

Christ Church, 17 Sept. 2023

Call to Worship (based on Psalm 103)

We may be thirsty and parched, like an un-watered garden,
so we come into God's presence: The Divine One is a spring of water!
We may be weary from worry and work so we come into God's presence:
The Holy One offers us Sabbath rest!
We may be lost or confused so we come into God's presence:
The Wise One offers us welcome and guidance!
We may be bent over with struggle or pain, so we come into God's presence:
The Healing One empowers us to stand strong!

Hymn Bless the Lord, O my soul Red Folder 14

Introduction/Children's Time – Disability Awareness Video

A prayer from Emily, who lost her hearing overnight:

Dear God, Sometimes I compare myself with other people.
I can't be like them, however much I wish I could.
Help me to remember that You made me.
I don't need to be like someone else.
I'm special to You just as I am. You rejoice over me!
Help me to do what I can without worrying about what I can't.
Help me to be who I am without worrying about who I'm not.
Thank you that You are always with me,
encouraging me, strengthening me, and guiding me
as I fill a space in Your world that only I can fill. **Amen**

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.**

Hymn At the name of Jesus R&S 261

At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow,
every tongue confess him king of glory now;
this the Father's pleasure, that we call him Lord,
who from the beginning was the mighty word.

Humbled for a season, to receive a Name
from the lips of sinners unto whom he came;
he became a witness, faithful to the last,
and returned victorious when from death he passed.

In your hearts enthrone him; there let him make new
all that is not holy, all that is not true;
He is God the Saviour, he is Christ the Lord,
ever to be worshipped, trusted and adored.

When this same Lord Jesus shall appear again,
in his Father's glory, there with him to reign,
then may we adore him, all before him bow,
as our hearts confess him king of glory now.

Caroline M. Noel

Children leave for Sunday Club

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Opening Prayer (inspired by Psalm 103)

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 Praise to the holiest R&S 103 (tune *Gerontius*) OMIT v 3 & 4

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| Praise to the Holiest in the height, And in the depth be praise: In all His words most wonderful; Most sure in all His ways. | The double agony in man For man should undergo. And in the garden secretly, And on the cross on high, Should teach His brethren, and inspire To suffer and to die. |
| O loving wisdom of our God, When all was sin and shame, He, the last Adam, to the fight And to the rescue came. | Praise to the Holiest in the height, And in the depth be praise: In all His words most wonderful; Most sure in all His ways |
| O generous love! that He, who smote In man for man the foe, | |

J. H. Newman

Readings: Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

Today is Disability Awareness Sunday. We are an Inclusive Church which means we try to be open and welcoming to everyone, especially of those with certain characteristics that have often been overlooked by the church, or people in those groups who have been deliberately, or through ignorance, excluded from the church, and that includes the disabled. Our first reading was from Paul's letter to the Romans. I spoke about that two weeks ago when we looked at verses from chapter 12 which are kind of a blueprint for Christian life. Chapter 12, also talks about us all having different gifts and how we should not think of ourselves more highly than we think of others – we shouldn't put people down. Today's reading from chapter 14 continues that theme, saying 'who are you to pass judgement on others.' The particular examples Paul speaks about, were very relevant to the church in Rome at the time where Jewish Christians were mixing with Gentile Christians and people didn't know if to be Christian they had to follow the food laws of the Jews – that is the bit about the weak eating vegetables, because they didn't know if the meat had been used in Roman sacrifices or not, and Jews don't eat pork. So, to be on the safe side they avoided all meat. They also didn't know if they had to keep the Jewish Sabbath or not – the bit where he talks about some people thinking one day is better than another. Paul tells them if they do keep a special day, make sure they do it in honour of God. Christians do observe a sabbath – Sunday, but it is not the same as the Jewish Sabbath, when observant Jews cannot even turn on a light switch.

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Sadly, able-bodied people often think less of disabled people. You may have seen recent TV programmes like the paralympic swimmer Ellie Simmonds talking about being adopted, because her birth parents didn't want a disabled child; or Rose Alying-Ellis the deaf actress talking about how her parents were told not to teach her sign language because then she wouldn't learn to speak. Or you might have seen Rosie Jones, the comedian with cerebral palsy talking about the abuse she receives on a daily basis both in person and online.

In this church, I believe we do treat anyone with a disability as a child of God, made in the image of God, but it is good to reflect sometimes on how inadvertently careless we can be when trying to include everyone. And indeed, how hard it can be to meet the needs of everyone, and how we should be forgiving if we sometimes get things wrong.

