**United Lent Service 6th March 2022**

God is our refuge
in times of trouble,
keeping our feet steady upon the road,
watching over us and keeping us from harm.
L: Where does our help come from?
ALL: Our help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth!

God is our fortress
in times of distress,
circling us in the safety of his arms,
granting peace when our lives are not at ease.
L: Where does our help come from?
ALL: Our help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth!

God is our Father
who knows us so well,
wanting only the best for his children,
willing always to forgive and forget.
L: Where does our help come from?
ALL: Our help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth!

Lord, as we enter Lent help us to draw near to you in praise, stripping away all that distracts us from worship. **Amen**
As Jesus resisted temptation by the devil in the wilderness, help us reflect on his faithfulness to God, his rejection of worldly values and hold these thoughts in our hearts throughout Lent and beyond. **Amen**

Jesus, you prayed and fasted. As your disciple teach me about spiritual discipline in my relationship with you. **Amen**

Lord may Lent be a time of inward searching that makes me more able to look with compassion at the needs of the world. **Amen**

Thank you Lord for desert experiences, when being confronted with myself makes me realise my need of you. **Amen**

Lord, you've guided us through the difficult days of Lent, encouraging us along the way. We pray as we move towards the darkest day, that you'll not forsake us but remind us of our Saviour's ultimate gift and promise of new, abundant, eternal life for all who believe and trust in him, your precious son, Jesus. **Amen**

**Sermon**

This Lent we are reflecting on the seven sayings of Jesus from the cross on that first Good Friday. Over the next five weeks we will stand at the foot of the cross and look up.

In a world thrown once more into conflict and war, bloodshed and violence, suffering and death we will look up to our crucified saviour and contemplate why the cross makes all the difference? Why has the cross been the emblem of our faith for 2000 years? How does the cross speak into our lives and our world today?

We stand on holy ground.

That old spiritual ‘were you there when they crucified my lord?’ invites us to open our hearts and the imagination of our minds to be there at Calvary as Roman soldiers hammered nails into the hands and feet of Jesus. They undertook the public execution of someone the empire had labelled a rebel: a king of the Jews. This was historically a political extermination of a rival to Caesar, a disturber of the peace, an unsettling presence, that they wanted to do away with. The mockery of a trial under Pilate was only ever going to come to one decision. Crucify him.

And the first words of retaliation that came from Jesus on the cross was ‘Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’

We stand on holy ground.

These words are so shocking that we are not even sure whether Jesus said them. Walter Brueggemann in his book on which we are basing these services ‘In your hand,’[[1]](#endnote-1) remarks that this famous verse is missing from some of the most important manuscripts of the New Testament. That it is missing in some manuscripts means that it is treated with suspicion by some scholars, whether it belongs there and if he really did say it… plus that it is not reported in any Gospel narrative except Luke. Brueggemann concludes you could ask a question about what the absence of this verse means in two ways.

Assume that Jesus said it: why would the early church leave it out and pretend he didn’t say it? Well, maybe they found it too radical. Maybe they figured that there was a limit to forgiveness.

President Zelensky of Ukraine has said the Ukrainians will neither forgive nor forget the invasion of the Russians.

If there is something that could not be forgiven, then surely this must be it?

Dictators come and go, often killing thousands even millions in their way. Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, now President Putin. Holocausts genocides, pogroms, ethnic cleansing: history testifies to numerous atrocities.

Personally, people suffer abuse, rape, murder all of which leave their scars.

Last summer we had the terrible stabbing of Josh Hall. Harley Demmon who at the age of only fifteen was found guilty of the murder last April in Cam Sports ground. The crime was motivated by a feud on social media. The judge said they were teenagers in Gloucestershire but spoke in the patois of urban gangsters. You intended to be fearless when in fact you were insecure. You adopted the personas of hardened criminals. Perceived slights to honour and status were met by promises of violence. Reminders of evil influences in our society,

Josh’s mother said her world has fallen apart. And she could never forgive Harley Damon for the actions he took.

What is unforgivable?

