

Welcome to this time of worship on the 4th Sunday in Lent. As you see, we have the cross on the platform to which different items are added each Sunday in the run up to Easter. We do this to give us a reminder of different aspects of Jesus' journey to the cross, the pivotal point of our faith.

Call to worship - taken from Ps 103: 1-2, 8 (MSG), 11 (NIV), 13,22 (MSG)

O my soul, praise the Lord.

From head to toe, I'll bless his holy name!

O my soul, praise the Lord,
don't forget a single blessing!

GOD is sheer mercy and grace;
not easily angered, he's rich in love.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who (honour) him;

As parents feel for their children,
GOD feels for those who (honour) him.

Bless GOD, all creatures, wherever you are—
everything and everyone made by GOD.

And you, O my soul, praise the Lord!

• **Hymn - 'Father God I wonder how I managed to exist' WF 22**

Father God I wonder how I managed to exist without the knowledge of Your parenthood and Your loving care,

But now I and Your child, I am adopted in Your family, and I can never be alone, 'cause Father God, You're there beside me.

I will sing Your praises, I will sing Your praises, I will sing Your praises, for evermore.

I will sing Your praises, I will sing Your praises, I will sing Your praises, for evermore.

Ian Smale. SoF 92, MP 128, Copyright © 1984 Kingsway's Thankyou Music.

All-age time - Sandy

• **Hymn - 'Jesus' love is very wonderful' WF 46**

Jesus' love is very wonderful, Jesus' love is very wonderful, Jesus' love is very wonderful, O wonderful love!

So high you can't get over it, so low you can't get under it, so wide you can't get round it, O wonderful love!

H.W. Rattle. JP 139, Copyright © Scripture Union

Prayer and Lords' Prayer

Blessings to the children and their leaders as they continue in worship together in Sunday Club. Let's say together prayer Jesus taught us, the Lord's prayer:

Our Father, who lives in heaven, hallowed be Your Name.

Your kingdom come, Your 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 Yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen. (children if there are any! leave for Sunday Club)

Offertory

As has become our custom during lent in this church, as well as our usual offertory, we take a collection of silver coins which goes towards supporting the work of Water Aid, providing vital clean water and sanitation in developing countries. If you would like to contribute, please put your coins in the pots as they come round.

Dear Lord, receive our money as a token of our gratitude for Your provision to us. May it be a message of hope and support for those to whom You will send it, and a token of our thankfulness for Your outrageous love for us all. Amen.

POI

On this Mothering Sunday,

We open our hearts before You, faithful God, bringing those we love, and those we struggle to love, those we have lost, and those we are afraid of losing.

We bring our tears and our joys, our disappointments, and our hopes.

We bring all that we carry and all that we long to lay down.

Living God.

You do not save us from our mistakes, but You release us to learn from them.

Thank You for being there to welcome us back when we have lost our way, to challenge our resentment when we have lost our grace, to embrace our need when we have exhausted our self-sufficiency. We are so grateful.

Gracious God,

We pray that Your reconciling love may bring harmony to our world, especially in the Ukraine and surrounding countries. We pray for those caught up in conflicts between nations and states; for those who are living in fear of the bullet or the bomb. Please Lord, draw the leaders of the nations listen to each other, and commit themselves to working for peace above economics, hunger for power or political gain.

Loving God,

We pray for those who seek to mediate in whatever situation, that Your love and wisdom will prevail to bring reconciliation and peace, patience, and compassion.

And we pray for those we love and care for, for Your healing touch where there is disease, for Your joy in our family celebrations, and for Your unity in Christ to pervade and define our church community here.

We bring our prayers to You in the Name of Christ, through whose love all can be reconciled to You, our God. Amen.

Talk 1 - 1st Impressions

Outrageous love ...

Q What does 'outrageous love' mean to you?, anybody care to share?

Here are some characteristics of 'outrageous': exceeding the limits of what is usual; excessive; extravagant; exorbitant; immoderate; extreme; over the top; beyond reason.

