

The Bridgwater Drive Church, 10 Sept. 2023

**Call to worship** (inspired by psalm 103)

Bless the Lord, O my soul  
And all that is in me, bless God's Holy Name!  
I will never forget how kind God has been.  
God forgives our sins, heals us when we are sick,  
and protects us from death.

God's kindness and love are a crown on our heads.  
Each day that we live God provides for our needs  
and gives us the strength of a young eagle.  
The Lord, our God, is merciful!  
God is kind and patient, with unfailing love.  
With all my heart, I praise the Lord!  
With all that I am, I praise God's holy name!

**Hymn** Bless the Lord, O my soul MP 1259

**Offering**

May the offerings brought this day be used as seeds,  
planted faithfully and nurtured lovingly  
so that God's way may be realized anew in this world.  
Holy God, multiply and use them through the power of the Holy Spirit  
to accomplish Christ's work of love in the world. **Amen.**

**Opening Prayers**

O God of all goodness, you welcome us, forgive us and heal us.  
You seek us out from places where we have hidden from you.  
You crown us with steadfast love and mercy.  
Reveal yourself to us in this moment.  
Let us know your presence so that we may bless you:  
Bless you, O God! Bless your holy name!

**URC Prayer Handbook p51**

**Hymn** Make me a channel of your peace MP456

**Bible readings:**      **Romans 14:1-12**  
                                 **Matthew 18:21-35**

The way we read the Bible in the lectionary – in small chunks in Sunday worship every week, means we rarely see the full picture. And in fact, today I'm cheating a bit. It's rare that I can't find something to talk about from the four readings on offer, but I couldn't get very enthused about the readings set for today. But fortune was on my side – next week John Amos is leading worship, and he is not following the lectionary, so that leaves me free to use next Sunday's readings today. Unfortunately, the gospel reading we heard today from Matthew follows on straight from what should have been today's reading – verses 15-20. And therein lies the problem with following the lectionary when you have different preachers each week – they can choose not to follow it at all, or they might choose to focus on a different reading rather than following the gospel story, so you get a rather disjointed

picture. Still, that's the hand we've been dealt, so I'll start by a bit of an overview of Matthew's Gospel to set the scene.

As we know, Matthew is the first book in the New Testament. It is the gospel which draws most extensively on the Hebrew Scriptures – the Old Testament so it acts as a kind of bridge between the two testaments by showing how prophecies from the Old Testament are fulfilled in Jesus. It also arranges the teaching of Jesus into five neat discourses, or conversations, which made it easy to use as instruction for new converts in the early church. The first discourse includes the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord's Prayer and what is called the Golden Rule – treating others as you would like to be treated.

The second discourse in chapter ten is directed at the twelve disciples. It is sometimes called the 'mission' discourse as Jesus advises them how to travel from city to city, to carry no belongings and to preach only to the Jewish communities. He also tells them to be wary of opposition and not to stay in places where they are not welcomed.

The third discourse in chapter 13 provides several parables explaining what the 'kingdom of heaven' or God's reign is like. And then we come to the fourth, chapter 18, the discourse on the church. The general theme is the anticipation of a future community of followers, and the role of his disciples in leading it. Jesus emphasizes the importance of humility and self-sacrifice as the high virtues this community should be built on. It teaches that in the Kingdom of God, it is childlike humility that matters, not social prominence and clout. The chapter offers practical wisdom on relationships within the community of disciples Jesus is forming and that will continue after he is gone. The culture of this community will feature humility (verses 1-5), mercy or forgiveness (21-35 today), and accountability (verses 6-10, 15-20, 23-35). The set verses for today 15-20 sketch out a process for holding members of the community accountable for actions that have brought harm - "if another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." It is very specific and legalistic – if the person doesn't listen, you are to go again with witnesses and gather evidence, and then take it to the whole church. You can perhaps see why I wasn't too enthused to preach on those verses! There is an overarching commitment to justice-seeking that is important, but Peter wonders how far mercy should be extended. How often should I forgive the church member who offends me, asks Peter, seven times? No, Jesus says, seventy-seven times, in other words keep on forgiving without counting. Isn't Jesus contradicting himself? How can there be justice and mercy? An acceptance of responsibility for wrongdoing and forgiveness? This is often a question asked in the criminal justice system – can someone pay for their crime, yet still be in some way forgiven and rehabilitated back into society?

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Compassionate mercy defines the ministry of Jesus, as it does the character of God and God's kingdom, and it is to be emulated by communities of faith. However, the parable that follows about the indebted slave balances a radical summons to forgiveness with an insistence on accountability and just relations that is important in any community.

The parable tells the story of a king and his slave or servant which aims to show us the character of God's reign. The king undertakes a review of the accounts of all his servants. The focus is on one servant in particular, presumably a highly placed administrator who has managed to accumulate a financial obligation of staggering size. His debt of 10,000 talents combines the largest monetary unit of the time with the largest numerical value in that world. We might think of billions of pounds in today's terms. The story unfolds in four scenes, with surprises at every turn.

Firstly, extravagant compassion (verses 24-27): the servant, unable to pay what he owes and facing imprisonment and the forced sale of his family and possessions, pleads for more time. The master stuns the servant and the reader by cancelling the debt completely! Compassion, not harsh judgment, prevails.

Next comes compassion denied (verses 28-30): immediately after his unexpected escape from disaster, the forgiven servant accosts a fellow servant who owes him a modest debt - 100 denarii, amounting to something like four or five months of wages for a labourer. Despite the debtor's plea for more time (the same line that worked on the master), the servant refuses even this request and has the man imprisoned. This withholding of mercy distresses the other servants, and they file a complaint with the king, acting as whistleblowers. And in the last two verses (32-34) The king's compassion gives way to anger. He summons the heartless servant and reinstates the unpayable debt in full. The story had every chance to have a happy ending, but it ends in disaster, with the servant being tortured until he can repay the debt.

