

# Forgiveness, identity, and witness

In witnessing to Christian faith, it is inappropriate to regard other people only as those who simply absorb what we offer them.

## Others

We need to become more conscious of who “others” are. They are people in their own right who have an identity different from ours. In relationships in everyday life in New Zealand, identity is a matter of what kind of people we are, of people expressing a different nature through their different views.

Such different views are sometimes expressed in connection with forgiveness.

Journalists probably reflect the general population in being aware of the possibility of forgiveness: they often ask people who have been wronged whether they can forgive. They may also show what kind of people they are when they often seem disappointed if the interviewees say they can forgive. Often they give the impression that those who say they forgive are naive or superficial. Such scepticism is not necessarily always unjustified, because forgiveness is sometimes superficial, having no lasting effects.

It is necessary, however, to come to grips with the nature of others when they also regard forgiveness as some kind of other-worldly essence that some people have, but other sensible (sentencing?) people do not. They also seem to assume that this forgiving essence must be turned on immediately, or not at all.

A prerequisite in witnessing to Christian faith is that Christians themselves be the kind of people

who offer forgiveness to others in the knowledge that they need to be forgiven themselves. Others are not merely the objects of our forgiveness but those whose response we need in relationship. We and the others need each other in the reciprocal relation of questioning each other’s identity: we cannot assume we need no more than we are already. At the same time, however, there will be

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no forgiveness unless we affirm each other as those capable of becoming more than we are already. The psalmist gives a classic example of the need for such affirmation: having requested forgiveness of sins, the next petition is for the creation of a pure heart and for a right spirit to be renewed within (Ps 51:9-10).

When Jesus heals the paralytic he is both questioning and affirming (Mk 2:1-12). He has seen the faith of those who brought the paralytic (they are confident that Jesus is the kind of person who can change the identity of the paralytic to a person who can walk). The first thing Jesus says is, however, “Child, your sins are forgiven.” There is no interest in any particular sins the paralytic may have committed. Without any such particulars, Jesus’ words imply that anyone needs a wholeness of life that is more than physical health. Jesus wishes to give the paralytic a whole new identity that certainly includes the physical but also

surpasses it. In saying “your sins are forgiven”, Jesus is implicitly questioning that the man is alright as he is, questioning him in ways that go beyond paralysis; and he is also affirming him as someone who has become much more. Jesus was someone who gave others much more than they bargained for.

When Jesus is questioned about his right to forgive sins, he affirms his own identity as one who does have that right, and in doing this and proceeding to heal the paralytic, he shows that forgiveness can achieve a new identity that is both physical and spiritual; or rather the elements of the forgiven identity are so bound up

with each other that it is misleading to think of one without the other. It would seem too that, in the context in which the story is presented, Mark is assuming that the Son of Man’s forgiveness conveys God’s forgiveness. Jesus, in earthly circumstances, looking through the obvious need to something deeper, is a channel for God’s forgiveness.

New Zealand Christians too, in a context where different aspects of life are involved, can witness to God’s forgiveness as intimately linked with what people are, do and say in earthly circumstances. That is, God’s forgiveness is not something that people just have to believe in as an other-worldly essence. Rather Christians experience God’s forgiveness in the combination of forgiving each other, others questioning it, and of the particular earthly circumstances in which all are involved. No one factor is sufficient, for God is weaving through them all, transcending the rejecting of

forgiveness and deepening its affirmation between people. God emerges in the situation where there does not seem to be any need for forgiveness but where witnessing to it is of such a quality that it is accepted. God is recognised as the one who amazes us into accepting.

If Christian identity is of those who have received the gift of questioning and affirmation from others, they become those also able to witness to it to others again, and to achieve forgiveness as the reciprocal relation where affirmation does not stifle questioning and questioning does not overwhelm affirmation. Such going backwards and forwards between others and ourselves can become the actualising in our lives of Jesus' challenge to forgive seventy times seven (Mt 18:21-22). For there are

opportunities for forgiveness in many of the relations of ordinary life and not only when some outstanding wrong is done. It is possible indeed that the assumption in New Zealand that forgiveness is naive is because it is seen only in connection with grievous wrong and not with our identity, the kind of people we are.

One of Jesus' characteristics was to act, to speak, and to be a forgiving person at any time. In a section on Jesus imparting forgiveness, H.R. Mackintosh describes his person in these terms: "There is a sympathy which does not stand aloof, content with words, but which descends into the depth of need and lays hold upon the other's burden."<sup>1</sup> Such "laying hold upon the other's burden" is expressed by Jesus' rejoinder to those who object to his eating with those whom they call sinners: "I haven't come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Lk 5:32). This describes the kind of inviting, forgiving, but also challenging person Jesus is: who

really are the "righteous" and "sinners"?

