**17th September 2023**

**Call to worship**

Come and find peace in the Lord.
Put behind you the troubles you bring with you.
Empty your mind of anger and regret.
Focus on God’s love for you,
and for all your sisters and brothers,
and be ready for worship.

**A gathering prayer**

Loving God, as we come to worship you,
forgive us as we forgive one another;
stir in us that flow of love from brother to sister,
sister to brother, and back again.
Help us to nurture it in one another,
all in the name of Jesus Christ.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

God of all, we come to offer you the best of ourselves:
to take hold of mercy and let go of fear,
to take hold of generosity and to let go of resentment,
to take hold of forgiveness and to let go of sin,
to take hold of gratitude and to let go of grudge,
to take hold of all your very self,
in Jesus Christ our Saviour.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

Creator God, living Saviour, enlivening Spirit,
your generosity far outweighs our deserving.
Your grace is far more beautiful than our imagining.
Your forgiveness far exceeds our understanding.
So, we bow our heads and open our hearts,
as we offer you our lives in adoration and thankfulness.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

Incredible God, forgive us we pray when we are reluctant to let
go of the things that have been done to us that hurt. Help us to
understand more fully what it is to forgive,
**and heal us.**

Forgive us when we justify our own mistakes but are harsh in
our judgements of others. Help us to understand them better
from the way that you treat us. Help us to understand more fully
what it is to forgive,
**and heal us.**

Forgive us when we could offer forgiveness but withhold it.
Help us to understand more fully what it is to forgive,
**and heal us.**

Forgive us, heal us and help us grow into the likeness of your Son
Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Gracious God,
there are debts to you and to others that we cannot pay.
There are mistakes that we cannot undo.
There are words that we cannot unsay.
But because you forgive us, we can take another step,
face another day with confidence,
and rejoice at your love for us and for all creation.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

God of all hope and love,
we stand under your forgiveness and praise you,
we are bowled over by your generosity and praise you,
we are in awe of your mercy and praise you,
we are reassured by your understanding and praise you,
we are confident of your faithfulness and praise you,
we are the people we are and the people we can become
because of you – and we praise you.
For all your blessings, for all your patience, for all your love,
we praise you in Jesus’ name.
**Amen.**

 **A reminder of the nature of God’s forgiveness.**

**You will need:** sheets of paper.

* Give everyone a piece of paper and ask them to scrunch it up into a tiny ball as they think about the things that they have done that hurt God. Then, when they are ready, ask them to unfold their paper out again, making it as flat as possible. This is how God forgives: by restoring things to how they should be.
* Invite people to notice that the paper, while flat again, is now permanently creased – a reminder that lives are affected and can be damaged by what we do wrong. Invite everyone to spend a few moments thinking about ways in which they might need God’s healing touch on their lives.
* At the end, put the sheet of paper through a paper shredder, saying: ‘You’ll see why shortly!’

**Matthew 18.21-35**

**Sermon**

This is a profound parable about forgiveness. It raises huge issues that I will not have the time to cover in the space of fifteen minutes today – so this is just a start and we will come back to this parable next week.

Forgiveness is problematic. There is a modern-day conflict over forgiveness because people don’t do God anymore. This parable is about knowing you are forgiven by God and how that should change your life and your relationships to others. Vertical forgiveness, internal forgiveness leading to horizontal forgiveness. I will come back to that in a moment.

First the modern-day problems with forgiveness and the contemporary models of forgiveness.

Desmond Tutu who died at the end of 2021, said that without forgiveness there is no future for South Africa. He rejected the Nuremberg trials model that was used in post Nazi Germany in dealing with war crimes. That approach would have required a full trial and punishment for all accused of violent crimes under the apartheid regime. Instead, Tutu devised a plan that offered amnesty and forgiveness for any perpetrators of violence – black or white – who would come forward and publicly confess the full truth of what they had done during certain prescribed years.

His approach was controversial. Many survivors of abuse warned that the requirement of forgiveness had been used against victims, imploring them to move on, get over it, and forgive. Some responders saw this as a strategy for institutions and abusers to avoid accountability. And yet many of these same voices could not deny the accomplishments of Desmond Tutus Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

One obituary for Tutu said ‘Asking people to forgive and move on… helps abusers escape responsibility’ but then added ‘I know Rev Tutu did an amazing job and showed and taught true grace.

The #MeToo movement struggles with the call to forgive. Many women ask: doesn’t forgiving perpetrators only encourage abuse? The social media world also seems to be a realm in which missteps and wrongful posts are never forgiven.

The pressure to nonconditionally forgive, to forgive and forget can keep people stuck and unsafe. This easy grace can allow abuse to thrive within families and institutions. This is a call to forgiveness without conditions, a cheap grace whereby the power differentials between abusers and the abused remain unchanged and no justice is pursued. The victims inner healing is usually the only real concern, they don’t want to be consumed by hate and bitterness if they remain unforgiving. But it lacks the element of justice. Cheap Grace.

