

Healing the Hurts: Shaping the Future

A Series of Six Bible Studies

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Towards a Theology of Suffering and Pastoral Healing

The response of the faith community in Northern Ireland needs to acknowledge the sensitivity required and the complexity of the personal and community situation. To ignore sensitivity and to reduce the complexities of personal loss and suffering will guarantee failure for any pastoral response.

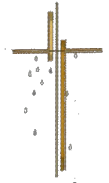
1. Towards a Theology of Pain and Suffering

1.1 *God-talk and God-images*

There is much theological talk that intensifies personal pain and suffering. There are God-images that are destructive and damaging to personal health and community well-being. In the face of tragic loss, pain and suffering, especially of the innocent, theology needs to lower its voice. There are times when God-talk needs to whisper.

The Jewish scriptures have a remarkable reticence when talking about God. They refused to name God, realising that finite humanity cannot name God because God is beyond all human language. God is not at the mercy of our vocabulary (Isaiah 55 v 8-9). There is even the command not to make wrongful use of God's name (Exodus 20 v 7).

Suffering as God's judgement or punishment is an immoral idea and a violent God-image. Also in our community suffering God did not intervene to stop things happening. The unprecedented slaughter of 180 million people from wars and violence in the twentieth century has blown away the idea of an interventionist God.



So what in a lowered voice, with the reticence of the Bible itself can we say about God?

- a. God suffers. God suffers in and with the suffering of people and creation.
- b. God is vulnerable. We might still prefer those images of a God who is all-powerful, all-knowing and all-controlling. The God of the cross is a God who is vulnerable, suffers setbacks and is affected by the violence of humans and nature.
- c. God struggles at the heart of a complex universe still in the making. The creation stories are not once upon a time stories, still less literal facticity. They offer faith insights by Israel's poetic theologians into a suffering, vulnerable God struggling at the heart of a universe still in the making to bring order out of chaos, life out of death and well-being, SHALOM, out of all that is violent and destructive.

1.2 *A Biblical Theology of Catastrophe*

Three key catastrophes dominate the biblical story. Israel's pre-history has the story of a flood. It reflects various stories of floods from different cultures in the ancient Near-East. It is a profound parable of what happens when human violence rules, community is destroyed. Yet the biblical affirmation in every catastrophe is that in every end there is a potential new beginning.

In 587 BCE Israel suffered catastrophe, unspeakable loss and suffering when the Babylonians utterly destroyed the nation, city, temple and took the best of the population into captivity in Babylon. Out of that end Judaism was born and the religion of a tiny Middle Eastern people became a universal faith.



Centuries later the Calvary catastrophe, the execution of Jesus by state power and violence brought to birth the Christian faith, rooted in the Jewish traditions, with in-depth suffering and liberating images of God, and as utterly compassionate.

2. Towards a Theology of Pastoral Care

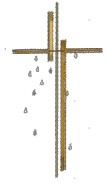
2.1 *The Need for Lament*

Pain, hurt and catastrophe need to be acknowledged and named. We need to give expression to our grief, anger, rage, vengeance, motives and desires and the sense of overwhelming desolation.

Israel's tradition provides us with lament. There are more Psalms of lament than of thanksgiving and praise. One third of Psalms are laments, prayer language that is raw, savage in urgency, protesting, complaining and arguing with God. Psalm 79 expects and demands God to answer. Psalm 88 ends without hope for God is silent and absent. But authentic faith will not give up the argument even if God seems to be in a sound-proof room. The recovery of lament is an essential part of genuine pastoral care.

2.2 *The Politics of Healing*

The hurts and deep wounds of victims/survivors in Northern Ireland happened in a political context. What people suffered was the result of politics gone wrong, religion and politics run wild and a community where relationships were dysfunctional because the political entity was founded in the beginning on violence and continued in violence. Pastoral care and healing cannot take place outside this context.



The book of Isaiah covers eras in Israel's history which extend over two centuries. The theological shape and form of this profound book offers a model of pastoral experience which takes seriously the politics of healing.

- Chapters 1-39 a socio-economic and political critique of an unjust society.
- Chapters 40-55 public naming of the pain of loss and catastrophe i.e. exile experience.
- Chapters 56-66 the release of imagination to envision a new beginning and a new future rooted in inclusive justice and peace.

