PRINCIPLES OF FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION
COVENTRY CATHEDRAL, COVENTRY
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This great cathedral is a most fitting venue for the consideration of questions relating to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Its magnificent predecessor, that stood here for hundreds of years, was destroyed by German bombers during the Second World War. Those bombers also devastated much of your city. They killed many of your townsfolk and shattered the lives of many more. The temptation to respond to your enemies with bitterness and revenge must have been very great. Instead, the new cathedral that arose from the rubble, has become a symbol for forgiveness and reconciliation.

Several weeks ago I had the privilege of speaking at a conference in Hiroshima. I visited the Peace Museum there and saw the remnants of the cataclysm that the city suffered at quarter past eight on the morning of 6 August 1945.

The significance of the atomic bomb attack on Hiroshima goes far beyond questions of who was right and who was wrong, of who should forgive and who should be forgiven.

- The school children, who had come into the city to help clear the rubble of conventional bombs, were probably not aware that Hiroshima was a major munitions centre and junction for troop movements.
- The elderly, going about their daily business as best they could, had not been consulted about the Japanese decision to attack Pearl Harbour.
- The young men and soldiers in the city probably would have fought fanatically to defend their fatherland and would have inflicted dreadful losses on any invading army.

All such arguments and analyses fade away in the face of such incalculable destruction and human suffering. To these there can be only one response: that such a thing should never happen again.

And yet the suffering of the people of Hiroshima constituted only a tiny portion of the suffering of millions of people throughout the world during the Second World War and the countless wars that we have experienced since then. The ruins of Dresden, Hamburg and Coventry; the battlefields of the Middle East, Korea and Vietnam; the killing fields of Cambodia, Bosnia and Rwanda/Burundi should leave us all with a simple imperative: that these things also should not be allowed to happen again.

It is therefore imperative that political and spiritual leaders should become involved, even more deeply than at the moment, in strategies and action plans to resolve conflict, as well as in the changing of attitudes which give rise to conflicts and violence. It is with regard to the latter that the work of the Centre for Forgiveness and Reconciliation is so relevant.

FW de Klerk
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An important part of helping to break the ghastly cycle of human conflict can be provided by the healing power of forgiveness and the peace-making power of reconciliation.

One of the central themes of our religion is the commandment that we should forgive one another. One of the central realities of our histories has been the utter failure of most Christians and most Christian countries to carry out this commandment.

Despite the lip service that we give every day to the importance of forgiveness - Forgive us this day our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us - the reality is that we seldom truly forgive.

Yet forgiveness is essential, not only because it is a central commandment of our Lord, but because it is critically important for our own spiritual and mental wellbeing and for the search for lasting peace.

Until we truly forgive our enemies we carry within our hearts a bitterness which can poison every other aspect of our lives. Only when we truly and sincerely forgive the wrongs that have been done to us can we free ourselves from this burden. By continuing to nurse grievances against those who have done us wrong, we give them continuing power over us. With each remembrance of past wrongs we perpetuate the evil that has been done to us. In the end we forgive those who have done us wrong not only for their sake, but also for our own liberation.

It follows that our forgiveness should be unconditional, since we grant it, not only for the sake of those who have wronged us, but also for our own spiritual and mental wellbeing.

There are, of course, also very practical reasons why we should forgive one another and why we should not allow the wrongs of the past to fester in our hearts. We all have sinned against others as others have sinned against us. If we do not clean the slate, our grievances will lead to alienation, vengeance and conflict.

Let me illustrate this. My branch of the De Klerk family started a farm, called Spioenkop, in the Burgersdorp district of the Cape Province about 170 years ago. It was a beautiful farm with a strong spring - an important asset in the dry Karoo. Many years later my great-grandfather and his brother farmed there and lived in homes about 100 yards from one another. Then they argued and became enemies. My great-grandfather joined the newly established Gereformeerde Kerk - the church to which our branch of the family still belongs. His brother stayed in the Dutch Reformed Church. Both churches taught the importance of forgiveness, but the De Klerk brothers refused to listen.