An alternative is what is called transactional forgiveness or merited forgiveness. You have to earn it. At first glance, it seems to be a good comprise between the bitterness of no forgiveness position and the apparent injustice of non-conditional forgiveness. But closer examination suggests that earned forgiveness is in the end a way of exercising power over someone. But that means it is not really forgiveness. It can be just another skilfully hidden way to pay people back and get control over them - a form of revenge masquerading as virtue. If there is enough weeping, imploring, and apologising – typically involving considerable self-abasement then he or she is forgiven. But all that is the pre-condition for the forgiveness. That is the gauntlet they are forced to run until they are wounded sufficiently. There is little grace in this model.

The other culturally dominant model of forgiveness is that there is no forgiveness’ at all. Some things are so evil they cannot be forgiven only the pursuit of justice for the victim. No grace.

What all these models have in common: cheap grace/non conditional forgiveness, little grace – the transactional merited forgiveness, or the no grace, no forgiveness model, is that they lack any vertical dimension.

They all contrast with the costly grace model of forgiveness assumed in the Bible, which has both a horizontal and vertical dimension to it and the internal dimension that changes the heart of the forgiven.

Let me explain using this parable.

First of all, there is **the offence.**

A king had a servant who owed him a debt of ten thousand bags of gold. An ordinary working man in those days could expect to earn perhaps a bag of gold in a year. So, it is an inconceivable number. Jesus seems to be speaking vividly of an infinite immeasurable debt.

The king confronts the servant and demands that he make good on his debt, but this is something that no human being could possibly do. The customary way to handle bankruptcy in ancient cultures was to become a slave, and the king calls for his sale, although of course it could not possibly help him recoup his losses.

Then there is **the request**. The servant asks that the king’ have patience with him. The offer to pay back everything is an offer to make restitution but even the most sincere effort on the part of the servant could never replace the money that the king and the kingdom had lost.

But then there is **the release**. In response the king released him and forgave the debt. Freeing him from liability and obligation. The request by the servant for patience – makrothumeo in Greek – literally means to be slow to boil or melt – hints at the cost of forgiveness. The older English word is long suffering. Patience is the ability to bear suffering rather than give in to it. To forgive someone’s debt means to absorb the debt yourself. If a friend borrows your car, wrecks it through reckless driving, and hasn’t any ability to remunerate you financially, you may say ‘I forgive you,’ but the price of the wrong does not evaporate into air. You either find the money to buy a new car or go without one. Either way forgiveness means the cost of the wrong moves from the perpetrator to you, and you bear it.

Forgiveness then is a form of voluntary suffering. In forgiving, rather than retaliating, you make a choice to bear the cost.

But then there is a **new offence**. In the next scene we see the forgiven servant meeting a second servant. The second man owes the forgiven servant the modern equivalent of a few pounds. But the forgiven servant seizes him and starts choking him! The second servant responds in exactly the same way the forgiven servant responded to the King – making the same request. But when his fellow servant cannot immediately produce the money, the forgiven servant throws him into jail.

The final piece of the parable is **the verdict**. When the king hears this, he summons the first servant and he says in effect; ‘How can anyone who has experienced the lavish mercy I showed you have such a cruel, ungenerous attitude towards others?’ and with that he throws the first servant into prison. Jesus ends with a chilling line:

*This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*

The meaning is not hard to discern. The king is God . We all are the servants. The ten thousand gold coins is the infinite debt we owe God. God created us and sustains our lives every second – so we owe God supreme love and gratitude, dependence and obedience, but we don’t’ give it to God. There is not a person on earth who does not receive the mercy of God in some way. Yet the way we treat other human beings falls infinitely short of the generous mercy with which God treats us. The law, as summarized by Jesus has the two greatest commandments: commandments not advice or suggestions – commandments - love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and love your neighbour as you love yourself. No-one comes anywhere near fulfilling those requirements.

With that basic understanding of the parables’ meaning, here’s what we learn about both God’s forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others.

Forgiveness is perceived as difficult and problematic. The parable is more than realistic about this. God may forgive us, but we fail to forgive others.

Forgiveness is difficult for us to receive. The enormous debt that the servant owes tells us that our debt to God is too large to ever make up. God’s forgiveness cannot in any way be merited – it will have to be absolutely free. The servants pathetic offer to pay the king back is as unrealistic as any effort to earn our way into God’s favour by good works. Please forgive me God. I’ll go to church every week. Ill try harder to be a better person. Or I will loathe myself and grovel and then I’ll be worthy of forgiveness. No amount of self-flagellation can undo the damage we’ve done.

Our only hope is in the astounding free grace and forgiveness from God.

 But then there is our pride. I am an upstanding induvial., I try to have the best standards. I’ve never abused anyone. Let alone robbed or killed anyone. What do I need to be forgiven for? I keep being told I’m loved and special. God is there to support my life not someone who I give an account to. I’m entitled. If anything God owes me!