And that brings us neatly to our reading from Matthew which talks about forgiveness. I'll start with a bit of an overview of Matthew's Gospel to set the scene. 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.

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 about the future community of followers, and the role of his disciples in leading it. Jesus emphasizes the importance of humility and self-sacrifice as the qualities this community should be built on. It teaches that in the Kingdom of God, it is childlike humility that matters, not social prominence and 'likes' on social media. 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, mercy or forgiveness, and accountability. The verses from last week (15-20) sketched 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. 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

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system – can someone pay for their crime, yet still be in some way forgiven and rehabilitated back into society?

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 servant 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 servant which aims to show us the character of God's world. 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 his world. We might think of billions of pounds in today's terms. The story unfolds in four scenes:

Firstly, extravagant compassion - 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! Compassion, not harsh judgment, prevails.

Next comes compassion denied - immediately after his unexpected escape from disaster, the forgiven servant meets 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 his request and has the man thrown into jail. 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 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; and for bigger things that may seem out of our control like institutionalized racism, or how society treats the disabled.

How can communities of faith practice both mercy and justice? One of the most powerful and instructive models from recent history is the Truth and Reconciliation 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 -

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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. 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 relation to others. The king tells him, I forgave all your debt, I showed mercy, you should have done the same to the man who owed you a very much smaller debt. The master, God, is angry with the servant's lack of forgiveness and mercy. He should have shared the grace he received with 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. Not only in the way we treat all people the same as us, but in the way we share the love, grace and mercy we have received from God with others in the way we act.

Hymn Let us talents and tongues employ R&S 453

Let us talents and tongues employ,
reaching out with a shout of joy:
bread is broken, the wine is poured,
Christ is spoken and seen and heard.

at the table he set the tone,
teaching people to live, to bless,
love in word and in deed express.

Refrain

*Refrain: Jesus lives again, earth can breathe
again,
pass the Word around: loaves abound!*

Jesus calls us in, sends us out
bearing fruit in a world of doubt,
gives us love to tell, bread to share:
God (Immanuel) everywhere!

Refrain

Christ is able to make us one,

Fred Kaan

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

Christ Church, 5 Sept. 2021 Written service circulated to both churches

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

Merciful God, on this Disability Awareness Sunday we pray with all those living with any kind of disability or impairment. Make us mindful that often the difficulties of being disabled are caused by prejudice and misunderstanding of the able-bodied. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer**

We pray for all those with mental health issues and those who care for them. And we pray for those who are neurodivergent – with learning difficulties or autism, that they may find understanding and support. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer**

We pray for unity and equality and an end to discrimination and prejudice of all kind. We pray for those who have experienced discrimination because of their disability, mental health, or stigma because they live with dementia; for those who experience prejudice because of their sexuality or the colour of their skin, or because they are poor, or uneducated. Help us to truly remember that in Christ we are all one, created in God's image. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

Gracious God, we pray today with all those living in poverty. We pray especially for those in our own country who are suffering due to the cost-of-living crisis. We pray for all those who go hungry and for the people who help them, through volunteering at foodbanks, by donating food and money, or by speaking out and raising awareness of issues.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for all those around the world affected by climate change in recent heatwaves, floods and storms; and for all those affected by the earthquake in Morocco and the rescue teams.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

In this week of the anniversary of 9/11 we pray for peace in all places, especially in Ukraine and the Middle East. And an end to undemocratic regimes. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

We pray for all those who are ill and those who care for them; for those in hospital, those awaiting test results or treatment, for the dying and those who mourn.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Holy God, we gather all our prayers together in the prayer your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ taught us, saying:

Lord's Prayer

Hymn We turn to you R&S 654

We turn to you, O God of every nation,
giver of good and origin of life;
your love is at the heart of all creation,
your hurt is people's pain in war and death.

Free every heart from pride and self-reliance,
our ways of thought inspire with simple grace;
break down among us barriers of defiance,
speak to the soul of all the human race.

We turn to you that we may be forgiven
for crucifying Christ on earth again.
We know that we have never wholly striven
to share with all the promise of your reign.

On all who work on earth for right relations,
we pray the light of love from hour to hour.
Grant wisdom to the leaders of the nations,
the gift of carefulness to those in power.

Teach us, good Lord, to serve the need of others,
help us to give and not to count the cost.
Unite us all to live as sisters, brother,
defeat our Babel with your Pentecost!

Fred Kaan

Blessing

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.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship
of the Holy Spirit, be with you this day and every day. Amen