

FORGIVENESS

NOVEMBER 2025

All saints Sunday when we honour those who have carried the Christian torch throughout the past 2000 years, many of them with whom we have a special affinity. St Chad comes to mind of course with St Patrick high in my esteem, while St Anthony inspires much gratitude from Annabel and I as he regularly comes up trumps and finds “lost things” in our house! We have just returned from a week in Penola so I have to mention St Mary McKillop too!

Saints encourage us to do things **not** because they are easy but because they are hard. This morning, I want to reflect upon one of the most difficult things that our faith asks us to do. The idea of forgiveness is often responded to with “we can try to forgive but we cannot forget”. At each service in this place, we ask God to forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us and on the cross Jesus said “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.” Both of these requests **sound** very transactional to me. They seem to suggest that we are only forgiven **if** we forgive others or that **if** the intention of perpetrator is grounded in ignorance, then we can forgive. But maybe these instances show us more about being grateful that God forgives us even in the most extreme circumstances.

We have all been damaged and hurt by the words or actions of others, often those closest to us and sometimes by strangers as well. I can remember to this day the words of a young curate who upon meeting my twin sister and I, said “Ah, she got the beauty and you got the brains”. Given that we had only just met and he didn’t actually know either of us, all I could only infer or hear that I was the ugly duckling and she was the beautiful swan. The appalling lack of sensitivity present in this young man, has had me ever since questioning his suitability for the priesthood!

Erin Patterson and the death cap mushroom beef wellington trial, provoked a media frenzy not seen since the conviction of Lindy Chamberlain in the 1980s. The latter spent over 3 years in prison for a crime she did not commit and yet upon her release was able to say that she forgave her husband as well as the criminal justice system that had done such a grave **injustice** to her.

Ian Wilkinson, whose wife was killed by the poisonous lunch, is the sole survivor of the tragedy and at the conclusion of the trial was able to say that he forgave Erin.

Upon exploring the reasons how it was possible for both these people to forgive such damage done to them, I came to this conclusion. They believed that if they did **not** forgive, they themselves would be forever changed and potentially sink into the toxicity of resentment, bitterness or worse into seeking revenge.

I lived through what we Irish euphemistically called “The Troubles” in the 1970s and 80s. Over 3000 people died, many of them civilians as well as combatants, in dreadful circumstances. People were shot or bombed simply because they were Catholic or Protestant; atrocities often witnessed by their children and families. Women were tarred and feathered and tied to lampposts on the suspicion that they were police informers. The level of cruelty was so high that I wondered if we Irish had lost our humanity altogether. As the Dean of St Patrick’s cathedral in Dublin remarked at the time “we have enough religion in this country to encourage us to hate but not nearly enough to encourage us to love”. However, what often amazed me by the mid-1970s was the number of people directly affected by the violence, who publicly stated that they forgave the perpetrators who had killed or injured the people they loved.

As individuals we need to ask ourselves what we mean by forgiveness and how we can stay true to New Testament values. Lindy Chamberlain seems to be a good role model. She has said that she decided to forgive so that she was not changed by what had happened to her. She refused to allow anger or bitterness to infest her with toxicity. Ian Wilkinson who was seriously injured by the notorious lunch has stated that he forgives Erin. He is the pastor of the Baptist Church in Leongatha. At the end of the trial that convicted Erin of murder, he stood on the steps of the court and said “I forgive her ask you all to **be kind to one another**”. Wow, such grace and such an example to us all.

We need to explore how can we deal with the idea of forgiveness and exactly what it means to us. Avoiding **feelings** of anger, resentment and bitterness may be a bridge too far but being determined **not** to act on these feelings is surely a goal worth pursuing. What really matters is not what we feel but what we do.

May we all be given the grace and the courage to live out the New Testament value of forgiveness. Amen