

"Forgive your neighbour the wrong done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray." (Ecclus. 28:2)

In a violent society such as the one we live in, forgiveness is a difficult issue to face. How can you forgive someone who has destroyed your family, committed unspeakable acts of criminality or, more simply, has deeply hurt you in personal matters, ruining your career or betraying your trust?

The first instinctive reaction is to get your own back, rendering evil for evil, unleashing a spiral of hatred and aggression, and increasing barbarism in society. Or else it causes a breakdown in relations, nursing grudges and spite, an attitude that embitters life and poisons relationships.

The Word of God erupts with force in the most varied situations of conflict and proposes, uncompromisingly, the most difficult and bravest solution: forgiveness.

The invitation this time comes from a wise man from the ancient people of Israel, Ben Sirach, who shows how absurd it is to ask forgiveness of God if, in turn, you do not know how to forgive. And in an ancient text from Jewish tradition we read: 'To whom does God pardon iniquity? To whoever pardons the wrongs done by others.' It is what Jesus himself taught in our prayer to the Father: 'Father ... forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.'

We too make mistakes, and every time we wish to be forgiven! We beg humbly and hope that we will be given again the chance for a new start, that we will be trusted once more. If it is like that for us, will it not be so also for others? Must we not love our neighbour as ourselves?

Chiara Lubich, who continues to inspire our understanding of the Word, commented on the invitation to forgive in this way: 'It is not the kind of forgetfulness that means not looking reality in the face. Forgiveness is not about saying that something serious does not matter, or calling good what is evil. Forgiveness is not indifference. Forgiveness is an act of will and of clear thinking, and so of freedom. It is about accepting our brother or sister as they are, despite the wrong that has been committed, as God accepts us sinners, despite our defects. Forgiveness is about not responding to an affront with an affront, but it does as Paul says: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21).

'Forgiveness is about opening up for whoever does you wrong the possibility of a new relationship with you. So it gives the possibility for the two of you to begin life again, to have a future where evil does not have the last word.'

The Word of Life will help us resist the temptation of replying in kind, of immediately getting our own back. It will help us to see whoever is our 'enemy' with new eyes, recognizing them as a brother or sister. However bad they may be, they need someone to love them, to help them to change. It will be our 'vendetta of love'.

Chiara went on to explain: 'You will say, "But it's impossible." That's understandable. But here is the beauty of Christianity. It is not for nothing that you follow a God who, dying upon the cross, asked his Father to forgive those who killed him. Take courage. New life starts here. I can assure you, you will have a peace never tasted till now and a huge but surprising new joy.'