2.3 *Symbiotic Relationships*

Any society in the world struggling to emerge from its history of conflict and suffering cannot ignore the inseparable, symbiotic relationships as part of its healing response. Put simply, there are victims/survivors, there are those who by bombs and guns caused it, and it all happened in the context of a community. The healing process cannot avoid these three sets of relationships. There is no healing for one group without the others, because they are bound together in a web of inter-connected relationships.

Put theologically it is the inter-relationship between forgiveness, repentance and solidarity in community, the latter described in the Bible as covenant.

2.4 *The Dynamics of Forgiveness*

Forgiveness is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus, yet forgiveness cannot be prescribed as a dutiful or legal obligation, nor can it be demanded from the victim/survivor, neither by the church community, wider community nor the offender. It is a free offer of grace rooted in the truth of the victim.



The following key components may prove helpful.

- Forgiveness is the response of victims.
- Forgiveness is something freely given to the perpetrator.
- Forgiveness is also release for the victim.
- Forgiveness does not repay in kind.
- Forgiveness is fulfilled in reconciliation (if the offender acknowledges the wrong).

Forgiveness can liberate the victim/survivor from the destructive anger and bitterness as well as the feelings of being debased, dishonoured, disrespected or shamed. It can also deal with self-loathing and self-blame. At the same time the act of forgiveness is an act of judgement. It is saying that the act of violence was wrong, that an immoral wrong was done. Forgiveness asks of the offender the moral response of repentance. That means three things:

- Acknowledgement and remorse for the violence done.
- Change of life orientation and direction.
- Restitution as a concrete, practical component to the forgiveness process.

The latter is not payment for forgiveness nor a way of repairing the past. The clock cannot be put back, the past uncreated or forgiveness bought. Whatever form restitution takes (Zacchaeus is a good example, Luke 19) the act affirms the victim's significance and worth. The three-step repentance can also become liberating for the offender who is also a human being with pastoral needs.

2.5 *Nurturing Moral Courage*

Within the symbiotic relationship is the community, which includes various sub-communities such as the church. The process of healing requires the whole community to take responsibility for the past and for its victims/survivors and



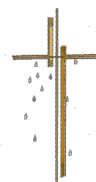
offenders. None of these people exists outside the community. They are the victims or products of the community's violence and sectarian relationships and division. Covenant means community in solidarity sharing the pain and the blame. Biblical covenantal community is marked by four core qualities:

- Justice
- Equality
- Compassion
- Truthfulness.

These are all relational and socio-political core community values. Community therefore embraces its victims and offenders within the commitment to be a new and different kind of community.

Being church is about engaging in character education as an essential part of pastoral care. At the heart of pastoral character education or moral formation are the core values of the reign of God as in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5) and the relational virtues found in Paul's Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5) and his hymn of love (I Corinthians 13). In the church's pastoral care to those within or on the edge of its *'open house'*, including victims and offenders, there is the importance of nurturing moral courage. It takes moral courage to forgive and to repent and together move from the painful and shameful past to a new and different future.

Moral courage can be nurtured by inviting people into the experience of resurrection. Resurrection is the possibility of new beginning, of moving from death, those life-denying experiences, to life-giving ones. It is the living power of hope enabling women and men to stretch out to what is ahead with the readiness for a fresh start. Such hope empowers people with moral courage to be changed in themselves and to be change makers in society. Christian hope is



rooted in Jesus, based on recalling his life of non-violence, compassion, God-presence, his death and resurrection. Through word and sacrament, community and education the church explores, announces, retells the Jesus story, and in doing so nurtures moral courage, empowers with hope so that whatever the pain and shame of people's past, they don't give up, and don't give themselves up. Such a multi-faceted theology of pastoral care is ultimately reconciling.



Six Interactive Bible Studies

Christians draw on the Hebrew and Christian scriptures for models and experiences to help them live faithfully or with integrity in public or community life.

After three decades of violence and conflict, the most recent phase in Ireland's long and troubled history, there is the shared challenge to heal past wounds and shape a very different future. That process has begun but a long haul lies ahead. It is a generational task.

What does it mean to be authentic followers of Jesus in this real-life setting? What resources are there to motivate and sustain commitment and action in the long reconciling process?

This series of Bible studies offers such a resource to help shape faithful Christian living and contemporary discipleship. Input by a leader or facilitator is meant to be brief with an introduction and notes to help. The studies are interactive, using group work since this is the most effective way of participating and engaging in mutual discovery and learning.

