

Call to Worship

Into your presence we come, Lord of freedom, remembering those who fled captivity and found freedom in your sanctuary. Into your presence we come, Lord of forgiveness, remembering your Son's gift to us, and your gracious reconciliation. Into your presence we come, Lord of grace, and we know your generosity to us is beyond our understanding. Into your presence we come, may we lift up our praise to you!

Hymn CH4 485 – Dear Lord and Father of Mankind,

Prayer of Adoration & Praise

We clear our heads, we still our hearts and we come before God in prayer, let us pray;

God of grace, your love created the universe, and all that it contains. Earth, air, fire, and water the traditional 'elements' of all life.

Every part of creation made from the same tiny atoms of life-giving energy. Each one made with love.

You give us so much more than we deserve, and you ask only that we love you in return. You give us free will, which allows us to choose to say yes or no to your love.

Merciful God, forgive us, for those times we chose to say no, help us desire to say yes.

Father, you promise to forgive us; to restore our relationship with you when we turn and say yes to your love.

You invite us into a relationship and desire us to play our full part in it. You also ask us to treat the rest of creation as you do, with love and mercy.

You have given us a great responsibility over all creation and too often, over millennia, we have failed to act wisely; we have been greedy and selfish, and have forgotten to care and share all that creation gives us.

Merciful God, forgive us. Help us to seek to be better co-creators, and to make the changes we need to so that our world can flourish as it should. Your son, Jesus, has left us the example we can choose to follow. Give us courage to want to choose his path.

This we ask in Jesus' name, who taught us when we pray together to say; Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive others that sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

Reading: Matthew 18: 21 - 35 (taken from The Good News Translation)

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?"

²² "No, not seven times," answered Jesus, "but seventy times seven, ²³ because the Kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a king who decided to check on his servants' accounts. ²⁴ He had just begun to do so when one of them was brought in who owed him millions of pounds. ²⁵ The servant did not have enough to pay his debt, so the king ordered him to be sold as a slave, with his wife and his children and all that he had, in order to pay the debt. ²⁶ The servant fell on his knees before the king. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay you everything!' ²⁷ The king felt sorry for him, so he forgave him the debt and let him go.

²⁸ "Then the man went out and met one of his fellow servants who owed him a few dollars. He grabbed him and started choking him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he said. ²⁹ His fellow servant fell down and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back!' ³⁰ But he refused; instead, he had him thrown into jail until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were very upset and went to the king and told him everything. ³² So he called the servant in. 'You worthless slave!' he said. 'I forgave you the whole amount you owed me, just because you asked me to. ³³ You should have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you.' ³⁴ The king was very angry, and he sent the servant to jail to be punished until he should pay back the whole amount."

³⁵ And Jesus concluded, "That is how my Father in heaven will treat every one of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Hymn CH4 528 – Make me a channel of your peace

Sermon – 'Freedom & Forgiveness'

How hard is it to say sorry when we have made a mistake? To do that, means swallowing our pride, overcoming our embarrassment and laying ourselves open to a

possible rebuff. How often have you thought to yourself, 'I'll just keep my head down and wait for the whole situation to blow over!' Saying sorry can be so difficult that it led the singer Sir Elton John and his writing partner Bernie Taupin to write a song about this during 1976. Do you remember the lyrics:

*'What have I got to do to make you love me, what have I got to do to make you care, what do I do when lightning strikes me, and I wake to find that you're not there. What do I do to make you want me, what have I got to do to be heard, what do I say when it's all over and sorry seems to be the hardest word.'*¹

Yet, if 'sorry' seems to be the hardest word, there are three other words which are directly related to it, which can be even more difficult to say: 'I forgive you.' Now, we may be happy to say: 'I forgive you'; we may want to mean it and genuinely believe that we do, but to really forgive someone in the truest sense of the word is a rare gift indeed. All too often, a past mistake is dredged up in anger. An error which we thought was long-since forgotten is suddenly thrown back in our face. Are we not all guilty of doing that? Do we ever resent having to give someone else forgiveness?

