



15 forgiveness

concluding reflections

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introducing the series

This paper is the last in a series of 15 papers to be produced as part of the *Embodying Forgiveness* project run by the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland (CCCI). Drawing on a broad range of contributors, from a broad range of backgrounds, the papers have aimed to explore the meaning of forgiveness in the Bible and in different Christian traditions, and to ask about the implications of the practice of forgiveness for our society. We have not insisted on a particular definition or understanding of forgiveness among those who contributed to the series. Rather, our hope is that through this series of papers we will come to a fuller and more authentic understanding of forgiveness and its implications for church and society.

CCCI: 2003

what have we learned?

After fourteen papers and two conferences, what have we learned? From the beginning of the *Embodying Forgiveness* project, we chose not to impose any particular model of forgiveness on our writers and speakers, allowing them the freedom to explore forgiveness from their own perspective and enabling them to have room to bring their own insights. It might then seem appropriate to some people that in the final paper of the series we should name, identify or construct the 'best' or the 'evangelical' model of forgiveness. It might *seem* appropriate – but it is not. For if the papers in this series and the conferences that have accompanied them tell us anything, they tell us that forgiveness is too important to be reduced to a 'model' or a 'process.' No model of forgiveness, no Christian tradition and no human philosophy can possibly capture the wealth of meaning and depth of richness inherent in forgiveness. A diversity of approaches helps us to see many aspects that our own tradition or approach ignores or downplays. This does not, of course, mean that every approach to forgiveness is equally valid to every other approach. It is a simple recognition that no single tradition or approach has a monopoly on forgiveness.

So, what have we learned? We have primarily learned two very important things: firstly, that the church has an embarrassment of riches in the resources it has to offer, and secondly, that forgiveness never stands alone, it is always “forgiveness and...”

an embarrassment of riches

The riches of the church are to be found both in scripture (explored in papers 2&3) and in the breadth of Christian tradition (explored in papers 4-7).

When we speak of forgiveness, we often start with the New Testament – not surprising given that it is the New Testament that confronts us with both the teaching and example of Jesus Christ, with his radical calling to each of our lives in both word and deed, often shocking and challenging us with the seemingly impossible. Yet often we not only start with the New Testament, we finish with it too. In doing so, perhaps we demonstrate the extent to which we have unconsciously imbibed the assumption that the God of the Old Testament is somehow less forgiving, and even that the Old Testament is somehow less important than the New Testament. In his paper, *Forgiveness in the Old Testament*, David Montgomery challenges us to return to this part of the Bible and find again the God who “doesn’t just show mercy or overlook wrongdoing at certain times, but who actually initiates a cosmic plan of forgiveness and salvation.”

While the *fullness* of the Christian understanding of forgiveness is only made known in the New Testament, it cannot be understood without the witness of the Old Testament – a point made particularly clear in the book of Hebrews. Moreover, whatever the New Testament adds to our understanding of the nature of forgiveness between people, it does so on the foundation of the Old Testament witness to the “rooting of forgiveness in the character of God.” These ideas were reiterated in paper 9, *Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Justice*, where it was shown that there is not as neat a dichotomy between Old and New Testament as popular Christianity appears to suggest. The God of the Old Testament is as concerned about forgiveness, mercy, reconciliation and renewed relationship as the God of the New Testament – because it *is* the same God.

In *Forgiveness in the New Testament*, Janet Unsworth gives us a detailed reflection on some of the key passages from the gospels. “Central to the teaching of Jesus,” she suggests, “is the idea that an individual should act

towards another individual in the way that God has acted towards them.” And God, as we know from the Old Testament, is a God who forgives. However, while God's forgiveness is unconditional, it is not undemanding, and thus is not cheap grace. It brings salvation, acceptance and wholeness, but it demands that forgiveness be extended to others without limit. Furthermore, it threatens that those who have been forgiven but remain unforgiving stand under the judgement of God. It could even be added that those who refuse to forgive cannot honestly ask God for forgiveness – for to do so would be a little hypocritical.

Christ stands as the exemplar of Christian forgiveness. The New Testament writers explore the implications of not just his life, but of his death and resurrection for the practice of forgiveness among his followers. Paul in particular connects the death of Christ with the experience of forgiveness, and encourages believers to “forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13). For Paul, the virtue of forgiveness should be a normative aspect of relationships among believers, rather than a rare and surprising occurrence. Christian community, according to Paul, should embody these principles in their day-to-day existence, acting as a witness to those outside of that community that there is a better life.