Each theme has an introduction followed by notes on the texts. The discussion questions and role-play bring the community challenges to heal and shape a new future into dialogue with the biblical text. Each study ends with the challenge to respond with some practical action.

Whether these studies are used by a group or for personal reflection, it is hoped that they will enable us to be healers, alternative history makers and reconcilers; those who seek first the reign of God.



I But Then, Nothing, Nothing Justifies Violence:

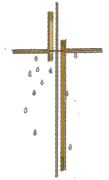
Hosea's Critique of the Mystique of Violence

Introduction

The prophet Hosea belongs to the eightieth century BC and to a world of violent politics. The emerging and threatening superpower of the day was Assyria. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had become caught up in the geopolitical violence and on-going internal violence. From 745-722 BC Israel had six kings, four of whom were violently assassinated. A century earlier, supported by Elisha, Jehu became king and set about a brutal and bloody slaughter. God was used to legitimise his new and violent dynasty. Violent domination was blessed and the use of violence in the Kingdom of Israel was surrounded by mystique – *'for God and Israel'* (II Kings 9 & 10). This mystique was at the heart of Israel's social and political life in the eightieth century. Hosea the prophet made a devastating critique of the mystique of violence.

The mystique of violence in Irish politics runs deep in history and is at the heart of an all-pervasive culture of violence. It is expressed through state and paramilitary violence which is given a sacred dimension especially through the theme of blood sacrifice for a nationalist cause.

This mystique of violence has brought much suffering, especially to innocent people, but also to others. Hosea's critique speaks across the centuries.



Notes

Violent mystique leads to social disintegration – Hosea 10 v 13-14

Eighth century society was characterised by injustice, violence and lies. Community leaders had put their ultimate trust in militarism and violence. It was a deeply held belief, an article of faith that violence liberates or defends. The result in the Northern Kingdom of Israel was brutality and social disintegration.

Repudiation of nationalistic violence – Hosea 1 v 4

Jehu was a violent hero, a role model, because he carried out a violent political purge. *'The blood of Jezreel'* refers to a religiously justified tradition that booty and prisoners were destroyed through fear of contaminating national purity. This destruction of the enemy was in Hebrew called HEREM. Jehu's violent purge was supported by the prophet Elisha and the nationalist extremist Jehonadab. Hosea repudiated this religiously justified nationalistic violence.

The mystique of violence popularises crime and brutality – Hosea 4 v 1-3

Violence corrupts personal attitudes and behaviour and destroys the environment. Hosea was clear that no violent cause, neither of the state nor nationalist group, was an expression of loyalty to God or commitment to a just community.

The mystique of violence perverts justice

When the institutions of law and order condone violence or use unlawful violence, justice is destroyed.

Hosea 5 v 1 – when religious leaders abuse justice and are ambivalent towards or supportive of violence, then others engage in corrupt practices.



Hosea 10 v 3-4 – the disillusioned public has lost respect for law and order. Hosea has critiqued the mystique of violence believed in and practiced by state institutions and other nationalist groups.

'But violence always delays the day of justice. Violence destroys the work of justice. Further violence in Ireland will only drag down to ruin the land you claim to love and the values you claim to cherish.' Pope John Paul II, Drogheda 1979.

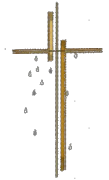
'No cause, not even a just cause, can make legitimate the killing of innocent civilians, no matter how long the list of accusations and the register of grievances. Terror never paves the way to justice, but leads down a short path to hell.' Palestinian poets, writers and political leaders – 2001. Their statement was entitled, *'But Then, Nothing, Nothing Justifies Terrorism'*.

Group Work

Create three groups to discuss the following:

- How does violence destroy and distort the work of justice?
- What human and community values are destroyed by violence?

Share feedback from the groups.



Notes

Beyond the legacy of violence and destruction – Hosea 2 v 14-18

The culture and legacy of violence can be overcome. God can '*allure*', not coerce those caught up in the mystique of violence away from the violent culture and from the politics of vengeance (HEREM). '*Valley of Achor*' – where Achan and his family were stoned to death for failing to carry out the obligations of HEREM. This violent tradition will be reversed and Achor become a '*door of hope*'.

v 18 – end of violence, abolition of weapons, harmony and reconciliation between all humans and the environment.

