

# Forgiving made Practical

## A third of the World Population!

Did you know that roughly a third of the world population of the entire world are Christians? That is one third of all humanity. 7.8 Billion people. That includes Protestants and Catholics, Evangelicals, Liberals and Orthodox. Happy clappy Christians and their more solemn brothers & sisters. It includes the confrontational and the harmonious, the optimists and the pessimists. Men, Women and Children.

How is that possible, if you know that it all started with just 120 people who had gathered together to remember a loved one who had passed away? The only explanation can be that their loved one, who had indeed passed away, had re-emerged from the world of the dead to live and reign and build his church.

## The Book of Acts

The biblical book of Acts is about the origins and growth of the church in those early years after Jesus died and rose from the dead.

Two figures play a central role in that book: Peter and Paul. In those early days, Peter was the central figure in the formation of the church. All major decisions were made under his leadership. The developments he set in motion ultimately led to what we see today: that a third of all humanity adheres to some form of Christian faith. Without Peter, we would not be here today. We will focus on Peter for now.

## Jesus and Peter

Simon Peter was passionate, impulsive, radical, total, devoted... a born leader.

Once he had fallen to his knees before Jesus and said, 'What do you want me to do?' And Jesus had said, 'Come with me, we are going to do great things together.' And that was how the adventure began...

And after about two years, Jesus asked: who do you think I am? And Simon had said with conviction: you are the one who was to come, whom our people have been waiting for for so long. The Messiah. The sent one. And Jesus had said: that confession will be the rock on which the church will be built. We will no longer call you Simon, but Peter – rock.

## Peter could not accept Jesus' Death

And then Jesus had started to speaking about the manner in which he would die and that it would happen soon and that he would not resist this. And Peter had opposed this. With all his strength. He had put his whole weight behind it. That can't be right. My Messiah cannot die. But Jesus had persisted. And for the next six months, this had been a shadow over their relationship. There were moments when Peter wondered in confusion: what on earth is Jesus doing?

When the time came and Jesus was about to be arrested, Peter had still tried to defend him – he had taken a sword and launched an attack. But all he had managed to do was cut off an ear. And Jesus had cut him short. No, not like that.

And Peter would have liked to have done even more to save Jesus. He had followed him to the enormous villa where Jesus was being tried. Because he thought: maybe I can still save him. And when they asked him if he knew Jesus, who was standing there on trial, he wisely said that he did not. Wisely? Wise in his own logic. That night, Peter suddenly understood that Jesus really wanted this death, and how much he, Peter, had stood in his way. How he had only contributed to his suffering through his lack of understanding. Through his opposition. But he could no longer talk to him about it. And how often is that the case when someone dies? That you can no longer resolve it. Never again. For Peter, at that moment, it was game over. *Einde oefening*.

And you wonder: How is that possible? How can someone who has failed so badly, recover to such an extent that he once again takes the lead, once again assumes such a leadership role – and that this is accepted by the others? The answer lies in the story we have just read.

## Peter goes fishing

After the resurrection, the disciples had returned to their native region on Jesus' instructions. Yes, and now? Well, they went back to their familiar craft. Fishing. Peter, always the leader, had taken the initiative. Fishing was a familiar activity. It was tangible. Perhaps we should just go back to doing the ordinary things. That can also be healing after so much has happened.

Only it didn't work. Had they forgotten how to do it? They caught no fish. And after a night of struggling, which they had started cheerfully, the atmosphere became less cheerful. What's going on? What's wrong? They became short-tempered with each other and grew tired.

I. And then suddenly there was that man on the shore who said: try a different approach. They follow his suggestion. And suddenly there are fish everywhere. A miracle. A miracle that has an electrifying effect on the disciples. Goosebumps. Because they recognize this. That feeling that life is breaking through again, a miracle that brings tears of joy to your eyes. When something like this happens, there can only be one explanation: it is the Lord! *He* is standing there on the shore. And Peter, who had been grieving over what had gone wrong. Who had been walking around with *his soul under his arm* because of what had happened. He leaves everything behind, dives into the water and goes to Jesus. In that one leap, we see where Peter's heart was. His heart went out to Jesus. And when he stands dripping on the shore that early morning in the mist – that is when the encounter takes place. We do not know what was said there. That was private. The writer respects that confidentiality. But we know from what follows that all was well between them. That something happened there that made everything possible again.

II. Then the fish are brought ashore and Peter helps out for a moment. And they prepare some of it. There is a strange atmosphere as they busy themselves doing this. Because it is familiar and as it used to be, but still different. Because Jesus is the same, but not as he used to be. He sat there and ate with them. But at the same time, they knew that he had not returned from the dead, but had passed through death. Was he a spirit then? No. But he now lived on a different level. There was that holy otherness that was also there. That is why there was a certain hesitation and the conversations were not like they used to be.

## Do you love me?

1. And then Jesus says to Peter, in the middle of that circle: Simon, do you love me more than the others? He puts him on the spot. He makes it clear. Strange, really, because didn't that dive earlier make it clear? But Jesus is the healer. He knows this is necessary, even though it hurts.

Earlier, before Jesus was arrested, Peter had said: even if everyone else abandons you, I will not. I will give my life for you (Mt 26:30-35, cf. Jn 13). That echoes in this question.

It is also an invitation. Jesus asks Peter to declare publicly where his heart lies, where his loyalty lies. It is also an invitation to action. Peter (actually: Simon), are you still there? Are you still with me? Are you still in the game? Or have you gone offside? Outside the lines? Is it game over? Or are you still playing? Jesus' invitation is also a reassurance: You can enter the game again, as far as I'm concerned.