The feud became so bitter that, there, in the great expanse of the Karoo, they built a fence between their homes. Despite the fact that they had no neighbours for miles around, they never spoke to one another again. Today they lie buried together at Spioenkop in the same small family cemetery. Their graves are a sad monument to the alienation of those who cannot forgive.

On a much more tragic scale, many of the conflicts that continue to wrack the world have

their roots deep in memories of ancient and unforgiven wrongs.

Think of Northern Ireland, where the origins of the present conflict go all the way back to the original settlement of the Province by Protestants in the seventeenth century. The Battle of the Boyne, fought more than three centuries ago, is still commemorated every year, and still on each commemoration revives bitter memories of ancient grievances. The cycle of violence is strengthened by each brutal and unforgiven outrage.

Think of the tragic conflict in Bosnia/Herzegovina, where memories of grievances can be traced back hundreds of years to bitter conflicts between the Turks, the Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croatians.

The same is true of the conflicts in Rwanda and Burundi, between the Hutu and the Tutsi; in Cyprus, between the Greeks and the Turks and in the Middle East between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

Very often, the fuel that keeps these conflicts smouldering - or ablaze - is the memory of past atrocities - all carefully nurtured and remembered - all of them unforgiven and therefore unresolved.

We cannot truly hope to establish peace between such peoples until we address the root of their sense of grievance - and this can only be done through forgiveness.

We Afrikaners know about this. I grew up in a society that nurtured a deep sense of grievance against the British. For us the Anglo-Boer War was not another distant and bothersome colonial campaign that we read about in the morning papers. We called it the Second Freedom War.

It utterly devastated our two young republics; it deprived us of our hard-won right to rule ourselves; and most tragically, it led to the deaths of a considerable portion of our women and children in disease-ridden concentration camps. According to Thomas Pakenham, in his epic work on the the Boer War no one knows how many Boers - men, women and children - died in the concentration camps. Official estimates vary between 18 000 and 28 000 - out of a total population of a few hundred thousand. When I grew up, there was hardly a family in our community that that had not suffered some or other loss. Many of the older people still had first-hand memories of the conflict.

But somehow, or other, we have succeeded in putting most of this bitterness behind us. The establishment of the Republic of South Africa in 1961 played an important part in all of this. For many Afrikaners it was the final resolution of their struggle with Britain. Since then the ties that bind my people and the British have become stronger than the past bitterness that divided us - except, of course, when we play cricket or rugby against one another.

So we, as a people, know what it is to have been sinned against and to have forgiven. But we also know what it is to have sinned against others and to have needed forgiveness. The apartheid policies that my party implemented for many years caused enormous suffering, disruption and humiliation to millions of South Africans. On 15 May this year I once again

expressed my deep and sincere apology for these policies.

I apologised in my capacity as Leader of the National Party to the millions of South Africans who suffered the wrenching disruption of forced removals from their homes, businesses and land; who over the years suffered the shame of being arrested for pass law offences; who over the centuries had suffered the indignities and humiliation of racial discrimination; who had been prevented from exercising their full democratic rights in the land of their birth; who were unable to achieve their full potential; and who in any way suffered as a result of the policies and actions of former Governments.

This renewed apology was offered in a spirit of true repentance in full knowledge of the tremendous harm that apartheid had done to millions of South Africans. I hope that the victims of our policies will find it in their hearts to forgive us - not only to relieve us of the burden of responsibility that we must carry - but to free themselves finally from the oppression of the past.

Forgiveness helps to break the vicious cycle of bitterness, revenge and escalating conflict. It is the beginning of the road to reconciliation.

Reconciliation is a concept which requires thorough analysis if one is to avoid the misuse of the word as simply another rhetorical catch-phrase. It has a number of different meanings, each, in its own way essential for the establishment of lasting peace.