Q What could someone (or maybe you!) do as an expression of 'outrageous love'? answers from congregation, then



As a meditation before our next hymn, we're going to hear some verses from scripture about the love of our God. Please feel free to close your eyes, or focus on the cross on the screen as you let the words of these scriptures fill your thoughts.....

God is love (1 John 4: 16b)

Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; His love endures forever. (1 Chron 16:34)

Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens, Your faithfulness to the skies. (Ps 36: 5-6)

The earth is filled with Your love, O Lord (Ps 119: 64)

Because Your love is better than life my lips will glorify You (Ps 63:3)

'Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet My unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,' says the Lord,. (Isa 54: 10)

The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love. (Ps 33: 5)

Your love, LORD, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies.
You, Lord, are forgiving and good, abounding in love to all who call to you. (Ps 86: 5)

But God demonstrated His own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom 5: 8)

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! (1 John 3: 1)

His banner over me is love. (Song of Songs 2:4)

• **Hymn** - 'How deep the Father's love for us' WF 35

How deep the Father's love for us, how vast beyond all measure,
That He should give His only Son to make a wretch His treasure.
How great the pain of searing loss - the Father turns His face away,
As wounds which mar the Chosen One bring many sons to glory.

Behold the man upon a cross, my sin upon His shoulders;
Ashamed, I hear my nocking voice call out among the scoffers.
It was my sin that held Him there until it was accomplished;
His dying breath had brought me life - I know that it is finished.

I will not boast in anything, no gifts, no power, no wisdom;
But I will boast in Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection.
Why should I gain from His reward? I cannot give an answer;
But this I know with all my heart - His wounds have paid my ransom.
Stuart Townend. SoF 780, MP 988, CH 549. Copyright © 1984 Kingsway's Thankyou Music.

Readings -

One a Psalm about God's amazing love, and one a familiar parable to demonstrate it:

Reading - **PS 103: 1-14, 17-18, 21-22 (GNB)**

Praise the LORD, my soul!

All my being, praise his holy name!

² Praise the LORD, my soul,
and do not forget how kind he is.

³ He forgives all my sins
and heals all my diseases.

⁴ He keeps me from the grave
and blesses me with love and mercy.

⁵ He fills my life^[b] with good things,
so that I stay young and strong like an eagle.

⁶ The LORD judges in favour of the oppressed
and gives them their rights.

⁷ He revealed his plans to Moses
and let the people of Israel see his mighty deeds.

⁸ The LORD is merciful and loving,
slow to become angry and full of constant love.

⁹ He does not keep on rebuking;
he is not angry forever.

¹⁰ He does not punish us as we deserve
or repay us according to our sins and wrongs.

¹¹ As high as the sky is above the earth,
so great is his love for those who honour him.

¹² As far as the east is from the west,

so far does he remove our sins from us.

¹³ As a father is kind to his children,
so the LORD is kind to those who honour him.

¹⁴ He knows what we are made of;
he remembers that we are dust.

But for those who honour the LORD, his love lasts forever,
and his goodness endures for all generations

¹⁸ of those who are true to his covenant
and who faithfully obey his commands.

Praise the LORD, all you heavenly powers,
you servants of his, who do his will!

²² Praise the LORD, all his creatures
in all the places he rules.

Praise the LORD, my soul!

Reading, a parable of a Father's outrageous love.

Father: I have two sons and I love them. Both of them have caused me heartache, but I still love them. Listen to my story (*sits and listens along with everyone else*).

Reading - Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-33

Father: (*stands up*) So there you have it. I know what many of you are thinking: I was too soft and indulgent with my younger son. It is true that he acted disgracefully. He shamed our family - not only by going off in the way he did, but also by how he acted while he was away. So why did I run to meet him? Why did I not only allow him back, but also celebrate his return with a party - and restore his status as a son? Couldn't I understand my other son's resentment and anger? From his perspective, his younger brother had ruined our family, and didn't deserve to be forgiven - let alone be reinstated. He though, had never gone astray. So why should his brother's outrageous behaviour be rewarded?

