

The prison of resentment
14 September 2014

Genesis 50:15-21
Matthew 18:21-35

I cannot think of any historical figure from the latter part of last century that I would hold in higher esteem than the late Nelson Mandela. And what inspires me the most about Nelson Mandela is not his commitment to social justice, nor his tremendous courage in standing up against one of the modern world's most oppressive regimes, as worthy as these are. What I find the most inspirational about Nelson Mandela is how he demonstrated to the world the power of forgiveness and reconciliation.

It would have been easy for him to have become very bitter and twisted after his 27 years in captivity, 18 years of which were spent in extremely harsh conditions on Robben Island.

Now while it is true that his imprisonment was a result of the African National Congress' involvement with sabotage, this had been a non violent political movement that had been inspired by Mohandas Gandhi. That all changed following the Sharpeville Massacre by the apartheid regime in 1960.

But as Mandela said after his release, "As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind I would remain in prison." And his actions certainly lived up to his words.

As we know, Mandela became President of South Africa, following the republic's first truly democratic election. He forgave his former enemies. He even invited Percy Yutar to lunch. Yutar had been the prosecutor at his trial, who had argued that the full weight of the law should be brought to bear on the defendants. And his government established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to help heal the country and bring about reconciliation, by uncovering the truth about human rights violations that had occurred under the apartheid regime.

In today's Lesson from Genesis, Joseph's brothers are worried. Earlier in the story, they had sold Joseph into slavery and told their father he was dead. Now Joseph is one of the most powerful men in Egypt, and it would be very easy for him to extract some harsh vengeance on them. Instead, he forgives them.

That is in sharp contrast to what happens in today's Gospel, which is often called the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. A servant in debt

to his king pleads for mercy, and the king forgives his debt. However, the same servant shows no such mercy to another servant who is in debt to him. When the king hears how he has treated his fellow servant, he withdraws his forgiveness and judges him by his own standards. We are told that we must forgive others in order to be forgiven ourselves, and that we will be judged in the manner in which we judge others.

The need to forgive others is a central tenet of the Christian faith. "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us," is at the core of the Lord's Prayer.

For many years, I took this at face level, as it was so obvious that we cannot expect forgiveness if we are not forgiving ourselves. It took me a long time to realise there was a whole other level.

Many years ago now, someone did something that greatly upset me. I harboured a bitter resentment against that person for many months. Now I never actually said anything to him about it, mainly because I made a point of avoiding his company at all costs. But sometimes, I would stay awake at night, replaying my resentment over and over through my head like a broken record, and at times I even fantasied about vengeance.

But eventually, I let it go. And some time later, I ran into the person I had been so angry with, and somehow I ended up having a drink with him. I never mentioned the incident that I had got so upset over because I didn't see the point of it, given I had finally let it go some time ago. The other person didn't say or do anything that would indicate he had a clue how much I had despised him. And I then realised that the real victim of my resentment had not been its intended target, but me.

Anyone who has ever participated in any kind of Twelve Step programme to deal with addictions or other issues will have almost certainly heard it said that the worst obstacles to recovery is resentment.

As a billboard outside what is now the Taranaki Cathedral of St. Mary's Cathedral once said, "Resentment is letting someone else live in your head rent free".

Or, as the 'Big Book' of Alcoholics Anonymous says, "It destroys more alcoholics than anything else. From it stem all forms of spiritual disease, for we have been not only mentally and physically ill, we

have been spiritually sick. When the spiritual malady is overcome, we straighten out mentally and physically.”¹

Forgiving others is not only important because it enables our forgiveness. Forgiving others sets us free from our self imposed prisons of bitterness and resentment.

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¹ Alcoholics Anonymous World Services Inc. (1939, 2001). Alcoholics Anonymous. 4th edition, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services Inc, New York, New York, USA. P 64.