

Apology and reparations

“Now we have half-stepped away from our long centuries of despoilment, promising ‘Never again!’ But still we are haunted. It is as though we have run up a credit card bill and, having pledged to charge no more, remain befuddled that the balance does not disappear.” Ta Nehisi Coates¹

1. Making apologies and reparations

(this section is for reading out. Each paragraph can be read by a different voice)

We all know about making apologies and reparations; they are basic to all our efforts to put things right. Our parents taught us. We teach our children. If, as a child, you took another child's toy and broke it, an investigating adult would insist you "say sorry" and devise some action or cost you need to do or pay to 'make up' for your misdemeanour. Being human, living in community, requires us to be ready to apologise and make reparations. Our legal system affirms a right to 'damages' or 'compensation' when we are wronged. We even explain the whole criminal justice system as designed to ensure miscreants "pay their debt to society". But when the wrong is incalculable, the abuse is historic and the guilt runs through whole nations and cultures, we keep finding disconnects, excuses and avoidance strategies.

In September 2015 David Cameron went on the first UK Prime Ministerial trade mission to Jamaica in fourteen years. The issue of slavery, apologies and reparations had become a prominent part of Caribbean political discussion. David Cameron addressed this when he spoke to the Jamaican parliament. He got a rumbling of feet when he acknowledged that "*slavery was and is abhorrent in all its forms*", but he immediately slipped over to assert that "*Britain is proud to have eventually led the way in its abolition*" and say that, as friends, he hoped "*we can move on from this painful legacy*". No apology. No consideration of reparations.² He seemed to imply that Jamaicans should just try to 'get over it'.

We'll explore Jesus' understanding of the importance of apologies and reparations. What does a willingness to apologise and "put things right" do for how human society works? How does that relate to the issue of apologising to God? What are the effects of a grudging apology or a refusal to apologise? How does 'sorry' work?

Take five minutes to discuss what society gains when people are prepared to apologise and make reparations?

Saying you are sorry is central to Christianity (and many other faiths), but it is centrally focussed on saying sorry to God. We're going to look at what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount about sorting out our mess-ups with other people. Then we'll look at a new friend of Jesus who wants to make restitution for his failures.

¹ from Coates' famous and richly readable *Atlantic* article on the Case for Reparations in a US context:
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/> (accessed 20/10/20)

² as reported in a 2015 article in the Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/30/jamaica-should-move-on-from-painful-legacy-of-slavery-says-cameron> (accessed 20/10/20)

2. Sorting messes and paying back

let's begin by reading and exploring a well-known Jesus saying we find in the Sermon on the Mount. Let anyone with ears, listen!

Matthew 5.23-24

²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

Making peace

This familiar saying is probably the origins of “the Peace” that some churches share at communion services. Though, in worship, it has become much more of a moment of mutual greeting than a real opportunity to mend fractures in the fellowship.

So, let's explore what Jesus is saying here:

- **To whom do we have to say ‘sorry’ first? To our neighbours or our God?**
- **Why might that be?**
- **How important does that make saying sorry?**
- **Is more than ‘saying’ sorry involved? What might we have to do?**
- **How does this connect with “*Forgive our sins as we forgive those...*”?**
- **Can we write a parallel saying about seeking forgiveness from others and from God?**
- **What do you think Jesus is saying about apologies and reparations?**
- **Should this affect whole communities and nations, not just individuals?**
- **If not, why not?**

And now a very familiar Jesus story where we watch apologies and reparations happening as a result of someone receiving the ministry of Jesus.

Let anyone with ears, listen!

Luke 19.1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ² A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵ When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” ⁶ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷ All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”

⁸ Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” ⁹ Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

What is going on here?

Let's explore this story of a man who got himself symbolically stuck up a tree...

- **From what you know, explain Zacchaeus' predicament**
- **Why might he have become a tax collector?**
- **Why might he have wanted to see Jesus?**
- **What does Jesus do for Zacchaeus?**
- **What difference does that make?**
- **So, why does he want to give stuff back?**
- **What does this making of reparations do for Zacchaeus?**
- **What does it do for his community and those he'd defrauded?**
- **What do you think Jesus thinks about Zacchaeus' response?**
- **What do we need to learn from this for us and our society?**

3. Questions for discussion

1. What reasons might someone give for not making an apology for slavery?
2. What responses could be made to those offered reasons?
3. What should the role of a church like the URC be in this?
 - Should we, as a church, be apologising (other denominations have)?
 - The URC was only formed in 1972 but formed from previous denominations with long histories - including involvement in transatlantic slavery. Should we be considering reparations for past engagement with slavery by our Christian forebears? What might that include?
 - Should we, as a church, be campaigning for the UK, as a nation, to make an apology and offer some sort of reparations or restorative justice?
 - To whom should either the URC or the UK be apologising?
 - What do we bring as Christians to consideration of apology for slavery and reparations for slavery and the racist injustices that persisted afterwards?
 - Whose voices do we need to hear as we consider this matter?
 - What benefits, for us and for others, might flow from our careful engagement with the issues of apology and reparations for slavery?

*John M Campbell
for the URC Legacies of Slavery Working Group*