Well, it’s not a competition. All these events from the national to the international to the personal and the individual are desperately sad.

But in the Christian story, we believe that God was in Christ. That Jesus was the son of God. That on Good Friday we, humanity, was putting God on a cross. We were killing God. We were going above and beyond just ignoring or actively rebelling against our creator. We had turned violent against the source and destiny of our lives.

If there is any limit to forgiveness, then surely this was a red line that was crossed in the execution of Jesus? Maybe the writers of the New Testament thought this was too radical and left it out.

But turn the question around, what if Jesus did not say it but the writers of some of the manuscripts thought they needed to put it in anyway even if it doesn’t belong there? That the early church could not imagine the narrative without it. So they had him say it, even if he didn’t? They couldn’t imagine that Jesus did not say it because the word of forgiveness is his ultimate, most radical word. It was what he was known for. Grace and mercy. Radical grace and mercy. It must not be left unspoken, even if he didn’t say it. So its there!

Before you execute me. Before you accuse me. Before you beat me: know that I will not hold a grudge against you. Know that I will not seek revenge on you. Know that, although I could call down a legion of angels and beat the crap out of you, I won’t. I will forgive you who do the actual killing. I will forgive you who have plotted against me. I will forgive you onlookers then and down through the ages who are indifferent to me, to God. I will forgive because that is my very nature. It is my signature act, that for which I am best and most faithfully known.

We stand on holy ground.

But Jesus doesn’t forgive them. He refers the matter to his Father. He says ‘Father forgive them’. He addresses his petition to the creator of heaven and earth. This act of forgiveness has cosmic proportions. Again, a Christin belief in the trinity would suggest that what happens to Jesus happens to the Father. God is involved all the way through. But God is at bottom a forgiver. Thank God.

Throughout human history humanity has wondered if God has got it in for us. The Greeks and the Romans had gods that were vindictive and vengeful. Even today, people will read misfortune, ill health, suffering as a punishment from God. What have I done to deserve this? Bad karma. The gods are against me.

If the world is in such a mess - what does God make of us? What will be God’s judgement on us? How can we be sure that God will forgive us and welcome us back?

The psalmist in Psalm 103 makes faith statements.

Praise the Lord, my soul,
    and forget not all his benefits—
**3**who forgives all your sins
    and heals all your diseases,
**4**who redeems your life from the pit
    and crowns you with love and compassion,
**5**who satisfies your desires with good things
    so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.

They say at the crunch moment, at the point of crisis then you find out what people are really like. Their true colours come out. When Jesus was crucified, he forgave those who killed him (Luke 23 v34). That’s why it is a Good Friday. Because God is good.

The cross of Christ is good because it’s God’s way of bringing us back to himself by showing how much he loved the world - so much so that he was prepared to die for us (John 3 v16) and how willing he was to forgive us for making such a mess, even killing the creator of the universe!

When I was out in New Zealand, I met a Korean business man Harry Tan. Harry took every opportunity to share his faith in the cross of Christ in the world of his business contacts. One of his favourite stories was the Bridge:

There was once a bridge which spanned a large river. During most of the day the bridge sat with its length running up and down the river paralleled with the banks, allowing ships to pass thru freely on both sides of the bridge. But at certain times each day, a train would come along and the bridge would be turned sideways across the river, allowing a train to cross it. A switchman sat in a small shack on one side of the river where he operated the controls to turn the bridge and lock it into place as the train crossed.

One evening as the switchman was waiting for the last train of the day to come; he looked off into the distance thru the dimming twilight and caught sight of the train lights. He stepped to the control and waited until the train was within a prescribed distance when he was to turn the bridge. He turned the bridge into position, but, to his horror, he found the locking control did not work. If the bridge was not securely in position it would wobble back and forth at the ends when the train came onto it, causing the train to jump the track and go crashing into the river. This would be a passenger train with many people aboard. He let the bridge turn across the river, and hurried across the bridge to the other side of the river where there was a lever switch he could hold to operate the lock manually. He would have to hold the lever back firmly as the train crossed. He could hear the rumble of the train now, and he took hold of the lever and leaned backward to apply his weight to it, locking the bridge. He kept applying the pressure to keep the mechanism locked. Many lives depended on this man’s strength.