The passionate love and justice of God can draw people in community away from self-destructive militarism and violence. Jesus embodied Hosea's God by expressing love in Roman dominated Galilee to people obsessed by the mystique of violence, as well as to those suffering under its brutal and destructive impact.

Group Work

In three groups consider:

- What does it mean for us in a culture obsessed by the mystique of violence to be shaped by Hosea's critique and above all, to be followers of Jesus?



2 The Politics of Healing:

Isaiah's Model of Community Process

Introduction

The grief and trauma experienced by many in Northern Ireland over the last decades happened in a political context. Violence and counter-violence had roots in politics gone wrong, religion and politics confused and often merged, and dysfunctional community relationships. Sectarianism became a brutal, violent and bloody beast. The roots of our historical and community tragedy are complex and require rigorous analysis and critique.

A healing process and liberation to a better and shared future requires the naming of pain and the release of imagination. As the hurts happened in a political context, so the healing will only happen within a new political context. Political stalemate and stagnation hinder the healing process as does the refusal to deal with our community past. Politics, power and relationships are significant factors in the healing of memories and hurts.

Notes

The book we now call Isaiah provides an experiential and theological model of a community process. The book covers different eras in Israel's history and spans over two centuries. At some point, probably early fourth century BC, Israel's creative theologians conflated three separate scrolls from three different periods of their history and produced one of the most theologically insightful books of the Hebrew scriptures.



Not surprisingly, when the Christian Gospel writers and communities wanted to articulate the significance of Jesus for them in their context, they frequently borrowed quotations, images and metaphors from Second Isaiah (Isaiah chapters 40-55), more than from any other part of their Hebrew scriptures.

What the final shape and form of the book of Isaiah offers is a model of pastoral experience and process which takes seriously the politics of healing. The following diagram expresses the book's prophetic shape and form.

Isaiah of Jerusalem	Second Isaiah	Third Isaiah
8 Century BC	6 Century BC	6-5 Century BC
chapters 1-39	chapters 40-55	chapters 56-66
Assyrian Empire Destruction	Babylonian Empire Exile	Persian Empire Return

In each period of history Israel's life is dominated by a superpower within the geopolitics of the day. Each part of the book has a particular insight which together expresses the reality of the politics of healing.

The theological/pastoral process has a sequence – critique – naming – release of imagination follows on from the other.

Chapters 1-39 A socio-economic and political critique of an unjust society
Key text – Isaiah 1 v 10-23

Chapters 40-55 Public naming of pain of loss and catastrophe i.e. the traumatic experience of exile. The processing of the community's hurt and displacement.
Key text – Isaiah 40 v 1-11



Chapters 56-66 The release of imagination to envision a new beginning and a new future rooted in inclusion, justice and peace

Key text – Isaiah 65 v 17-25

It is important to avoid individualised and spiritualised readings of the texts. They are community based texts, addressing community and public issues, critically and imaginatively. The texts are rich in poetic metaphor and imagery and they critique a society's past, publicly name its pain and trauma and then experience the release of imagination to envision a new future.

Group Work

Allocate one of the key texts to each of the three discussion groups.

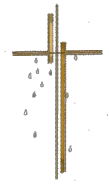
→ What is each text saying to Israel in its respective political context?

After discussion ask each group to report its discussion in summary form.

Plenary Discussion

How does Isaiah's model of community process help us to deal with the politics of healing in Northern Ireland today?

Is there some practical action we can take as a group/congregation?



3 They Cried to the Lord:

Rediscovering Lament

Introduction

When pain, grief, anger, rage and strong desires for vengeance are suppressed there are often serious consequences for psychological and physical health. Likewise when a section of a community denies or represses its hurt, anger and sense of loss or injustice, a collective apathy, social paralysis or internal/external violence can follow.

It is therefore important for individuals or groups to find meaningful, healthy and non-violent ways to express their deepest feelings, to name pain, to vent anger, rage or feelings of vengeance.

The anger or rage may be against people or it may be against God. Popular religion and piety has conditioned many to believe that anger and rage against God is wrong or is a lack of faith.

In Israel's experience and understanding, not to express anger and rage towards God was the real lack of faith. The Jewish tradition has always had and still has this liberating ability to argue with God, make accusation and complaint. In the 20th century Jews had good reason to argue, lament and rage!

