

## The Best Word in the World

Is there a word that can change the world? If you were to choose one word to change this world today, what would it be?

Chief Rabbi Johnathan Sacks wrote, in his book, *The Dignity of Difference – How to Avoid the Clash of Civilisations*, in his chapter, *The Best Word in the World* he spoke of how he visited Kosovo after the Kosovan war. He visited in 1999 where 800,000 had fled in fear of their lives, 10,000 had been killed. It was as he was standing in the centre of Pristina amid the wreckage and rubble of war, that he said, “I understood as never before the power of a single word to change the world – the word forgiveness.”

We can easily transfer the images of the Kosovan war to that of Ukraine and say the same words of Johnathan Sacks, “I understood as never before the power of a single word to change the world – the word forgiveness.”

The conflict in Kosovo had started 6 centuries earlier in 1389 and memories had not died. It was a recurring theme in their history. If you live in those areas, nothing is more dispiriting than the cycle of revenge that haunts conflict zones and traps their populations into a past that never relaxes its grip.

At university, I can remember our Roman History lecturer saying that the reason we study history is to learn from the past so that we don't make the same mistakes!

War is not a new thing to the Balkans, as it is not new to Northern Ireland, India, Kashmir, Syria, Afghanistan, Palestine and the list goes on. The virus of hate can lie dormant for a while, but it rarely dies.

Retaliation is the instinctual response to a perceived wrong. It has been quoted that “No man ever forgets where he buries the hatchet.”

So where does forgiveness come into war situations! Does it ever?

It is a true saying, “to err is human, to forgive is divine.”

Sacks writes, “Forgiveness is a counterintuitive idea. In a world without forgiveness, evil begets evil, harm generates harm and there is no way of breaking the sequence apart from forgiveness. “

So, when Jesus called his disciples to repent, he was bringing into his world the idea that the only way forward with the Pilates and dictators of this world is repentance.

In the Ukrainian context, nothing short of a miracle needs to happen, and that miracle is if Putin sees his wrong, and is convicted in his conscience that he has sinned, against God and man, and that he needs to turn to God for forgiveness. That's a prayer worth praying, for repentance and forgiveness breaks the chain. It represents a decision not to do what instinct and passion urge us to do. It answers hate with a refusal to hate, animosity with generosity.

Sacks wrote, "Forgiveness is the most compelling testimony to human freedom. It represents our ability to change course, reframe the narrative of the past and create an unexpected set of possibilities for the future."

"Unless you repent" said Jesus, "you too will all perish." That's the message for everyone who goes around with hate and revenge on their minds.

For ultimately hate is a burden that weighs us down. It is like carrying a rucksack of boulders, going up a steep hill on our back. Hate will eventually cripple us, and it is ultimately dehumanising. Hate destroys the hated and it destroys the hater. That's what we are seeing in the killing fields of Ukraine today – nothing short of hate, for who would do such things to other people!

Forgiveness is a human decision, a decision that can change lives and bring individuals into relationships with the Almighty and each other.

That's what Jesus is about, calling people to repentance and forgiveness. Two sides of the same coin.

When I read Johnathan Sack's views on forgiveness, I could not help but think, that he was speaking about Jesus. Jesus, born a Jew, born into a world of oppression, where his people were controlled and often persecuted. This Jesus who claimed to be the Son of God went about forgiving and teaching people to forgive even those who hated him.

He brought into the world a spirit of forgiveness.

In our passage today, Jesus is told about a tragedy in the Temple, where Pilate had Galileans murdered.

Jesus answers those who told him of this tragic event, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way" and he asks a similar question about the tower of Siloam which collapsed and killed 18 innocent people.

“Was it that they were greater sinners than others?” Of course not, it was a rhetorical question, Jesus already knew the answer.

Punishment followed sin was how many people thought in those days.

In our passage today, he is pointing out to them that we are all sinners, and that we are all in need of repentance; we have all fallen short of God's ideal; so we all deserve punishment, but that doesn't happen arbitrarily in this life, like murder and misfortunes, judgement is held back for the life to come, and that is why he calls them to repentance now.

He said to them, “But unless you repent, you too will all perish!”

If forgiveness is the best word in the world, repentance is part of it.

What is repentance?

Repentance is a turning away from what we know to be wrong and a turning to Christ to experience his forgiveness and grace. Dr Paul Tournier – renowned Christian psychiatrist wrote, “The progress of our spiritual lives is made up of successful discoveries, in which we perceive that we have turned away from God instead of going towards Him. That is what makes a great saint like St Francis of Assisi declare that he was chief among sinners.”

Repentance asks the question do we know that we have turned away from God. If we do, then saying sorry to Him will be our daily prayer, forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.

This will not be a popular teaching today. Nobody likes to be told to repent. But that is what Jesus is telling them and I am speaking for him.

He calls them to turn from sin and follow Him! There is a Judgement Day and what will save us on Judgement Day is our actions here and now!

So, he tells them the parable of the fig tree. The fig tree and the vineyard are symbols of the Jewish nation which God had cultivated and nurtured over many centuries in the hope that it would be spiritually fruitful. But this special relationship with God had, by and large, turned into a barren religion.

In the parable, the tree is being given another chance to prove itself. The fig tree pops up on several occasions in the life of Jesus, and during his final week, the week before his crucifixion, when he found by the Bethany Road a fig tree which had no fruit and which he declared would never bear fruit again. By that

time, the last chance had come and gone, and the fig tree withered at once. Matthew 21 v19. It was a parable of Judgement Day!

There is a final chance. If we refuse chance after chance and turn our backs on the grace of God and refuse his generosity to come and buy and drink at his fountain, as we heard from the prophet Isaiah today, at his well of living water and goodness, then there will be a day when that well runs dry and there is no water or wine left.

But the parable of the fig tree tells clearly of the Gospel of the second chance. How many of us have had a second chance in life? A fig tree normally takes three years to reach maturity. If it is not fruiting by that time, then it is not likely to fruit at all. But this fig tree was given another year, another chance.

It is always Jesus' way, to give another chance while we have the opportunity on earth. We see this throughout the Gospels and into the early church, people were given another chance. Peter, Mark, Paul and others, were all folks who had failed, like the fig tree and yet were given another year to bear fruit and didn't they do well.

President Putin will never hear this sermon, I'm sure he wouldn't like it, but he can hear the Spirit of the Almighty speaking into his soul, and we pray that that the Holy Spirit will clearly tell him about the best word in the world, to repent and to seek forgiveness, and to choose the path of peace.

There is a story told of a group of scientists who decided that humans could do without God. So, one of them looked up to God and said, "We've decided that we no longer need you. We have enough wisdom to clone people and do many miraculous things. God listened patiently and said very well. "Let's have a man making contest". "We'll do it just like I did in the old days with Adam." The scientists agreed and bent down to pick up some earth. God looked at them and said "No, you have to make your own earth!"

If forgiveness has the power to change hearts and lives for all eternity then the Chief Rabbi was right, it is the best word in the world!

When Jesus calls us to repent, he is simply inviting us into relationship with God. A relationship of trust and humility, as we walk with Him.