

CONRAD HUNTE gave the sermon at the Kensington Temple, London, during the Morning Service broadcast nationwide in the UK on BBC Radio 4, Sunday, 24 February 1991. He was introduced by the Senior Pastor of Kensington Temple, Reverend Wynne Lewis, who said: "It gives me special pleasure to welcome to our pulpit this morning a former Vice Captain of the West Indies cricket team, Conrad Hunte. As one of the great opening batsmen, Conrad has thrilled cricket lovers everywhere, but he has also had a second career as a Christian worker for Christ, peace and reconciliation, which has made him the friend of statesmen and ordinary people on every continent."

I have been asked, "If I had one sermon to preach, what would I say?" That is quite a tall order. There are so many things that burn in my heart about the world we live in. But I think if I had to say just one thing, it would have to be about forgiveness. When Jesus was dying on the Cross, what were his last words? It was this amazing message: "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing."

Jesus was applying to himself his own teaching. He had said to his friends earlier, "I say to you, love your enemy, and pray for those who persecute you." Jesus' life and death was a culmination of a growing awareness in the people of Israel, that forgiveness was central in the experience of God. You will remember that, further back in history, when the people were in exile, the prophet Isaiah had a vision. It was a vision of an innocent servant suffering for mankind. The prophet wrote, "He bore the sins of many and interceded for his transgressors."

Further back still, at the origins of the nation of Israel, there's the story of Joseph and his brothers. They were jealous of Joseph to the point of planning to murder him. They changed their minds and sold him into slavery instead. Years later they met him and expected to be chastised. To their amazement, Joseph kissed all his brothers and wept over them. That is the earliest story of forgiveness in the world's literature.

When I was first asked to preach this sermon I thought of those last words of Jesus. I did not know then I would be preaching in the middle of a war.

These are dark days for all of us, but whatever happens in the next days and weeks, all of us, east and west, will face the awesome task of how to cure the hate and the humiliation which are the legacy of war.

I am a black man. I come from a people who themselves were sold into slavery, and we carry the memory with us. I was born in a tiny village on the Island of Barbados. My father worked on a sugar plantation. My mother was a home-maker. The eldest of nine children, I know what it is to be poor. From kindergarten to the age of twelve, I walked bare-footed to primary school. I walked three miles there and three miles back again, in sunshine and in rain. It was an unhappy childhood. I was often lonely and puzzled by the circumstances of our poverty. Cricket was my way out. It's the national game of the West Indies. It's almost the national religion. Quite early in life I discovered I had a talent for cricket. I set out to shape and sharpen that talent.

My first cricket bat was a coconut frond and my first cricket ball home-made. I took a round piece of cork, tightly wrapped it in a part of my dad's old shirt and bound it with cord. I knitted the cord around the cloth much as a fisherman knits a net. I played first on the beach and on the dusty patches of any open ground in our village. I ate, lived, dreamed and practised cricket to become one of the best of the West Indies.

I rose from poverty to plenty, from obscurity to name and fame. Then my complacent world was shaken by events I considered to be unjust.

I was Vice Captain of the world champion West Indies Cricket Team for three years under the late Sir Frank Worrell. I expected to be named Captain after him. Instead Gary Sobers was made Captain. I was hurt and angry. I was bitter. For six long weeks I walked around under a dark cloud. Then the sun broke through. I mustered the courage to ask Sobers to forgive me for my bitterness against him. That year, 1965, against the Australians I gave my best performance to date. My action also helped to strengthen the unity built into our team by our previous captain. We beat Australia for the first time in competitions between our two countries, and my apology

cemented a relationship between Gary Sobers and me that is precious to this day.

Some years later I was part of an inter-racial group on a visit to South Africa. On a journey from Johannesburg to Cape Town, I found myself with another black colleague in a back room - the servants' quarters - of a hotel. The other twelve white friends were in decent accommodation in the front of the hotel.

As my friend and I prayed, giving thanks for safety during the day and for shelter during the night, such as it was, I wept and shook with rage at the injustice of our situation. Then God spoke to me. He said, "Why are you crying? I promised you, did I not, that on this visit to South Africa I would teach you to know and understand the suffering servant of God?" My tears stopped immediately.

It flashed across my mind's eye the whole picture of what I was experiencing. During the day, we were all comrades in a common task to bring healing where there might be hurts. At night, we two black ones alone became non-persons, not worthy of care and cleanliness. In that back room the toilet was filthy, the bath was closed. There was candle light, not electric light. The walls were cold and bare. The sheets and the blankets were torn. That is the life of the poor everywhere. They face such shocks daily. They are forced to turn to God for healing, or away from him in despair. Where would I turn?

Then I saw the privileged of every race, colour and class. There was a vast gulf between the poor and the privileged that no human agency could bridge. Only the outstretched arms of Christ could bridge that gulf, and God was asking me to stand with him in the breach. I faced the choice to turn to him or turn aside to man's remedies. I forgave the members of the white government that had stripped me of my dignity and self-hood. I embraced the poor and the privileged of every land.

Although I knew I would risk the ridicule and misunderstanding of my friends, and the continuous scorn and emotional hurts of my foes, I chose

to be a reconciler. No longer would I instinctively take the side of the poor against the rich, or the black against the white. I became free to choose what was right in every situation.

Through these experiences I have learned that in every broken relationship it is the injured party who must take the first step to rebuild the bridges.

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Forgiveness unlocks the past and reveals a path to the future. Those who will not forgive condemn themselves to live in despair. Forgiveness makes it possible to hope again. It's a lesson that's essential for the world's survival. Individuals and nations can make mistakes that wrong others. The wrongdoer can forget he did wrong. The person or nation wronged does not forget. The story is handed down from generation to generation.

Yet the cycle of hate and revenge can be broken. "Father, forgive them: for they do not know what they are doing."

On that lonely hill of Calvary the innocent servant of God took upon himself the world's injustice and prayed to the Father that we might be forgiven. Beside him two criminals hung. One of them cursed him. One repented and received the promise of paradise. When forgiveness meets repentance - forgiveness by the injured party, repentance by the one who caused the injury - something new and creative comes into being, an energy we have scarcely begun to tap.

But, if we are ever to resolve our conflicts, personal, national and international, if we are ever to put right the wrongs that lead to war, we will need to draw on that power. There is within every human heart the spirit of truth to show us the way. Amen.