**13th September 2020**

Call to worship

Come to the God who knows us,
to the God who created our being,
to the God who knows our frailty,
to the God who loves and cherishes us beyond measure.
Come as you are and worship God.



**SONG: As the deer pants for the water**.

PIPE CLEANERS PRAYER \_ MAKE A PERSON

A prayer of approach

O God you are our Creator. The creator of the whole world.

 Unexplainable, unimaginable,
unbelievable, incomprehensible love.

We saw that love in Jesus who came with pen arms and open heart to love the world you had made and still through Christ you beckon us to come back to you.

Yet often we run away

We hide from you.

We close our hearts and minds to you and your ways.



A prayer of confession

Forgiving God,
you are more willing to forgive than often we are to confess,
help us to see our failings,
to see where we fall short,
to see where we deceive ourselves,
where we close our eyes and ears
to the ripples of our wrongdoing.

We come before you, seeking forgiveness. (keep silence)
Now let us receive the power of your forgiveness,

that we may go and forgive as you have forgiven us.
Amen.



A prayer of adoration and thanksgiving

thankful that you care for us, and love us beyond measure;
that you have endless patience with us;

With overflowing hearts, hear our prayer.
Amen.

The Lord’s Prayer



**Students Presentation**

**Matthew 18: 21-35**

**SONG: God forgave my sin**

**Sermon**

This week the Prime Minister introduced the rule of six. Only six people can gather in public or private with some exemptions, for example religious acts of worship!

This morning’s Bible passage is the rule of seven – or rather seventy-seven times or seventy times seven as some bible versions have it.

Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?’

Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Or in short – you should carry on forgiving as many times as is necessary.

We have just finished the Prayer course based on the book How to Pray by Pete Grieg. The book is based on the Lord’s Prayer and in the book, he has a chapter on confession and repentance[[1]](#endnote-1) – the bit about forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

One of the stories he retells is that of Ruby Bridges. At the age of six ruby was volunteered by her mother to become the first African American girl to attend an all-white elementary school in Louisiana New Orleans. Each day she had to be escorted to and form the school by up to twenty-five federal marshals to protect her from the crowd of angry protesters at the school gates. One woman would regularly scream death threats at Ruby. Another protestor held a black doll aloft in a coffin. Every parent pulled their child out of the school.

Having braved the crowd’s hatred, Ruby would sit all alone in an empty classroom. She was taught by Barbara Henry, the only teacher willing to offer her an education. In her breaks she recalls wandering the school, looking for all the other children. Images of this tiny little girl – so smartly dressed and clutching her school bag, guarded by suited men twice her size polarised America.

Watching this tragedy unfold, child psychologist Robert Coles offered Ruby counselling. Once a week he sat in the humble home she shared with four siblings and her parents, who could neither read nor write.

‘you looked like you were talking to the people in the street on your way into school yesterday,’ he said on one occasion. ‘did you finally get angry with them? Were you telling them to leave you alone?’

‘no, doctor,’ replied Ruby politely. ‘I didn’t tell them anything. I didn’t talk to them.’

‘well, who were you talking to?’

The little girl stared at him. ‘I was talking to God. I was praying to God for the people in the street.’

‘You were praying for them? But Ruby, why were you praying for them?’

Her eyes widened. ‘Well, don’t you think they need praying for?’

Robert Coles was lost for words. Regaining his composure, he whispered, ‘what do you say when you pray for them, Ruby?’

‘Oh, I always say the same thing. Please God, try to forgive these people because even if they say these mean things, they don’t know what they are doing’.

Jesus talks about forgiving some one seventy times seven – the rule of seventy times seven. He tells the parable of the unmerciful servant.

The main point of this reading is clearly about forgiveness rather than finance: if we have been the recipient of God’s grace, we should also be a channel for it. As we have been forgiven, so we should forgive.

And yet, the numbers cited by Peter in his question and Jesus in his response remind us, perhaps, of the Old Testament – and, in particular, of sabbath and Jubilee ‘economics’. Some believe that the line in the Lord’s Prayer – ‘forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors’ – also refers to the writing off of debts in Jubilee economics (which Roman laws had overturned). Does our understanding and practice of forgiveness include the possibility of such practical and transformative actions?

Jesus’ parable emphasises the inequality in wealth within the Roman Empire. There is a great contrast between the two amounts of money. Ten thousand bags of gold were an impossibly large amount (equivalent to over 200,000 years of work), compared to 100 silver coins (100 days’ pay). You could read it as a reflection on the inequalities in the world where (for example) large corporations sometimes seem to escape addressing issues of injustice, while individuals are punished for (in comparison) relatively minor offences?

The parable says the servant was forgiven a huge debt by his master but then didn’t forgive a small debt owed him by a fellow servant. He had received mercy but didn’t offer mercy to another.

There’s plenty of questions swirling around about forgiveness aren’t there?

Is forgiveness a ‘one-off’ act or a process? Research into forgiveness shows that it usually has several stages, including anger, reframing the situation, and releasing the sense of victimhood. When Jesus asks us to forgive seventy-seven times, does this reflect making a repeated decision to forgive a grievance – and acknowledgement of the many stages people need to progress through – rather than simply forgiving seventy-seven separate grievances? Is he asking us to hold, continually, an attitude of forgiveness to others? Holding onto grievances, of course, is harmful to mental health and wellbeing. Is this the heart of what Jesus is saying?

