

A RECONCILIATION DILEMMA

Some years ago I met a white South African woman whose daughter had been raped and murdered by a young black African man. The woman now travels the world with her daughter's murderer, and together they run programmes and give talks on the possibility and utter necessity of forgiveness. Last year I met a Muslim man whose son had been done to death in America by a young gangster. The bereaved father befriended the uncle of the offender and together they also conduct sessions on reconciliation, while the young repentant murderer serves a life sentence for his crime. There was a film made a few years ago about Xanana Gusmão, the resistance leader during East Timor's struggle for independence. A Timorese man was interviewed whose arms had been twisted all out of shape during torture, one so badly that his son had to cut it off for him. The tortured man holds no grudge. The man who tortured him lives just down the road a little, but is not the object of anger or resentment.

How to balance reconciliation and justice in response to those who commit crimes against humanity is a human dilemma which must be wrestled with on many levels. Lent is a perfect time to undertake this reflection, for in a few weeks we will again be witnesses to the state-sanctioned execution of Jesus of Nazareth who was tortured to death, a murder approved by the religious and political leaders of the time and bayed for by the manipulated mob, the local merchants, layabouts, priests, workers, students and housewives. We will be presented again with the empty tomb and words of peace. We will move on once more in the resurrection, commissioned to follow in Jesus' way.

Of the many levels in the dilemma a major one how easy it is for people who have not undergone similar suffering to talk about forgiveness. The biblical injunctions to be reconciled as well as the example of Jesus who embodies reconciliation are easily invoked by outsiders whose lives and memories are not affected by the brutal treatment of others. This is especially so when the causes of the suffering can be laid partly at the door of the armchair witnesses, as in the case of Australia and East Timor. Pursuit of justice for the major perpetrators might uncover some very uncomfortable facts about ourselves.

However, there are other levels of reflection which must be undertaken too, not in the hope of 'solving' the problems, which are as old as humanity, but with the sincere desire to be part of the struggle of this time and of these circumstances so to be true to the work of following Christ. The willingness to *be* part of it, to do something, to make one's voice heard is the only way not to be complicit with the anti-human forces which see violence as acceptable.

Robert J. Schreiter in his books *The Ministry Of Reconciliation: Spirituality And Strategies* and *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* has written compellingly about the gift of reconciliation which exists even within situations of violence. He reflects on violence as attacking not only the humanity of the victim but that of the offender too. Schreiter then demonstrates the essential character of true reconciliation as a spiritual process rather than merely a set of programmes or a political plan. It is the *victim* who has the power, in the embrace of God, to offer to the perpetrator the restoration of his or her humanity. By refusing revenge or hatred, the victim allows forgiveness to take root, enabling the criminal to find a path to sorrow. The usual expectation of remorse followed by forgiveness is reversed. Despite every political and quasi-religious trick in the book and the resulting murder by torture of God's Son, God is still the first to run to welcome the sinner, paving the path for sorrow.

The requirements of justice without revenge remain, however, for if suffering is not acknowledged and honoured it is belittled, and impunity endangers others. The dilemma of grasping this truth within the call to understand reconciliation as the spiritual process Schreier describes is well summed up for me in the words of a young South African woman appearing in the Truth and Reconciliation process. She said, "I am willing to forgive, but I would like to know who to forgive."

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