

## **A Thought for the Week: Reflecting on Forgiveness**

The recent media coverage of the anniversary of VJ Day reminded me of Doug. He was a Reader at Elstow Abbey in Bedford where I served my Curacy. Doug was stooped and frail and needed an arm to guide him safely down the aisle at the start and end of every service. I have no idea how old he was, but I expect he looked older than his years. Doug had been a prisoner of war in Changi, one of the most notorious Japanese POW camps. A great many of his friends had died in captivity and for those like Doug who survived, the nightmares returned to haunt their sleep, even in old age. Each August, the Abbey would host the annual service of FEPOW (Far East Prisoners of War Association) and the church would fill with gentlemen like Doug and their families. To hear Doug preach on these occasions was a privilege. To listen to a man who had suffered in such a cruel and inhumane way at the hands of his captors, speak with gentleness of love, forgiveness and reconciliation was a revelation.

On one such occasion, Doug told a very moving story of how, after their release, the train that he and other ex-prisoners were travelling on stopped by chance next to a train carrying badly wounded Japanese soldiers. Doug and the others left their train and went to minister to the injured Japanese soldiers, the very same men who for years had treated them so cruelly. The text for Doug's sermon that particular day came from St Matthew's Gospel. It was *'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'*

When it comes to forgiveness Jesus set the benchmark very high. Forgiveness and the need to forgive was at the heart of his teaching. And yet, so often we struggle with it. Forgiveness is such an easy word to say, but not such an easy state to achieve. If by any chance you find yourself struggling to bring yourself to forgive someone who has hurt you or to love someone who you find impossible to get along with, then I hope Doug's story might inspire you to at least have another try.

Martin Luther King once said that forgiveness is that experience which allows the Holy Spirit to return to us and enliven us again. If we want to be enlivened then we need to pray for the vision to be able, like Doug, to turn the hurts in *our* past into the stepping stones into the future and for God's healing and reconciling presence to work in us and through us.

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