

Alexander Pope is an old English poet who is best known for one of the most frequently quoted sayings in the English language: "To err is human, to forgive is divine."

It's a great saying which many of us would agree with, yet, there is a problem, - not with what it is saying, but with what it leaves out. The first part, "to err is human" is completely true. It is the second part, "to forgive is divine". It is also human to forgive.

In fact, it is an absolutely human necessity if we are to live a full human life. We find that expressed already in the first reading, where the writer of that reading writes: "Forgive your neighbour the hurt he does you, and when you pray, your sins will be forgiven; If a man nurses anger against another, can he demand compassion from the Lord? Showing no pity for a man like himself, can he then plead for his own sins?"

We find the same thing expressed in the findings of psychology, where we are warned that resentment is one of the most self-destructive afflictions that can cripple or imprison us. We remain its prisoner until we chose to forgive. Jesus expressed that at the end of the parable about the unforgiving servant, where he tells us that the king in his anger handed the servant over to the torturers until he should pay all of his debt. It is ourselves we torture by our lack of forgiveness, and it is in forgiving that we set ourselves free.

To forgive someone who has hurt or offended us is never easy. Sometimes it is extremely difficult. Nevertheless, it is good to remember that to forgive is to be in a position of strength. We are the injured one. We are doing the giving, We are in control. It makes us feel good. We have something to gain from it.

On the other hand, to ask for forgiveness can be a lot harder. It is to put ourselves in a position of weakness, poverty and humility. Now you are the one who has done wrong. You have to humble yourself to ask another for something, which you may or may not receive. You are not in control, Things are out of your hands.

According to Jewish law, sins committed against God can be absolved by sincere repentance. But for sins committed against fellow human beings we must first seek forgiveness of those we have wronged, in order to be in a position to ask for divine mercy, which is not so different from what we ask for in the Lord's Prayer.

Let me tell you a story. Once in Poland an elderly rabbi boarded a train to travel home to Warsaw. He entered a compartment in which three salesman were playing cards. It need of a foursome, so they asked the rabbi to join in, but he politely refused, saying he had been busy all day and he needed time to catch up on his prayers, and in any case he did not play cards. They tried to persuade him, but he still refused. At this they got very hostile and started to abuse him. When he still refused, they threw him out of the compartment, so he had to stand in the corridor for the rest of the journey.

On arriving in Warsaw the rabbi got off the train. So did the salesmen. The rabbi was met by a large crowd of his followers. On seeing this one of the salesmen asked: "Who is that man?"

"That's rabbi Solomon, the most revered rabbi in the whole of Poland", was the answer. On hearing this, the man regretted what he had done. He had no idea of who it was he had offended. So he quickly went up to the rabbi and asked for forgiveness. However, the rabbi refused to forgive him.

The rabbi's followers were taken aback at this. They could not figure out how their rabbi, a man renowned for his gentleness and holiness could refuse to forgive someone. So they asked him: "When someone who has offended us asks for forgiveness, should we net forgive him?"

"Yes", the rabbi replied. "Well then, why didn't you forgive that man?" "I cannot forgive him. The salesman didn't offend me, the chief rabbi of Warsaw. He offended a common man. Let him go to him and ask for forgiveness."

In other words, he was asking for forgiveness only because he had offended a famous person. But had it been just an ordinary person that he had offended, he would never have asked for forgiveness.

I wonder if God doesn't sometimes feel like saying something similar to us: "Why do you tell me that you are sorry for offending your neighbour? Why don't you go to your neighbour, tell him you're sorry, and ask for his forgiveness? By that very act you would open the door, and my forgiveness would come in."

It is not only being ready to forgive that challenges the very core of us, - to ask for forgiveness can be even harder, and we need humility for both.

Have we allowed the One who hung on the Cross for us to teach us that much?