Different Christian traditions have embodied this biblical instruction in their own teaching and practice in various ways. Two papers in the series looked at this from the familiar perspectives of Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions, but we also tried to move beyond this by introducing perspectives from the Anabaptist and Orthodox traditions, overlooked by, and even unknown to, many within Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. Yet for some, even identifying these four broad strands is a step too far, for it suggests that none of these traditions has spoken the final word on the meaning of Christian forgiveness. Some advocates of a tradition may prefer to think of their own tradition as having indeed spoken the final word on such matters. However, we believe it is possible to assert the strength of one's own tradition without thereby implying that there is nothing to learn from other traditions. It is also possible to value them all without holding them all to be equally valid. Each of these major traditions mediates particular aspects or emphases of the Christian understanding of forgiveness. An approach to forgiveness that locates it solely within one tradition has not begun to grasp the breadth and depth of forgiveness.

In his paper on *Forgiveness in the Protestant Tradition*, Stephen Graham offers “a number of ‘snapshots’ of Protestant thinking on the issue of forgiveness and the cross,” recognising that there is no single model to call on, even within Protestantism. He notes the important link in the Protestant tradition between the theology of the atonement and the theology of forgiveness and explores this through the work of a number of representative Protestant thinkers. Yet in the end he concludes that “it almost seems wrong to have a conclusion” because even within the Protestant tradition “no single theory or model can possibly incorporate everything of the richness of these terms and ideas.” This is an important insight, not only for those in other traditions trying to understand the Protestant tradition, but also for Protestants themselves. On the one hand, it challenges the temptation to reject the complexity of the tradition in favour of the assertion of only one aspect of it; on the other hand, it also challenges those who would want to leave behind some of the more ‘traditional’ or familiar models since it stands as a reminder that just because a particular view makes us uncomfortable it is not a good enough reason to reject it, for it too is part of the richness of the wider tradition.

Stephen also emphasises the “personal, experiential and practical” focus of forgiveness – something he explores through the life and writings of

John Wesley and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This is a welcome corrective to a tradition that, in its more conservative or evangelical forms, struggles to move concepts like forgiveness beyond “the text books, confessions of faith or denominational lecture halls.”

Eoin de Bhaldraithe explores the Catholic tradition in the light of relationships between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, and with reference to the Catholic church’s approach to other Christian traditions and other faiths. Starting from the position that our forgiveness by God requires us to forgive those who have sinned against us, he takes the argument a stage further suggesting that “Christians cannot genuinely offer forgiveness without being convinced that they themselves have also sinned.” We are always more comfortable being the one sinned against, the one who offers forgiveness, rather than the sinner in need of forgiveness. To confront one’s own sin and the sin of one’s community is a task for leaders, for prophets, and ultimately for us all. But such is necessary because our sins “offend God and we need God’s forgiveness above all.” To view repentance and forgiveness as things which *we* need, rather than simply things *they* need is an important understanding of both the gospel and the human condition, worthy of stress.

This is a demanding standard for Catholic and Protestant. Yet even when we fail to meet the standard, something important can be happening, for “even with shallow repentance and while still partly in our blindness, we believe that God will come to heal us.”

In *Forgiveness in the Anabaptist Tradition*, Megan Halteman introduces us to a way of thinking about forgiveness that has rarely been represented in our community. Megan focuses, in particular, on the relationship between forgiveness and church discipline. The Anabaptist emphasis on the church as a community of believers ensures that forgiveness is never reduced to an individual transaction between the believer and God. Forgiveness is also relevant for inter-personal relationships within the community of believers, in many ways marking what that community is about. If relationships within the community are to be sustained or, where broken, restored, forgiveness is vital. But church discipline aimed not at exclusion, but at restoration, is also vital if forgiveness is to achieve the goal of restored relationships. Forgiveness, then, is neither “easy and endless” nor “harsh and punitive.”

While Megan’s paper focuses on forgiveness within the Christian community, there are clear implications for the wider community. There are at least three principles just as applicable in this wider context. The first is that forgiveness only makes sense in the context of relationship. If we want to see a forgiving and forgiven community, we need to foster the strength of that community. The second principle is that forgiveness cannot be separated from accountability. Declarations of forgiveness and acts of reconciliation that fail to address why there is a need for reconciliation and forgiveness in the first place will not do. Forgiveness should bring to light the need for it in the first place, showing just what it is that is to be forgiven. The third principle is that discipline and accountability have as their aim the restoration of the community. There is a “cheap forgiveness” that demands no accountability, but there can also be a “cheap discipline” that offers no restoration. Discipline and accountability should not be treated as ends in themselves – they are means to the end of restored relationship.

