

I lived in a village in Shropshire called Ashford Carbonell across the River Teme from Ashford Bowdler. You could sit in some of the houses of Ashford Bowdler and see into the lounge rooms of Ashford Carbonell and vice-versa. The two Domesday Book villages were connected a few miles upstream by a ford. The ford was replaced by a bridge designed by Thomas Telford in 1797. However later a footbridge was built in the 1930's which almost made the two villages one village. For centuries, residents had gone from one village across to the other by way of the ford and then later the bridge upstream. Some people became concerned because the footbridge would do away with the traditional way of getting from one side to the other. Most of those who were opposed to the footbridge finally admitted that they were against it because they really didn't want to be that closely connected with the people on the other side. They liked the distance between them as it was. It was no surprise then that in 1939 the home Guard blew up the footbridge in case of Nazi invasion! I always wondered who were perceived as the real enemies!

The footbridge brought the two sides much closer together. It did what bridges are supposed to do - bring things that are separated closer together. When we see a bridge, we can assume that there are distances, separations, or gaps that need to be narrowed. Obviously, this isn't always just over a body of water. All we have to do is to look around us, and we can see that there are plenty of gaps that need to be bridged - gaps in our relationships with one another. Distances can occur between us in even our very closest relationships - with our best friend, even in our own homes. Instead of being close and intimate, our most cherished relationships often wind up feeling very distant and remote. Rifts can happen between life partners or in families. I've known families where mothers and daughters, sons and fathers, brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles, have refused to speak to one another or be in the same place at the same time, and this has gone on for years!

A similar thing can happen in our work world, when workers are in competition with one another, each one looking for the promotion or the raise or recognition. They would never consider turning to the person in the next cubicle with a question or a helpful hint. I wonder if that isn't why there is so much resistance to creating teamwork in the workforce. Team building tears down the old hierarchical structures that arbitrarily created distance between us. In the old days, workers knew their places and their roles and all the rules, but working as a team changes all that. It puts everyone on the same level, and that can be very threatening.

Whatever the reason, I suspect we'd all agree that there are plenty of places in each of our lives where we are distanced from one another. There are ruptures and gaps that keep us apart, which is precisely what our Bible passage for today is all about. It is saying that if there is something between us and another person - anger, a rift, alienation, bad feelings, then we've got a problem. Being distanced from other people creates distance in our relationship with God. The two are very closely intertwined.

It's like a well-known story about Leonardo da Vinci. When he was painting The Last Supper, he got involved in a terrible argument with a fellow artist. He was just at the point of painting the disciples around the table, and he was so angry with the man that he decided to paint his fellow artist's face as the face of Judas, the one who betrayed Jesus. When he had finished, everyone could see that he had done just that! The painter's face was easily recognised.

However, there was a problem for da Vinci, because next it was time to paint the face of Jesus. He wasn't able to do it. Something was blocking every effort. Finally, after a lot of soul searching, he realised that the cause of his problem was his bitterness and lack of forgiveness toward this fellow painter. It was only after he came to terms with that, and moved toward reconciliation in the relationship that he was able to paint the face of Jesus. He was separated from God because he was separated from another person.

In our Gospel passage, Jesus is saying that if we are at odds with someone else, if there is a distance in any of our relationships with one another, if there is a gap between us, there is also a gap between us and God. We cannot truly expect to have a close, intimate relationship with God unless and until we do something about the distance between us as human beings. That means that the first order of business is doing our part to narrow the gap. The key to a right relationship with God comes in the course of building bridges that connect us more closely to one another.

How do we go about that? How can we begin to narrow the distance between us? The Bible passage gives us a good place to start. It says, "If you enter a place of worship ... and you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you...." In other words, when we connect with God, it is very probable and hopefully, we will become aware of the hurtful actions, unkind words, and self-centered behaviours which have hurt our friends or loved ones. We will become more aware of how our words and deeds affect other people; we will see ourselves in a new way, in a more honest way.

In a very real way, we are attempting to see ourselves as God sees us, with all pretences and disguises dropped. When we do that, we see ourselves for who and what we are; we see ourselves more honestly. We know that each of us is a creation of God, and loved by God, but we also come face-to-face with the ways in which we are demanding, hurtful, apathetic, and uncaring. Being more closely attuned to God allows us to experience the regret and remorse for our past actions.

Once we realise how we have contributed to the distance that exists between us, the Bible passage makes it very clear what we have to do next — go to the other person, and make it right. Whatever the reason, we are to take the first step. It doesn't say to sit there and wait until the other person initiates contact or comes grovelling for forgiveness. It says we are to go and make it right, and then we can come back and work things out with God. Henri Nouwen priest, spiritual writer and theologian defined forgiveness this way: "Love practiced among people who love poorly."

Forgiveness is hard, but if we really want to experience God's love fully in our lives, we have to take steps to bridge the gap between us, and that means we have to forgive. We often spend a lot of time and energy building up our defences, making excuses for ourselves, explaining how right we were or why we did what we did. When we build those barriers of self-defence, we do more damage to our relationships, and increase the distance between us.

However, when we really realise and understand and acknowledge the role we play in wrongdoing, and when we drop our defences, there's an amazing freeing of the burden we carry. It's as though we've punched a hole in the wall of our defence mechanisms, and we begin to leave room for God's love to fill us. When we let down the barriers of self-defence, it's then that God's love can permeate our lives in an entirely new, life-giving way. It fills us with love for one another, the kind of love that allows us to go to the person we've wronged, and, as the Bible passage says, "Make it right."

I read somewhere that the three hardest things for us to say are, “I was wrong,” “I’m sorry,” and “I love you.” Yet, if we want to “make things right,” those are words we have to practice saying. Forgiveness is the ultimate gift of love, but it’s not a natural thing; it’s not an easy thing. Forgiveness means we refuse to hold onto past hurts, and choose instead to release grievances and let go of blame. Forgiveness is our only hope, because it leads us to a different way of relating. It lowers the barriers between us, and, subsequently, opens wide the door for a relationship with God. I am convinced, that a relationship can be changed from one filled with hard feelings and animosity, to one that is filled with good will toward one another.

As a priest, I have often encountered people who are near death or bereaved families, and all too often, there is someone in their lives from whom they are estranged. It might be a brother or a sister, or someone who was once a dear friend. More than once, the one dying has expressed a desire to talk with the other person to try to make things right. When that has been possible, it is amazing to see the transformation that happens! Quite often, the two see one another with different eyes, and they’re able to see one another as the people they once loved and cherished. Things tend to take on a different perspective when someone is on their deathbed, and seeing through eyes of love and forgiveness can change everything. No longer is that relationship distant and remote, but a bridge of acceptance, love, forgiveness, and understanding has been built.

That’s exactly what it takes to bring us closer to one another and to God. That’s the only way we’ll ever really be able to bridge the gaps between us.

Fr Robert Newton