

## *And Forgive Us ... As We Forgive ...*

An Address by Dr Noel C Schultz, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2006,  
Highfield Road Uniting Church, Canterbury.

I'm sure you will remember that in the older version of the Lord's Prayer, we used to pray 'Give us this day our daily bread **and** forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'. Unfortunately the newer versions omit the 'and'. The way we used to say it, the prayer for the things we need to support physical life was linked by means of 'and' with the need for forgiveness.

Our needs as humans are many-sided. To stop short with the material physical needs would be to deprive other dimensions of our person of other equally necessary gifts. Accordingly we find in the Lord's Prayer, side by side, requests both for daily bread and for the forgiveness of our sins. Both are necessary.

Many would dispute that statement. We are living at a period in history when sin (personal and collective) is not taken seriously, and the seeking of divine pardon for sins is regarded as outmoded, totally unnecessary. According to many commentators politicians are expected to lie and deceive and few regard their dishonesty as important. Many will still vote for them.

Sin is an unfashionable word today, even in the church. Call it what you like – sin, disobedience, trespass, debt, lovelessness, our humanity (as in the latest Assembly resolution) - its reality is experienced by all who are honest with themselves. One indication of this is how expert we can become in looking for scapegoats.

We put the blame for relationship problems on others, or on the circumstances; we can become experts in passing the buck, in making excuses. Almost always someone or something else is to blame when things go wrong. Someone kills another deliberately, and the social conditions, or alcohol, or drugs, or provocation are blamed. Nations cause massive destruction to water and electricity supplies and slaughter thousands of innocent victims in other countries on the excuse that the other side started it, or it was thought they might have weapons of mass destruction.

Instead of passing the buck, this prayer would have us take responsibility for ourselves, to acknowledge that we come short of what we might and ought to be in our relationship with God and with one another. In short, it would have us acknowledge the need for God to forgive us.

Forgiveness is not something that we can gain or qualify for from God. God does not forgive us because we forgive others, nor because he sees that we are for the most part pretty good living people, who slip up from time to time. God does not make the reform of my behaviour a pre-condition for forgiveness; changed behaviours are often a consequence of God first forgiving and restoring

A very important part, many would say the most important, of Jesus' teaching ministry was the emphasis he placed on God's grace and forgiveness. Think of the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the two lost sons (Luke 15); and of the servant whose colossal debt was wiped out (Matthew 18). Recall his statement to the woman accused of adultery, "I do not condemn you, go and sin no more" (John 7:51ff); his command to the man paralysed, "Take heart, my son, your sins are forgiven... rise, take your bed and walk" (Matthew 9); remember his defence of the woman who had spent a huge sum of money on buying an expensive perfume to anoint him, "her sins which were many are forgiven, that's obvious from the love she has lavished on me" (Luke 7:37-47).

The whole life of Jesus was dedicated to the task of restoring broken relationships between God and people, of bringing people back into fellowship and unity with God. His ministry, including his death and resurrection was one of reconciliation, of creating a community of people who could pray in faith and with certainty "Forgive us our trespasses".

But what is it we are asking God to forgive? In Matthew it is 'debts', in Luke it is 'sins'. Most churches used to say 'trespasses'. This word was first used in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by John Wycliffe, a contemporary of Chaucer, and then adopted by William Tyndale in 1525, in the first English translation of the New Testament from the original Greek. A 'trespass' a violation of what is owed to someone or something. "No trespassing" signs indicate private property and private lives. Trespasses are thus transgressions, offences, violations.

The word 'sin' is from an old English word which means that the arrow has missed the mark, so we might think of words, or actions and thoughts that are 'off target', that fall short, or that are wide of the mark. The word 'debt' or 'what we owe' suggests that we are debtors to God and to one another. Think of all the good we might have done, the talents we might have employed, but buried instead. Thus it is a prayer that God would forgive us not only what we have done, but what we failed to do.

Whichever expression we use, it takes our humanity seriously. We are acknowledging our need for God to forgive us. We are also expressing the hope and belief that God is gracious and forgiving.

But we are also committing ourselves to deal with the sins against us in the same way. We are stating that we also forgive those who trespass against us. This is a very significant thing to say and even more difficult to do. Whereas God's nature is to be gracious and forgiving, we are more inclined to put limitations on the practice of forgiving others. It is difficult on occasions to forgive, and even more difficult to forgive ourselves.

It is instructive that in Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer, it is this petition that is singled out by our Lord for special comment, undoubtedly because he realised the difficulty we often have in practising forgiveness. What is helpful to many is to see their forgiving of others as a response to what God has done for us. In other words, we forgive because we have been forgiven. We may picture God's forgiveness reaching others through us. Certain it is that we often need all the help that we can get to be forgiving.

Jesus spoke of our becoming reconciled with our neighbour before offering our gifts. In many ancient liturgies of the church, it was the practice in worship that after praying the Lord's Prayer, there would be opportunity for worshippers to exchange the greeting or kiss of peace. Only after that had been done would the service continue and Holy Communion celebrated. Anyone who has tried to share a meal with people who are consumed by smouldering resentment or bitterness knows how difficult that is. Our daily bread would be bitter food indeed without prior reconciliation. The whole symbolism of the bread and wine in the Eucharist would be called into question when forgiveness is withheld. Thus as I said at the beginning, daily bread and daily forgiveness belong together. "Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us as we forgive others." Amen.