Geoffrey Ready represents another voice rarely heard in Northern Ireland – that of Orthodoxy. In the Orthodox tradition, “sin is not conceived primarily as legal transgression, as a trespassing of rules, but as breaking of relationship. Above all it is a failure to love.” Through Christ, though,

human beings are once more enabled to grow “towards the divine life of selfless love.” Yet because growing into this love is a gradual process, so too learning to be forgiving is a gradual process. Yet, however difficult a struggle, “there is no heart too cold or unforgiving that cannot be transfigured by God if we turn to him with singleness of purpose.” In a real sense, no human being is beyond the power of God’s grace to change.

The practice of forgiveness is intimately bound up with the life and worship of the church through the Eucharist and through “the Sunday of forgiveness,” when the worshippers bow down and ask forgiveness of one another. As they do so, they bear witness to the truth that “the failure to love...is the betrayal of all human beings.” But they also bear witness to the breaking in of the Kingdom into a fallen world, testifying also to a better way of life for all humanity.

In paper 14, *Forgiveness and Popular Culture*, Gareth Higgins encourages us to look for “the creative signposts that may help us consider forgiveness.” While the scriptures and the tradition of the church will remain our primary source of understanding, this is not to say that there is no wisdom to be found elsewhere, as Gareth reminds us, with the words of David Dark, that “there is not a secular atom in the universe.” Through his study of three films, Gareth reminds us that among the dross are many gems: “the rich messages of art may take a little bit of digging to find but they are there if we are attentive.”

In a Christian culture that is often suspicious of the arts, Gareth’s affirmation of and engagement with human creativity is a challenge Christians need to hear. On the other hand, in many respects our Christian culture has lost its suspicion of the arts, and with this has lost its capacity to critically engage the arts from a Christian perspective: “*If we are attentive, we will find spiritual truth in these unexpected places.*”

forgiveness and...

Often, our temptation is to try and make simple what is complex in order to make more comprehensible what is important. There is little harm, and considerable value, in that, provided we remember that there is then a challenge to reconnect that which we have separated. Paper 1 and papers 8-13 aimed to demonstrate some of the complexity of forgiveness by bringing it into relationship with a raft of other – equally complex – ideas.

Gillian McChesney and Alwyn Thomson introduce us, in *Forgiveness and Psychology*, to the increasingly important role that forgiveness has played in psychology in recent years. Long neglected precisely because of its religious dimensions, psychologists, both religious and secular, have begun to see the power of forgiveness as a psychological health intervention. By identifying the stages that a person goes through in the process of forgiving, psychologists have attempted to “devise a model for the forgiveness process that can help people to forgive.”

The psychological models, though, are largely therapeutic in their intent – concerned with addressing the needs of the one forgiving. While some Christian thinkers have welcomed this apparent coming together of psychological and Christian models of forgiveness, others are more concerned. Greg Jones fears that a “therapeutic mindset” has become dominant within Christian practice and, as a result, Christians have too easily assumed a continuity between psychological and Christian approaches that is dubious. “The emphasis on individual autonomy and the importance of technique have undermined forgiveness, since the primary focus of true forgiveness is on community rather than the individual, and

on character rather than technique.” Consequently, while the recognition of the importance of forgiveness is welcome, Christians need to ensure that the integrity of the Christian view of forgiveness is maintained.

In Paper 8, *Forgiveness, Truth and Memory*, Alwyn Thomson explores the complexities of truth. Identifying three kinds of truth – factual, interpretive and functional truth – he asks if it is possible for people or communities in conflict to find a shared sense of truth. He concludes, “Discerning the truth is no easy task and it is highly unlikely that any shared understanding of the truth will emerge in situations of conflict or disagreement... However, the difficulty of finding the truth should not lead us to abandon the pursuit, but rather to pursue the truth with humility and circumspection, together with those whose truth is other than our own.” Equally challenging is the complexity of memory. Identifying the intimate relationship between individual and communal memory, the challenge is to find a way of dealing with both. For some people, remembering has become an obsession – such is apparent in Israel, Bosnia and Northern Ireland. Others have chosen a collective amnesia – such as the people of Mozambique. Others still have tried to provide formal means by which the past can be addressed – something we have seen in the recent history of South Africa with its Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Yet telling the truth and addressing the past will not inevitably produce forgiveness. It might actually even make forgiveness more difficult: “The best we can say is that telling the truth and knowing the truth may help create the conditions under which forgiveness becomes possible.” And since the truth of the past is often a “patchwork quilt” rather than a seamless robe, perhaps our greatest hope might be for a “patchwork quilt” of forgiveness.

