

'Genocide is not the end of the

Five of Denise Uwimama's relatives were slaughtered during the Rwandan genocide 25 years ago. She tells **Sarah Meyrick** about the daily struggle to forgive and to heal

THE day when 29-year-old Denise Uwimama gave birth to her third son was the day that Interahamwe killers broke into her house with machetes and slaughtered five of the family members who were sheltering there.

The horror had started a week earlier. For days, fanatical voices on the radio had called for all Tutsi "snakes and cockroaches" to die. "Look in the bushes! Look in the swamps!" was the shrill message. "Whenever you find Tutsi, kill! Kill without mercy!" Later, it emerged that the massacre had been planned for months. Young men were trained as killers, while lists of Tutsi victims were being compiled with ruthless efficiency.

It was a beautiful Saturday morning when the slaughter reached Bugarama, in the far south-west of the country, close to the borders with Congo and Burundi. Denise and her husband, Charles, had lived there since their marriage. At first, they both had good jobs at Cimerwa, a huge cement works: Charles as a geologist, Denise as an administrator.

But, by the time the killing took



The house to the left was Denise Uwimama's home at the time of the genocide. She shows the hole in the fence that she crawled through on 16 April 1994

place, Charles was no longer able to live at home. He had been imprisoned without charge for six months and, after his release, sacked from his job. As a result, he was forced to work away from home, visiting the family only under the cover of darkness.

That day, as the attackers stormed her home, the heavily pregnant Denise handed over her two older children to her houseboy, who begged her to spare them the sight of their mother being murdered.

"Leaving my children tore me in two, but they had a better chance with my Hutu houseboy than with me," she says.

She crawled under the bed and waited for the worst. While the men continued their killing spree, she lay for hours on a concrete floor that was wet with the blood of her relatives. She heard her 16-year-old cousin Thérèse praying for mercy as she bled to death. Finally, at three in the morning, her waters broke, forcing her out of her hiding place.

With the help of another cousin, Manasseh, who had somehow survived along with Denise, she crawled out of the house into the garden of her Hutu neighbour. The woman sheltered her just long enough for her to give birth — in silence — while looters tore apart her house. She dragged herself and her newborn baby into a store cupboard, while Manasseh hid in the attic.

They were still not safe. The killers descended, determined to root out any remaining Tutsi "cockroaches".

Manasseh was beheaded before her eyes. Miraculously, Denise was spared, thanks to the intervention of another Hutu neighbour. Reunited with the older boys, she was taken to the medical centre where a small remnant of Tutsi sheltered for the next six weeks.

The massacre continued, and dead bodies piled up outside their windows. Daily, the survivors were threatened with rape and death, and survived thanks only to the food and drink smuggled in by their Hutu friends and neighbours. There was no news of Charles.

THE genocide that swept through Rwanda in 1994 lasted 100 days. During that time, close to a million victims — one tenth of the entire population of Rwanda — were slaughtered by the militia, aided and abetted by Hutu neighbours. The trauma is almost unthinkable.

Twenty-five years later, Denise has written a book, *From Red Earth: A Rwandan story of healing and forgiveness*, "because genocide is not the end of the story — not for me, and not for my beloved country".

She writes: "How gladly I would forget all I saw that day but — as war veterans can confirm — such images are seared into the brain as if by a camera's flash.

"As a witness to the genocide against the Tutsi, I must tell what happened, no matter how painful. I hope my account will help ensure that nothing like this ever happens again, anywhere on earth. If a

The Easter gospel does not mean that every victim has a duty to let bygones be bygones, argues **Stephen Cherry**

WHEN we read in St Luke's Gospel the words of Jesus as he prayed for the forgiveness of those who put him to death — "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" — we find ourselves touched and moved by his generosity of spirit. Forgiveness amid horrors is one of the most impressive acts that we can witness.

Perhaps we are also challenged. If Jesus could forgive from the cross, why can't I forgive those who have, by all objective criteria, done me significantly less harm?

There are undoubtedly people for whom this has been a helpful question. The challenge has been the right one, unlocking in them the ability to overcome their anger, resentment, or desire for retribution towards one who has done them harm.

But I want to suggest another possibility. Are there those for whom this is not the right challenge? Are



The Hyde Park memorial commemorating victims of the London terrorist attacks on 7 July 2005

evil and sin as well as death. Should we not, therefore, forgive and forget, and be reconciled to one another in newness of life?

We are to be "dead to sin". Surely this means that we are neither to let our lives be dominated by our responses to the sins of others, nor to indulge our own negative, bitter, or retributive emotions.

The absolute sacrifice of Christ and the power of his example rightly inspire us, and his moving words from the cross must always inform our actions and attitudes. And yet to leap from "Jesus did it" to "I should do it," or to "You should do it," is a short cut that we would be wiser to avoid.

IN REAL life, questions of forgiveness are far subtler and more complicated than they often seem when considered in the abstract — or, for that matter, when stories of the heroic forgiveness of others are presented either in the heated immediate aftermath of an atrocity, or after many years have passed.

Forgiveness is a subject that needs to be handled with care and sensitivity, especially by pastors and preachers. The right word, at the right time, offered in the right way,

may lead someone who has been harmed towards a genuine and liberating journey of forgiving.

The wrong word, however, offered in the wrong way, at the wrong time, despite being well-intended, could make life worse for someone who is already damaged by what has happened to them.

Needless to say, there is a range of definitions of forgiveness. For some, forgiveness is about shaking off resentment; for others, it is a decision not to hate. Others say that it is not about feelings, but about behaviour: to forgive is to decline to retaliate or to take revenge. For others, forgiveness is to rescind a legitimate punishment.

In Christian circles, forgiveness and reconciliation are understood to be closely related, because there is an overarching belief in community and fellowship. For the Christian, the absence of forward momentum towards reconciliation renders forgiveness suspect.

Therapeutic psychologists, on the other hand, see forgiveness as a distinctive process that happens within an individual who is thereby freed from the negative emotions towards a person who has harmed him or her.

This would not normally involve that other person, as forgiveness is not about others at all. It is an internal matter. The advantage of this is that someone who has been

When you can't forgive

there people who, although they seek to follow in the way of Christ, might quite rightly decline to forgive?

Even to raise this question seems

to go against the grain of the message that we would most earnestly want to preach as part of the Easter gospel. Christ has triumphed over