

Forgiveness

Last Friday we commemorated Holocaust Memorial Day. Around that time last year there were various television programmes, one of which I recorded but only got around to watching a few days ago. This was about a survivor in her eighties called Eva Kor. She and her sister alone of her family survived Auschwitz because they were twins and were recruited into the terrible experiments of the notorious Dr Josef Mengele. Her sister Miriam died just over twenty years ago in Israel, probably as a result of the procedures to which she was subjected by Mengele.

Eva got to know a German doctor who as a young man worked with Mengele but he was not able to shed light on the exact nature of the experiments. As a result of their meeting Eva felt able to forgive that doctor. But a much more public act of forgiveness was to follow. In 2015 the 93 old Oskar Gröning, a former SS guard, known as the “bookkeeper of Auschwitz”, was brought to trial in Germany and Eva was one of the plaintiffs. In the courtroom she publicly forgave not just Oskar Gröning but all Nazis. Not unexpectedly this shocked and angered the other plaintiffs. Though one man in the programme did actually support her.

Eva said: “The day I forgave the Nazis, privately I forgave my parents whom I hated all my life for not having saved me from Auschwitz. Children expect their parents to protect them; mine couldn’t. And then I forgave myself for hating my parents.”

She also said: “I forgave the Nazis not because they deserve it but because I deserve it.”

One of the aims of the Community of the Cross of Nails is to heal the wounds of history. For Eva this act of forgiveness was one of self-healing. It was a way of ensuring that the pain of the past does not dictate the path of the future.

Forgiveness is not easy, particularly if you have experienced something so horrific and final as the holocaust. One can understand why the other survivors could not accept why Eva had done this and why they could not take that step themselves. Eva did not find the act of forgiveness easy, and yet she discovered that it was liberating. Hatred and resentment can destroy us. Forgiveness, on the other hand, can heal and free us.

In a real sense only God can forgive those who commit such terrible atrocities. And yet, in our reading just now (Luke 6.32-38) Jesus teaches us quite clearly: “Forgive, and you will be forgiven”. God’s forgiveness of us requires us to forgive others.

Forgiveness is an integral part of the process of reconciliation. Yet it does not remove the need for repentance and an acceptance of responsibility on the part of the perpetrator. Far from it. Indeed in a strange way forgiveness may even elicit that repentance. We give thanks for those who are able to forgive. With God’s help may we be able to follow their example.