In paper 9 Geraldine Smyth and Stephen Graham look at the interrelationship between *Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Justice*. Geraldine suggests that forgiveness is located within the “larger soteriological model of reconciliation.” However, the relationship between the two is not to be understood in a mechanical way, as though forgiveness were a mere “staging post” to reconciliation or reconciliation an inevitable outcome of forgiveness. Forgiveness brings with it “the invitation to a reconciled life in community.” This is so because forgiveness and reconciliation are, ultimately, relational concepts, something that Western Christianity has sometimes lost sight of in its emphasis on judicial models of theology.

Stephen makes a similar point in his discussion of the relationship between forgiveness and justice. Discussing the Western emphasis on retribution as the primary category of justice, he points to the wider biblical tradition which, while asserting the retributive dimensions of justice, is not exhausted by them. In fact, Stephen argues, “the restorative framework is wider in scope and helps to take into account elements of the biblical idea that retributive justice does not.”

Paper 10 confronts us with the difficult and controversial question of the relationship between *Forgiveness, Guilt and Repentance*. Stephen Graham revisits some of the gospel texts arguing that while repentance remains a central part of Jesus’ ministry, “it certainly seems difficult to build a biblical case that a Christian should only forgive those who repent.” Furthermore, as Stephen points out, while we are often discussing the need for *others* to repent before we will forgive them, the New Testament more often speaks of *our* need for repentance and forgiveness. If we fall into the trap of focusing on someone else’s need to repent and seek forgiveness rather than our own need, then “we miss the point of the gospel message.”

Repentance, however, remains crucial. It is central to the message of Jesus. Bonhoeffer believed that it was the preaching of repentance that saves forgiveness from being what he called “cheap grace.” Its very importance means that we cannot reduce it merely to the role of a test of a person’s worthiness to be forgiven. Nor can we say that once forgiven there is no need for repentance, a point often overlooked or even contradicted in some Christian circles either explicitly by word or implicitly by action. “We are called to live lives of forgiveness, but also to live lives of repentance.” This we do well to remember.

Janet Morris’s paper (paper 11) looks at the nature of individual forgiveness. Here Janet summarises many of the key themes explored in earlier papers regarding forgiveness and explores how these might be worked out in practice in cases of conflict between individuals. Janet links forgiveness with discipleship – a process of learning which “enables us to be realistic about the possibilities and limits of forgiveness.” Through exploring some scenarios of broken friendships, Janet identifies some of the possibilities and challenges of forgiveness. Forgiveness takes time – time to deal with the hurt and the shock of the damage that has been done. Forgiveness demands decisions – choices we have to make to forgive and to take the risks that accompany forgiveness. Forgiveness requires that we deal with memories – we cannot forget, we cannot undo the past, but there is good remembering and there is bad remembering.

Forgiveness, Janet concludes, cannot be demanded or coerced. Forgiveness is a choice, a journey, and a grace. Forgiveness holds out the possibility of healing, of new life, and of growth; but it is not without risk, for it makes us vulnerable – opening us up to further rejection and hurt.

Paper 12 looks at *Forgiveness and the Church*. Writing from the context of her own experience as a minister in the Presbyterian church – and, in particular her experience as a woman in that role – Lesley Carroll suggests that “forgiving others can be neither easily nor lightly done, not even within the ‘community’ of the church where we are all one in Christ.” *If* churches are genuinely to be able to offer hope and healing, they need to find ways to become places in which the hurts of men and women can be heard, and forgiveness practiced and known. Such is a great challenge to most churches as they exist in their present structures and practices.

At the heart of Lesley’s argument is her conviction that a church that fails to practice forgiveness not only damages its relationship with God, but also damages its relationship with the community to which it witnesses. Three challenges flow from this: the challenge of “building honest, open accountable community;” the challenge making the church a place where forgiveness is practiced and known and then carried by the Christian community into the wider world; and the challenge of building relationships with those “claiming to be church yet who are somewhat different from ourselves.” Her paper calls the church to embody forgiveness at all the levels of relationship, for the good of the individuals, the church community and of the wider society in which the church operates.

