

24th September 2023 – Morning Service

Martin Rider

Call to Worship – Psalm 145 : 8-10

The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. All you have made will praise you, O LORD; your saints will extol you. Amen.

Today's service is centred on a Hebrew word, *chesed*, which is translated as mercy, or compassion, generosity, or better-still as loving-kindness and what it means in our discipleship. We are going to begin with two worship songs.

Our opening song was written in 1998 by Brian Doerksen, a Canadian singer-songwriter, when he was only thirty-three years old. He was something of a prodigy – his earliest hymns were published when he was in his mid-twenties.

StF 24 – Come now is the time to worship

Come, now is the time to worship.

One day every tongue will confess You are God.

Come, now is the time to give your heart.

One day every knee will bow.

Come, just as you are to worship.

Still the greatest treasure remains

Come, just as you are before your God,

For those who gladly choose You now.

Come.

Brian Doerksen © 1998 Vineyard Songs CCL No. 515642

The second song was written by Matt and Beth Redman in 2002 and echoes the minor prophet Habakkuk, who wrote, *'Though the fig-tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Saviour.'*

StF 41 – Blessed be your name

1) Blessed be Your name in the land
that is plentiful,
Where Your streams of abundance flow,
Blessed be Your name.
Blessed be Your name when I'm found
in the desert place,
Though I walk through the wilderness,
Blessed be Your name.
Every blessing You pour out I'll turn
back to praise.
When the darkness closes in, Lord, still I will say

2) Blessed be Your name when the sun's
shining down on me,
When the world's all as it should be,
Blessed be Your name.
Blessed be Your name on the road
marked with suffering,
Though there's pain in the offering,
Blessed be Your name.
Every blessing You pour out I'll turn
back to praise.
When the darkness closes in, Lord, still I will say

Ch) *Blessed be the name of the Lord,
Blessed be Your name.
Blessed be the name of the Lord,
Blessed be Your glorious name.*

Br) You give and take away,
You give and take away,
My heart will choose to say,
Lord, blessed be Your name.

Matt & Beth Redman © 2002 Thankyou Music CCL No. 515642

Prayer

Almighty God, you are the Word who spoke and brought our universe to life; you made the earth on which we live and not only created human beings, but gave us stewardship of this beautiful planet. In your loving-kindness, you sustain all living things and you call us to you enjoy a covenant of enduring joy as your earthly sons and daughters. You know everything about us: our virtues and vices, our successes and our failures, for, in order to bring us close, you took human form and lived among us as Christ Jesus. His life, death and resurrection show us how we should live in harmony with you and with each other and he broke the power of sin and death for humankind. Therefore, as we come to worship you today, help us to concentrate so we may adore you in love, spirit and truth.

Heavenly Father, accept our heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we have received from you: for all you have done for us, given us and achieved in us. Most of all, thank you for loving us even at our worst when we say and do things that cause offence and hurt our neighbours. Help us change our ways as we do so, breathe your forgiveness over us.

Merciful Lord, we believe you hear and answer our prayers and you have not only forgiven us, but call us to follow you once again. Therefore, gracious Lord, from this time forth may we serve you and our neighbours joyfully and faithfully, in Jesus' beautiful name. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who 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 for ever. **Amen.**

Frederick Faber left the Church of England to become a Catholic priest around the time John Henry Newman did. Cardinal Newman founded the Oratory at Edgbaston, whilst Frederick Faber founded Brompton Oratory.

StF 416 – There's a wideness in God's mercy

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| 1) There's a wideness in God's mercy
Like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in his justice
Which is more than liberty. | 4) For the love of God is broader
Than the measures of the mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind. |
| 2) There is plentiful redemption
In the blood that has been shed;
There is joy for all the members
In the sorrows of the Head. | 5) But we make his love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify his strictness
With a zeal he will not own. |
| 3) There is grace enough for thousands
Of new worlds as great as this;
There is room for fresh creations
In that upper home of bliss. | 6) If our love were but more simple
We should take him at his word;
And our lives would be illumined
By the presence of our Lord. |

Frederick William Faber

Reading: Jonah 3 : 10 – 4 : 11

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the LORD, “O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

But the LORD replied, “Have you any right to be angry?” Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live.”

But God said to Jonah, “Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?” “I do,” he said. “I am angry enough to die.” But the LORD said, “You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?” Amen.