The "righteous" may be the people who are always objecting to the company others keep. Forgiveness may be necessary as much in the kind of attitudes we express, in the lives we live overall, as in some particular wrong. Such forgiveness may be as much necessary within the church as outside it. Many reasons have been given in recent years in New Zealand why people leave the church: one not often mentioned is that people have a disagreement and do not seek or are unable to achieve forgiveness in a matter where it is not clear that one side is

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more in the wrong than another. New Zealanders pride themselves on being practical, but we often do not accept that God's forgiveness needs to be realised between New Zealanders as the kind of people who disagree over practical matters, and who are not able to forgive each other their differences.

#### **Humiliation and risk**

There can sometimes be a witness to forgiveness in the very reactions of others (and ours to them) which appear to counteract it. An example of counteracting forgiveness is when others humiliate us, because humiliation can deaden almost any reaction at all. It can be used to further forgiveness, however, as long as Jesus' seventy times seven is not too much for us.

In considering humiliation, it is salutary to see ourselves as the others.<sup>2</sup> When immigrants come to New Zealand, especially when they are not wanted elsewhere, we are the others to them, for having been rejected by others once, they are

aware that it may happen again. We can be the others who ask them how they like it here, but assume that everything that they are, and what they have done in another place until now, is of no consequence whatsoever. We humiliate them by stripping them of their identity.

Recognising ourselves as those who humiliate is one opportunity to witness to forgiveness. We should not underestimate the force of demonstrating Christian faith by being prepared to be forgiven even on our own ground. Once we get over forgiving seven times and strive for seventy times seven, forgiveness can achieve a relation where we become closer to others who were once foreign to us than to those to whom we were previously more similar. Through forgiving and being forgiven, we can, like Jesus, identify more

closely with "publicans and sinners" than we do with the "righteous". If the others who forgive us are people of another religion, the primary matter is not that they be converted: the willingness of Christians to be forgiven by non-Christians is itself a primary witness to the nature of Christian faith. People of both religions may find their experience of God's forgiveness deepened by this. It is a supreme example of God forgiving along with people forgiving each other; it does not matter what people!

We began with immigrants being humiliated by others, but have shown that, far from counteracting forgiveness, humiliation can become the sphere in which Jesus' seventy times seven continues to work itself out. But humiliation also continues to appear in forms never imagined. We can be surprised to find, for example, that immigrants and ethnic minorities can be humiliated by always being seen through

others' (our) eyes. We judge them by our own identity. We expect them simply to conform. We can even be hurt ourselves when they continue to want to practise their culture. They are humiliated when we treat it as "ethnic" alongside what is normal.

In such humiliation, however, there appears another dimension through which forgiveness can operate: it can also be practised from the side of the humiliated. But when they seek to overcome humiliation, they must take a risk. Immigrants and minorities must risk asserting their own identity in the face of assumptions that all they should be doing is conforming to expectations. This is all the more difficult when they realise that, in another environment, they cannot be and do everything they were and did when they lived only among their own people; they have to decide on those features that are essential to their identity.

When they do take the risk of saying what is essential to them, they show how identity is bound up with forgiveness. For in asserting the bottom line of their identity, they are putting Jesus' seventy times seven to the test by challenging others to jump what may be the most difficult hurdle. For now these others must accept that different peoples are not going to become what they want them to be. The most difficult thing that seventy times seven means is that we must actually forgive people for being what they are – and not only for any wrong they may have done. It sounds strange, perhaps even absurd, to say that forgiveness is required just for people being themselves, but what they are is different, and we can be so convinced that their identity is unreasonable, or even harmful, that we make progress only in forgiving them for it.

Perhaps it is more to the point

that such forgiveness is as much a change in our own identity as it is an acceptance of theirs. For if strangers can be forgiven only in their true identity, those forgiving will be able to do so only if they take the risk of realising and accepting their own limited identity; that they are not the norm to which everyone should strive, but that they also have a distinctive, relative identity. It is in this new realisation and acceptance of their own particular identity that they are able to forgive strangers for being different, and – what is as

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much to the point – to be forgiven for being different themselves. For those who are New Zealanders, it is a decisive step towards knowing God's forgiveness to realise that, since God's forgiveness is linked with what people are, it is only as New Zealanders that we can receive God's forgiveness, and not as people who identify with larger, more powerful countries. Making that devastating confession, throws us where we belong – onto God's merciful forgiveness.