In paper 13 Haddon Willmer reflects on the relationship between *Forgiveness and Politics*. Haddon starts by acknowledging the seeming dissonance between these two concepts and the objections from both religious and political perspectives to the possibility of forgiveness in politics. He attempts to address these concerns through an exploration of the relationship between politics and war. War, he argues, squeezes out forgiveness. In war we have an enemy. We are prepared to kill that enemy. What forgiveness there is in war, is a distorted forgiveness of ourselves for the wrongs our side may commit. However, while politics may, at times, be *like* war, politics is *not* war.

Politics, argues Haddon, “has forgiving as a key ingredient. Politics happens when forgiving is not squeezed out.” In politics, difference, friction, and conflict are channelled into the making of community. In politics, power is controlled, questioned – even shared. In politics there is space for “second thoughts, second chances, second parties.” This, though, is not inevitable. “The distinction between war and politics is real and significant but it is not a simple contrast of opposites, where one has nothing in common with the other. The distinction is achieved by the injection of forgiveness.”

Of the rich and varied contributions to the subject of forgiveness to be found in the forgiveness papers, these are the two broad themes that I have discerned. Both are challenging. Forgiveness is complicated and difficult. Forgiveness is about relationships – relationships with God, relationships with one another as individuals, as church, as political community. Our relationships are not simple – why should we expect forgiveness in those relationships to be simple? But there is no need to fear the challenge of forgiveness because of the wealth of the churches’ resources for talking of and practicing forgiveness. The diversity in the Christian tradition is not a failing or a weakness – it is its great strength.

the railway man

I want to close with a story. At one point our hope had been that this project might be accompanied by a book that would tell stories of men and women and their encounters with forgiveness – as forgivers, forgiven, unable to forgive, unforgiven. Sadly, that was not possible. Instead, I want to reflect on the story of Eric Lomax, *The Railway Man*.

Eric Lomax was born in Edinburgh in 1919. Eric’s great passion was trains, and it was as he watched trains at Dalry Road station that he met Jack Ewart of Charlotte Baptist Chapel. Within weeks Eric had joined the chapel. “Looking back, I can recall little except an extraordinary arrogance – the members of the chapel were better than everybody else, they were saved, they were exempt from normal rules and they were certainly above compassion.” Eric got a job with Post Office Telephones, where he learned about the workings and maintenance of radios, but before long, with war looming, he joined the Royal Corps of Signals.

In March 1941, Eric assembled with his battalion to begin their journey to India. Before he did, he got engaged to a young woman from the Chapel. As they marched out, “my mother stood there in the crowd, and I suppose she waved. She looked distraught. I never saw her again.” From India, Eric was posted to Malaya. As British forces began to retreat before the advancing Japanese, he found himself in Singapore. Shortly after, he found himself a prisoner of war.

Sometime later, Eric was sent to a prisoner of war camp at Ban Pong to work with thousands of others on the building of the infamous Burma railway. In February 1943, he was among a group of prisoners sent to Kanburi. There, with the help of a small group of fellow prisoners, Eric managed to construct a rudimentary radio set, which enabled the prisoners to keep in touch with events in the outside world. Eric had also managed to draw a map. In August 1943, the Japanese found the radio.

The prisoners were taken to another camp where they were forced to stand in the sweltering sun for twelve hours. As dusk fell, each man in turn was called forward. A group of Japanese soldiers carrying pick-helves beat each man senseless. “I went down with a blow that shook every bone, and which released a sensation of scorching liquid pain which seared through my entire body...I could identify the periodic stamping of

boots on the back of my head, crunching my face into the gravel; the crack of bones snapping; my teeth breaking... It went on and on. I could not measure the time it took... I do know that I thought I was dying. I have never forgotten, from that moment onwards, crying out 'Jesus,' crying out for help, the utter despair of helplessness."

They spent the next day lying, bloodied and beaten, on the ground until the following morning they were taken off to be "patched up." The Dutch doctor, himself a POW, had counted the blows in an effort to gauge the state of his patients when they finally arrived. He had counted nine hundred blows on the five men before the beating stopped.