Our culture has taken an inward turn. Modern therapy was designed to define individuals against any community or outward influence that foisted guilt-producing standards on them. Freud took an analytic approach – one of deconstruction – of any moral norms or beliefs that created anxiety or shame. Individual authenticity came to mean liberation from any norms that you do not choose or create yourself. So, extricate yourself from the bonds of tradition, duty, obligation to community and especially to a belief in a divine being in order to purse your own personal aspirations and desires. For that view of course, God has to be a convenient illusion or delusion or at least turned into someone harmless but not holy.

Forgiveness is not merely difficult for us. While we have to speak carefully and reverently here, the parable points to what we will see in the rest of the Bible, namely that God faces obstacles to forgiveness. The story hints at the extraordinary costliness of forgiveness to God. The parable does not address this directly, yet Jesus deliberately chose an unthinkably mind-numbing size debt that he knew even a great king would find impossible to forgive without de stabilizing his kingdom. How forgiving us required of God measures costly even to Godself remains outside of the scope of this parable. It is hinted at however and that is important.

Forgiveness is difficult for us to grant. Perhaps the most shocking part of the story is the callousness of the forgiven servant towards others. How could he fail to be softened and transformed by the king’s mercy? How could he fail to be softened and transformed by the king’s mercy? As listeners to the story, we can see the incongruity clearly. Yet we who live only by the mercy of God every second of our lives fail to be kind, merciful, generous, gracious, and forgiving every day. This story, then is an arrow pointed directly at our own hearts.

We should not miss the confrontational nature of this parable. This is not a feel-good story about people receiving God’s forgiveness and then eagerly spreading the love to others. Rather it is a story about a person asking for forgiveness and then being utterly unchanged when he gets it.

Why that may be, how to change that, what are the consequences should it happen are issues I will look at next week.

Ponder on these issues in the meantime.

**Prayers of intercession**

Just as I am, thou wilt receive,
wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
because thy promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.
*(Charlotte Elliot 1789 – 1871)*

God, who alone can forgive all our sins and heal all our infirmities, in your mercy,
**hear our prayer.**

We come before you now to offer up prayers for our troubled world. So many people and so many situations where forgiveness could bring so much healing and power – from individuals up to whole countries. We think about the stories in the news this week. We have been so conscious of human shortcomings. We pray for the resolution of unrest in prisons. For the continuous threat of terrorism. We pray for countries – such as the Ukraine – where war is no longer a headline, but where people live each day with uncertainty and terror. We pray for places where a solution cannot even be imagined and the hurt just gets deeper. For people working together to promote peace and forgiveness. We pray for areas – such as Morocco and Libya –  affected by such terrible natural disasters, that aid will reach where it is most needed.

God, who alone can forgive all our sins and heal all our infirmities, in your mercy,
**hear our prayer.**

We pray for the church worldwide. Church, the place where we expect to find tolerance and forgiveness; but it’s not exempt from trouble, both from within and without. We pray for the situation in Eritreya, where outside violence has come within the church walls and caused so much harm. We pray against any kind of violence in your holy places, verbal or physical. May the Church be a beacon of your love and forgiveness.

God, who alone can forgive all our sins and heal all our infirmities, in your mercy,
**hear our prayer.**

We pray for our communities. For people who have had tough lives, perhaps have known only unkindness and even violence, and probably don’t even understand what love and forgiveness are. We pray for people who have had things happen in their lives that they can’t forgive. We pray for people whose lives are eaten up by guilt over things they have done.

God, who alone can forgive all our sins and heal all our infirmities, in your mercy,
**hear our prayer.**

We pray for the sick, in body mind and spirit. For those who have lost a loved one. May they know your healing touch in the way they need it most. We pray for people who have hurt us; and for people we have hurt. Jacob’s sons told Joseph lies, watching out for themselves. Joseph forgave and provided for them. Help us to forgive from the heart, with deeds, not just words. We pray that we would always put the needs of others before our own.

God, who alone can forgive all our sins and heal all our infirmities, in your mercy,
**hear our prayer.**

We pay for our young people, our children and grandchildren, that they will learn the way of forgiveness, forgiving and being forgive. We think about the man who didn’t pay it forward when he was forgiven his debt. He didn’t even think about it. Help us to be totally honest and open before you, realising forgiveness must be passed on to others. It can’t be hoarded, stored up, hugged close. God, who alone can forgive all our sins and heal all our infirmities, in your mercy,
**hear our prayer. Amen.**

**A prayer for all ages together**

[insert complete prayer]

**A sending out prayer**

Go out as forgiven people,
forgiving those who hurt, disappoint or outrage,
not in the world’s way of ‘anything for a quiet life’,
but as disciples of Jesus who forgive from the heart,
offering generously of yourselves,
in the cause of God’s peace.
**Amen.**

References: Timothy Keller, Forgive, Hodder, 2022