The forgiveness of people in their true, limited identity is forgiveness where differences are accepted and still relate. Strangers may have been humiliated to find that the native-born of their adopted country were more different than they expected, just as the native-born may have been humiliated to find the strangers did not wish to give up their different identity. Taking the risk of overcoming humiliation by asserting and accepting identity furthers the process of forgiving each other for having a different identity. Christians may ultimately realise that they have repeated (in

however a modest way) Jesus' forgiving those who did not know what they were doing (Lk 23:34); for in embarking on forgiveness, people often do not yet realise that it will be necessary to reveal identities that either they or the others still did not know they had.

Taking the risk of overcoming humiliation is partly the risk of going onto others' territory. This does not have to be on foreign territory. It is a risk that native-born women sometimes take: they are humiliated by men who do not accept that they have a place in a common enterprise. The women overcome humiliation, however, by taking the risk of affirming the men's contribution while still insisting that their own unique contribution should be accepted

as well. They have gone onto what was previously men's territory and they are going to stay there, though in their own way. In doing this, they may offer a forgiveness that renounces the view that only an identity of all-encompassing sameness is valid. It is the forgiveness of seventy times seven in forgiving a deficiency that the women recognise while the men are still in the process of doing so. It is possible to witness to forgiveness in the often strained relations between women and men in New Zealand, not least in the church. It is an area where scepticism about forgiveness still often reigns.

#### **Place**

Speaking of going onto others' territory raises another dimension of forgiveness and witness: the role *place* plays in relation to identity. This may be linked with humiliation since others may be contemptuous of the kind of people newcomers from overseas are when they are unable to relate immediately to their new place. Sometimes too the place itself humiliates newcomers and

compromises their identity. The place may be so strange that it affects their confidence in living there. But this is not confined to newcomers. Some people from the same country find a new town or building humiliating, or at least so strange that it is difficult for them to express themselves as they are there. It raises the question whether the very places where we live may provide the opportunity for witness to the Christian faith.

To take first the example of immigrants: if they show signs of being indifferent or even hostile to the new place, the native-born are likely to resent it or even become hostile themselves. This is certainly an attitude for which forgiveness is necessary. Such attitudes to other

people seem to feed on themselves and are easily transferred from one group of the native-born to another. They require a really concerted push towards forgiving seventy times seven, a push given by the invigoration of the Jesus who could not only say these words but also enliven them right onto the cross (Lk 23:34).

With the goal of forgiveness in view, Christians will attempt both to understand what newcomers have lost by leaving their own place, and also point out to them the nature of the place where they now live, and perhaps even take them to some significant instance of the place. Part of this will be to point out that everyone who lives in this place is responsible to appreciate it in its own nature as God's creation, and to do what is appropriately human to allow it to continue to express that nature.

Through this process, the identity of the newcomers may change in relation to the place: instead of being the kind of people who are indifferent or even hostile to it, they become those who are now gaining a relation to it. But it is not only people from overseas who change: when the native-born see

the identity of the newcomers has changed, they may be able to forgive them for their lack of previous relation to the place. It may be as well that they are forgiven for their own hostility because they too have become different people in their relation to the newcomers.<sup>3</sup> They may also find an opportunity to report on the forgiveness that has taken place to those compatriots of theirs who remain hostile to the newcomers. If forgiveness is there, it is Christian witness to challenge others to acknowledge that it has happened.

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After all the participants have been through, it should not be too difficult to show that there is nothing superficial about such forgiveness.

Perhaps, however, all this has happened without anything specific being said about the Christian faith. But if Christians are acting through the forgiving invigoration of Christ, something particular may have been noticed, leading people to ask about it. Whether this is so or not, again conversion should not be the main aim. The aim, and the witness, is what has just been said: to convey the invigorating forgiveness of Christ. This is the same invigorating forgiveness also necessary among native-born Christians to resolve the discomfort that some feel in place, for example in particular church buildings. It may be just as difficult as with newcomers to a country (and potentially as rewarding) to lead the native-born to appreciate the nature of the place, and even more difficult to forgive them if they fail to do so!

It is also necessary to acknowledge that, when newcomers change their identity in relation to place, it is still not the

same as that of the people who have always been there. Indeed since newcomers are now a different kind of people they may even enhance the appreciation that the native-born have of the place. It is a common experience in Aotearoa New Zealand for the native-born to realise that newcomers can see the place with different eyes. For example, some Maori have come to realise that the Dutch photographer Ans Westra showed the place in a new light, which both they and Pakeha needed to see as well.

### **Affirmation of identity**

The kind of contribution that Ans Westra and other newcomers have made means that others sometimes affirm

our identity better than we do ourselves. There was something of this with Westra's *Washday at the Pa*.<sup>4</sup> This book affirmed an identity that even some Maori at the time questioned. Some Pakeha were only too ready to accept it, but it was not an authentic affirmation because, by ignoring the spontaneous and caring aspects of the identity, they were seeing only part of it. Many Christians would have been among those who did this – we need to be a Christian witness to ourselves.

