan Aitken

FORGIVING ENEMIES IS ONE OF THE hardest commandments in Jesus's teachings. Most of us struggle with it personally at some period in our lives. But however searing such private wrestlings of the soul may be, they are dwarfed by the public difficulties experienced by communities and countries that have been challenged to forgive horrific acts of evil.

A short roll call of the most brutal international barbarities in living memory—including the Holocaust, Pol Pot's Cambodian genocide, ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, South African apartheid, and Hutu-Tutsi massacres in Rwanda—is enough to provide insights into the complexity and magnitude of the forgiveness problem. But sometimes there are glimpses of solutions too, most notably the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.

It was in the spirit of searching for a solution to one of the 21st century's newest and most intractable forgiveness problems that I recently chaired a public seminar with the title "Forgiving Enemies in Northern Ireland." The fragile peace process in the province is holding well enough to allow talk about both the theology and the methodology of forgiveness between old adversaries across past paramilitary divides. So with the assistance of the John Templeton Foundation and the Trinity Forum we put on a fascinating discussion evening in Westminster starring two experts. One was the Nobel Peace Prize winner David Trimble (now ennobled as Baron Trimble of Lisnagarvey), a former first minister of Northern Ireland who for many years led the United Ulster Unionist Party. The other was Nigel Biggar, Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Oxford University and author of many distinguished writings on forgiveness, including *Burying the Past: Making Peace and Doing Justice After Civil Conflict*.

In his opening paper Biggar did not minimize the difficulties of a forgiveness process that might follow on from the peace process in the politics of post-Troubles Northern Ireland. He drew an intriguing distinction between two types of forgiveness. The first would be motivated by a combination of personal compassion and spiritual self-preservation. It should be seen as an unconditional and unilateral movement of sheer grace directed at reducing bitterness and resentment.

The second would be a far stronger cleansing potion, which Professor Biggar called forgiveness-as-absolution. Its vital ingredients were repentance and reconciliation. He saw no likelihood of this in Northern Ireland while so many perpetrators of past acts of violence would not take responsibility for the injuries they had caused. Political expressions of regret in the absence of sincere repentance would not bring closure "this side of the grave," because mutual trust would be missing from the equation. The best that could be hoped for from forgiveness-as-compassion on its own were coexistence, cooperation, and accommodation, but not reconciliation.

If Nigel Biggar's presentation sounded bleak, David Trimble's was arctic. Anecdotal rather than theological, his account of life at the sharp end of governing two communities in conflict was depressingly realistic. He was contemptuous of the existing mechanisms for reconciliation, particularly the province's Community Relations Commission, which he dismissed as "an utter token failure."

But when he came to the level of localized and personal forgiveness, Trimble could see a focus for future hope. In this context he told a moving personal story.

When he was first minister of Northern Ireland, David Trimble was often driven, under heavy police

protection, down a particular street in his own neighborhood. A lady lived there whose house he and his family had often visited. She was a friend. Or so the first minister thought until he discovered, on the basis of police surveillance, that in this street a certain lady was an active IRA informer. She specialized in telephoning detailed information about Trimble's movements to the very terrorists who were trying to assassinate him. "It did not take me long to work out who this informer was," said the former first minister with traces of hurt in his voice over the pain he had evidently felt from such an intimate betrayal. "But I've never mentioned it to her," he commented, adding with a wry smile, "Besides, I just could be wrong about her."

The audience took the point of the story to be that David Trimble had found it in his heart to forgive this Judas from within his inner circle of friends.

An interesting link between Biggar's theological and Trimble's political presentations was that both speakers referred to the parable of the prodigal son and therefore, by implication, to the centrality of the teachings of Jesus on the obligation to forgive wrongdoers. This is or should be a source of inspiration in Northern Ireland, which is by far the most Christian part of the United Kingdom; churchgoing in the Province is three times more popular than it is in England. Talk of forgiveness is not unique to Christianity, but it does seem to be uniquely proclaimed in the Gospels (see Matthew 18:21-22, John 20:22-23, and Luke 14:11-24) and should therefore inspire all followers of Jesus.

WHEN I HEARD THIS SAID during our Westminster seminar, there tumbled out of the attic of my memory an episode of maximum non-forgiveness in my own life. Paradoxically, it happened at a time when I was traveling at maximum velocity on my own Christian journey and believed that I was forgiving toward anyone who had ever wronged me.

This piety proved misplaced under pressure. The circumstances were that after a legal and political drama I had pleaded guilty to charges of perjury and was just starting an 18-month jail sentence. Among the players in that arena was one particular tabloid journalist whose reporting, in my subjective view, had been unfair and inaccurate. However, I had forgiven him his press passes. Or so I thought until walking round the exercise yard on my third day of incarceration when a fellow prisoner handed

me a copy of a pejorative article beneath the screaming headline "STINKER AITKEN TOO SCARED TO COME OUT OF HIS CELL." The gist of the report, written or rather invented by my tormentor, was that I was so terrified by the company of my fellow inmates that I did not dare come out of my cell even to go to the washroom. As a result, I stank to high heaven.

For some inexplicable reason, this article made me boil over with unforgiving indignation. The recipient of my immediate wrath was a Benedictine

Biggar drew an intriguing distinction between two types of forgiveness. The first would be motivated by a combination of personal compassion and spiritual self-preservation. The second would be a far stronger cleansing potion, which he called forgiveness-as-absolution. Its vital ingredients were repentance and reconciliation.

monk on duty in the exercise yard as a part-time prison chaplain. I harangued him for several minutes on the evils of gutter journalism, the record of this particular journalist's sins, and the impossibility of forgiving him. When I eventually paused for breath the monk said, "Well, I see you can't forgive Mr. X right now. So, for the time being, don't even try. Instead, why don't you ask God for the gift of forgiveness? He will answer your prayer by giving it to you. And then gradually you will be able to use that gift—even in the case of forgiving Mr. X."

I took the monk's advice. It worked. Even though that journalist's transgressions were hardly in the same league as those of paramilitary bombers and killers, I still think that praying for the gift of forgiveness is a good route to grace—and reconciliation—in prison, in Northern Ireland, or anywhere else. ❧

Jonathan Aitken is most recently author of *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Crossway Books). His biographies include *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed* (Doubleday) and *Nixon: A Life*, now available in paperback (Regnery).