Notes

Rediscovering Israel's tradition of lament is essential as we struggle to emerge from conflict and a violent situation. The destruction of all forms of violence, experienced in unprecedented ways in the twentieth century, globally and locally makes lament crucial to our healing and well-being. There is even the urgent

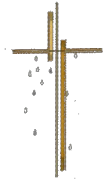


need to recover lament in our worship which in the last few decades has over emphasised praise to the point of idolatry and the denial and removal of those raw experiences of historical and personal hurt and suffering from acts of worship. Praise groups do well to think again critically about life and perhaps become praise and lament groups!

There are more Psalms of lament than praise which perhaps says much about Israel's repeated experience of imperial domination and political oppression and violence. Lamentations comes from a context of political exile, crisis and trauma and retains a special place in Jewish liturgy. Significantly these dirges or laments were sung by women. Do women, generally more in tune with their emotional beings, (big boys don't cry) find it easier to express lament with all its raw, savage urgency?

In his crucifixion, the Roman method of political execution, Jesus uttered his cry of dereliction, a deep psychic experience of abandonment by God, using words from Psalm 22, one of Israel's laments.

Psalms 74 and 79 expect and demand God to answer. Psalm 88 ends without hope, just utter despair and hopelessness in the face of God's total silence and absence. But even if God seems to be unreal or in a sound proof room, the poet will keep up the argument. Many will recognise the poet's experience of darkness, despair and silence. Faith refuses to be silent even when there is nothing there.



Group Work

Using three groups allocate to each one of the following texts:

Psalm 79; Psalm 88; Lamentations 5.

What experience of history or life lies behind each of these texts? Is there anything in your own experience that resonates with the experience described here?

After discussion ask each group to reflect briefly how they felt about their text?

Plenary Discussion

What practical action might now be planned?

Is there a place for lament in our contemporary worship? How could this dimension be included in a worship service?



4 We Are All in This Together!

Circles of Symbiosis

Introduction

Dealing with the past and healing hurts and memories is hugely complex. Even coming to agreement about who is or is not a victim is difficult. The sectarianisation of victimhood is also evident; *'we are real victims, they are not'*. Victimhood even becomes a guarded badge of identity. As well as victims/survivors there are those who caused suffering and loss, sometimes described as perpetrators.

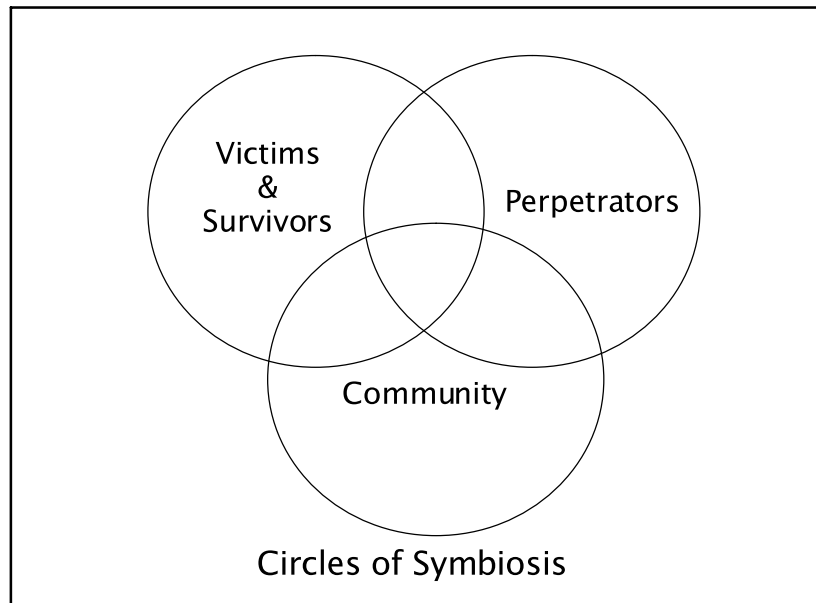
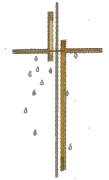
Acts of violence were unlawfully carried out by state forces as well as paramilitaries. *'We were fighting a war'* is the frequent justification. All of this happened, not apart from, but within a community.

Victims/survivors and perpetrators were not somehow outsiders but all belonged together in the Northern Ireland or Irish community. The term *'neighbours'* was often literally true. People knew and know.

We might wish it were otherwise but then and now we are all bound together in a web of inter-connected relationships. We cannot avoid it.