This can be a humbling experience, especially when it is linked with the observation that others have affirmed our *Christian* identity better than we have ourselves. I experienced this when I worked as a young man on various labouring jobs. Sometimes I underplayed my Christian identity saying things that appeared to deny it. But my workmates did not “buy” that; they preferred me as I was (partly because that was what I really was), and accepted me that way.

Later reflection gave me the sense that they had forgiven me both for being a Christian and for trying to tone it down, and that

made me more confident about affirming Christian identity myself. What my workmates did was a kind of Christian witness in reverse, in this case affirming that ordinary New Zealand working people were a community in which Christian faith could be expressed. My workmates may not have known it, but they were not sceptical about forgiveness. I may not have known it till later, but through them I experienced both God's rebuke and forgiveness. It was a humbling but invigorating experience of God's forgiveness linked with what people are.

Now I must admit that this experience took place 50 years ago, at a time when workmates were more likely to have some acquaintance with Christianity than many do now. But I think it still true that there are Christian identities that people recognise, hard as it may be to define what they mean by them. It is also possible that people affirm identity in ways that we cannot accept ourselves. It is certainly true that Christians are seen more and more in stereotyped and often harsh ways. But the fact that this is being done at all, both in writing and conversation, means that there are opportunities *offered by others* to witness to our own understanding of Christian identity. Part of it may be to take the hard road of forgiving harsh stereotypes. Seventy times seven indeed!

But even the repetition of stereotypes is not necessarily meant in a harsh way. We may need to be prepared to forgive others as we fill out our Christian identity in disagreement with them, but also in gratitude that others wanted to affirm it even if it was in an incomplete way. Thus Jesus' seventy times seven may apply even in situations that were intended to be positive.

As my example with workmates shows, however, others may affirm our Christian identity positively by forgiving us for wishing to lessen it. Since the affirmation can be directed against that which pretends to be what we are not, it is

an affirmation of our difference and can strengthen us to see our difference as complementary rather than as something to be avoided. Failing to affirm Christian identity may after all be fed from a fear of being different from other (more modish) people who are so sure that only their identity makes any sense.

### **“God’s present has a lot to do with the future having a past.”**

When we do affirm our identity, having previously failed, we realise too that identity is connected with change, that forgiveness through the invigorating life of Jesus known with us when we affirm difference, leads to new dimensions in our Christian identity. Forgiveness connected with identity does not stand still. Indeed we may realise that one aspect of sin for which we need to be forgiven is the sin of standing still. What God does in forgiveness is to “move us on”. This is not in the sense in which the phrase is often used by New Zealanders – “don’t bother me with this any more.” God moving us on is by working through what is necessary to provide its necessary foundation. God’s present has a lot to do with the future having a past.

#### **Time**

So God’s forgiveness bound up with identity is also connected with time. It is rooted in the past, challenges us in the present, and develops a goal for the future. Part of this proceeding into time is to wrestle with challenges that never seem to cease. Forgiving seventy times seven cannot be effected all at once. Faced with Jesus’ challenge, we realise that forgiveness is sometimes a matter of seeking the roots of a relationship, and of going backwards as well as forwards, because forgiveness is not confined to single circumstances. It is not

systematic but dynamic, a process and not a state; it is not only concerned with one wrong but with a chain of varying relations over time.

Just as Jesus challenged people through forgiveness to become more than they already were (“Go and sin no more” – Jn 8:11), we find that others forgive us by questioning our identity in assuming that we are alright as we are, but also by affirming a new identity as those able to become more than we are already. We are often tempted with the thought that we have had enough of this “becoming more”. However many aspects of forgiveness become clear to us over time, times of exasperation come when we think “not again”, “how many times am I expected to do this?” Seven times is enough for us, but we receive Jesus’ answer “seventy times seven”.

This answer furnishes a provocative Christian content to forgiveness as the reciprocal relation where the questioning of a settled Christian identity can further the affirmation of a growing Christian identity. Such affirmation based on questioning is what invigorates us to witness to forgiveness in everyday New Zealand life.

#### **Endnotes**

1. H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (London: Nisbet, 1927), 213.
2. See Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago, IL and London: Chicago University Press, 1992).
3. Here as elsewhere, I am partly dependent on Christopher Marshall’s incisive statement on forgiveness in *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids, MI/ Cambridge: Eerdmans; Auckland/ Sydney: Lime Grove House, 2001), 277.
4. Ans Westra, *Washday at the Pa* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1964).



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