

Nelson Mandela (now old and unwell) will be remembered for many things, but perhaps most for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. After so many years in jail, he could have become bitter and full of hatred and a desire for revenge, and yet he saw it as his mission to work for justice, for unity and for healing of the past hurts. He knew that without openness, without the painful truth being exposed, these wounds would fester and cause fatalities. The terrible injustices could not be undone, neither could the horrific killings and injuries that had been committed as acts of revenge or protest - nothing could change that – but Nelson Mandela saw that the future could be different, if, and only if, the people had the courage and the humility to own up to the wrongs they had done.

Would they have done this without Nelson Mandela and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission? Almost certainly not! Very few people willingly admit they are in the wrong, let alone admit serious crimes which would earn them only the right to be despised, hated, condemned. Yet to keep such things secret leads to fear, fear of being found out and punished, it leads to loneliness, the avoidance of those people who might know or guess the truth, and it leads to hatred, lurking always ready to turn to violence.

What we all forget, and what Jesus reminded Simon about, is that forgiveness brings relief, freedom from fear, loneliness and hatred, it brings thankfulness and joy. But how can anyone be forgiven for what we might term unforgivable crimes? Some people are better at forgiving than others, but forgiveness is only possible when the perpetrator first admits to themselves and to others that they have done wrong. We have this wonderful gift through Christ, of the knowledge that with God, we have the certainty of forgiveness, whatever we have done, however awful, but, and it is a big but, this is only true if we repent, if we admit what we have done and are truly sorry.

The trouble is, like King David, so often we just don't see our own faults or the parts we have played. David longed for the beautiful Bathsheba. He was King, he could do what he liked. No, more than

that – it was his right as king to take what he wanted. So he had Bathsheba's husband sent to the frontline of battle to ensure that he got killed.

It took the very brave prophet Nathan to show David that what he did was wrong. It could not be undone, there were inevitable consequences, but David repented, he became a changed man, and went on to rule with justice and has gone down in the history of the Israelites as a truly great king.

Nathan risked his life in speaking to David in that way. If Nathan, knowing what he knew, had done nothing, he would have failed, he would have been guilty by association. He was put in a very very difficult position.

How does this fit with Paul's teaching? Paul, writing to the Galatians, states that we are not justified by our works, but by faith in Christ. If we are not careful, that sounds as though Paul is saying it doesn't matter what you do, it is what you believe that counts. But that is not really what he is saying. Rather it is a realistic statement based upon the knowledge that we can never be perfect. It is only by the grace of God that we can be forgiven and move forward. Of course it matters what we do, but that will never be enough. God transforms it and makes it enough.

We may read the parables that Jesus taught about the Pharisees and the law, or the letters of Paul about justification and think well, we are different, we are not legalistic. Maybe not, perhaps in the same way, but we justify ourselves by saying that we keep with the law of the land, we are not harming anyone. We know that there are problems, but we don't see them as our fault.

We make excuses:

The rainforest is being cut down by loggers and miners or to grow palms for palm oil, so called green energy. That's not our fault, it is the criminal groups, or the unscrupulous businesses

There are families in Africa who are literally starving – that's not our fault, we give money to charity, but there is so much corruption that aid does not always reach the poor.

There are families in this country who are having to borrow money at outrageous interest rates from payloan companies to pay for food – that's not our fault, they should keep within their means.

The Government is being lobbied and influenced - some would say controlled - by the few most powerful businesses. Yes, but what can you do about it?

Our grandparents breathed air with 300 parts per million of CO₂, we breathe air with 400 ppm CO₂. We are reaching critical and possibly irreversible levels of CO₂. But we say, there's no point in us doing anything while China are building umpteen new power stations every day.

We cannot go on ignoring our own part in all of this. It is wrong, and our silence makes us complicit.

Remember Nathan.

If everybody rose up and protested, wrote letters, spoke out, change would happen.

Look at the great reformers in times past. When the slave trade was at its height there were a few that spoke against it. They were shouted down and told it is not possible to stop it, the economy will collapse. The shipping companies argued that wouldn't be able to compete unless involved in this, the sugar growers argued that it would make sugar too expensive, no-one would buy it. Always the arguments, as they are now, were about money.

But there were a few people, notably Wilberforce, who would not give up, and my goodness they were hated by the establishment. Things changed. Right prevailed. It couldn't undo what had gone before, and it was many years before governments accepted that a great wrong had been done, and until that was accepted, black and white had no hope of true reconciliation.

The truth is painful, and it is the truth about ourselves that we have to consider. It is not just the things we may do that are wrong, but it is our silence too, our failure to speak out.

When someone looks at us will they see Christian love or apathy. Let's make sure they see love.