Two weeks later, the *Kempetai* – Japan's equivalent of the Gestapo – took the five men to their local headquarters. There Eric was interrogated by two men – one an NCO; the other an interpreter. "Lomax, you will be killed shortly," the interpreter said. It was the interpreter who most got to Eric: "I hated him more and more... I would have killed him." After some days of interrogation his captors produced his map: "Lomax, you will tell us why you made the map." He was taken to a room with a bath full of water where his head was repeatedly held under. After this he was taken outside, tied to a bench and alternately beaten and half-drowned.

Moved, again, to Bangkok, the men were sentenced to five years imprisonment for "anti-Japanese activities." From there they were moved to Singapore and to the infamous Outram Road Gaol. This was a place "in which the living were turned into ghosts, starved, diseased creatures wasted down to their skeletal outlines." Eric survived by faking a degree of illness that got him transferred to an ordinary POW camp. It was there in August 1945 that he learned of the Japanese surrender and the end of the war.

Eric returned to Edinburgh after a cursory medical inspection. After inhabiting the world of the camps, he was now expected to inhabit the world of every day. Unable to talk of his experiences and suffering recurring nightmares, he married his fiancé but the gulf between them could not be bridged. Burning with anger, Eric imagined himself doing violence to his interrogators and the "hateful little interpreter."

Estranged from family, from the Chapel and from his wife, he tried to rebuild a normal life. His marriage eventually fell apart in 1981. For the most part, he was able to crowd out the past by focusing on the routines of his professional life. Yet despite an unwillingness to face the past, it could not be denied. Partly, he wanted to find out what had really happened, but most of all he wanted revenge. In particular, he wanted to find the interpreter who "stood in for all the worst horrors."

Eric began to investigate the past even as he began to form a new relationship with Patti. It was she who knew that Eric needed help if he was ever to come to terms with the past he was now beginning to piece together – and if they were ever to grow in their relationship. Eventually they found a source of help and for the first time ever Eric was able to talk about his wartime experience. Alongside that, however, he was still pursuing the people responsible with "the idea of revenge still very much alive."

And so, as a result of his enquiries, Eric found out about Nagase Takashi, a Japanese interpreter – *his* interpreter. Nagase, it seems, had spent his life trying to make up for the Japanese treatment of POWs, dedicating his life to the memory of those who died on the Burma railway. "In my moment of vengeful glory, triumph was already complicated by other feelings. This strange man was obviously drawn on in his work by memories of my

own cries of distress and fear.” And yet, despite this, Eric resisted the notion that it was time to forgive: “I was not inclined to forgive, not yet, and probably never.”

A correspondence began, first between Nagase and Patti and then directly between Nagase and Eric. As Eric read Nagase’s first letter to Patti, he writes: “I lost whatever hard armour I had wrapped around me and began to think the unthinkable: that I could meet Nagase face-to-face in simple good will. Forgiveness became more than an abstract idea: it was now a real possibility.” And so over the next month the arrangements were put in place for that face-to-face meeting to happen.

They met in Bangkok and travelled to the places in which Eric had been held captive, before travelling on to Japan. “I still needed to consider the matter of forgiveness, since it so concerned him. Assuming that our meeting, in itself, constituted forgiveness, or that the passage of time had made it irrelevant, seemed too easy; once someone raises forgiveness to such a pitch of importance you become judicial... I could no longer see the point of punishing Nagase by a refusal to reach out and forgive him. What mattered was our relations in the here and now, his obvious regret for what he had done and our mutual need to give our encounter some meaning beyond that of the emptiness of cruelty. It was surely worth salvaging as much as we could from the damage to both our lives.” Eric wrote a letter for Nagase and read it to him. “I told him that while I could not forget what happened in Kanburi in 1943, I assured him of my total forgiveness.”

As Eric flew out of Japan, he reflected on what his visit had accomplished. “Meeting Nagase had turned him from a hated enemy, with whom friendship would have been unthinkable, into a blood brother. If I’d never been able to put a name to the face of one of the men who had harmed me, and never discovered that behind that face there was also a damaged life, the nightmares would always have come from a past without meaning. And I had proved for myself that remembering is not enough, if it simply hardens hate.”

I have recounted the story of Eric Lomax at length because it is the most powerful story of forgiveness that I know. It is powerful for two reasons. Firstly, because it shows how a Christian community lacked the capacity to demonstrate compassion or forgiveness towards Eric Lomax, both before the war and on his return as a burdened and scarred person. Secondly, because it demonstrates both the complexity and simplicity of forgiveness. The former lesson stands as both a rebuke and a challenge; the latter as a challenge and a source of hope.

