

[Ecclesiasticus 27:33–28:9, Matthew 18:21-35]

What can we do when someone commits a terrible crime against us? Straight away we feel an instinct to hit back. Vengeance or pay-pack is an age-old way of trying to restore justice. But today's first reading and gospel both ask us *not* to take revenge. How can we do this?



About ten years ago, in New Zealand, I heard a talk by a doctor, whose name is Izzeldin Abuelaish. A Muslim, he lived in Gaza but was the first Palestinian doctor to work in a hospital in Israel. Like all who worked in Israel, he had to queue for hours every morning and evening to get through the barriers on the Palestine-Israel border.

During one of Israel's invasions of Gaza, in January 2009, an Israeli tank stopped in front of Dr Abuelaish's house, and fired shells directly into it. They exploded, killing his three young daughters and a niece: blowing their young bodies to pieces.

About a year later I heard Dr Abuelaish speaking in Auckland about the book he had just written: *I Shall Not Hate*. He had received no apology from the Israeli government, nor does he expect one, but amazingly, he has found the strength to decide to forgive the terrible evil done to his family. He now works to heal the anger and violence between Israel and Palestine. In honour of his daughters, he started a *Foundation* which awards scholarships to girls.

In today's gospel, Jesus teaches us to forgive. He tells us the story of a cruel king who demanded the huge sum of 10,000 talents from the slave who was probably his chief tax collector. The slave could not raise the money, and the king was about to sell him and his whole family, to get at least some profit, but when the slave begged for mercy, he forgave the debt. As we heard, the slave then bullied another slave to make him pay a much smaller debt.

Is Jesus telling us that we must forgive each other, because we can *never* repay God for the enormous gifts that we have received: life, family, love; all the beauty of creation around us: not to mention *eternal* life in God, which we cannot even begin to imagine.

Like ignorant and thoughtless children, we often hurt each other, causing anger and pain. But

any harm that other people do to us is trivial, when we reflect that we are all God's children, embraced by infinite love. If we do not forgive, we remain trapped, blinded by anger and hatred. The Muslim doctor could see that even the murder of three daughters and a niece are, yes, trivial when compared to God's plan that we live in peace together.

In another country, South Africa, after the terrible injustices of the apartheid regime, Bishop Tutu was part of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* that brought together victims and the people who had tortured or murdered them or their family members. After long experience, Tutu has written that to forgive does not mean to pretend that evil didn't happen. No, to forgive we must **retell** the story of our hurt; **name** it; try to begin to understand **why**, what **reasons** the person had for doing the evil; then **decide** that we can forgive and **restore our relationship** with the offender! Even though we may never have the opportunity to speak to the one who wronged us, forgiving means to accept that we are both children of God.

Forgiving really tests our belief that God loves us. Can we begin to believe that when we all come before God, we will be astonished at the inner beauty of those people we are tempted to hate for what they have done?

Dr. Abuelaish could see just that. He said: "Mutual respect, equality, and coexistence are the only reasonable way forward, and I firmly believe that the vast majority of people who live in Israel and Palestine agree with me."

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