Then, coming across the bridge from the direction of his control shack, he heard a sound that made his blood run cold.

“Daddy, where are you?”

His four-year-old son was crossing the bridge to look for him. His first impulse was to cry out to the child, “Run! Run!” But the train was too close; the tiny legs would never make it across the bridge in time. The man almost left his lever to run and snatch up his son and carry him to safety. But he realised that he could not get back to the lever. Either the people on the train or his little son must die.

He took a moment to make his decision.

The train sped safely and swiftly on its way, and no one aboard was even aware of the tiny broken body thrown mercilessly into the river by the onrushing train. Nor were they aware of the pitiful figure of the sobbing man, still clinging tightly to the locking lever long after the train had passed. They did not see him walking home more slowly than he had ever walked: to tell his wife how their son had brutally died, and how broken hearted and distraught she was to hear of the sad news.

Harry comments:

‘if you can comprehend the emotions and agony which went through this man’s heart, you can begin to understand the feelings of our Father in Heaven when He sacrificed His Son to bridge the gap between us and eternal life. Can there be any wonder that He caused the earth to tremble and the skies to darken when His Son died?

Now I think the illustration has limitations. The cross and the relationship between Father and Son has led many to accuse God of child abuse: that God vents his anger and wrath on his own son. We sang that opening hymn In Christ alone and some can’t sing that lne that on the cross the wrath of God was satisfied.

The fact is that the cross isn’t a form of cosmic child abuse where a vengeful father punishes his Son for an offence he has not committed. That is morally dubious. But God’s wrath is against injustice and evil and boy there is a lot of it in the world. But the way of Jesus and the nature of God was to overcome evil with good not to repay evil with evil. The cross is a symbol of love. A demonstration of just how far God as Father and Jesus as His son are prepared to go to prove that love.

The cross is a vivid statement of the powerlessness of love. Willard Waller an American sociologist spent his life understanding the complex interplay that goes on in human relationships. He made two simple statements. In any relationship one person loves more than another.

The person who loves the least in any relationship has the most power and conversely the person who loves the most has the least power.

The cross is the vivid statement of the powerlessness of love. Forgiveness is giving up the power of revenge. It is a sign that God is love

 If God is love, then where is he? Has God abandoned us? Is God in Ukraine at this moment? The reality is that God is always there with us, in suffering. The truth is that Jesus was born into a messy world and he died in a messy world.

The cross is often portrayed as the bridge over the chasm that separates heaven and earth. It is our means of escape. But the reality is that it stands at the centre of our decaying world – thrust into the dirt to proclaim God is here! God forgives. God loves.

The bible declares that the worst that the powers of this world and the powers of evil could throw at Jesus was defeated on the cross. Jesus gained the victory over evil. The resurrection of Jesus was God’s vindication of the way of Christ.

Brueggemann says the father doesn’t answer the prayer of Jesus too soon. The answer that leaps to forgiveness is at easter. Three days later. God’s forgiveness at Easter makes it the decisive moment in the history of the world. In Easter god has no vengeance, no grudge, no retaliation, only a reach into the hate and death of the world to make all things new. We live in the wake of that sweeping action. So, when you hear in the liturgy, ‘Christ is risen, he is risen indeed’ mark that as an answer to this prayer, as forgiveness. The world is forgiven. The men of hate and violence are forgiven. The greedy cruel executioners are forgiven. The pattern of death is broken. This is not a Friday moment, but it is a Sunday answer to the Friday prayer.

The drama of the world is made new by the forgiveness of the Father. We need not carry old grudges or old guilt, because the Father has no interest in them. The world is driving itself to death. But the reach of Jesus has broken that cycle of destruction. It only remains to act it out.