But if you have ever caused hurt to parents or family, then you understand that this story is not about deserving anything; it is about costly love. If, like my elder son, you have never gone astray, and imagine love is earned by good behaviour and forfeited by bad, you probably have yet to understand what costly love is. That is why I am begging my elder son to come in. I have two sons. I love them both. And I don't want to lose either of them.

Talk 2 - Outrageous love

In demanding his inheritance early, the younger son was not only selfish and greedy but in his culture at that time, his demand was equivalent to murdering his father, the son wishing his father as already dead, and treating him so. This wasn't merely putting the knife in to his father and his family, this was twisting that knife again and again, his family rocked to the core by his demonstrated blinkered, short-sighted self-interest and total denunciation of them.

In the culture into which this parable was speaking, with a stress on family duty and honour, the idea that such a disgraced and disgraceful son could return to the family on any terms would be anathema. In fact, it would be the duty and cultural demand of the father to banish him with a solemn curse, for the son to be disowned by not only the entire family, but by the whole community too.

And as if grabbing his inheritance early wasn't enough, the job the son took when he inevitably ran out of money, that of feeding the pigs was not only a sickeningly foul thing for the son himself to do (pigs were in every way unclean animals to a Jew), but according to one Bible commentator, that job was equivalent in severity and depravity in their day to something like setting up and running an explicit child pornography website or the like nowadays. Would you forgive that of someone you loved, let alone welcome them freely back into your home and your internet access? Jesus certainly knew how to make an impact with His stories, He didn't mince His words or sugar-coat the enormity of His message

But that brazen, arrogant, know-it-all, 'I'll do it my way and to hell with everyone else' son was not the man who returned to his Father. That man, the one the Father recognised from a long way off, was a broken man, humbled by guilt, remorse, and contrition, repentant and lost.

In my 'Word for Today bible notes recently it said this, 'After wasting all that he'd inherited from his father, the Prodigal son returned home, penniless and embarrassed. All he wanted was three square meals and a job in the servant's quarters. But the moment he said, 'Forgive me', his father called for the best robe (a sign of distinction), a ring for his finger (to denote sonship), and newest shoes for his feet (marking him as family - servants went barefoot).' **

How could the father do that after all the terrible things the son had done?

If any of you have been in love, you will know that feeling of wanting to be as close to your loved one as you could be, nothing in between or separating you both. It was pure, outrageous love that made the father in our parable greet his son the way he did. In *running* to greet his prodigal son, (which no dignified father would ever do in those days), in embracing him and celebrating him, the father was breaking many societal taboos, possibly even risking being ostracised himself from his community and family because of his love for his son. But the father's love conquered all, he forgave and forgave, holding the son close.

Outrageous love.

What of the other son? He was a good person, , he'd always been a good person he tells us, he'd lived a good-person life, he had nothing to be repentant for..... but yet it was he who missed out on the joy of a life restored, the feasting and celebrating.

Recognising that he'd made an utter pigs-ear of his life, the younger son had, eventually, listened to the voice of his heart and spirit and acknowledged his wrong/his sin. The realisation of the depth of that need, need that money/thrill-seeking/his own way could

not satisfy, drove him to repentance and in humility, to take the risk to return home, to seek his father's forgiveness. His father's response was a beaming, 'WELCOME, COME on in my precious son, you are home now, whooppee,' a response of celebration and feasting, of the cleansing and restoration of forgiveness. And the younger son was consumed and enwrapped in his father's love.

Outrageous love.

The young son knew what he had been saved from, knew his wrongdoing/ his sin and in repentance, experienced the freedom of forgiveness, opening his heart and spirit to the depth of his father's love, love that was vibrant, joyful, exciting, fulfilling.

The older son, the 'good' son, the 'I've nothing to be forgiven for, I've always done lived right' son, the 'I'm fine as I am in my father's house' son, what of him and his response to his father's forgiving love?

For me, I hope I never do anything to hurt as many people as did the younger son, but like him, I know what it is to come before my Father, my God in repentance, and I know the joy, freedom and love in the forgiveness of my God through my Saviour Jesus. I know in Christ I am forgiven for life, but my love for Him draws me many, many times to my knees in acknowledgement for the times I still try and live 'my way', when what I want to do is to always live His way.