The Christian faith proclaims God’s mercy to all of us. Forgiveness is a cornerstone of our faith and a hallmark of the work of Jesus in the world. But the New Testament's messages on forgiveness are sometimes mixed: Jesus calls for forgiveness without bound ("seventy times seven," Matthew 18:22), but also forgiveness "if there is repentance" (Luke 17:3). There are sins that even God will not forgive (Matthew 12:31-32; Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10), and on the cross, Jesus prays for the forgiveness of his attackers rather than forgiving them directly (Luke 23:34). But in spite of these inconsistencies, the general consensus is that forgiveness is a non-negotiable duty of faithful Christians

One of the difficulties with forgiveness is that in popular understanding to forgive means to forget. To treat as though the hurt didn’t happen. It is associated with some sort of martyrish passivity? Forgiving repeatedly does not mean being treated like a doormat. To forgive is not to forget but the opposite - to recognize the wrongdoing, label it for what it is and to confront the perpetrator and condemn their actions; you can’t forgive something that isn’t wrong – in the process of forgiving you call it out. Jesus didn’t die on a cross because human wrongdoing didn’t matter.

However, to forgive is to give wrongdoers the gift of not counting their wrongdoing against them. We all stand in the need of mercy. Hence this parable of Jesus in Matthew 18. We realize that forgiveness is so essential for our wholeness, healing and well-being – to experience mercy as well as to offer mercy. The truth Jesus teaches in our lesson today is that unlimited acts of mercy free us all.

Collective forgiveness may have no place, because the victims are the only ones with the ability to forgive, and the perpetrators are the only ones whose repentance really matters. Think about those reliving the bombing of the Manchester Arena in the public enquiry going on at the moment. Forgiving is in the province of the victims but remembering is something that everyone can do as it the responsibility to seek justice.

The world will never forget 9/11, nor should it. But like other acts of remembrance, such as November 11th, reflection should lead to new hope and a better way than just retaliation and retribution.

Methodist Bishop Will Willimon said in the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*: "American Christians may look back upon our response to 9/11 as our greatest Christological defeat ... when our people felt vulnerable, they reached for the flag instead of the cross."

Do you have difficulty forgiving yourself and accepting God’s forgiveness? Recognising that God loves us unconditionally can be challenging. Even though we pray regularly ‘forgive us our sins as we forgive others’ (or similar), God still loves and forgives us even if we have not been able to reach the stage where we are able to forgive. (For example, if someone has been seriously damaged or traumatised, is it right to expect them to forgive? Is that not just piling on extra burdens for them to bear?) Besides, we cannot forgive in our own strength; we need the grace of God to help us. Recognising God’s forgiveness for us helps to shape our attitude towards others.

On 15th July 2011, Ruby bridges was invited by President Barack Obama to the White House, where Norman’s Rockwell’s painting of her walking to school in front of graffiti was on display. The tow of them stood there looking at it, the first African American girl to attend Louisiana’ William Frantz Elementary School, and the first African American Commander in Chief. The President turned to Ruby and said, ‘If it hadn’t been for you guys, I might not be here and we wouldn’t be looking at this together’.

How had this happened? Ruby had been courageous and dignified and remarkable, but she had also been just six years old. She had inculcated grace quietly at home, been taught to pray for her persecutors by her poor, illiterate parents.

Ruby Bridges reminds us that our choices to forgive can change the world, break cycles of bitterness, healing division and multiplying fractals of grace. Without forgiveness all our prayers are dead religion. But when we forgive those who hurt us, the Father’ name is hallowed, his kingdom comes and we ourselves find wholeness and forgiveness.

Prayers of intercession

Lord,
teach us to forgive without keeping score;
without counting continually.
Teach us to forgive as we live –
day by day;
perpetually;
always.
We each have our own ongoing story;
help us to listen to the circumstances of others,
as we hope others will listen to us.
Teach us to take our historical rights and wrongs;
to transform them in this present moment,
into growth for the future.
Teach us to forgive as you forgive;
to forgive our brothers and sisters
from our hearts.

Jesus’ parables inspire us to pray for those who forgive us,
for big things and small…
for those who do not forgive, no matter what…
for those who do not know how to forgive…
for those who do not want to forgive…
for those who have not been forgiven.
God of forgiveness, for them all, we pray.

God of mercy, your love overwhelms us with your generous forgiveness. May your church be a place where compassion abounds.

God of mercy, you hold before us a model of justice tempered by mercy. Inspire those in political office to promote the restoration of those who offend. Bless the work of rehabilitation centres and projects.

God of mercy, you release us from a debt we can never repay. We pray for all out of their depth financially and those unemployed or facing redundancy. Keep them from despair and grant them hope.

God of mercy your compassion challenges us to work for the relief from suffering. We pray for those felling violence and hatred, especially those seeking refuge and asylum.

Pour out you healing presence on all who struggle to cope with illness and those who grieve. Receive in your love all who die and bring them to the place where sins are cancelled and we dwell in your love, whole and free at the last.

Amen.

NOTICES

SONG MAKE ME A CHANNEL OF YOUR PEACE

The prayer of dismissal prayed at the national service of mourning at the Washington National Cathedral immediately after the 9/11 attacks:

Go forth into the world in peace; Be of good courage; Hold fast to that which is good. Render to no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint hearted. Support the weak. Help the afflicted. Honour everyone. Love and serve the Lord.

1. Pete Greig, How to Pray, Hodder, 2019 ch.10 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)