

Today I saw Israel (Rabin/Perez) shake hands with the PLO (Arafat) at the White House. A few quotes give the flavor of this momentous occasion:

"Every seeming failure advanced the cause of peace these 20 years.

...The PLO has been weakened [enough to trigger] a change of attitude on both sides" (Kissinger, before the signing ceremony)....hope & prayer for the land to become "as prosperous as it is holy....Shalom, Salam, Peace!" (Clinton)...."yesterday a dream, today a commitment....from bullets to ballots, from guns to shovels....A Middle East of the people &...for the people....no more victims on either side....Peace to those near & to those far off, says the LORD" (Perez)....Now to "turn the agreements at the table into realities on the ground" (Christopher)...."enough of blood & tears. Enough!....We are giving peace a chance....In the Book of Books, Qoheleth says...'a time to heal,...a time for peace.' The time for peace has come" (Rabin)...."the battle for peace is more difficult" (Arafat)...."This time, praise God, guidance by the wisdom of the Almighty....Go in peace. Go as peacemakers" (Clinton).

At least for the time being, the realists have seized the day from the extremists. The Palestinians haven't a bad deal, though in 1947 they were offered a much better one: it took 44 years for their dream of hegemony over Palestine to die, or at least be officially renounced, upon tacit confession that it had dried up like a raisin in the Israeli sun. The humiliating fact: out of weakness the PLO has been reconciled to Israel. The parallel humiliating fact: Israel, failing to negotiate with any other Palestinian group, finally moved (to use a familiar phrase of Jas. Baker) "from contacts to contracts" with the PLO. (Cartoon: Arafat & Rabin digging, from either side, through a "NEVER!" wall.)

1 Last week, a Palestinian negotiator denied the obvious: "We are not on our good behavior." But of course they are: the accords are null & void if the PLO fails to contain the violence of dissident Palestinians. The reconciliation is conditional also on Israel's side: the Knesset was unanimous, but Israeli politics is highly volatile, & the accords could be overthrown politically.

2 Saturday I was studying **Jesus' Parable of Conditional Reconciliation**, traditionally called the P. of the Unmerciful Servant (Mt.18.23-35). A man owned \$100,000,000 (an exaggerated figure, as represented by the Jesus Seminar's THE PARABLES OF JESUS: RED LETTER EDITION [Polebridge/88], p.49). He couldn't pay & was thrown in jail "till he should pay all his debt" (vs.34).

In that telling of the parable, I've told the truth but not the whole truth. I could have concluded this way (vs.25): the debtee ordered the debtor liquidated, "sold, with his wife and children and all that he had." That way of telling the story would have been true, but not the whole truth.

Both of those tellings obscure the fact that the debtee forgave the debt (& so, reconciliation, a new start in the relationship). Then he withdrew the forgiveness!

Is it ever honorable to withdraw forgiveness? Yes, if the forgiveness was conditional. But the condition was only a mental reservation: the forgiver did not state it. So, is it ever honorable to withdraw forgiveness when its conditionality was only a mental reservation? Jesus thought so....

3"if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Mt.6.15, first put positively in the previous vs.: "if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you"; cf.M.11.25: "forgive...so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you"--all NRSV).

4 Some folks currently are preaching "unconditional love," but how can there be such if there's no unconditional forgiveness? Or was Jesus wrong? (The parable is, says the Jesus Seminar [p.77], authentic, "in the data base for determining who Jesus was.") No, Jesus was not wrong, he was moral as well as loving; "unconditional love" is immoral.

5 In our parable, what happened that occasioned the debtee's change of mind from being forgiving to being unforgiving? The forgiven showed himself unworthy of being forgiven. He didn't get it: he assumed that being forgiven meant simply & only being let off. The MidEast peace will amount to little or nothing if Israel feels only that it's been let off of the intifada & the Palestinians feel only that they've been let off of being policed by Israeli "occupation troops." Peace without reconciliation is only a piece of paper, because reconciliation depends on mutual forgiveness, which is a plant to which "mutual recognition" is only the soil....Money was the currency of the parable: blood-sweat-tears that of today's Israeli-PLO accords.

