

ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE – SUNDAY 13th SEPTEMBER
2020

INTRODUCTION

"...and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." Those words, which we pray so often, bring us back to the centrality of forgiveness to our faith as followers of Christ. Our liturgy in Church reminds us time and time again that we need to be forgiven – not because God wants us to feel bad, but because it's true, and unless we see and admit it, the door to healing and abundant life remains closed to us. But to open that door requires a key, and that key is our willingness to forgive others. Being forgiven (receiving God's forgiveness, and forgiving ourselves) and forgiving others are where the rubber hits the road in our journey in life and faith.

But how easy to be glib about it – until someone really wrongs us. Then we are faced with the reality of just how painful and costly forgiveness can be in practice. And that's what Jesus asks us to think about in our Gospel today.

So, pause for a moment to reflect. Are you carrying a hidden load of guilt? God longs for you to find forgiveness. Are you carrying a load of resentment and hostility? Be honest, and allow yourself to be open to the possibility that, safe in the knowledge of God's unshakeable love for you, you might be able to take some baby steps towards new life today.

CALL TO WORSHIP

From the rising of the sun to its setting

GOD'S HOLY NAME BE PRAISED.

On the lips of children and adults

GOD'S HOLY NAME BE PRAISED

In the glory of heaven and the dark corners of the world

GOD'S HOLY NAME BE PRAISED

In the corridors of power and the dwellings of the humble

GOD'S HOLY NAME BE PRAISED

Let all that has life and breath praise the Lord.

AMEN. WE PRAISE THE LORD.

TURNING AGAIN TO GOD

Let us in silence be honest with God and with ourselves about where we need forgiveness in our lives.

Silence.

Your name is above every name;
yet we so often put our trust in money and power.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

You turn our hearts towards the world;
yet we turn away from its suffering.

Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

You call us to be your broken body;
yet we struggle to share the gift of forgiveness.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

**May God forgive us,
Christ befriend us,
And the Spirit renew us,
And change our lives.**

GIVING THANKS FOR GOD'S GOODNESS - A PSALM

Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and all that is within me bless his holy name.

**Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits;**

Who forgives all your sins
and heals all your infirmities;

**Who redeems your life from the Pit
and crowns you with faithful love and compassion;**

Who satisfies you with good things,
so that your youth is renewed like an eagle's.

**The Lord executes righteousness
and judgement for all who are oppressed.**

He made his ways known to Moses
and his works to the children of Israel.

**The Lord is full of compassion and mercy,
slow to anger and of great kindness.**

He will not always accuse us,
neither will he keep his anger for ever.

**He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.**

For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his mercy upon those who fear him.

**As far as the east is from the west,
so far has he set our sins from us.**

As a father or mother has compassion on their children,
so is the Lord merciful towards those who fear him.

(Psalm 103:1-13)

NEW TESTAMENT READING (Romans 14:1-12 New Living Translation)

Accept other believers who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong. For instance, one person believes it's all right to eat anything. But another believer with a sensitive conscience will eat only vegetables. Those who feel free to eat anything must not look down on those who don't. And those who don't eat certain foods must not condemn those who do, for God has accepted them. Who are you to condemn someone else's servants? Their own master will judge whether they stand or fall. And with the Lord's help, they will stand and receive his approval.

In the same way, some think one day is more holy than another day, while others think every day is alike. You should each be fully convinced that whichever day you choose is acceptable. Those who worship the Lord on a special day do it to honour him. Those who eat any kind of food do so to honour the Lord, since they give thanks to God before eating. And those who refuse to eat certain foods also want to please the Lord and give thanks to God. For we don't live for ourselves or die for ourselves. If we live, it's to honour the Lord. And if we die, it's to honour the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. Christ died and rose again for this very purpose—to be Lord both of the living and of the dead.

So why do you condemn another believer? Why do you look down on another believer? Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For the Scriptures say,

“As surely as I live,’ says the LORD,
'every knee will bend to me,
and every tongue will declare allegiance to God.’”

Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL READING (Matthew 18:21-35 NRSV)

Then Peter came and said to Jesus, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him

over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

Thanks be to God.

REFLECTION (by Lindsey Coulthard)

Lord, how often should I forgive?

Most of you will know I have recently returned from a holiday which should have been a motorbike tour of Europe but ended up as a tour of the north. And it was quite a journey! Whilst I was away, it came time for the trial of Brenton Tarrant who you may remember was charged with the attacks on the Al Noor and Linwood Mosques in New Zealand last year.

