

I can forgive

The Cross shaped window dominates His Office. That is to be expected. It is a token of death and life. Seen in the light of Christ's resurrection it is the heart of the Gospel. It represents the culmination of the director's ministry. On frequent visits to the scene, I hear him say, *'Keep close to the cross. Let nothing detract you from what it means. It's at the sign of my completed work of salvation and healing for the whole world.'*

We have a very limited amount of detail of all that happened at Jesus' crucifixion. That is hardly surprising. For one thing, only one disciple, John, was there. Maybe the others felt the shame of desertion for the rest of their lives. But I would think the reason is more likely that the cruelty, commonplace to the Gospel writers, is really beyond description. Horrific though it is, I still pause at the moment of his 'nailing'. One Good Friday morning as our procession of witness moved off into the town a builder nearby was re-tiling a house roof. We walked, our steps keeping time with the beat of his hammer, and for some of us Calvary became real. I could almost hear the officer give his order, *'Nail him.'* The victim would be expected to scream. Jesus' cry flowed into words - *'Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing.'* He reminds me again of the ignorance of sinfulness, of how little they knew what they were doing - to God, and equally, how little we know of God's pain with the nail-strikes of human wrong-doing. When we do appreciate the enormity of our

offence, we begin to see the immensity of divine love - of his forgiveness.

Another picture filled the window. I saw the vast, rugged and lonely Judaeian wilderness where Jesus forged a human closeness to his Father. Shunning the temptation to power in human terms, he knew the greatest healing force of all - forgiveness. No surprise then that he made that the central word of the prayer we have used since he first taught it to his followers - '*forgive us as we forgive.*' The word takes us to the heart of divine grace and the whole nature of God. Here is hope of reconciliation for every human condition. It cost God everything, but his grace for us is free. There is no other cost except to put him first; to live in Jesus Christ; to share the love of God!

The picture window is always busy when he directs my mind to this amazing theme. I see so many illustrations which appear in other 'minutes' - so much suffering - fighting, oppression, the dying children; the hungry and homeless.... every situation having answers which begin with forgiving, reconciling love. It is said that if we live by the rule of 'an eye for an eye' we will eventually make the whole world blind and sometimes that seems close. It is also true that when opponents have the grace to say '*no more retaliation. I forgive.*' the fighting can cease. Yes, there will be crosses to bear, but there will be peace. I am not thinking first of international events and crises, though we have talked at other times of how the way of the cross is worked out on a larger canvas.

Whatever the scale of our distress, forgiveness is first a very personal and individual thing. We thought of this often in his Office and this time the pictures which came to our world window were more of everyday people and their situations. One in particular. I saw June in her mother's first floor flat. She called that morning while I was visiting. Her mother had only just had time to tell me how June was different, but not to go on to explain why. As soon as the daughter, a woman in her early fifties, came in, I too could see the change in her too. There was a radiance about her. It was a far cry from a couple of months ago when I had seen a tired, care-worn woman, physically bent as though her shoulders carried the world's burdens. Many would agree she had every right to be bitter. Her husband had moved in with her unmarried twin sister. Shocked by the unexpectedness and deceit of the discovery, she broke down physically and mentally. For a while she had turned away from her mother, believing she must have known what was happening and shutting her mind to the pain the older lady felt for all of them. This morning was different. She sat and talked of how she had made the simple, costly discovery of forgiveness. *'I was the one who was hurt,'* she said. *'I was the loser in every way. I could not turn off the bitterness I felt, but I made a determined effort to pray for my sister and my husband. I forced myself to love them though I still cannot like them for what they have done to us. Then one morning while I was making a determined effort to feel loving towards them, I thought how much it must cost God to go on loving all of us. It dawned on me that in some way this is what the Cross*

must have meant for Jesus. It was amazing. Like being caught up in something bigger than I can understand. I still don't understand, but I was surrounded by a sort of cloud – an overwhelming sense of healing love.' Nothing had changed about the circumstances. June had though. The bitterness which had been crippling her life was slipping away, very slowly, in painful forgiveness. She and her story were to touch many others for good in future years.

I was further reminded of another picture which often comes from my memories. It is of a dish of fresh strawberries set on a farmhouse kitchen table with a jug of cream and a spoon beside it. I did not actually see that scene at the time. I only saw the punnet of strawberries in Sara's shopping basket. She had been visiting her sister on the way home from the village when I called. In a little while she got up to leave and after rinsing her teacup picked up her basket, carefully adjusting the box of strawberries. *'I mustn't upset these,'* she said. *'They're for Ned's tea. He loves the first fresh strawberries. Even if they are a bit expensive.'* Sara's sister gave me a quick look which said clearly, *'Don't you let on that you know.'* I did know. Sara and Ned led an outwardly normal married life. They were rarely if ever seen together in the village. At home Sara mostly led a strange silent life. Ned only spoke a few words to her when it was really necessary. It had been like that now for over forty years. The boy would have been about forty now. Their only child had died at birth and from that time Ned was a changed man. He was

grief-stricken for the son whose whole future he had planned during Sara's pregnancy. For months he spoke to no-one but spent days and sometimes nights with his sheep on the hill. There was one outburst some six months after the tragedy. Sara took the brunt of it and understood that Ned blamed her for the loss of their child. All his energies went into the farm, making it one of the best in the area. Sara wanted for nothing - nothing but love and true companionship. Instead, she sat through silent meals, put on a good face to the neighbours and never came back from town without a treat for the man she still loved. A punnet of fresh strawberries still makes me think long on the gracious forgiving love of God and helps me pray more earnestly for the nations of the world to see the truth which reaches to the heart of all our human agonies.

The director is full of grace and truth. I am learning that the moment I open his office door I am forgiven - just for being there at his invitation and entering into grace - love beyond words.