

TFTD 25.24 Tuesday April 1st

Forgiveness and faith: Luke 17.1-19



“Have you forgiven John Smyth?”

Laura Kuenssberg’s question hung in the air. She was fishing for the clickbait headline “Former Archbishop forgives serial abuser.”.

There was a long pause, just long enough for me to think, “Oh thank goodness, he has spotted the trap and he will avoid it.”

And then came the answer: “Yes.”

To be fair to Justin Welby, he then went onto say that his forgiveness was irrelevant – it was the forgiveness of the survivors of Smyth’s abuse that mattered.

Which would have been a good thing to say as your first answer. Because, as it was, the damage had been done and the headline had effectively been written.

Luke’s Gospel has a lot to say about mercy and forgiveness.

Luke 17:3 for example, “Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive”.

It would be a good thing if bishops and archbishops were in the habit of quoting Scripture and mentioning God and/or Jesus when they answer these sorts of questions. It would show the world that a faith in Christ can make a difference and would help them give better answers to difficult questions.

So a model answer might be, “Jesus said that if another disciple sins you must rebuke the offender and then if there is repentance, you must forgive, but in the case of Smyth, he was never rebuked by the church so we do not know whether there ever was any repentance and so the survivors cannot know if they can forgive. And the reason we never came to the point of repentance was because the church was scandalously slow in responding to the situation for which the church asks for forgiveness and must demonstrate true repentance.”

Later on, in the interview Kuenssberg set up another trap. Talking about people in leadership positions, she asked whether there was a “rush to judge”. Justin Welby walked with some enthusiasm into that trap. He absolutely thought that people in leadership should be forgiven more. According to him lack of forgiveness for people in leadership has been a problem for the last 50 years. So ever since the Watergate scandal, I suppose.

One of the survivors of Smyth’s abuse, interviewed by Kuenssberg, had this to say when asked whether he forgave Welby.

"If in 2017 he had contacted us, said 'I will come and apologise to you personally. I am sorry. I messed up.' I would have forgiven him immediately, but he never has in those terms."

In other words, if there had been repentance there would have been forgiveness.

So a person who was seriously abused by a church leader is still better able to articulate a clear doctrine of repentance and forgiveness than the former Archbishop of Canterbury.

We so urgently need an archbishop who can talk about God and Jesus and root all their answers to difficult questions in the Gospel of Jesus

Christ. In recent days I have heard people say that the church which appointed Justin Welby to be Archbishop of Canterbury can hardly be expected to appoint a decent successor.

I have thought about this and come to a slightly more optimistic conclusion. Maybe we will see true repentance. Maybe the Holy Spirit is at work somewhere in this. We should all pray for a new Archbishop whose whole life and being is rooted in the Gospel. If we do, maybe Jesus will say to us, as he said to the Samaritan leper, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

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