
The Social Power of Forgiveness

Luke 4.14-30

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on January 24, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

A friend of mine spent her life at university dominated by two men. One was her father. Her father had been a controlling presence since her childhood. The other was an international graduate student who became her mentor and then her boyfriend. And then she became pregnant. And suddenly she didn't know where to turn. As soon as her father got hold of the news he swung into action, and more or less forced her to have an abortion. She felt trapped. She loved her boyfriend, but deep down she didn't trust him. She was angry with her father, but deep down she knew he'd always be there in a way she sensed her boyfriend wouldn't be. So she gave into her father's demands. The strange thing was that for years afterwards, she didn't feel angry with either of these two controlling men – she just felt profoundly guilty in herself. One day she went into a church and poured out the whole story to a priest and simply said "Sorry. I'm so sorry." And the priest said "God forgives you." And as she walked out of the building she felt such incredible relief and joy and convulsive energy she ran round the outside of the church three times.

I want to suggest to you that what my friend experienced was the most radical power in the world. There are all kinds of power – the power of love, the power of money, the power of the market, the power of armies, the power of a little child. But none of these has the power to get a person out of prison. They can blow the prison away, or make life in prison sustainable, or offer hope or a future. But only one power can get you out of prison. And that's the power of forgiveness.

Because when you can't forgive, or find forgiveness, you're in prison. Make no mistake about it. Think about how much energy we exhaust in sleepless nights of guilt or resentment. Dwell for a moment on the effort that goes into avoiding particular people because of our anger or theirs. Recall the earnest attempts to avoid difficult subjects with friends or strangers. Be mindful of how many of us change jobs or even move across the country because a particular person is an intolerable presence in our life. When that store of energy is released, we find ourselves free, we find ourselves at peace, we find ourselves joyful, ... we find ourselves running around a church three times.

And it's precisely that radical power, and that overwhelmingly energizing feeling, that Jesus came to bring. Except he didn't limit that power to individuals and their feelings. Because forgiveness isn't just about your feeling of bitterness toward the physician who failed to diagnose your father's cancer, or your feelings of guilt toward the late friend you never visited because you didn't realize she was so ill. Forgiveness is also about the prisons whole peoples put themselves in, the paralysis of guilt felt by a whole race or a whole city or a whole gender. Imagine what that feeling of running round the church would mean when translated to a whole population. *That's* what the kingdom of God means.

And *that's* what Jesus is talking about when he walks into the synagogue in Nazareth in Luke chapter 4. This is the point where Luke's gospel begins in earnest. We've had the Christmas story, we've had Jesus' baptism and temptations, we've had a bit more of Jesus' genealogy than we were really looking for. And now Luke says "This is what all the fuss was about." We're all in jail and Jesus has come to set us free.

Jesus makes five proclamations in Nazareth. He declares good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and the favor of the Lord. The crucial point is, these are all social dimensions of the power of forgiveness. These are all areas where the poison of resentment and hardheartedness and bitterness and cruelty has become encrusted in such a way as to leave whole swathes of people in prison, either literally or metaphorically. This is about economic, legal, physical and relational bondage. And Jesus has come to set people free. And the best way to describe that freedom is that it's like my friend's exuberant whoops of energy running round that church.

Now there's many different ways to be a youth worker, but one of my colleagues from the days when I was a pastor in England came from the "I'm so wacky I'm way more interesting than God" school of youth work. He used to drive an old double-decker bus into the church parking lot on a Wednesday evening. It made for a

better youth club because on the bus there were fewer precious items for the kids to wreck than when we held the club in the church itself. Now I know attention deficit is a serious problem for a lot of people but these young people didn't so much have attention deficit but global attention meltdown. Wednesday night youth club was a weekly Congressional bailout package in which we tried to infuse eye-watering amounts of personal attention into way-too-many young people or face apocalyptic consequences. This particular youth worker's party piece was to get into a straitjacket and ask someone to wrap him up in heavy iron chains. He'd then switch on a CD with a drum-roll and spend the next 2 or 3 minutes writhing around until he'd escaped from the chains. It was quite a performance. In fact it was a profound meditation on Luke chapter 4, but somehow neither he nor the young people were ever in the mood for making the connection.

The trouble is, what about the person who's in chains and can't get out? That's the person Jesus is speaking to. And yet he's doing so in code. It's a code that may seem obscure to us, but would have been very obvious to his childhood friends in the synagogue in Nazareth. And the key to the code lies in two Old Testament chapters – Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15. What Jesus is talking about is the Jubilee year. The Old Testament law is very realistic about the fact that the children of Israel, despite being God's people, will still take advantage of one another and fall into significant patterns of social inequality. Some people will inevitably become landless and vulnerable. That's human nature. You can't legislate perpetual economic equality. You can give everyone \$50,000, but by the weekend through a mixture of bad luck, cold-blooded exploitation, costly compassion, and in some cases bad judgment, a whole bunch of people will find themselves deep in poverty. And in the ancient world that meant slavery.

