

# ‘Forgive us our trespasses’

Herbert McCabe OP

*On the four Sundays of Advent the Family Mass at Blackfriars, Oxford, was televised live on BBC 1 with Herbert McCabe preaching on the theme of hope. The Catholic Truth Society of London will shortly be publishing all four of his sermons as a pamphlet. The first focused on prayer, the expression of hope in our personal lives, the second on hope for the whole world, the third on contrition as an expression of hope, and the last on mourning as an expression of hope. Here we are publishing the third, broadcast on Gaudete Sunday.*

Take this scenario: I sin and so I offend God. He is angry with me, and I fear the wrath of God. Then I kneel before him and beg for his forgiveness, saying that I know I have done wrong and do not deserve his friendship; but will he take me back all the same? Then the wrath of God is appeased; he changes his mind and is no longer angry with me.

Now this is a perfectly good story, or picture, of God and ourselves. If we are going to imagine God at all we should sometimes imagine him as very angry—especially angry about injustice to his special people, the poor and the helpless. This is a very important image of God, but it is one image. We have to set this image alongside the image of the God who relents, the God who endures our sin and forgives us all the same. We need many images, especially conflicting images. We need lots of images lest we suppose that any of these images *is* God, lest we worship any one of them. We probably all know people who worship the idol of a punitive God; and others whose idol is simply sentimental. If we suppose that God is literally first wrathful and then relenting, we just have two idols, one after the other.

The fact is that the God of wrath and the God who relents are both good but inadequate images, merely pictures of the unfathomable, incomprehensible love which is God.

If we are going to understand anything about the forgiveness of sin we cannot just be content with pictures; we have to *think* as clearly as we can. First of all, we need to make the same kind of somersault as we did about prayer. We have to turn the story on its head. When God forgives our sin, he is not changing *his* mind about us; he is changing *our* mind

about him. The forgiveness of sin is God's creative and re-creative act making the desert bloom again, bringing us back from dry sterility to rich and wanton life bursting out all over the place. When God changes your mind in this way, when he pours out on you his Spirit of new life, it is exhilarating but it is also fairly painful. There is a trauma of rebirth as perhaps there is of birth. The exhilaration and the pain that belong to being reborn is what we call contrition, and this *is* the forgiveness of sin. Contrition is not anxious guilt about sin; it is the continual recognition in hope that the Spirit has come to me *as healing my sin*.

So it is not literally true that because we are sorry, God decides to forgive us. That is a perfectly good story but it is only a story. The literal truth is that we are sorry because God forgives us. Our sorrow for sin *is* the forgiveness of God working within us. Contrition and forgiveness are just two names for the same thing, they are the gift of the Spirit; the re-creative transforming act of God in us. God does not forgive us because of anything he finds in us; he forgives us out of his sheer delight, his exuberant joy in making the desert bloom again.

In the New Testament, the opposite of love is not hate but fear. Let me explain what I mean. You know how it is with a child who has been deprived of love by her parents and others. She has not been told and shown that she matters to others and so she finds it difficult to believe that she matters at all. She works *hard* at seeming to matter, seeming to be important. To prove that she *is* someone, she avidly accumulates things, possessions that are *hers*; but deep beneath it all is an anxiety, a feeling that at the centre of her being there is really nothing at all. She lives in fear—not a sensible, rational fear of things or people that may be harmful, but an irrational, generalised fear that there is nothing to her. Because she finds nothing to love in herself, she finds it hard to love others. Others are dangerous; she must put up barriers to protect herself. She will not take delight in people or things unless she possesses them. For her, importance is found not in the real world that God made but in a world of fantasy that she has made. And all the time she is deeply aware of how fragile this fantasy world is, how precarious this fantasy self is. That is why above all she is terrified of admitting that she has been wrong; admitting it to others or to herself.

I hope it is clear that I am talking about most of us; there is some of this anxiety and this fantasy in nearly everyone.

