



Can you forgive a rapist?

The release of serial rapist John Worboys presents a moral dilemma for Christians.

Forgiveness is in our DNA. Jesus didn't just place one verse about it in the Lord's Prayer, he put two, and he even made our own reception of forgiveness conditional on our ability to forgive others:

"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those that trespass against us."

We Christians also believe in redemption, the ability to change one's life, to transcend the sins of previous phases of life and to have a fresh start. And yet, and yet...

The stress on forgiveness has led the Church to make grievous errors in the past, in particular with regard to clerical sex abuse. Priests were found to have abused someone, and (I'm talking mainly about the Sixties here) when it was disclosed, they would apologise to their bishop, and swear that they would never do it again. The bishops back then tended to believe them, move them into a new parish believing that there would be a fresh start, only for the priest to recede into abusing people. The intention of the bishops was kind; the results were awful.

And so to the case of John Worboys, convicted of no fewer than nineteen rapes, and possibly responsible for eighty more. He had a particular technique, that of drugging his victims by giving them champagne laced with sedatives. He has been in prison for

around a decade, which is not an insignificant amount of time, but then his crimes were particularly horrendous. He is about to be released.

If you wish he remained behind bars, what is your reason? Is it that he is still a danger, and so it's for public safety? Is it that you don't believe he can have reformed in that time and so needs longer for rehabilitation? Or is it just that nine years is not "long enough" for what he has done?

I suspect that it is the last which is the most compelling reason for most people, and yet it is the one that is least tenable from a Christian perspective. Just how many years would be enough? Twenty? Thirty? Surely it will never be enough. The heart of this argument is retribution (vengeance?) rather than rehabilitation. And it is costly vengeance at that: prisoners cost the nation £50,000 a year.

Some would phrase this less as a need for vengeance as a need for justice. The victims live with what he did for the rest of their lives; how can Worboys be let out 'early'? This goes back to the Old Testament, 'an eye for an eye': trying to make a sentence in a manner equivalent to a crime. More time for worse crimes. But that is Old rather than New Testament logic.

I prefer to query his release by questioning his ability to have been rehabilitated and the threat that he will do it again. But it is cases like his which present the greatest challenge to the Christian command to forgive.

December 2017. Thought for the Train is a short column written by the Reverend Robert Stanier, the vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train, or elsewhere. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at www.surbitonchurch.org.uk.