As we ponder these questions it seems to me that our Gospel reading today can help us make steps towards a solution. At the beginning of our reading we have a conversation between Peter and Jesus that we only find in Matthew's Gospel. It seems that Peter was also someone who found forgiving others hard and so he approaches Jesus, and asks, perhaps in exasperation: *'Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?'* Peter suggests seven times, and must have felt within that he was giving 'the world' because the Old Testament Prophet Amos related a message from God, in verse three of chapter one, of the book named after him: *'For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke my punishment.'*

The Rabbis, therefore, had taught that to forgive someone three times was enough. Peter probably thought that by suggesting seven times, he would be showing extreme forgiveness. After all, how many times could you forgive a person, the same person, for a sin against you, perhaps the same sin over and over again and that's before we determine if the sin is so great that forgiveness is not an option.

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Jesus, as usual, astounds Peter with His answer in verse twenty-two: *'No, not seven times,... but seventy times seven...'* In essence, Jesus is saying – go on and on forgiving Peter. Go on and on and on forgiving. In the way that God has forgiven us, over and over and over again, for turning away from Him and for grieving His heart, we must be able to say; 'I forgive you' truly and sincerely to others. However, just to say 'I forgive you' is not enough. It needs to be repeated every time we feel the sense of grievance rising up within us.

Jesus goes on to reinforce His answer by telling the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. A king wanted to settle his accounts with his servants. A servant was brought before the king who owed him millions of pounds. The servant could not pay, so the king was prepared to sell the servant, his family and his possessions to recoup his money. However, the servant begged for mercy and patience and promised to pay all he owed the king. The king was merciful, he cancelled the debt and let the servant go.

Yet, later, this same servant encounters a peer who owes him a small sum of money. When his peer cannot pay, and begs for mercy, the servant denies him mercy and has him thrown in prison. When the king finds out what has happened, he calls the servant before him and tells him, in verse thirty-three: *'You should have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you.'* Finally, the king sends this servant to prison to be punished until he can repay his debt. Jesus concludes by saying that this is how it will be for us, if we do not forgive one another.

Yet, forgiveness is a 'tricky' thing isn't it? All of us are often willing to go so far, before we start wanting to place limits on our forgiveness. How much? How often? Who must we forgive and in what circumstances? And, above all, is it fair? Are we getting as much forgiveness as the person who we are sat next to this morning? Are they giving up as much as we are giving up by granting forgiveness?

Let me share with you what could be described as a petty example. When I was about eight years old and my brother, David, was five he had a toy police car that he absolutely adored. Yet, brothers are brothers and at that age we often fell out, ended fighting one another and then our Mum or Dad or both would 'ground' us for it.

Now, I'm ashamed to admit it, but after one such event, I decided that I would teach my little brother 'a lesson'. I took the aforementioned toy car and threw it, full force, at our bedroom door. The car ended up in three bits and David went 'bananas'. At the time, I refused to say sorry and when I eventually gave in and did say sorry, he refused to forgive me. We are now forty-one and thirty-eight respectively and although he has forgiven me, every so often David will smile and say: 'Remember when you broke my favourite toy car ...' and I'll say, 'Yes – and I'm still sorry.'

Having spoken about human forgiveness, we also have to take some time to look at God's forgiveness. Can God forgive us? Does God forgive all sins? What are the conditions of God's forgiveness? If we believe that human forgiveness is possible, then forgiveness from God is certain. In order for us to believe that we are forgiven and reconciled people, truly forgiven by God, then we must believe that human forgiveness is possible and that our human relationships can be reconciled.

Nevertheless, I'm left with other questions. How realistic is it that we will be able to forgive everyone who hurts us? Why is it so difficult to forgive, forget and move on? I suppose it is because all our actions, all the sins we commit against others, have consequences. People do many things that hurt us. People say many things that hurt us. So, how can we erase the hurt that they have done? Often saying, 'you're forgiven' does not make us feel much better. We know that to be true.

