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The news feed this past week was truly buzzing: a lady was almost sucked out of an aircraft when one of its engines blew up; a Russian bomber was intercepted 35 miles from UK airspace; In County Antrim, a herd of cows released into a field after a long winter indoors, were seen to jump and frolic for joy (don't you wish we could shed our inhibitions and do just that!); and then of course, good news for men (I guess!): a new migraine medication appears to work well even when others have failed!¹

Among the glut of news, three caught my attention: the first about the robber who broke into a pensioner's home, was stabbed and later died; the second related to the Stephen Lawrence case; and the third was the "fiasco" of the immigration status of those who landed in the United Kingdom on the *Windrush*.

Let me tell you why these three news items caught my attention.

Very early one morning, a man from a traveller Gypsy family, known to the authorities as a serial criminal, broke into the home of a 78-year old pensioner with intent to steal. The pensioner awoke, confronted the robber, a scuffle ensued, during which he stabbed the robber with a kitchen knife. The robber escaped only to succumb to his wounds across the road, from where he was taken to hospital, and there he died.

Flowers, cards and notes appeared where the robber first fell, and a floral *shrine* took shape. A hand-written card read: "*To my daddy, no words can describe the pain and heartache we are going through. These people won't put us down. We love you dad. We miss you so much*".

The pensioner and his wife have been so traumatised, they have moved away temporarily.

¹ All taken from www.bbc.co.uk on Wednesday 18th April, 2018 between 9:00 - 9:30 am

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It is interesting to note, when God gave Moses the Law, He had this very situation in mind: *"If a thief is caught breaking in [after dark] and is struck [by the owner] so that he dies, the owner of the house has not committed murder; unless it happens after sunrise, in which case it is murder!"*² Before we dismiss the Bible as irrelevant, out-of-date, or not fit for our times, let's first read it to see what God **has** to say.

In this situation, where a child mourns her beloved father's death, while an elderly couple are in shock from the ordeal, an interesting question is being raised, and its not about the legality of the home-owners' rights. It is this: *when a perpetrator is no longer available to repent of his wrong, ... is there need for forgiveness?*

Hold that thought.....

The second news item I was drawn to, was the interview with Neville Lawrence, Stephen Lawrence's father, who said, *"The fact that I had to lose my first child has been devastating. I can't begin to explain the pain and the anguish me and my family have suffered over the past 25 years."*³ He described the cause of His anguish. *"When you read the Bible, it tells you that in the days of Moses and the pharaohs, one of the punishments that was [sic] dished out was that if you did something wrong you lose your first born. And so I'm thinking, maybe I did something wrong?"*

In 2012, Neville's wife Baroness Doreen Lawrence said she could not forgive her son's killers because, *"you can only forgive somebody when they have shown remorse... and they haven't".*

Last week, 78-year old Neville Lawrence made public his decision to forgive the gang for the racist attack, crediting his Christian faith. He

² Exodus 22:2 (Expanded Bible)

³ The Guardian on Sun 15 Apr 2018 22.00 BST. by Robert Booth

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planned to spend the anniversary of his son's death in church, worshipping God.

Two questions come to mind:

1. *Are we truly in a position to judge whether a person's remorse or repentance is genuine, in order to forgive them?*
2. *How do we draw lessons from passages of Scripture, and know that we have rightly understood the text?* Neville read the account of Moses and the 10 plagues and misunderstood its application: the death of **all** firstborn in Pharaoh's Egypt was the consequence, an evil ruler brought on himself by denying God's blessings on His chosen people; Neville **presumes** his first born died because he, like the Egyptian Pharaoh, must have done something wrong to deserve his son's death.

The third and final news item which held my attention was the narrative of the "*Windrush Generation and the Immigration Scandal*".

Listening to the news as it unravelled, listening to four days of the political blame-game, *Not on my watch, but yours*, left me wondering whether, saying "*I'm sorry*" is the same as repentance, and **if** it is, why do we find it so difficult to forgive?

One word runs through these three stories, a word which is the essence of the Easter narrative, and the word is **Forgiveness**.

Before we try and understand **forgiveness**, let's clarify once again, our understanding of sin.

First, **sinfulness** - because of the disobedience of the first man and woman, a narrative we know well, we live in a world now destroyed by sin.

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We, therefore, live in **sinfulness** in need of **redemption**: someone has to pay the price to remove the label of **SIN** hung around our necks. We cannot repent of something we have not done, but we can certainly be immensely grateful to the person who paid the price to have the label of **SIN** removed from around our necks.

Second, those who choose to deliberately break the law of God, have **committed sin**. To break God's law is to agree with satan that God is not Holy, He is not perfect and His law is not perfect. God can, therefore, be disobeyed and disregarded. Anyone who has broken God's law, needs **salvation**, needs to be saved from God's anger against sin.

The prophet Isaiah makes this very clear to the people of Israel: *It's the state of evil in which you live (your sin/iniquity⁴) that has cut you off from God. Because of your (individual, deliberate) sins, he has turned away and hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear you anymore.*⁵

The matter of **forgiveness** is critically important. When the disciples asked Jesus, *Teach us to pray...* Jesus said, *Pray like this: Father... forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us... for if you forgive others their sin against you, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do **not** forgive others their sin against you, neither will your Father.*⁶ The Risen, Resurrected Christ's first instruction to His disciples huddled in the upper room was, *Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.*⁷

⁴ for an understanding of the Hebrew term "iniquity", please read: <http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/emagazine/056.html>

⁵ Isaiah 59:2 New Living Translation (NLT)

⁶ Matthew 6:12 and 14-15

⁷ John 20:22-23

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Forgiveness is at the heart of the Easter message and the central theme of our lives. God places on us a **H-U-G-E** responsibility: you forgive anyone and I will forgive them; you hold back forgiveness from anyone, and I will hold back forgiveness from that person.

Read this alongside Jesus' teaching on prayer, *Father, forgive us our sins, **as** we forgive others*, and we suddenly realise, the process of forgiveness begins with **ME!**

Neville Lawrence realised this. He forgave his son's killers because his Christian faith spoke to him, if he forgives his son's killers, God will forgive him his thoughts and them for their actions; if he withholds his forgiveness, God will hold back HIS forgiveness.

The robber who died trying to steal from a pensioner, is no longer around to repent of his action, but should the pensioner withhold his forgiveness and condemn the robber to an eternity outside the presence and love of God?

Without taking any political sides, but purely at a human level, if a Prime Minister says, *I'm sorry...*, should we sit in judgement whether her words were genuine remorse, and hold back forgiveness?

*Father, forgive us our sins, **as** we forgive others...*

If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.

Do you really want to carry the burden of not forgiving someone, and withhold God's forgiveness, blessings, joy and peace from yourself and them, while expecting God to bless you with the same?

AMEN