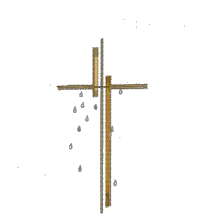
We are inseparably bound up in circles of symbiosis and as the hurt and loss occurred in this context, so too will the healing. We are all in this together, victims/survivors, perpetrators and community, all needing healing, all needing each other for healing and all sharing responsibility for it.

Notes



In theological terms we are describing the inter-relationship between forgiveness, repentance and community solidarity. The latter is described in the Bible as covenant, a community of indivisible, inseparable relationships bound together by proximity and therefore called to solidarity. Study five will return to the forgiveness/repentance themes.

Covenant is core to both parts of scripture and is essentially about a vision of community. Covenants were common to all of Israel's ancient near-eastern neighbours. Israel did not invent anything new but took the covenant/community idea from surrounding peoples and communities. What was radically new was the just and egalitarian social vision that Israel's faith poured into the idea.



Covenant was community in solidarity sharing the pain and the blame. Four core qualities marked covenantal community.

Justice

Equality

Compassion

Truthfulness

Psalm 85 v 10 names these qualities and points up the inseparable and intimate relationship between them. This is the kind of community in which authentic healing takes place.

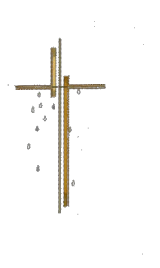
Group Work – role play

Create four groups and ask each to identify with one of the qualities. Imagine your quality as a person – who are you and what are you for? Then ask; what do you require from each of the other qualities?

Bring the groups together at a round table conference and ask them to negotiate what each needs from the others if a community is to experience a healing process.

Plenary Discussion

Community responsibility is to embrace its victims and offenders within the commitment to a new and different kind of community. If we are all in this together, what concrete action is now required?



5 I Can't Forgive – Not Yet!

The Life-Long Process of Forgiveness

Introduction

Victims/survivors will often say that they can't forgive and after a pause, add, not yet. It may be an acknowledgement that forgiveness is necessary for future well-being and relationships but it is neither easy nor sometimes even possible.

Moralistic and religious judgements on those who find forgiveness difficult or impossible are out of place in a human, pastoral context, especially when made by those who have not suffered.

At the same time forgiveness is fine so long as it remains part of theological rhetoric or liturgical vocabulary. A classic avoidance strategy is to confine forgiveness to God's forgiveness of the individual with individual sins domesticated to ensure a comfort zone if not self-righteousness.

Forgiveness in the context of political violence or in the public square is extremely emotive and highly controversial, if not unacceptable. Yet Jesus, living and teaching in the highly charged context of Roman political and military domination, the violent tyranny of Herodian kings and the oppressive economics of the temple religious system, not only had a lot to say about forgiveness, but earthed it completely in the public square.

In our attempts to domesticate forgiveness, we have often confused the nature and role of repentance and its symbiotic relationship with forgiveness.



Notes

In the context of superpower and other domination systems, Jesus said much about the relationship between divine and human forgiveness.

In the Lord's Prayer and Matthew's Gospel God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others appears indivisible. Indeed the forgiveness petition of the Lord's Prayer is the only one to be expanded in the Sermon on the Mount. The prayer itself is significant based as it is on Israel's Jubilee tradition.

The '*debts*' are literally economic debts and the '*evil*' from which we ask deliverance is the evil of economic poverty, injustice and oppression. '*Forgive*' is the Jubilee word from Leviticus 25 meaning '*to release*'. It is a Jubilee prayer, release from debts, slavery, return of land, release from an unjust past and the redistribution of power and resources on a fair and equitable basis providing for a new start in community life. A prayer that too easily becomes '*vain repetition*'!

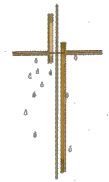
No one can demand forgiveness from the victim/survivor. It is free grace rooted in the truth of the victim. But the act itself, not only liberates or releases the victim from her/his past, it can also liberate the offender. It also asks of the offender the moral response of repentance. In this context repentance means three things:

acknowledgement and remorse for violence done

change of life orientation and direction

restitution as a concrete, practical component to the forgiveness process.

The story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19 is a classic example of three-step repentance as response to a forgiving/accepting initiative. Both victim and offender are human beings with pastoral needs and both can find liberation, often only from each other.