Now I don't normally pay too much attention to the news when I'm away, but on this occasion I found myself tuning into the News at Ten every night, to hear the words of those who had lost family members and friends in this appalling attack whilst they had been in worship.

In all a total of ninety-one victim impact statements were heard over the course of three days; and it was the impact of these accounts that kept me tuning in each night to listen. Not just to hear stories of the remarkable fortitude and bravery these survivors and their deceased relatives had shown, but to hear these deeply wounded people of faith grappling with the

nature of forgiveness. The diversity of their responses giving a glimpse into the agonising pain of that process; all of them at different stages.

The ache and anguish of those who survived the attacks is near incomprehensible but allow me to share some of their experiences and reactions with you:

Noraini Milne whose fourteen year old son was killed said her own survival came as a blessing, as she planned to spend her life helping others.

Aden Ibrahim Diriye whose little boy was shot said to the accused, "know that justice is waiting for you in the next life and that will be more severe. I will never forgive you for what you have done".

Farid Ahmed, whose wife was killed in the attack said he harbours no hatred towards the gunman but insists that forgiveness is the best path forward. Asked if he forgave the terrorist, he replied "Of course. The best thing is forgiveness, generosity, loving and caring".

I was fascinated by the different ways and words that the victims spoke as they faced the man accused of the attacks. And these are only a few examples. There were a great many more.

So, in approaching the gospel reading this morning, I drew in a deep breath as it might have been easier to approach this passage with a saccharin sweetness about the fact that since we are so generously forgiven, so must we forgive. But let's face it – how difficult is that?

Whenever we meet together for worship, we pray forgiveness, in the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples; 'forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us'. That, to me, can seem like such a tall order. Just how is that possible – if we have been wounded beyond compare? Admittedly, some things are easier to forgive than others but when the hurt is so deep - just *how* do we forgive? Never mind how many times.

So when Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, how often should I forgive?", and the response is, "not seven but seventy-seven times", we can only imagine how he must have felt. Because he obviously thought that seven times was a seriously substantial offering. Peter's question is in response to Jesus' advice about how to resolve fallings-out in the church. He asks the question in the context of the community of faith – "Lord, if another *member of the church* sins against me, how often should I forgive?" But although Peter's question is directed towards others in the church, the area of forgiveness is one that weighs heavily upon all people of faith, in all areas of our lives; as the victim statements I began with earlier clearly demonstrate.

The parable that Jesus goes on to tell speaks of the king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. The story goes that the one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Apparently, the amount was so striking that some early Greek manuscripts reduced the number – because it was so outrageously large. Just to give you an idea – it would have taken a typical labourer 200,000 years to earn this amount of money. But it's the absurdity of the amount that is crucial to the story. The slave being unable to repay his debt is treated harshly by the king who responds by not only selling the slave and all his possessions, but his wife and children too. However, when the slave asks for leniency and mercy, he is forgiven the entire loan.

But notice how Jesus deliberately uses the title "lord" after having initially introduced him as "king". Matthew understands this lord as God; as one who wishes to settle accounts – as one who longs to put things right.

It doesn't take long though, for the forgiven slave to start lording it over the one who owes a strikingly small amount of money (a hundred denarii – typically about three months wages); refusing to hear his plea and throwing him into prison. All of this being told in such a way as to evoke the command for forgiveness. The contrast in the amounts, between ten thousand talents and a hundred denarii anticipate the contrast

between what God forgives us and what we forgive each other. And I want to suggest that this contrast is not made in order to criticise *how little* we forgive each other but to recognise *how difficult* it can be to forgive each other. We can only ever aspire to forgive in the extravagantly abundant way that God does.

I want to return also to the opening sentence of the parable. To the king who 'wished to settle accounts'. To the Lord who longs to put things right. To the Lord who longs for us to mirror that behaviour by putting things right with others. That is not to say that it should happen in an instant. That is not to make light of forgiveness when hurt runs deep. But to acknowledge that it's a process, even a journey. And it's a journey that can take time, sometimes a lifetime.

Some of our brothers and sisters within the Church of England understand this only too well. Victims and survivors, both lay people and clergy continue to struggle with forgiveness in the aftermath of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse back in 2014. That was seven years ago now, but the struggle still remains. Forgiveness is fraught with complexity and struggle, and our difficulty in offering forgiveness stems from a normal and necessary aspect of human nature. The process

of forgiveness is a journey along what can feel like a long and convoluted road, even within our own church.