Verse 35 offers Jesus' commentary on the parable. He reinforces what he has said earlier in the gospel that if you forgive others, God will forgive your misdeeds. Each one of us is called to forgive from the heart, no matter what the offence was. The parable swings back and forth between extreme mercy and severe judgment. Underneath it all, perhaps, is a simple reality: forgiveness is not easy. Matthew's Gospel emphasizes the importance of forgiveness in the lives of individuals and for the health of communities: blessing comes to those who are merciful. Yet justice matters too. There needs to be accountability for harmful actions and abuses of power.

How do, how should, communities of faith practice both mercy and justice? One of the most powerful and instructive models from recent history is the Truth and Reconciliation

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Commission in post-apartheid South Africa, guided by Bishop Desmond Tutu.

Reconciliation entails both the offer of forgiveness and the naming and acceptance of responsibility for wrongful, wounding actions. Other reconciliation processes that simply forgive crimes without any accountability tend not to work so well. This approach to mercy and justice goes along with Jesus' call in Matthew 18 as a whole - while the faith community prioritizes grace and mercy, it must also hold its members accountable for what they do to others.

This parable is tricky, because forgiveness is tricky. While this story may be about monetary debts, so we may think it hasn't got much to say to us, overall, it is about forgiveness and about how we should live in community both inside and outside the church. Small offences may be fairly easy to forgive, but many of the things done to us by others may be much harder to forgive and move on from. (If any of you have been watching it, you might think of the Woman in the Wall and how young women were damaged by the Catholic Church in Ireland; or indeed of many abuses by churches and church leaders.) It is not unknown for people to hold grudges about even small matters, for many years, causing more hurt and bitterness.

The servant at the centre of this story doesn't realize that his experience of receiving radical generosity from the king, in other words God, obligates him not toward the king but in his relations to others. What is now asked of him? He should extend the grace he received to others. He should have forgiven the debt owed to him with the same mercy and generosity. If nothing else, that is one thing we can take away from this story - as those who have benefited from the generous mercy of God, we are called to extend generous mercy to others.

**Hymn** Let us break bread together MP 414

### **LORD'S SUPPER**

We remember, as we do at every communion service, the gift of the life and death of God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Come to this table, you who are beloved in Christ. Come, not because you must, but because you may.

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**

Lift up your hearts.

**We lift them to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

**It is right to give our thanks and praise.**

We give you all thanks and praise, O God,  
with every knee bowed

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and every tongue giving you praise,  
for in you is extravagant mercy  
and salvation from all that would destroy us.

In the first of your mighty wonders, you created the earth,  
dividing the watery chaos and bringing forth dry land.  
In the days of Moses you divided the sea again  
and delivered your people from their oppressors,  
leading them by fire and cloud to the land of freedom.

In your child, Jesus the Christ,  
your reign of love and mercy has embraced all who live  
and even in our weaknesses you uphold us.  
He was killed but lived again so that he might be Lord of both the living and the dead.  
Now whether we live or die we belong to you  
and in gratitude we share your love and mercy with all.

You give us your Holy Spirit, to teach and to strengthen us,  
to remind us of Jesus Christ and to make us one in him.  
For all these gifts we thank you, and join with all your people  
on earth and in heaven, in joyful praise, saying:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord  
God of power and might,  
heaven and earth are full of your glory.  
Hosanna in the highest.  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.  
Hosanna in the highest.**

This is the mystery of faith:

**Christ has died  
Christ is risen  
Christ will come again.**

Lord God, send your Holy Spirit upon this bread and wine,  
and upon your people, that Christ may be with us,  
and we may be ready to live for you  
and do what you ask of us, today and every day to come. **Amen**

On the night when he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and when he had given thanks, he  
broke it and said, this is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In  
the same way he took the cup after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant in my  
blood, Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this  
bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

### **Sharing of bread and wine**

#### **Prayer after communion**

Most gracious God, we thank you for what you have given us.  
You have fed us with the bread of life and renewed us for your service.  
Now we give ourselves to you, and ask that our daily living  
may be part of the life of your kingdom, and that our love may be your love  
reaching out into the life of the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

**Prayers of intercession**

When we look over our shoulders at fear shadowing us today,  
you go before us into tomorrow, making a path through the sea of yesterday's doubts.  
When our legs tremble from the effort of standing up for what you hope for all creation,  
you stand at our side, offering your hope's strength.

Cloud of Grace, we offer our love to you.

When we turn our hearts into deserts of stony bitterness,  
you transform them into oases of joy.

When we come up with all sorts of rules for those who come to us seeking to find you,  
you tear up the list, stretching wide your arms in welcoming grace.

Servant of all, we offer our lives to you.

When we would clasp old worries to our hearts,  
you open our eyes to that hope which paves the path ahead of us.

When we spend each day consumed with doubts and fears,  
you remind us that this day is the time to honour God, by serving God's children.

Mist of Mercy, we offer our hearts to you.

In the silence we bring before you our own personal prayers for those we know who are ill  
or in need of your grace, especially today thinking of the family and friends of Barbara, as  
we come together to celebrate her life on Tuesday.

God in Community, Holy in One, as you are all to us,  
so we would offer all we are to you, even as we pray as Jesus taught us,

**Lord's Prayer**

**Hymn**      At the name of Jesus MP 41 omit v2

**Blessing** (based on Matthew 18:21-35)

As you have been forgiven,  
now go into a world that needs your forgiving, healing touch.  
Bring peace and hope to others, sharing God's love with them. Amen

The Bridgwater Drive Church sung Blessing.