And Peter responds well to this. He does not react indignantly. He says, without arrogance, without bravado, without pretension: You know that I am your friend.

2. And Jesus asks again. In the circle of disciples, in the presence of witnesses, with the aim that it would be passed on. Simon, do you love me? Perhaps no more than the others. You now know that you also have weaknesses and that all that overconfidence is no longer such a good idea. Even with that knowledge, are you still with me? Will you still join me? I want to hear that from you. Here before God and his congregation. I know that you are only human. Not perfect. But in order to continue together, you must say to me: do you love me?

And again, Peter says the same thing. You know that I am devoted to you. And that is enough for Jesus.

3. And then Jesus does it again. Now everyone in that circle knows what this is about. Jesus did not engage in a group discussion in which everyone could recount how things had gone that night. Or before that. Or after that. There was no evaluation. And yet, in this indirect way, Jesus makes it crystal clear that He knew very well what had happened. That He knew Peter had denied Him three times. And there, in front of everyone, He gives Peter a new responsibility and entrusts him with the work He Himself had done. To be a shepherd in the congregation. Feed my sheep. Care for and lead the people I entrust to you.

That is why Peter was able to play such a central role in the book of Acts. Not only did Jesus forgive him, He also gave him a new mandate, and He did so in such a way that the entire community knew about it. So that no one could later say: but wasn't there something wrong with Peter? Is this acceptable? Yes, it is acceptable, because the Master Himself addressed his sin and gave him a place and a task again. Now Peter can be more than the one who says: I'm going fishing. He can now also say: I'm going to care for others. From fishing to feeding.

This story is about rehabilitation. Restoring Peter to his former glory. Forgiveness made practical. Forgiveness given hands and feet. And note that it is also about Jesus forgiving Peter for getting things so wrong, for hurting him – Jesus – so badly. About Jesus rising above what had happened and opening himself to this relationship with Peter once again.

## What about us?

This story applies to relationships – in families, in love relationships; also to relationships within the church community – the communion of saints. First, there is forgiveness for me, for you. Second, we are invited to follow Jesus' example and forgive. Even if we are the victim. Even if the other person does not ask for it. Unconditional forgiveness. (refer PT!)

## Marriage

In marriage, you go through hi's and lows together. Sooner or later circumstances arise that put pressure on the relationship. Marriage is not only about love, but also about working together as a team. Coping with the stresses of life; caring for children; financial issues; issues in the extended family; the death of loved ones; accidents that intervene; illness. Each partner brings their dreams to the relationship. Each partner brings a set of practices and behavior patterns and expectations to the joint household. And as you struggle with all these things, and bow under the pressure, misunderstandings arise, and you discover things about your partner you had no idea were there. As Tim Keller famously said: "The art of marriage is to love the stranger you find yourself marries to".

Struggling together under pressure, you learn to be vulnerable with each other as much as you are each other's heroes. And both are true. Sometimes you make amazing strides and achieve amazing successes. Sometimes your partner stands their ground in a remarkable way and shows lion-like courage. At other times, it's a lot less impressive. And then you become more humble. Then your love becomes less pretentious. Sometimes you drop the ball or fall flat on your face in an unbelievable way. Like Simon Peter.

Isn't it also true in your relationship with each other that you sometimes have to endure pain? That sometimes things happen that leave you feeling lost? That love becomes confused? That there are shards to clean up? The greatness of the story of Jesus and Peter is that it doesn't end there. That Jesus continues the relationship. That he invites Peter to say: Do you love me?

We learn from Jesus' example that we don't have to talk every problem to death. We don't have to rub salt in the wounds. We don't always have to prove ourselves right. Sometimes

it's enough to reaffirm your mutual love, accept each other and make a fresh start. And sometimes it is necessary to share this with trusted people around you – find validation outside yourselves - with trusted friends, a pastor or a counselor.

As you go through life together, you find that love is sometimes overshadowed by anger, worry or fear. But you also learn that if you take time for each other and take time for God, love becomes more humble but also stronger; that you can confide in each other and say to each other: yes, I am committed to you. With my shortcomings, I still love you the most. And with God's help, we can keep this up together.

I know. It does not always work out. There are situations where it is no longer possible to stay in a relationship, even if you are willing to forgive. We grieve over every divorce that happens in our community. Just let's not make the mistake of blaming that on God. If we go through divorce, we should move closer to God – not move away from him. If we do, we will discover things about God and about ourselves we didn't know were there.

Peter had encountered himself in a profoundly humbling way. He had recognized his mistakes. With that insight, he was now able to make a significant contribution. And that is exactly what happened. So in marriage, we get to know ourselves and each other better and better. And we also learn to forgive ourselves and forgive the other person, *without obscuring the truth in any way*. That insight is the basis for moving forward together and building on what you have learned through your experiences.

What this story teaches us is important for husbands and wives. It is also important for all of us. Even if we are not married. Even if we sometimes encounter difficulties in relationships other than marital ones.

This story tells us that reconciliation is possible. Between people and God, but also between people themselves. And one leads to the other. This story tells of forgiveness and making a new start. It tells of the importance of moments when we take time for each other to find each other again. It also tells us that forgiveness is not just something individual. No, Peter was given a place in the group again, in the community.

And if you think: I need to think about that story some more, there's still a lot to it. I don't quite understand it yet... Then that means you do understand. You carry that story with you. You think about it. It becomes interwoven with your own life story and sometimes helps you to understand yourself better.

Bind this story to your heart,

fasten it around your neck.

May it guide you when you walk,

may it watch over you when you sleep,

may it speak to you when you wake up. (Proverbs 6:21-22)