

Friday Night Theology – Forgiveness – 16<sup>th</sup> May, 2008

"What, I wonder, do Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and all the other professional atheists who make good money out of knocking people's religious faith make of the behaviour of Margaret Mizen in the immediate aftermath of her son Jimmy's murder?"

This is not my question. Rather, it came from the pen of Will Self as the opening line of a [comment piece](#) in this week's *London Evening Standard*. He goes on to praise the way in which Mrs Mizen's faith clearly impacts her response to the [death of her son](#) in a brutal attack this week. And in the process he notes, "It's hard to think of any secularist, no matter how great a 'humanist', who can match this level of raw sympathy, understanding and forgiveness." Now Mr Self is hardly an apologist for religion yet here he is recognising the fruit of an authentic faith.

Mrs Mizen's response is not unique though. In July 2005, Anthony Walker was brutally murdered in a racially motivated attack in Huyton, Merseyside. Two men had killed Anthony by plunging an ice-axe into his head. Anthony was a devout Christian, as was his mother Gee Walker. After the verdict, Gee Walker [spoke to reporters](#) of the forgiveness she offered.

*Do I forgive them? At the point of death, Jesus said, "I forgive them, cos they don't know what they do." I've got to forgive them. I still forgive them. My family and I still stand by what we believe: forgiveness.*

Similarly in January 2003, Stephen Oake, a special branch officer, was murdered by a terrorist suspect during a raid. At a subsequent [press conference](#), his father Robin Oake was asked how he felt about the killer.

*I took some time to put words together. I had anticipated words like that, so it wasn't as if I was unprepared. I said something like, "I don't know the man or all the circumstances of the operation, but from my heart I forgive him."*

*I heard another journalist say, "You what?" So I repeated what I had said. I wanted everyone in the room to hear it plainly: "I forgive him. I'll be praying that God will forgive him too."*

Like Gee Walker and Margaret Mizen, Robin Oake is a committed Christian. But why is it that they can forgive while so many others cannot? No doubt, there are many different reasons: the example of Jesus Christ, the sense that justice ultimately belongs to God, the knowledge that bitterness only destroys or the desire to be a witness to the love and forgiveness that they have received.

It strikes me though that while we can have all kinds of academic arguments over the reality of God (and clearly there is a place for them), the example of Christians like these is what ultimately silences the pretensions of Dawkins and Hitchens. These Christians show us that in life what really matters is not the complexity of our arguments, but the integrity of our lives. Jesus once said, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:16) These folks have done that, and the challenge for us all is to do the same.

By Justin Thacker, Head of Theology