Group Work

Create three groups with the following tasks:

- Group A: Read the Lord's Prayer – Matthew 6 v 9-13. Focus on v 12 in the Jubilee context and explore what this petition means in our post-troubles situation.
- Group B: Read Matthew 6 v 14-15 keeping in mind the first century political context in which Jesus lived and taught. What does this text mean in our struggle to deal with a political past?
- Group C: Read Luke 19 v 1-10. Reflect on Zacchaeus three-step repentance and why he took this action. What does the story say to our process of healing our political and community past?

Plenary Discussion

Ask each group for a brief summary of their discussion. Have we a clearer idea of what forgiveness, repentance and community responsibility mean in our efforts to deal with our violent past?



6 The Courage To Be:

Nurturing Moral Courage in Community

Introduction

To forgive, repent and take responsibility for building a new society requires moral courage. None of this comes easily and all of it is costly. Irish culture and history, orange and green, is saturated with the violent myth of self-sacrifice; political liberation through the shedding of blood.

Versions of religious imagery and theology have even contributed towards this ideology, dressed as high morality but the ultimate delusion. To deal with the past, heal hurts and memories, offer forgiveness, enact repentance and envision a different culture and future will need all the moral courage we can find.

Authentic community in Ireland, north and south, is moral community. Moral courage is empowering and transformative. We become radically changed in ourselves and become change-makers in society.

Faith communities are committed to moral formation. This is true of the Christian faith community and the other neighbour religious communities. All are deeply and essentially concerned with character education and moral formation. Nurturing core values is at the heart of moral formation shaping character and relationships. All of us need the courage to be ourselves and to be with others in community.

Notes

The Christian faith community, while drawing positively and reflectively from whatever sources of goodness, truth and beauty, (Philippians 4 v 8) draws its



primary moral resource from its scriptures. Three key texts offer core moral and relational values. The nurturing power of each text is enhanced when read in its own context in dialogue with the contemporary context.

The Beatitudes – Matthew 5 v 1-12

Jesus lived and taught in a peasant, rural community dominated by Roman, Herodian and Temple violence and oppression. The core idea at the heart of his teaching was the reign of God, the alternative empire. The Beatitudes are the core values of the reign of God and the lifestyle of those who participate in it. They are values for the socio-economic, political and public square.

The Fruit of the Spirit – Galatians 5 v 22-25

Paul, unlike Jesus, was an urban dweller. His locations were towns and cities of the Roman empire and the faith communities he formed and nurtured were to be small communities of resistance in the key centres of imperial domination. They were to be alternative communities, the alternative POLIS – body politic – in Galatia, Corinth, Philippi or wherever.

The fruit of the spirit points to relational virtues essential to what it means to be radically and relationally different in a Roman province where relationships and public life were built on favouritism, inequalities, violence and domination.

Paul's Hymn of Love – I Corinthians 13

Corinth was a cosmopolitan city populated since its reconstruction by diverse peoples, many of whom were freed slaves from Rome. It was therefore a city with considerable social, economic and political tensions and divisions. Sadly the church mirrored the same tensions and divisions, which was why Paul had to write his letters.

His '*body language*' in I Corinthians 12 uses the key political buzz word in Corinth, '*body*', the body politic, and gives it a radical twist. The body of Christ is



to be different, modelling an alternative body politic at the heart of Corinth. Diversity, equity and interdependence are core. Yet there is '*a still more excellent way*' (I Corinthians 12 v 31), the hymn of love with its key social, relational qualities in v 4-7.

Group Work

Create three groups and allocate one of the three texts to each.

(a) *Matthew 5 v 1-12*

What would it mean to live these 'reign of God values' at the heart of Ireland today?

As an exercise re-write the Beatitudes for today's context.

(b) *Galatians 5 v 22-25*

How might these relational virtues apply to community relations and the building of a shared future?

What does it mean to be a community of resistance in a culture dominated by violence? Write the response as a brief vision statement.

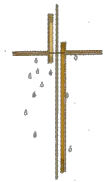
(c) *I Corinthians 13 v 4-7*

What would contemporary political relationships look like if shaped by this more excellent way?

As an exercise re-write verses 4-7 as a political charter.

Plenary Discussion

Ask each of the groups to share their writing exercises.



Brief Evaluation

What has changed us most in this series of studies?

Are there other issues we would like to look at in dialogue with scripture?

Have the studies committed us as individuals, group or congregation to practical actions and outcomes in relation to a healing process and to relationship/community building?