giveness helps us to give up our need to be special, give up grasping for outer rewards, give up our illusions of security and give up tormenting ourselves. It is a quality of great power which can be experienced through profound heroic shifts or through little actions and gestures. It is a natural loving response to others and to ourselves. It enables us to see ourselves through the Eternal as God sees us. She does not forgive, for She does not condemn. In this way, when we are one with the Eternal, we no longer need the bridge of forgiveness.

A Political Issue?

John Lampen

The day after the 1988 IRA bomb in Enniskillen, which injured him and killed his daughter, Gordon Wilson told a BBC interviewer that he had prayed for the men who placed it. He later wrote, 'I did not use the word "forgive" in that broadcast, but people understood that my words were about forgiveness. They were not intended as a statement of theology or of righteousness, rather they were from the heart, and they expressed exactly how I felt at the time and as I still do. Better men than I have wrestled with the whole concept of forgiveness and have failed. I believe that I do my best in human terms to show forgiveness, but the last word rests with God and those who seek his forgiveness will need to repent. At that level, such a judgement is way beyond me. All I can do is to continue not to think evil or malicious thoughts about these people and to go on bearing them no ill-will.'

This made a great impact in Ireland and around the world. The leader of the largest paramilitary group in the Protestant community said that Wilson's words had undoubtedly prevented reprisal killings. Public reactions to Enniskillen can be recognized with hindsight as one of the factors which moved events towards the eventual cease-fires. Yet not everyone shared the same sentiments. 'If I knew the bombers had repented,' said a newly bereaved widow, 'perhaps I could forgive them. But how can I forgive someone who may be planting another bomb at this very minute?'

Wrongdoing and forgiveness raise very hard questions, as these examples show; it would be easy to conclude that forgiving is a difficult and heroic act. That may be true, but we should not overlook the fact that acts of forgiveness are happening around us all the time. If it were not so, family life would be impossible, friendships could seldom survive, workplaces would be poisoned by resentment, our mental hospital population would soar, and the world's violent conflicts could never end in peace. Among my own Irish and South African friends are people who have forgiven terrible wrongs. I do think

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they are heroes, but there are many more of these quiet heroes around than we realise. It was a ten-year-old boy, his father murdered by the IRA, who told me, 'That's right, we just *have* to forgive those people.' For some of them, like Gordon Wilson, a forgiving attitude seems to spring spontaneously from their nature — or perhaps from the whole pattern they have chosen for their lives. For others it is the outcome of a painful struggle with feelings of rage and hurt. It may also be true, more often than we recognize, that those who have done wrong are not gloating, but struggling with guilt and hated memories which forgiveness might relieve.

It is natural to think of forgiveness as a transaction between two parties; as Shakespeare says, 'It blesseth him that gives and him that takes'. The Enniskillen widow made the reasonable demand that those who have done wrong should first take the step of regretting it and changing their lives. Gordon Wilson showed that this sequence is not essential. It can even happen that the offer of forgiveness is the key which unlocks a change of heart. Antonio Savasta, a Red Brigades member, took the industrialist Guiseppe Taliercio prisoner and murdered him. On the fifth anniversary of the death, he wrote from prison to Signora Taliercio, who had made a public statement that she forgave the murderers: 'Believe me, I am in your debt for this and other things. I only hope to fill this vacuum by restoring and teaching to others what you have given and taught me. If it were not for you, I would still be lost in the desert.' His letter reveals that his change began with the forgiving attitude shown by his victim: 'Your husband in those days was as you described him — calm, full of faith, incapable of hating us, and very dignified. It was he who tried to explain to us what the meaning of life was, and I in particular did not understand, did not understand from where he gathered the force to be so serene, almost detached from worldly things. I know, signora, that this will not give you back very much, but please know that within me the word your husband carried has won.'

But in other cases it was the repentance of the perpetrator which won forgiveness from the person wronged. Nagase Takashi was an interpreter in the Japanese army in Thailand in 1944–5 and took part in interrogations with torture. One of the survivors, Eric Lomax, has just published his own life story, *The Railway Man*. He tells how he went back to the river Kwai to confront Nagase, who has devoted the rest of his life to the memory of the dead and the needs of survivors. Against his own expectations, Lomax found himself reconciled to his torturer.

The full power of forgiveness is seen when it is offered and accepted. But if forgiving has worth in itself, surely repentance must also have a value, even if it is not accepted by those who suffered. Shane Paul O'Doherty sent letter-bombs to a number of prominent people, some of whom were badly injured. In prison he rethought his beliefs and became a pacifist. He wrote letters of apology to all his victims. None responded, and some said they were very angry that he had written. Yet his admission of guilt and regret gave credibility to his new and public efforts to persuade people that 'twenty years of violence have only damaged the ideals we

sought to serve'.

I have deliberately chosen examples with a political significance. This is because I believe that true peace processes depend on innumerable acts of forgiveness by those who have suffered in the conflict. Hannah Arendt pointed out how forgiveness breaks the cycle of vendetta, preventing the future from being controlled by the worst features of the past. The failure of Tito's regime to make any space for this is a crucial factor in the present wars in Yugoslavia. And in contrast it is the demonstrable magnanimity of African people which gives hope that peace will continue to spread in Namibia, South Africa and now Mozambique. An earlier example from Mozambique shows the politics of forgiveness in action. At independence President Samora Machel had to consider the future of one hundred thousand of his compatriots who had collaborated with the repressive aspects of the Portuguese regime. He arranged a meeting which lasted five days between a thousand of them and senior figures in the government. The accused were grouped under labels describing their role in the secret police, army and other organisations. The president began by saying that bygones could not simply be bygones, as some suggested; the past must be dealt with if the future was to be different. He walked about, questioning people and drawing out their stories of what they had done, spying, betrayals and massacres. After one story he said to his own supporters, 'Do you want to hear any more? How much time would it take to liquidate them?' But at the end of the hearing, he told the guilty to pull down the signs indicating their past roles. 'Let us unite and stand together for a strong and wealthy country. Socialism shall triumph. Put away these signs — there are no secret police or traitors any more.'