So the stipulation was that every 50 years all slaves and debts would be released and land would be restored to its original owner. This was how Israel was to show its gratitude for being delivered from slavery in Egypt by being merciful in its dealings with the poor and needy and enslaved among its own people. When Jesus swings into downtown Nazareth, pushes back the saloon bar door and announces "release to the captives and freedom for the oppressed," everyone knows he's talking about the Jubilee. And when he proclaims "the year of the Lord's favor," it couldn't be more explicit that he's inaugurating the year of releasing debts and freeing slaves.

But everyone knew the Jubilee year had never really been put into practice, because Israel had never really believed that, having escaped slavery, it would ever find itself back there again. So when Jesus opens the scroll in Nazareth, he's saying "Hey guys, we sure are in slavery again, aren't we? But this time there really is gonna be a Jubilee, and it's starting today. And I'm *it*." Jesus brings bad news, good news, and a challenge. The bad news is – "You're in prison." The good news is – "I'm here to set you free." The challenge is, "Today."

Think again about that youth worker writhing around in his straitjacket. Jesus is talking to people who've stopped trusting in the power of forgiveness, people who believe they'll be in debt forever, people who know God's supposed to be all powerful but don't think that that power will ever work for them, people who sense the Jubilee year will never come. This is what he says.

If you're poor, you're in a straitjacket. If you're deep in debt, if you've got no reliable source of income, if most of the people you meet are dealers or predators and if banks won't take any kind of risk on you, if all your relationships have been soured by the distrust of unpaid loans and the fear of stolen goods, if you're vulnerable to the slightest break in the weather or the economy, then you're in chains. I've come to set you free.

If you're in prison, you're in a straitjacket. If you're in the slavery of another's scheming, like your forebears were in Egypt, or in the exile of your own folly, like your forebears were in Babylon, if you're in a tiny space and you've no room to express yourself or grow or play or dance, if you've done something wrong and will always regret it or been punished for something you never did, then you're in chains. I've come to set you free.

If you're imprisoned in your own body, you're in a straitjacket. If you just can't bring yourself to eat, if you gulp food down in binges that make you throw up, if you can't stop yourself snacking and grow well beyond your mirror and your wardrobe, if you're weighed down by limbs or organs or senses that can no longer work as they should or never have, if your mind is beset by panic or disintegration or hallucination or addiction, then you're in chains. I've come to set you free.

If you're dominated by the oppressive force of another, you're in a straitjacket. If your home is a scene of hidden violence and stifled secrecy, if your workplace is a site of exploitation and fear, if your society is one in which

you cannot show your face without a mask or your country is one in which you cannot speak the truth without being disappeared, if your nation is in the grip of aggressive corporations or willful militias or merciless oligarchies, then you're in chains. I've come to set you free.

If you're languishing in guilt, you're in a straitjacket. If you've done something or are doing something that doesn't belong in God's heart, if you long for an honest life but feel crippled by shame and fear, if you spend every day dreading that God or the world will find you out, then you're in chains. I've come to set you free.

What Jesus is offering is a personal, spiritual, social, political, psychological and physical program well beyond our limited imaginations. It's more radical than any social or economic program, although it is a social and an economic program. It's more profound than any of the dramatic ministry of a wacky youth worker. It's the political, psychological and personal heart of the gospel, the element in Jesus' proclamation that isn't significantly found in any other of the major world religions. It's the greatest power in the universe, and, if it were unleashed in its entirety, the world would be an almost completely different place. It's the forgiveness of sins.

That's what the Jubilee year means, that's what transformation means, that's what salvation means. It's about the explosion of energy released when you're reconciled to God. It's about the social dynamism that's sparked when you're reconciled with one another. Forgiveness means allowing the forces that keep us in prison to be slowly dismantled. Forces like unpayable debt, which believes mercy has no place in the economy. Forces like endless incarceration, which believes punishment is more just and more effective than reconciliation. Forces like hatred of our own body, which make our greatest enemy ourselves. Forces like oppressive relationships, which substitute violence for things that can't be said. Forces like our fear of God's disfavor, which makes us live each day in the shadows to avoid the truth.

If forgiveness makes you nervous, if you think it's all very well but you can't do it, if you feel you like the idea of it but actually taking the step of forgiving or asking forgiveness is just too much, then that's more than understandable. You're bound to be nervous. You're standing beside the greatest volcano of pent-up energy in the world.

Happy new year everybody. It's the year of the Lord's favor. Here's the bad news. Jesus says you're poor. He says you're in prison. He says your body's in prison. He says you're oppressed. He says you can't hide your lies and deceit from him. Here's the good news. Jesus wants to set you free. He wants you to open your life to the most powerful force in the world. He wants you to give and receive forgiveness, from God and one another. He wants to make this your Jubilee year. Here's the challenge. Will you let him? Today?