Jesus concludes his parable by noting the seriousness of our forgiveness of others, which is neither optional nor contingent. Why? Because God's forgiveness is so extravagantly abundant (remember the cancellation of the ten thousand talent debt). And because God's forgiveness knows no end, so too our relationships should aspire to that grace that knows no bounds. So let's forget about the number seven, or seventy-seven; the numbers were never really intended to be the focus of the story after all. But they do show that our human capacity to forgive is limited; and that's ok. So I'd like to encourage you to think of forgiveness as a journey, as a way of travel rather than a numerical transaction. And know that God is with us whatever stage we're at.

Take a few moments to reflect quietly on what God may be saying to you.

PAUSE TO REFLECT

I'm accepted, I'm forgiven

I am fathered by the true and living God

I'm accepted, no condemnation

I am loved by the true and living God

*There's no guilt or fear as I draw near
To the Saviour and Creator of the World
There is joy and peace
As I release my worship to You, O Lord.*

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WHO IS THE GOD IN WHOM WE TRUST?

We affirm our faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God.

**Though he was divine,
he did not cling to equality with God,
but made himself nothing.
Taking the form of a slave,
he was born in human likeness.
He humbled himself
and was obedient to death,
even the death of the cross.**

**Therefore God has raised him on high,
and given him the name above every name:
that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bow,
and every voice proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.
Amen.**

cf Philippians 2.6-11

PRAYERS

In the knowledge of all God has done for us,
Let us bring to him our concerns
For the Church and for the world.

Thank you, Father, for the love
Which forgives again and again,
And is prepared to trust us
With the care of your people
Even after we have let you down many times.
Teach us to minister to one another's needs
With compassion, sensitivity and discipline,
So that all are affirmed and encouraged.

Silence

The Lord is full of compassion:
His love lasts for ever.

Thank you, Father, for the order and variety,
Simplicity and complexity of this universe.
Thank you for all that humankind is able to do;
May all these gifts be used wisely and well,
For the good of all, including those yet unborn.

Silence

The Lord is full of compassion:

His love lasts for ever.

Thank you, Father, for the opportunities we have each day
To learn the joy of forgiving others
And of being forgiven ourselves.
Break through our self-righteousness
And keep us learning in humility at your feet.

Silence

The Lord is full of compassion:

His love lasts for ever.

Thank you, Father, for all those who care for the sick,
The unstable, the ungrateful and the difficult.
We pray for all who are on the receiving end
Of hate, deceit, suspicion or abuse,
And for those who cause others pain and distress of any kind.
We pray for your healing and transformation.

We hold to your love all who are ill; and from our own
community, we pray especially for Ian King.
And in a moment now we offer you the people on our own
hearts.

Silence

The Lord is full of compassion:

His love lasts for ever.

Thank you, Father, for those whose living and dying
Has taught us much about love.
Freed from their pain and restrictions of age or injury,
May they enjoy for ever the abundant life of heaven.

We remember the recently departed, among them Dave
Butcher, Ilona Garwood-Gowers, and Derek Honeybourne.

And those whose anniversary of death falls at this time:
among them Ray Wallace.

Silence

The Lord is full of compassion:

His love lasts for ever.

Thank you, Father, for disturbing our complacency
And challenging us to move forward with you,
Assured of your company and your love.

*Take a few moments to remember before God other people and
situations on your heart now.*

The Lord is full of compassion:

His love lasts for ever.

The Lord's Prayer

We pray as Jesus taught us, saying:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily
bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who
sin against us.
Lead us not into
temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the
power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

Merciful Father
**Accept these prayers
For the sake of your Son,
Our Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.**

**Our Father, who art in
heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily
bread.
And forgive us our
trespasses,
as we forgive those who
trespass against us.
And lead us not into
temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.**

A CELEBRATION OF GOD'S MERCY

*There's a wideness in God's mercy,
like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in his justice
which is more than liberty.
There is no place where earth's sorrows
are more keenly felt than heaven:
there is no place where earth's failings
have such gracious judgement given.*

*There is plentiful redemption
through the blood that Christ has shed;
there is joy for all the members
in the sorrows of the head.
For the love of God is broader
than the measure of our mind;
and the heart of the eternal
is most wonderfully kind.*

*If our love were but more simple,
we should take him at his word;
and our lives would be illumined,
by the glory of the Lord.*

Frederick William Faber (1814-1863) and Jubilate Hymns
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ENDING

From where we are now
To where You want us to be
Jesus, lead us on.

From the security of what we know
To the adventure of what You will reveal
Jesus, lead us on.

To refashion the fabric of this world
Until it takes on the shape of your Kingdom
Jesus, lead us on.

Because we know that nothing can separate us from your
love
Jesus, lead us on.

**And may the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be with us all evermore.
Amen.**

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