

17th September, 2023

The paper-version Service



To Begin: Find a Bible and a comfortable place. If safe,

light a candle and read prayerfully through the service. If you have access to worship music, choose a song and listen to it as you begin or read, or even sing, the song from this Sunday's Service.

Opening Prayer: Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Song:

Christ triumphant, ever reigning,
Saviour, master, king,
Lord of heaven, our lives sustaining,
Hear us as we sing:
Yours the glory and the crown,
The high renown, the eternal name.

Word incarnate, truth revealing,
Son of man on earth!
power and majesty concealing
by your humble birth:
yours the glory and the crown,
the high renown, the eternal name.

Suffering servant, scorned, ill-
treated,
victim crucified!



The Good
Shepherd
Four Marks

Responding to God's Love

death is through the cross defeated,
sinners justified:
yours the glory and the crown,
the high renown, the eternal name.

Priestly King, enthroned forever
high in heaven above!
sin and death shall never
stifle hymns of love
yours the glory and the crown,
the high renown, the eternal name.

So our hearts and voices raising
Through the ages long,
Ceaselessly upon you gazing,
This shall be our song.
yours the glory and the crown,
the high renown, the eternal name.

The Sermon by Robert Hughes

Read Romans 6:15-23 & Matthew 18:21-35: Merciful Jesus

Even a shallow exploration of what it means to 'forgive' confirms it's a difficult subject. Our willingness to forgive speaks of who we are, of our values and morality. Last week, we explored the first part of Chapter 18 in Matthew's Gospel to see Jesus as the perfect model for personal relationships. Today, our attention shifts to the end of the Chapter, where Jesus shows that forgiveness and mercy are inseparable.

Chapter 18 is the fourth of Jesus' major teachings in this gospel, this time addressed to his followers, among them, those who understand him most, his disciples. They share his goal of bringing this world into the Kingdom of faith. As a community, his followers also serve as an example of faith to others. But they are not always a 'good' example - and only goodness will attract. So he stresses they must live-out the 'Christian' values they are learning, must be true to their faith, encouraging and where necessary reproving one another. To borrow the words James uses: Faith that is not practiced doesn't last (James 2:14-26). But, as we acknowledged last week, correcting others is a risky business. It can often appear to be passing judgment - which is not at all what Jesus intends. ... This is difficult 'stuff' at best, but it's especially hard for leaders in Peter's position.

The teaching ends with the parable of 'The unforgiving servant', which carries Jesus' (at first sight) shocking ultimatum: "If you do not forgive your brother from your heart, this is how my Heavenly Father will torture you until **you** pay what **you** owe!" ... If, at those words, your heart is not now trying to climb out through your ribs, you haven't been paying attention! Whatever happened to grace and unconditional love? Could it be we are seeing a 'coming together' - a collision between moral principle and urgent reality?

I don't think so; in fact, far from it. Jesus is making a crucial point, getting everyone's attention in a very amusing - very clever way! Yes, we have to settle our accounts in this world. But in this case the servant's debt, ten thousand talents, probably comes close to Judea's national income - an incomprehensible sum for the average person. Given an eternity you could not repay it. So for the servant to ask for more time: 'Lord have patience with me', merely emphasises the joke! Nothing short of a miracle can provide this morality tale with a happy ending. The first part of the story is filled with surprise. As the servant begs for mercy, his Lord decides not give him more time - because it would just prolong the servant's

agony at his inability to pay. Instead he is moved by compassion to forgive the entire debt. Only the most generous could demonstrate such unexpected compassion. It's an act that emphasises the enormity of the debt. Yet the same servant, unlike his merciful Lord, sends his fellow servant to prison for a trifling sum by comparison. Though he received mercy, he was unwilling to extend mercy to others. The point is, God's mercy is not given to those who do not forgive others. 'True 'religion builds not just relationships with God but also with everyone made in the divine image.

Jesus' parable both illustrates God's unparalleled mercy and underlines our need to evaluate our own relationships with others before we approach God.

Earlier in Chapter 18, Jesus characterises people drawing nearer to his community as 'little children', hearing the call of faith, coming closer, approaching in all innocence - 'with little knowledge' (v5). And so he says, if anyone causes one of these to sin (we presume he means by false teaching or bad example) they'd be better off dead! We all have to learn, he implies, what's 'right'. So his disciples must keep those learning within their sights (v10); show forgiveness; show them their faults (v15). And wherever they are together as a 'family' in Jesus' name, he tells them, 'I'll be right beside you to help you do it well' (v20).

And, if you remember, it was at this point we entered today's reading, Peter has asked 'how many times are we supposed to forgive (them)?' Maybe he's been involved in an altercation of some kind, a 'falling-out'. (Some followers will have been slow catch-on.) But Jesus has already told them: "Your Father in Heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost" (v14b).

From this same spot a few weeks ago, I remember talking about God's forgiveness when we looked at the conditionality in words Jesus gave us for 'The Lord's Prayer' - 'forgive us our sins **as we forgive others**'. If, as individuals, we want to be accepted by God, we **MUST** forgive others who wrong us with their sinning. This same instruction comes in several place of scriptures, including Matthew 6:14, Mark 11:25, Luke 6:37. It's an obligation each of us owes our heavenly Father because he **IS** our Father. What other reason do we need? But today's reading combines that obligation to forgive with our duty to help build God's Kingdom on Earth: It says we owe it to the community of faith to forgive.

For all that, Matthew 18 makes clear Jesus' instruction not to take wrong doing among us lightly. It's a fine balance, maybe. Love, yes; forgive, yes, but never forget that the spirit of forgiveness is **NOT** indifferent to sin. Our obligation to

forgive has no limits yet we cannot, should not, must not excuse sin. (Christ's call from the Cross: "Forgive them for they know not what they do" is an appeal to God to excuse his torturers (not a call to exonerate them).

But before we finish with Jesus' teaching about forgiveness and mercy in Matthew 18, we ought to remind ourselves not to get 'superior' or condescending about it, v18:10. For the people of Jesus' time, the idea of forgiveness is rooted in their word for sin, 'debt'. When we forgive a debt we are giving clemency - the debt is 'washed' clean away. Yet, even if you forgive my debt, you do not necessarily cancel your judgment of my character because of what I owed you. You might in your pride let go the debt yet keep your opinion.

Perhaps, like me, you have seen that forgiveness is one of the many threads of wisdom that God has woven into the fabric of Creation. In Jesus we discover more of the eternal purposes of love. His mercy resides in his unending presence. He will never abandon his followers. His is our inseparable link to our merciful God.

Collect: Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity: *God, who in generous mercy sent the Holy Spirit upon your Church in the burning fire of your love: grant that your people may be fervent in the fellowship of the gospel that, always abiding in you, they may be found steadfast in faith and active in service; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.. Amen.*

The Lord's Prayer: *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 forever. Amen.*

The Notices: We are now holding services in the building on Sundays at 8am and 9.30am, and are live streaming the 9.30 service. This Paper Service will continue for the moment and is generally available the week after the service.

- Tea and Chat & Bowls: Wed. 20th Sept & Oct 18th. at 2pm, Church Hall and Church.
- Coffee and Questions: Wed. 27th Sept at 11am, in Church Hall.
- Tea and Praise, for Harvest: Sunday October 1st at 3pm in Church.
- COGS Tots: 2nd Mondays.
- COGS Tinytots: Monday mornings.
- Messy Church: Second Sundays of the month.