Now, I say all this not to pose as a psychologist; it seems to me just common sense. I mention it because I think it makes a very good image of what Christians mean by sin. Of course it is not sin; but it is an image of sin. The root of all sin is fear: the very deep fear that we are nothing; the compulsion to make something of ourselves, to construct a self-flattering image of ourselves which we can worship, to believe in ourselves—our fantasy selves. I think that all sins are failures in being

realistic; even the simple everyday sins of the flesh, that seem to come from childish greed for pleasure, have their deepest origin in anxiety about whether we really matter, the anxiety that makes us desperate for self-reassurance. To sin is always to construct an illusory self we can admire; instead of the real self that we can only love. It is because we fail in realistic self-love that we fail in love for others. So sin too means being terrified of admitting that we have failed. In the New Testament sin is represented, first of all, by those who dare not know that they are sinners, the self-righteous, the people we call the 'pharisees' (which is deeply unfair to the real pharisees), the people obsessed with proving themselves good or 'the elect'.

The cure for this, of course, is to discover that it is all right; we don't have to worry because God loves us; we *do* matter because we matter to God. This is what we mean by faith: to realise that the most important thing about us, the deepest thing in us, is that we are loved, unconditionally, never-faillingly loved, by God. The gift of faith in God's love for us, the gift of a share in God's own way of seeing things, liberates us from all that tedious business of putting on a show for ourselves or others. We don't need to keep on justifying ourselves any more; we can admit to being the inadequate and rather unpleasant people, and certainly infantile people, that we really are, because it doesn't matter—God loves us anyway. And once we have seen this, once we have been liberated, once in the Spirit of God we find the courage to face our real selves, then at last we can grow up a bit; the perfect love of God for us has cast out fear, we can grow up in the life of the Spirit. One of the first signs of the divine life in us is that we can confess our sins.

In one way to face our sins for what they are is more painful, certainly more embarrassing, than to hide from them—as I said, contrition is painful as well as exhilarating—but we are no longer frightened of them; we can even find them rather funny; we can see ourselves as comic figures—everyone who takes *himself* too solemnly is a bit ridiculous. And this too is to share in God's own way of seeing things. Alongside the image of the God of wrath and the God who relents, we surely also need the God who is amused by his wayward children—especially when they are being very pompous and solemn.

I have hope, then, although I am not a saint, because I believe that God loves me and forgives me by his gift of contrition, that he continually brings me back to reality, to the truth of things. Of course I do not imagine that God has waved a magic wand so that sin is no longer a threat to me. My contrition, my joy in being forgiven, goes with a realistic understanding that while there is no danger that any power could drag me back to the world of shadows, of sin and illusion and self-worship, I could, if I worked at it, go back there by myself. Our hope, as I said last week, is very different from optimism. Just as there is no

automatic mechanism by which we are bound to progress regardless of how we struggle, so there is no automatic salvation regardless of our growth in the life of the Spirit. The grace of God will never reject us, but we can, if we really want to, reject the grace of God. We can want some possession for ourselves so badly that we will even sacrifice for it the friendship of God. Yet even then perhaps God may bring us his gift of contrition, of real faith in his love, of forgiveness so that we set forth again and

the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
... we shall come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon our heads;  
we shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

(Is. 35: 1b, 10)

## **Is there a place for Feminists in a Christian Church?**

**Daphne Hampson and  
Rosemary Radford Ruether**

*Based on a dialogue held on 16 May 1986 in London at Westminster Cathedral Hall, and organised by Catholic Women's Network and Women in Theology. Dr Daphne Hampson presents her own position at length, Dr Rosemary Ruether responds to it at length, and a discussion between the two of them follows.*

### **Daphne Hampson:**

Obviously the Christian church is better off with feminists than without feminists. Therefore if one is a feminist and a Christian one should stay in the Christian church and work for change. I do not underestimate what that means: how time and energy consuming, how discouraging and at times undermining it is. I remember well. We need feminists at