Brueggemann quotes the now late Desmond Tutu who wrote:

*When I develop a mindset of forgiveness rather than a mindset of grievance, I don’t just forgive a particular act; I become more forgiving person.*

*With a grievance mindset, I look at the world and see all that is wrong.*

*When I have a forgiveness mindset, I start to see the world not through grievance but through gratitude, in other words, I look at the world and start to see what is right.*

*There is a special kind of magic that happens when I become a more forgiving person – it is quite remarkable. What was once a grave affront melts into nothing more than a thoughtless or careless act. What was once a reason for rupture and alienation becomes an opportunity for repair and greater intimacy. A life that seemed littered with obstacles and antagonism is suddenly filled with opportunity and love.*

Revd Sam Davies was for a time the vicar at Uley but before that had been an army chaplain and a prisoner of War in Korea during the 1950s. He was awarded the MBE for staying behind with injured troops and so accepting inevitable capture. He proved a great source of strength to his comrades and refused to submit to intimidation by the camp authorities or undergo communist indoctrination. After one particularly savage beating of one of his fellow prisoners, Davies smuggled a slip of paper into his cell with his gruel on which he had written: ‘Great is love and it shall prevail’

In our bleakest moments, when we feel we have been wronged, or let down; bullied, unfairly treated, exploited, cast aside, the example of forgiveness given by Christ calls us not to seek violent revenge but to go on loving, to persevere and hang on in faith. It will be hard and there may even be suffering involved. Like the slip of paper in the beaten-up soldier’s gruel, we have to hold on to the belief that ‘great is love and it shall prevail’.

**Prayers**

Forty days alone,
a wilderness of thoughts,
tempting and inviting thoughts,
which could so easily have distracted you
from your task, your mission,
your vision.
Yet you emerged, stronger and more attuned
to all that had to be done,
despite a time constraint
that to our eyes would have seemed hopeless.
We too live in stressful times.
Demands are made of our time,
that leave so little
for the important things of life.
We are easily distracted
in the wilderness of our lives,
by every call to go this way or that,
to turn stone to bread
leap from mountains,
and do all that would keep us from the truth.
We listen to the voices of this world,
and ignore the one who endured all this
and so much more,
and emerged triumphant,
that we might not have to suffer so.
Forgive us, Father,
when we get distracted from our task.
Forgive us those times when we try
to be all things to all men,
and fail to be anything to anyone

You were a man of suffering
acquainted with grief,
loved and despised in equal measure.
You understand humanity,
know our failings,
love us despite the people that we are.
When we, like Peter, deny you
by word or action,
forgive us.
When we, like Judas, are tempted
to follow a different path,
forgive us.
When we, like those in the crowd
allow you to be crucified,
forgive us.
Bring us to the foot of the Cross
to stand next to the one who,
looking into your eyes declared
‘Surely this is the Son of God'

This is love.
Not that you spoke words of comfort,
walked with the unclean and unloved,
shared wisdom, bread and fish,
brought healing into lives
and challenged the status quo.
This is love.
That you spoke the word of God,
walked a painful road to the Cross,
shared living water, bread of life,
brought Salvation to the world
and died for the sake of all.
This is love.
that you forgave those who crucified and prayed father forgive.

Your forgiveness is total,
no notebook,
tape recorder,
or post-it note
to remind you of that moment
when.……..
You take our confession,
offered with hands outstretched,
and gently,
like the loving
heavenly Father that you are,
put it to one side
to be forgotten.
No grudges, no itching for judgement,
no resentment or ill-will.
Not like us
who find it easy to say sorry,
but so hard to forgive
absolutely.
Forgive us, Father,
that we are often more willing
to accept forgiveness,
than to forgive,
more willing to accept your love,
than to share it with those
who have hurt us.
Teach us to forgive,
as you forgive

Lord, grant us simplicity of faith
and a generosity of service
that gives without counting cost.
A life overflowing with Grace
poured out from the One
who gave everything,
that we might show
the power of love
to a broken world,
and share the truth
from a living Word.
Lord, grant us simplicity of faith,
and a yearning to share it

1. W Brueggemann, Into Your Hand, SCM Press, 2014 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)