And yet, to forgive means cancelling a debt – as the king does in the parable – to say that a debt is no longer owed. We have already cancelled our debts – our sins – when we prayed the Lord's Prayer today. We said, 'forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.' Sin results in a debt we owe to someone else and to God and forgiveness means a cancelling of the debts that we owe and are owed to us. Yet, how can sin be paid for if it is cancelled? If we forgive someone are they no longer accountable?

This last question, I feel, provides a stumbling block for us when it comes to forgiveness for ourselves and for others. We want to know what we are getting in to. What we are agreeing to. Before we sign 'on the dotted line' and 'let someone off the hook'. Furthermore, we also want to know what God expects from us, if God is offering us forgiveness. If we return to the parable we can find the answer. The king is prepared to hold the servant accountable until something important happens. The servant asks

for patience. He asks for mercy. He asks for a second chance. It is this act of repentance, this asking for forgiveness that triggers the king to cancel the debt.

When we ask God for forgiveness the answer is always, always, always, Yes. God's forgiveness flows out from a heart of love that never empties. Yet, what is our answer when others ask us for our forgiveness? Is the answer always yes? Is there a time limit to our forgiveness? How often do we wonder if someone is truly sorry? Truly apologetic? Maybe, we are right to do so because we know that our own apologies are sometimes weak and insincere. Yet, how often do we cross the line from questioning sincerity to questioning how much someone deserves to be forgiven. We judge some people to be beyond deserving our forgiveness or even God's forgiveness. The servant certainly decided his peer was beyond deserving mercy.

However, with God, it is different. When we confess our sins and truly sorry, they are put behind us. Forgiven. Over and done with. There will be no going back to them later. No dragging them up to use against us. It is as if they were never there. We are free and forgiven – that is the good news. The bad news is this – God wants you and I to show the same level of forgiveness to others. This will not be easy and we will often fail, but like Peter, we want to know – have we done enough?

Well, God promises us that practicing forgiveness is life-giving, whereas withholding forgiveness can only hurt us. So, we struggle, and we try harder to forgive those who have hurt us. We try harder to ask others for their forgiveness, so that 'sorry' is no longer the hardest word. No matter, where we are in this struggle today, we can trust that we find ourselves safely caught in God's Grace, God's Love and in God's boundless forgiveness.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Hymn– I will wait for you

Prayer for Ourselves and Others

We unite our hearts again in prayer, let us pray;

God of grace and mercy, your love for us is wider, deeper, and higher than we could ever imagine, and we are grateful for it.

You call us friends, and invite us to be co-creators of your kingdom, here on earth with you.

We know that our world is struggling: there is an increased risk of disease, an ongoing abuse of resources, poor decision making leading to long term damage for short term gains.

Christians have played a part in this over many generations, but perhaps now, as our old way of life unravels, and a new way of living unfolds, we can face up to our mistakes and try to make better choices that will bring your kingdom, here and now.

Our country is rich, profiting from years of slavery and mining other countries' resources.

For too long we have not acknowledged nor admitted our mistakes. We need help to accept them, and to turn from them, seeking forgiveness from those we have damaged and hurt.

We need to become humble, and let go of our sense of entitlement to ruling the world; instead we need to become servants of the world, looking for ways to bring justice and equality to all people.

The mistaken choices of our ancestors have caused misery and suffering for millions, and if we do not acknowledge and turn from their mistakes we will cause further misery and suffering to future generations.

We have been given an opportunity, due to the pandemic, to stop and make big changes to how we choose to live.

We have the chance to heal our world, to make right some of our mistakes. We have the ongoing invitation from you, Lord God, to continue to co-create and make this wonderful world more like heaven.

Help us to choose to be filled with love for creation, to seek new ways to bring justice and equality for all people. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers. Amen.

Hymn CH4 439 – Look, ye saints, the sight is glorious

Benediction

Forgiveness is hard to receive and often more difficult to give. As we close our time of worship, know that God can cope. Seventy-seven times is a lot of forgiveness, and it is yours. Receive it and go on. Go on into this new week: forgiven by God, loved by Jesus, and led by the Holy Spirit. May the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Spirit be with you and all who you love this day and forever more. Amen.