6 "No revenge," said Rabin on McNeil-Lehrer this evening. Vengeance is

2637. 2 unforgiveness in action. Arafat through the decades often appealed to it as a motivator to absolute resistance against Israel. It was a factor in his support for Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War, a decision disastrous for the PLO, which thereby lost its Arab-states funding, forcing it to sue for peace with Israel (God getting good through evil, as frequently in Scripture). Six years after the Camp David accords (Israel/Egypt, 1978), Arafat confessed to Carter that he should have supported Camp David. By 1984 it must have been clear to A. that his cause, the destruction of the State of Israel, had become unreal. Why then nine more years before peace? Because the spirit of vengeance, in diplomacy & the intifada, took that long to reveal its weakness & counterproductivity. Why is forgiveness more powerful than vengeance? Because satisfaction is the most vengeance can hope for: forgiveness yields not only satisfaction but also reconciliation in a community of new beginnings. Vengeance chokes (vs.28). And the news of vengeance becomes bad news for the vengeance-taker (vv.31-34). Vengeance shows the reverse of Santayana's bromide: if you remember history (as in multiethnic Yugoslavia), you are doomed to repeat it. Focus on the past empowers vengeance, focus on the future empowers hope, & hope empowered so draws energy out of memory that one forgets to remember not to forgive--which is the sense that "forgive & forget" makes. Finally, vengeance can entertain no other thought than victory: hope is open to thoughts of justice, which is not (as vengeance is) one-sided & zero sum. Remembering that the WWI allies wreaked vengeance on Germany, imposing a peace that was both unjust & short, Jn. Foster Dulles came up with the WWII phrase "a just & lasting peace." May it apply to today's MidEast accords!

7 Forgiveness frees justice to win through reconciliation. Biblically, the word-domains here speak to a **sacred triangle**. Though he realistically looks upon sinners as enemies of his, God takes the initiative toward the restoration of the divine-human relationship: in the life-death-resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ, God offers a reconciliation the sinner may appropriate by repentance toward God & faith through Jesus in the Spirit. From God's side, the reconciliation is a decisive-historical *act*: from the human side it's a *process* from forgivingness to forgiveness, ie of forgiveness.

The NT stem for reconciliation means an *exchange* (however conceived); & when the exchange occurs, it works a *change* in both parties (however the changes may be described). Since reconciled-forgiven human beings participate in the divine will to reconciliation-forgiveness, the test of our forgiven-ness is our willingness to be reconciled with, to forgive, our enemies. This attitude is intolerant of "the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (Eph.2.14 NRSV). Ill will predisposes toward wall-building/maintenance & is motored by lust, greed, & vengeance: good will predisposes toward wall-destruction, for it's driven by reconciliation, forgiveness, & the desire for community.

8 The giving & receiving of divine & human **forgiveness** completes the sacred triangle. 1Cor.15.2 shows reconciliation & belief as aorist-punctiliar, *events*, but being saved & being forgiven as (present-progressive) *processes* stoppable when behavior shows that one believed only superficially (εἰκῇ *eike* thoughtlessly, without due consideration, [so] in vain). God's forgiveness of us logically entails our forgiving-ness, & the Spirit helps our infirmity when somebody sorely tempts us. If our belief-faith-trust is authentic, we continue to "hold on" (in our vs.) to the spirit-attitude-will to forgive so that--as given, & representatives of, the divine character as holy love--we are ready to initiate the forgiveness process.

9 Forgiveness only begins with the offer ("I'm willing to forgive you"): it's complete only if the offer is accepted, the forgiveness received. The offer of forgiveness, by God or anyone else, is only an *act*: forgiveness is a *transaction*. To say "I forgive you" is ignorant (of the forgiveness process) & in danger of arrogance unless it's the second act, ie the reception of repentance. No repentance up front, no forgiveness out back. Act #1: "I'm sorry" (I repent): act #2: "Thanks" (I forgive you).

Why is there no forgiveness for the unforgiving (why is Jesus right)? Because act #2 cannot occur without act #1. In our parable, \$100,000,000 cannot be forgiveness somebody who won't forgive \$100. Repentance & forgiveness both must be iterative, habitual. Be ready to forgive 70x7 (the vs. before the parable).