

Bearing Grudges

Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-35

The human reality of grudge-holding is as old as time. The psychology around envy and resentment, simmering barely beneath the surface is an all-too recognisable feature of human life.

The late Sir Edward Heath, former Prime Minister never forgave Margaret Thatcher for ousting him from the Conservative Party Leadership in the 1970s. The bitterness of his loss of the leadership was deep and reflected in almost ceaseless, and sometimes savage, attacks on her policies that bear all the hallmarks of an abiding grudge. Heath became known amongst political and media chattering classes, rather unkindly, as 'The Incredible Sulk'.

Nearly all of us have held a grudge. It can be relatively harmless and secret or deep, long-lasting and all-consuming – and everything in between. But why do we hold them? And what purpose is achieved in sustaining them? Most commonly a grudge is held by one person against another, but this is not invariably the case. There are grudges held in the world of sport between teams; grudges between universities and academic disciplines; grudges in the world of arts where rivalries can be explosive.

One of the most important consequences of grudge-holding is that those who hold grudges usually suffer the most. To bear a serious grudge is a form of pain which may never go away.

The most bitter people I know are the ones who are bearing a grudge. That sense of wrong from some time in the past and which cannot be forgiven or let go. The greatest wish is that something bad will happen to the subject of the grudge. But even then, that would not be enough.

There are more than a few elements of grudge in the United States between Republicans and Democrats, with Donald Trump showing every possible hallmark of grudge you could imagine. In the febrile politics of the Middle East, does the bitter holding of grudge lie at the root of Palestinian and Israeli conflict? As it might also lie at the root of old Catholic and Protestant tensions in Ulster. As it might also lie at the root of the actions of thuggish, black-masked gangs causing disruption in Dover and other parts of the south of England, whose twisted concept of what they claim is patriotism is directed not only against refugees and immigrants, but the RNLI, the Police, and anyone who dares challenge them.

Carrying grudges is bad for us. Not only are they bad for us, and those around us, but they also separate us from God. Carrying a grudge isn't simply an issue about grievance, it is an issue about forgiveness, and about being able to move around, or move on.

The story of Joseph in the Old Testament is about so much more than his amazing technicolour dream-coat. It shimmers with resentment and envy, of arrogant hubris and lust. It has all the potential of endless grudges to be held, but moves on to something much harder, and more deeply faith-full: forgiveness with mercy and reconciliation and a closer walk with God.

We have the twelve sons of Jacob, jockeying for position with their father. We have the favoured son, Joseph, chosen as a favourite and given a remarkable coat to make him stand-out. We have the plot to kill Joseph transmitted in his being sold into slavery by his siblings, but with his father Jacob being told his boy had been killed. We have Joseph's dangerous time in the court of the Egyptian pharaoh. We have the death of Jacob, and famine in the land of Israel. We have the brothers realising their only hope for food is in Egypt, but fearing that Joseph will bear a grudge and do them harm, concocting a story that couches their own desire for forgiveness as a "command" from Jacob to forgive his transgressing brothers who had done evil to him. Are they

really penitent, or simply seeking assurance Joseph won't punish them for their guilty actions? The brothers know that the only one who can break the cycle of guilt and grudge and vengeance is the wronged party, Joseph, the one whom they most feared.

Instead of harbouring a grudge, Joseph not finds a way to forgive. He provides sustenance and hope for them, as well as restoration. He has been granted the dream of God's bigger agenda - saving the continually broken children of Israel, and through them, a wider world. If Joseph had reneged on his understanding of God's bigger picture of mercy and forgiveness, if Joseph had harboured a grudge and took his revenge, God's desire for mercy would have been thwarted at that moment. Until another way was found. Joseph will not bring judgement on his brothers. He will provide for them, so that God's chosen people will survive *through* them. Joseph clearly acknowledged the evil his brothers did to him. How does he find the faith way of handling forgiveness? When it is too big for him to handle, when it is too hard for him to deal with by himself, he handed over the response to God.

This is a story not about a grudge born, but a mercy manifested, and forgiveness found. Not sweeping the pain or hurt under the carpet, but recognising that when we struggle to forgive, or maybe can't yet forgive, God can. Not to help out the wrongdoer, but to help out us. Does that chime in for any of you? That grudge, that grievance, that hurt just under the surface of your skin, but ready to break out into the open at the slightest provocation. An unhealed wound scarring your bodies, your minds, your souls. Maybe it's the thing that keeps you wondering if you can be a faithful, good Christian at all. 'I just can't forgive her; I just forgive him; I just can't forgive them; I just can't forgive myself.'

Will bearing the grudge solve anything? I like the American novelist Anne Lamott's observation about the consequences of grudge-bearing and not finding forgiveness: *"Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die."*

How could Joseph honestly forgive his brothers who had meant him harm? He brings God into the situation, to make up Joseph's forgiveness deficit, so that life can move on. I don't know if that's a cop-out for any of us, who, are like Tam O'Shanter's wife, *"Gathering her brows like gathering storm, nursing her wrath to keep it warm"*. God does not intend his children to live under the shadow of a gathering storm, or nurse our wrath to keep our grudges toasty. God wants us, wants you, to be free, and when you can't get over the brow of the hill of forgiveness by yourself, God will help you over, and do the part this is for the moment too hard for you.

We are told in the Bible that we love because God first loved us. We are told here that we should attempt to forgive, because God has forgiven us much already.

It is the exact opposite of that odd little parable Jesus told in Matthew where an indebted servant is forgiven his debt by his king, but then fails to learn the lesson of mercy and does not forgive a fellow servant who owed money to him. Whether it is God in the story of Joseph, or Jesus teaching the parable of the unforgiving servant, the lessons are clear. Bearing grudges does harm; offering forgiveness and mercy, though costly, brings blessing.

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do", is shown right here. We may not know the full consequences of our cruel action; those who harm us may not know the full consequences of their cruel actions. But God does. And it is God, when we cannot, Who manages the process of mercy. Hoping that someday, we will manage it for ourselves. Because God has shown us how. Until then God's love in action, for us, for them, for all, does what is necessary.

The insight into God's activities may be the final twist in this deep story. In the end, it may not matter whether the repentance of the brothers is motivated by a desire for reconciliation or escape from retribution. It may not matter whether Joseph has been able completely to put behind him his desire to pay his brothers back for the way they treated him. It is God Who is at work to bring the redemption of Joseph and his brothers, to bring reconciliation to this shattered family. God is still busy imputing goodness in the midst of all the intentional and unintentional harm that is still done in the world today.

In the end, there is no room for bearing grudges. But there is room, and room aplenty, for gifting mercy, and living forgiveness.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ *Luke 23:34*