

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia  
Sunday March 25th  
by the Reverend Alan Neale  
“May God forgive you all, comrades”- The Challenge to Forgive  
Isaiah 43: 16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3: 4-14; John 12: 1-8**

Today we bid farewell to Carlos Eire and his memoirs “Waiting for Snow in Havana”, the text chosen for the One Book, One Philadelphia program in 2007. During this Lent we have allowed Holy Scripture to enter into dialogue not only with our lives but also with the life of young Carlos Eire who, at the age of 11, was forced to leave his native Cuba with brother but without parents. It seems almost in the twinkling of an eye in January 1959 President Batista is gone, a cigar-smoking guerilla named Castro has taken his place and Christmas is cancelled!

In conversation with Professor Eire, the themes we have considered have all been most profound and most significant for the Christian, actually for any human being - our hope, our shadow side, our sense of God’s presence (and absence) and the frailty and fragility of our human nature. But I believe strongly that today’s theme is probably the most crucial, the most necessary, the most essential for the Christian.

Of this theme Dennis Maynard writes, “(This) may very well be the most critical spiritual work we dare to undertake in this life” and “it may be the most difficult spiritual work we ever do”.

Of what does Father Maynard speak? What is our theme? Listen to the title for this sermon, suggested by Professor Eire... “May God forgive you all, comrades” - The Challenge to Forgive.

Of those horrible, wretched, traumatic moments when Carlos and his brother are separated from family in the airport ready to leave for America, Carlos Eire writes, “Tony and I said our physical goodbyes to everyone, warmly and calmly. We’d see them for the next few hours, and hear them faintly through the glass, but we wouldn’t be able to touch. That was the worst torture. Being locked up in the fishbowl, with them on one side and us on the other... Dios los perdone, companeros. May God forgive you all, comrades”.

Somehow... somehow Carlos Eire in a phrase is able to forgive all those, or rather ask God to forgive all those (from Fidel Castro at the top to the airport official at the bottom) who by their actions ruined the paradisaical life and island of Carlos, and who by their actions caused a young boy to be wrenched from family and friends. "May God forgive you all, comrades!".

In fact, forgiveness is one of the major themes of this book...

Carlos Eire is able to forgive his father – the man who would not leave his precious possessions in order to be with his family and protect them, the man who would not protect Carlos from an abusive adopted brother, the man who would not even remove a painting that profoundly scared Carlos... "When I told my father about these dreams and pleaded with him to banish the swearing Empress from our house, he had a very simple reply, 'Don't be silly'".

Carlos is able to forgive that awful trinity of lizards – Fidel Castro, Emmanuel Kant and his adopted brother. About Ernesto (the adopted brother who abused him) Carlos writes, "I'll send you to another spot in heaven. The very best spot. I think you should go straight before the throne of Jesus and spend eternity under his gaze. I think you should see him staring at you forever. Forgiving you over and over and over. Embracing you. Eternally".

"May God forgive you all, comrades!"

When you think of it, all that we need forgive, all that we must forgive... all of that is concerned with memories. Unless we live in some strange world described in the 2002 film "Minority Report" where murders and crimes are prevented through the efforts of 'precogs', mutants who can see the future... unless we live in such a world, all that we need forgive is inextricably linked with our memories. It was Dorothy Parker who once said, "I'd rather have a bottle in front of me, than a frontal lobotomy" but there is no frontal lobotomy to help us forget (and forgive) real or imagined hurts done to us. Professor Miroslav Volf of Yale writes, "Eire offers forgiveness of memories – and redemption of people who remember".

And this is the ministry of our God... listen to Isaiah, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive

it?”. Those who continually replay old, sometimes very old, tapes of past hurts (real or imagined) they live in a barren and dry place... a wilderness place inhabited by wild and ravenous animals. We need the Holy Spirit to work in us, to work with us, to work for us and to bring healing to our memories that, in Professor Eire’s words, they may then be consigned “to the vault of oblivion”.

Lord Harold Wilson, erstwhile Prime Minister of England, once told a friend, “Tell my political opponents that I have buried the hatchet... but tell them also that I know where I have buried it!”. This may or may not be acceptable political expediency; it is definitely not the way of the Christian, the disciple of Jesus.

There are some who find it so difficult to forgive at all... but most find it difficult to forgive some person, at some time, for some hurt. Friends this is no easy challenge to accept, no easy task to complete. Father Dennis Maynard writes, “The biggest surprise in life is not that people sin. The miracle is that people learn to forgive”... note, “learn to forgive”... this is surely a process, a life-long commitment... “to learn to forgive”... to be a person whose default setting is to forgive, to be a church community which is hard-wired to forgive.

Poor Judas Iscariot seemed unable to begin even “Forgiveness 101”. Mary performs what I think is one of the most beautiful acts in the Gospel and Judas with a relenting, harsh inability to understand and forgive... condemns her. And why? Well, here was a man who could not, would not accept forgiveness... he was a thief, it was his common practice to steal, as it were, from the offertory plate before it made its way to the bank. He did not want to be forgiven, he did not want to change. Here was a man who was intent to betray his Lord... He did not want to be forgiven, his mind was fixed, his intention firm. Brothers and sisters in Christ, we cannot forgive if we do not know what it is to be forgiven. Show me an unforgiving heart, and I will show you a heart that is not forgiven! The man, the woman, who is immersed in the grace of God, that man... that woman will exude grace to others.

How is Carlos Eire able to forgive, able to ask God to forgive those who caused him such incalculable pain... he is a friend of God and he knows the power and love of God to redeem, to rescue, to save.

I sometimes wonder at the capacity of the early church not only to welcome Paul, but also to allow and support his ministry as chief apostle to the Gentiles. Here was a man, by his own admission, who was (in the words of today's Epistle) "zealously a persecutor of the church", responsible for persistent harassment and even death. But he was transformed because he had a righteousness from Christ, not his own. He was transformed because in his life he knew the forgiving power of Christ's death and the strengthening power of Christ's resurrection.

Towards the end of his life, a portrait was painted of Sir Winston Churchill. A friend asked the great man, "Did it do you justice?". "Ah, at my age," replied the man, "what I require from a painter is not justice... but mercy!". And what we require from God is mercy, not justice'; and what we should offer to others is mercy, not justice. We are challenged, we are called, we are dared to forgive... how can we think of taking bread and wine if we will not even begin the path to forgive?! How we approach that table with a resolve not to begin the path of forgiveness... such an act is blasphemy and surely causes God to weep.

Carlos Eire writes of the Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola plants in Cuba being taken over by the state... the same bottles are used but "no two bottles ever tasted the same". The inside did not match the outside... there was no consistency, no congruency, no authenticity... there was no integrity. You, I, cannot grow as Christians, as people if we choose to nurse and nourish an unforgiving mind, an unforgiving spirit.

Friends, may we come to know God forgives us all, anything and everything... and may God empower us to forgive... in Jesus' Name.

AMEN