

Called to be a community of mercy and kindness: the search for forgiveness.

May my words be faithful to the written word, and may the written word lead us to the Living Word, Jesus the Lord. Amen.

*Wilt Thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which was my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt Thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
And do run still, though still I do deplore?
When Thou hast done, Thou hast not done, For I have more.*

Words of John Donne from *Wilt Thou Forgive*, which will be played after the Benediction later in this service. These are powerful words as we reflect on the search for forgiveness as our gospel picks up this theme from last Sunday.

Today's gospel unpacks Matthew's hermeneutic of mercy. We see this littered throughout Matthew's gospel and it's good for us to take time to think about this, as we deepen our awareness of the call to mercy and kindness.

Matthew has much of his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, earlier in the Gospel, where Jesus encourages his disciples to renounce anger (5.21-26) and practice forgiveness (6.12, 14-15). Many people have suggested this is a new teaching, but actually it has massively clear parallels with a text from 200 years before in the Jewish wisdom text of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus (27.30-28.4), which we are going to hear now:

*Anger and wrath, these also are abominations,
yet a sinner holds on to them.
The vengeful will face the Lord's vengeance,
for he keeps a strict account of their sins.
Forgive your neighbour the wrong he has done,
and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray.*

*Does anyone harbour anger against another,
and expect healing from the Lord?
If someone has no mercy towards another like himself,
can he then seek pardon for his own sins?*

Interestingly, you will notice that both texts connect forgiveness of neighbour with praying for forgiveness of one's own sins. And we see the importance of law leading to generous dealings with others - as God is generous with us.

We'll look at the parable in a moment, but first just to examine the entreaty to forgive freely as God forgives us. The question is *'if someone does something to me should I forgive as many as seven times?'* to which Jesus responds *'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy seven times.'*

This is a reversal of an ancient text from Genesis 4.23-24, where the chest-thumping Lamech says: *'I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.'*

Lamech was Cain's great, great grandson - Cain who killed his brother Abel - and here, Lamech tries to manipulate God to bring protection as God had done for Cain. The cycle of revenge and un-forgiveness stretches back far into the mists of human existence.

Jesus having moved the 77 times from revenge to forgiveness is entreating us to take on the mercy of God in our lives. Now, hear me when I say this is not easy. Forgiveness is not a warm fluffy pink thing like Candifloss at the Feast fair that just easily wraps itself round a problem.

Forgiveness is hard, painful and demanding. It doesn't mean forgetting and is a process that needs to be worked at time and again, over time, and with commitment.



And yet we seek to live this, because we know this is what God is like.

This picture depicts **Concentration of Hands II** by Barbara Hepworth (private collection)

After he had treated her daughter Sara in the hospital in Exeter, the surgeon invited the sculptor Barbara Hepworth to observe some operations at close quarters; and from

this she produced a number of drawings that capture the intense concentration, the co-operation and the almost prayerful reliance on a greater power that mark a surgical team at work. TS Eliot fans will get the allusion as well¹.

The essence of the surgeon's gift (like the divine grace) is that it is not rationed, and these drawings were made shortly after the establishment in the UK of the National Health Service (NHS). The NHS was to be free at the point of delivery, and this has marked it out as a beacon in the rest of the world. And it is something we are so mindful of at this time of Covid-19, and how fortunate we are to have our health service and the selflessness of those serving in it at this time.

Is the divine grace really as free as that - and even more available and extravagant? It has always been hard to believe that God's compassion is absolutely unlimited – absolutely free, with no strings attached.

¹ TS Eliot East Coker IV from The Four Quartets

Well the parable opens out this idea of the extravagant mercy of God. We are shown here how we are called to live with mercy and kindness - because through God's Kingdom we come to mirror the life of the divine, albeit through a glass darkly for now!

So let's look together at the parable a little more closely. The slave owes a tremendous debt - a talent is about 20 yrs worth of wages, so the slave owes the king approximately 200,000 years' wages. So on 2019 figures that's about £6bn!

To which the king responds that the man, his family and possessions be sold into slavery. Now that's pretty harsh and sweeping (although wouldn't come near to anything like the actual debt!).

The person then falls on his knees - literally in Greek 'worships' and says he will pay everything. It's madness - he never could.

Yet the king is moved. The word here is usually used of Jesus' compassion for a crowd, or those in need of healing. It's used in the parable of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. So this person receives mercy and kindness.

Imagine the relief! I've been forgiven!

Then the slave comes across a fellow slave who owes him an approximate ratio of 600,000 to 1. Still a lot of money, but nothing to his own debt.

This slave grabs the fellow slave by the neck and attempts to choke the money out of him (think back to Lamech at the beginning of the sermon, who murdered someone - and what happens just after that - we get to the Flood (Genesis Chapters 6-9!). And the result is that he ends up being tortured because of the frugality of his forgiveness.

I think the point of this teaching is that our forgiveness of others flows from our being forgiven. As we are called to pray each day: '*forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us*'.

When we fail to forgive, we become choked by our necks as the sin clings so fast to us (Hebrews 12.1) and ultimately we suffer because it consumes us.

Yes, the road of forgiveness is hard - the cross teaches us that. Yet the path of mercy leads to life.

Perhaps there are things in your life which you'd like to know forgiveness for? Something done to others; or things you would like to set down to try and forgive others something done to you? These parts of our lives are harsh terrains, where pain is visceral.

The reality is, that only when we die and have *spun our last thread*, will we truly know that mercy and kindness of God which I believe awaits us all.

John Donne's poem with which I began ends with this beautiful stanza:

*I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun My last thread,
I shall perish on the shore; But swear by Thyself,
that at my death Thy Son Shall shine as he shines now, and
heretofore;
And having done that, Thou hast done; I fear no more.*

May we come to fear no more. And may we know deep within ourselves that Jesus is the way, the source of forgiving and transforming grace for the sinner to love sisters and brothers and God. So may we find creative ways to live not in revenge cycles and choked by unforgiving. Rather may we know God's forgiveness of us deep within ourselves. And so find creative,

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gentle ways to search for forgiveness - and to mirror that forgiveness to all whom we encounter in our lives - this day, and always.

In the words of our opening prayer:

*[So God] Keep alive the memory of your mercy,
That our angers may be calmed
And our resentments dispelled.
May we discover the forgiveness
Promised to those who forgive
And become a people rich in mercy.
Amen.*