

Forgiveness

Assembly by Martin Ashton, Deputy Head (Pastoral), March 2024

Arguments and conflict

Human beings will fall out, have differences of opinion and argue about anything and everything:

'Who's the best composer?'

Bach - by a country mile.

'No chance - it's got to be Mozart'

'You must be joking - you don't know what you are talking about - it's Beethoven'

'You lot don't know anything' - it's Rachmaninov.

Well, I genuinely don't know what I'm talking about when it comes to composers so I'll leave that to the experts amongst you...and until people fall out it can be quite stimulating to disagree and hold strong opinions that differ from those of others.

And Sam Butler - great footballer though he was - Matt Le Tissier will never make it in my top 5. But keep going. I'm enjoying the debate.

We do fall out, we do hurt each other and we let each other down.

From an early stage we know what it is to say sorry when we take things too far and hurt each other because our parents drill it into us from the moment we are old enough to take our brother's toy or hit our sister over the head with a hot wheels car.

Sorry feels achievable for the everyday dispute with little history or deep seated emotions attached, the thoughtless act or word, the insensitive act, the brief loss of self control. The moment when we borrowed something and forgot to give it back.

And then there's the argument that develops into something bigger and from which it can be harder and harder to turn back and press **undo** as we can do on a google doc.

And so - if it's inevitable that human beings will fall out it makes it important that we find a way to resolve and ideally heal and repair because relationships matter. They have to.

This week Years 7-9 are taking to the stage with the very ambitious project to run two Shakespeare plays side by side. One of them is R and J and right from the start of the play we learn of a long standing feud between two rival families, the Capulets and the Montagues.

The only thing we know from the prologue is that it is an 'ancient grudge' 'bred of an airy word' by the Old Capulet and Montague. And it seems something that started out as quite a trivial matter, possibly a loose or casual insult - has snowballed into something much bigger.

I've just got to the scene with my Year 8 class whereby Romeo and Juliet the son and daughter of the two respective families, have fallen in love at a ball - but to their shock have realised that they have fallen in love with the enemy - famously Juliet exclaims 'my love sprung from my only hate!'

The strength of their teenage passion for each other wills them on - why should a family feud get in the way of our love for each other, they ask themselves - so Romeo asks Friar Lawrence to marry them the very next day - who thinks, understandably it's all too sudden, too impetuous,

But goes ahead with it because, as he says:

'For this alliance may so prove to turn your household's rancour to pure love.'

So he agrees to marry them in secret in the hope that this happy union may be the olive branch to put this feud to bed.

But as we know from the story the hatred between the families runs too deep, and as the prologue predicts -

A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;

And so as Friar Laurence predicts in the second act - the two young lovers will potentially bring the two families together but pay the ultimate price for it and...

'Do with their death bury their parents' strife

Sorry If I've ruined the ending for you but you can blame the prologue for that.

So for these families, it takes tragedy for the penny to drop that things have come too far.

At Wells Cathedral School we don't see the extreme outcomes of R and J but, as in any community, we do see people hurt each other, cause upset, sometimes heartache and relationships falter.

It's difficult to see the hurt we've caused others, whether intentionally or not, but it can be even more difficult to apologise, seek forgiveness and put matters right.

In my job I often get the privilege of seeing restoration following hurt and pain - a way through, a recognition that things can get better - a facing up to and sometimes, most

powerfully, genuine forgiveness and I often find myself thinking or even saying - you've earned more respect now that you had even before you made that error of judgement that caused hurt - because of the way you've handled it, the humility you've shown, the empathy you've shown, the courage you've shown Your determination to make things better when things have gone wrong.

Examples of Forgiveness

There are some extraordinary stories that seem to demonstrate that forgiveness is possible and incredibly powerful when it happens - both for the wronged and for the party who has inflicted it. I remember driving back to Wells some years ago from my parents near London - it was late in the evening and I was listening to a radio phone in about whether it's possible to forgive when someone does something truly awful - caller after caller phoning in to say no matter how hard they tried they could not forgive someone who had done something horrific to them or one of their family members. And it was hard to listen as a combination of a life changing act and years of anger and resentment had taken the joy and peace out of their lives.

And then a woman phoned in and quietly said that she'd forgiven a man who had murdered her son. And it went quiet, even the host couldn't believe it and the silence other than the sound of my car engine on the A303 was deafening. She went on to talk about the way in which holding onto her anger had made her life miserable and how her forgiveness of the man had freed her and also, once she had met him and expressed her forgiveness, it had helped to free him too. Still in prison but a weight had been lifted.

I find that remarkable and fortunately not many of us will have such a life altering life event to have to deal with. And I found it immensely challenging. How could she do that? I just don't think I could, is what kept running through my mind.

It's remarkable because when we're hurt we instinctively want the perpetrator to pay for what they have done - after all there's a debt to be paid - we want to somehow get them back. Tarnish their reputation - do something that pays their debt to us.

The problem with this is that by holding on to a grievance or resentment - by holding the person we believe has done us wrong - to account - we're weighing ourselves down and suffering ourselves.

The alternative forgiveness - lightens the load and can allow us to move forward.

But let's not assume this is easy - forgiveness is costly too - because it involves letting go of the wrongdoer continuing to pay their debt and absorbing that cost and the hurt ourselves.

We're pretty much right in the middle of the season of Lent - and we have the promise of Easter ahead - it's less than three weeks away.

I don't know what you're looking forward to - there's always room for plenty of chocolate - according to the internet we will spend nearly 500 million pounds on Easter eggs this Easter. And I have already started my annual consumption of Cadbury Creme Eggs that starts about mid March - one of my guilty secrets..not such a secret anymore clearly. In answer to the advertising campaign 'how do you eat yours?'. My answer is - it really doesn't matter - and it won't last long in my hands.

But the egg is of course the physical representation of new life and re-birth. It's also because in the medieval times eating eggs was forbidden during Lent so tucking into an egg on Easter Sunday was a real treat.

But beyond the joy of chocolate I do always try to remind myself that in Jesus there was a man willing to absorb the cost of all the hurt in the world - and not only willing to absorb it without demanding anything of his oppressors - but suffered for it.

It's not that the things we do are forgivable because they're *small* enough - it's that his love and forgiveness is *big* enough.

And so when it just gets too hard, when we are not able to truly forgive or to say sorry, the most extraordinary gift that we can receive is to first be forgiven, for everything we have done or thought and will ever do or think - by someone and by an act that can take it all.

I don't need to know everything about the cross - I fully admit its complexity - but I don't need to. When I got married in this building over twenty years ago I didn't need to understand it all. I just knew that I loved her.

And likewise I need only know that he died for us and forgave us out of love. It's a commitment I can't lose - I'm already forgiven, it's already happened and therefore I'm free to be better.

Make the most of Lent and Easter when it comes.

And all the best to the casts of 'As you like it' and 'Romeo and Juliet' in the week ahead.