Its first meaning is the bringing together of those who have previously been alienated from one another. It is the reconciliation, on a small scale, that my great grandfather and his brother failed to achieve - because they could not find it in their hearts to forgive one another.

It is the coming together that continues to elude many warring communities throughout the world - because they cannot liberate themselves from their burden of bitterness and grievance.

It is the new sense of common purpose and communion that I hope we, in South Africa, are tentatively beginning to develop after so many centuries of division and alienation. It is the peace that has developed over the past fifty years between Germany and Britain that is symbolised by this cathedral.

Reconciliation in this sense, requires us to put the hurt, reproach and conflict of a divided past behind us and to concentrate, instead, on the promise and common purpose of a united future.

The second sense of reconciliation is the auditing concept of balance. All of us have, at some time or other, struggled to reconcile our bank statements with the often wildly inaccurate figures in the stubs of our cheque books. We overlook long-standing debts and debits. Sometimes we are surprised by unexpected credits. And we have all experienced the satisfaction when we finally succeed in balancing our books to the last penny.

So it is also with our search for reconciliation with one another.We must forgive and we must hope to be forgiven. But we should not do this blindly without cognisance of our responsibilities, debts and credits. For that reason reconciliation requires that we should also carefully, and dispassionately, examine our collective accounts of our past relationships and seek to find a balance. The purpose of such an exercise must not be a reversion to the kind of reproach or retribution that caused our alienation from one another in the first place. But it is a necessary exercise before we can finally close the books on the past. The essence of the exercise, however, remains balance and the production of a statement that accurately reflects all of the data at our disposal. If all statements are not brought into reckoning, the accounts will not balance and our efforts will not lead to reconciliation.

A third meaning of reconciliation is the acceptance of things that, in an ideal world, we would rather not accept. We say, in this sense, that we have reconciled ourselves to this or that reality. We would have preferred something more but the imperative for compromise requires us to accept something less.

Reconciliation, in this sense, is also a prerequisite for peace. The reality is that any search for lasting solutions to the problems that have caused conflict in the past, will require all parties to make real - and sometimes painful - compromises.

In the case of South Africa, the ANC entered the negotiation process as a truly convinced socialist alliance. They wanted a rigidly centralist state that would have the power to implement far-reaching social reforms on all parts of our society, regardless of the complexities of our country and the demands of globalised economies. I am sure that it was difficult for many of their supporters to accept the broadly liberal, plural and free market society that is emerging in South Africa.

We, on the other hand, had to make one of the greatest sacrifices that can be asked of any people. My people, the Afrikaners, had to give up the right to exclusive national self-determination for which we had struggled for more than three centuries. We are as much a nation as any people on the face of the earth - with our own language, culture and history. Yet we realised that our efforts to continue to maintain this right would inevitably lead to further injustice to others and to a downward spiral of conflict and devastation.

In South Africa we have learned that reconciliation and peace require us to accept compromises. To achieve reconciliation and peace nearly always require a leap of faith and a willingness to trust those whom we had previously regarded as our sworn enemies.

The fourth meaning of reconciliation is the reconciliation of man with his God. As Christians we believe that the central act of history was the sacrifice that God made through the incarnation and crucifixion of His Son. We believe that through this sacrifice Christ took upon himself all the sins of all people through all the ages. By so-doing He made it possible for them to be reconciled with God, after the alienation that had been brought about between man and God by original sin.

- We humans should forgive one another because, by so-doing, we free ourselves from the burden of our oppressors.

- Those who have been alienated from one another should forgive their enemies because this is a prerequisite for reconciliation and the establishment of temporal peace.
- Christians should forgive one another because this is the command of the Lord and the precondition that he sets for our own forgiveness.

Ultimately, however, in our relationship with God, our sins can be forgiven only through the sacrifice and intercession of His Son, Jesus Christ. This, in its deepest sense, is the meaning of forgiveness and reconciliation and it leads not necessarily to peace in this world, but to the peace that passes all understanding.