Eric Lomax, *The Railway Man* (Vintage: London, 1996).

recommended reading

L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1995).

websites

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 Forgiveness and the Individual, by Janet Morris
 Forgiveness and the Church, by Lesley Carroll
 Forgiveness and Politics, by Haddon Willmer
 Forgiveness and Popular Culture, by Gareth Higgins

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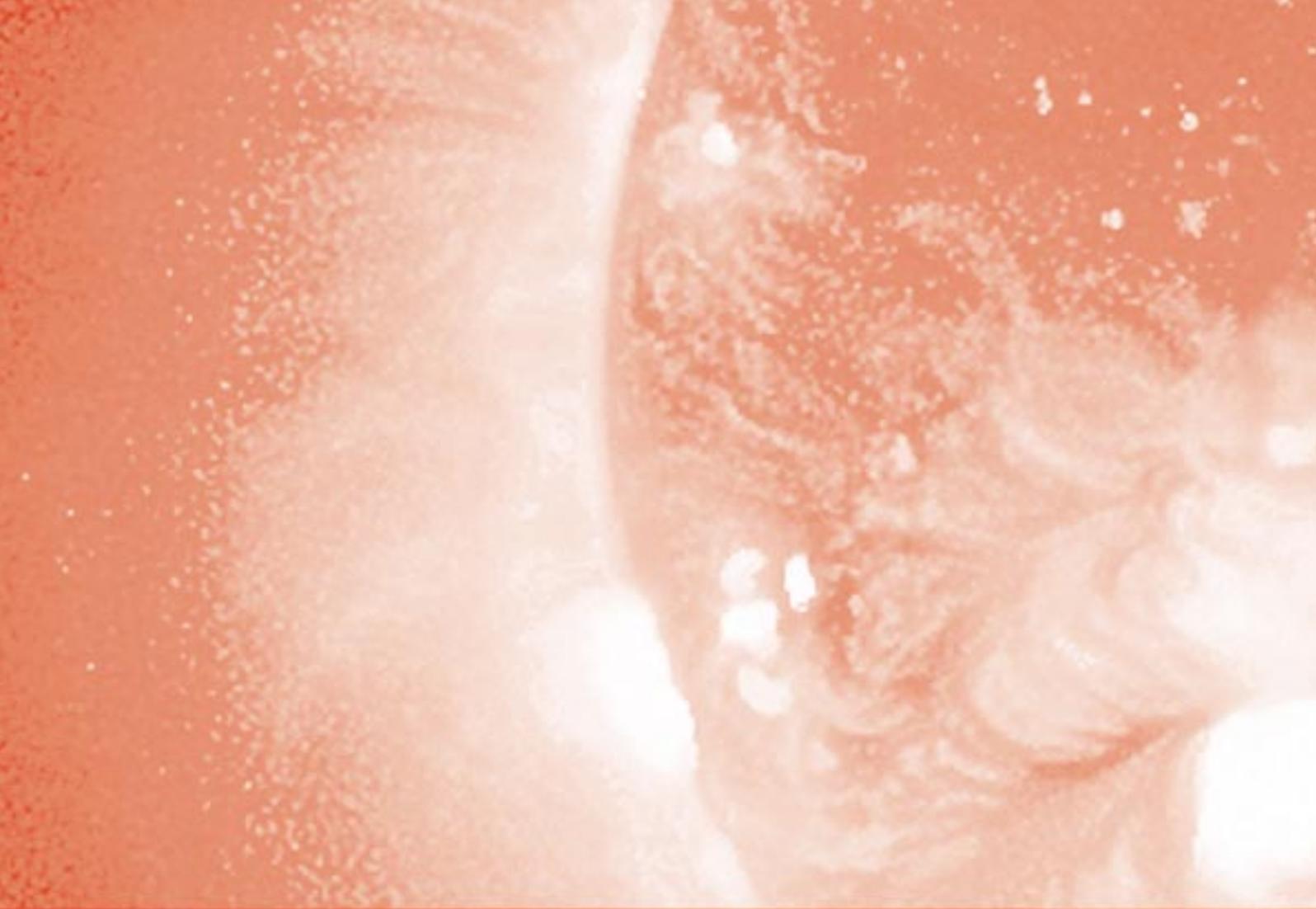
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