

Belfast Telegraph - IPR Website of the Year

Search Site

Advanced Search

- Loadzajobs.co.uk
- Propertynews.com
- Sunday Life**
 - Home
 - News**
 - Sport
 - Features
 - Archive
- Other Services**
 - Jobs
 - Training
 - Dating
 - Gaming
 - Reader Offers
- Other Titles**
 - Belfast Telegraph
 - Ireland's Saturday Night

Sunday Life Your Life, Your Paper

Belfast Telegraph ONLINE ARCHIVE

- Search from over 400,000 articles
- Dating back to 1995

[Home](#) > [News](#)

News

Alan McBride: Forgiveness isn't about forgetting

Sunday, October 28, 2007

JESUS Christ said that "a man should forgive his brother up to 70 times seven times". (Depending, of course, on which translation of the Bible you read, but in any case a lot of times.)

- Email Article
- Print Version
- Search

But what if your 'brother' shot your son in the head, or cut your daughter up into several pieces and dumped her dismembered body in a wheelie bin?

What if he left a bomb under your daddy's car and blew him to bits? What if your 'brother' wasn't your brother at all but some random person who lived up the street, across the park or over the bridge?

What if he was a member of the IRA or UFF and believed that he had the right to take the life of your loved-one in the name of whatever cause he believed in?

Would forgiveness really be possible or even appropriate in such circumstances?

OK, so I accept that Jesus forgave those who crucified him, but what about we mere mortals?

Yes, there were some people during the history of the Troubles who could find it in their hearts to forgive - the late Gordon Wilson and Michael McGoldrick being cases in point - but they were hardly the norm.

Last week, the WAVE Trauma Centre (an organisation working with victims and survivors of the Troubles) held its first conference on the issue of forgiveness.

The question addressed by conference delegates, all of whom had been directly affected by the violence was, 'Is forgiveness necessary for reconciliation to take place, or a step too far?'

As you would expect at a conference of this nature, a definitive answer to the question was not found, but the keynote address by Donald Shriver and the workshops that followed provided plenty of food for thought.

In particular, I was struck by the comments of one lady who had lost her son. She claimed that she could never under any circumstances forgive the people who took his life because she didn't want to send out the message that, 'Hey, you know what, it's OK that you murdered my son - it doesn't matter because I forgive you.'

Herein lies a big problem with forgiveness: if we equate forgiveness with forgetting that a wrong has been committed in the first place, then forgiveness flies in the face of justice.

Another problem is to suggest that to forgive someone must mean that we have warm feelings toward them. If this were the case, I doubt that anyone would ever be able to forgive.

So, what then does it mean to forgive?

For me, forgiveness is more about actions and less tied up with feelings - it's not about forgetting what happened in the past, but learning to live with it in ways which are not destructive to you personally.

In this regard, I wonder if forgiveness is even the right word and suggest that perhaps the term 'letting go' might be more appropriate.

For me, this involves the absence of revenge and an ability to move on with one's life, not to be held back any longer by events of the past - not because they are not important, or that all of a sudden you have developed a severe case of amnesia, but because you accept that life goes on.

Unfortunately, Northern Ireland is littered with individuals who simply have been unable to move on after the murder of their loved-one.

A while ago, I met a woman in a supermarket who had lost her husband in the 1970s. She said that she "was just waiting to die". I know many more like her.

Forgiveness, as it is commonly misunderstood, wouldn't mean an awful lot to people like this and it would be totally unfair for society to dump the expectation to forgive on the shoulders of those who have already suffered so much.

ADVERTISEMENTS

ADVERTISEMENTS

On the contrary, I believe that society should do whatever it can in helping victims and survivors move on with their lives by helping to create the right conditions for them to heal.

For example, by putting in place mechanisms that effectively deal with the past and through the further facilitation and development of self-help groups.

Having a stable political environment will also add considerable influence to the healing process.

Who knows, in this scenario, although forgiveness may still remain a step too far for many victims and survivors, at least they will understand that they have not been forgotten about.

While this, of itself, will not bring about personal healing, surely for a society to acknowledge and remember those who have suffered is an important part of building peace in that society and ultimately in that society being reconciled.

More articles in News

- [No 1 just for kicks](#)
- ['Inept council thwarted city stadium'](#)
- [Woolmer test inconclusive](#)
- [Council to pay half of annual NILGA fee](#)
- [MP fears gagging of whistleblower](#)

ADVERTISEMENTS