The older son, the comfortable, no risk son, , the son who, despite being heir to all that his family owned and having constant access to all the love his father had to give, yet his complacency of virtue, his blindness to anything but his own version of 'right' and 'good', his taking his father's love for granted had dulled his love for his father and family, it had grown stale. His father pleaded with him to come in to the celebrations with him, his father wanted both his sons with him, but the older son refused, wouldn't listen. Sure, he knew his father loved him, kinda, but he was the one who'd lost the plot of what being 'family' meant, and it was he therefore, who placed himself outside the joyous depths of his father's outrageous love, living instead good in his own eyes, but woefully unfulfilled, his love and life stale. I hope and pray the Lord will keep me from ever becoming that shallow in my love for my Father, my Father God.

And what of us? Is this parable teaching us that living a good life is somehow wrong? NO, of course it isn't! But it is warning us to not fall into the trap of relying on our own version of 'good' rather than that of our Lord Jesus.

And of course, it is giving us a picture of how incredible and unconditional is God's love for us and its readiness to forgive the repentant heart. But it is also a plea from God's very heart for us to not allow our love for our Lord to become mundane, to take our salvation for granted and carry on living our way. God's love for us is always passionately huge, vibrant, fresh, and God's desire is for us to come in and to share fully in that love as the younger son did.

The bible tells us that in the Garden of Eden, at the first meeting between God and Adam & Eve after the apple incident - after the very first sin - what were the first words of God to them? Gen 3: 9, 'But the Lord God called to them, "Where are you?".'

And what are the last words of God to us in Revelation? Rev 22: 17, 'The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!".'

From beginning to end God searches for us, seeks us, longs for us to come close, up close and personal, to share life with us every day. Nothing we have done or will do is beyond the scope of God's outrageous love for us - forgiving, passionate, vibrant, joyous, fulfilling love, personified in Jesus Christ. The outrageously loving arms of our God are forever open to us, running towards us saying, 'Come, my precious, beautiful child, welcome, I am your home.'

Outrageous love, welcoming love, redeeming love, fulfilling love.

Amen

Prayers

(1 Jn 3: 1 MSG). 'What marvellous love the Father has extended to us! Just look at it—we're called children of God! That's who we really are.'

Precious Lord God, we cannot thank You enough for the love that holds us in being, moment by moment, ever welcoming us home.

Lord God of our families and friends, we praise You for those who have inspired us, for those who have mothered us, for those who have nurtured our faith and shown us Your love.

In a world that judges and blames, You forgive and understand.

In a world that has no time for failure and mistakes, You forgive and understand again and again.

Thank You that Your heart is so full of love, it can never run out. Amen.

• Hymn - 'And can it be' R&S 366

And can it be that I should gain
an interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain;
for me, who him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

'Tis mystery all: the Immortal dies!
Who can explore his strange design?
In vain the first-born seraph tries
to sound the depths of love divine.
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,
let angel-minds enquire no more.

He left his Father's throne above—
so free, so infinite his grace—
emptied himself of all but love,
and bled for Adam's helpless race.
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;
for, O my God, it found out me!

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
fast bound in sin and nature's night;
thine eye diffused a quickening ray—
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light,
my chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in him, is mine!
Alive in him, my living Head,
and clothed in righteousness divine,
bold I approach the eternal throne,
and claim the crown, through Christ, my own.
Charles Wesley (1707-88). SoF 21, MP 33(11), R&S 366

Blessing

God of outrageous love,
We go from here with thankfulness that we can never fall out of Your outrageous love,
no matter what our mistakes,
no matter how mean and grudging our love may be.
As You welcome us with Your ever open arms, enlarge our hearts
and minds we pray with the love of Jesus, so that we may serve You faithfully and love
outrageously!

Amen.

**Courtesy of Word For Today, UCB, Westport Road, Stoke-on-Trent. ST6 4JF. Free issues of this devotional are available.