Exegesis and Reflection

Jonah is one of the treasures of the Hebrew Bible. It was written about seven hundred years before Jesus was born, certainly, after the Northern Kingdom, Israel or Samaria had been conquered by the Assyrians in 721BC. Although there was a prophet called Jonah, the Book is a rabbinic teaching story, revealing theological truths in easily-accessible and memorable ways. Some of those in Jonah are: you cannot escape God’s reach however hard you try; God is merciful and gives us a second chance; even if you are given a demanding task, God will be with you and, in the case of our reading, the Lord is even-handed and his forgiveness knows no bounds.

Our reading sets Jonah outside Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, as he waited for the destruction the Lord had forecast to occur. A Judean audience would have shared Jonah’s pleasure as he anticipated the annihilation of the Jews’ enemies, for they loathed and feared the Assyrian Empire. However, the King had called for everyone in Nineveh to repent – even animals were made to wear sackcloth as a sign of repentance, hoping God would relent and needless to say, he did. Jonah was frustrated and outraged when God spared the Ninevites whilst he sat outside waiting for the city’s destruction. Moreover, the plant beneath which he was sheltering then withered away, making him to grow even angrier as the sun beat down upon him, angry enough to want to die, but God said to Jonah,

“Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?”

“I do,” he said. “I am angry enough to die.” But God told him,

“This plant grew up in one night and disappeared the next; you didn’t do anything for it, and you didn’t make it grow—yet you feel sorry for it! How much more, then, should I have pity on Nineveh, that great city. After all, it has more than 120,000 innocent children in it, as well as many animals!”

Eight hundred years after this Book was written, Jesus commanded his disciples – and us – ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.’ God’s own Son did not set himself up above us: indeed, he reached out to sinners, people who were considered unclean, to Gentiles – even to the Samaritans who Jews hated with a passion. Christ’s life demonstrates how he treats everybody as important – indicating God’s will for us to adopt the same attitude. Amen.

Martin Leckebusch was born into a Methodist family in 1962, but having worshipped with Methodist, Anglican and Pentecostal churches, he is now an elder at a Baptist church in Gloucester. Martin writes that “intelligent discipleship means applying unchanging truth to a changing world in a way which will genuinely honour God”.

StF 429 – Lord we turn to you for mercy

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| 1) Lord, we turn to you for mercy:
May our prayerful words express
Something of our heartfelt sorrow
For the sins we now confess. | 4) Your forgiveness lifts our burdens,
Setting heart and spirit free
To fulfil our true potential,
All that we were meant to be. |
| 2) We have trusted far too often
In our human strength and skill;
We have proudly disregarded
What we knew to be your will. | 5) For you teach a way of wisdom
We may clearly understand:
Walking with the God of mercy
Step by step, and hand in hand. |
| 3) Yet by your immense compassion
You invite, accept, restore,
Leading us to greater wholeness
Than we ever knew before. | |

Martin Leckebusch © 1999 Kevin Mayhew CCL No. 515642

Reading: Matthew 20 : 1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’ The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ‘These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’ But he answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” Amen.

Address

The Victorians developed an interesting concept to deal with the Poor Law Reform Act, namely the ‘Worthy Poor’ and the ‘Unworthy Poor’. The idea was that you helped the former, by providing enough money to tide them over a difficult period and punished the latter by admitting them into the workhouse, where husbands were separated from wives and parents from children. There are strong feelings today when pensioners in England and Wales have to pay the full cost of their nursing or residential care, if they need to go into a home and have assets greater than £23,500, whilst those who don’t, or who live in Scotland, have their costs paid by the State.

To be fair, the State will pay everybody's fees once their assets fall to £23,500. Some people think the system is unjust, claiming it does not credit the thrifty and seems to favour those who have squandered their wages, on tobacco, drink, gambling and foreign holidays, or whatever else they disapprove of. Whilst they may accept that the Government can hardly leave the 'unworthy poor' destitute, they'd barely tolerate my argument that, if you have enough money to be charged, at least you have some control where you live, unlike the penniless, for they will argue that those who have made no provision for their retirement are less worthy than the prudent, in which case our parable may be as great a challenge to us as it was to the disciples.

Jesus was answering Peter's question, "We have left everything to follow you. What then will there be for us?" He reassured them that all who followed him would receive far more than they gave up, besides which they'd inherit eternal life, but he added, "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." Christ did so because, even at its inception, the Church was developing a 'pecking-order', with followers disputing one another's relative value to the faith. Indeed, when Matthew wrote his gospel primarily for Jewish Christians living in Palestine, or most probably at Antioch in Syria, the community was clearly divided along lines of both their background and the time for which they had been Christians. Thus, Jews who had already been followers when the church was formed deemed themselves superior to Jews who had converted after the founding of the church and all felt worthier than Gentile converts, who had no Jewish heritage to boast of. Try to put yourselves in the Gentiles' shoes, by thinking back to our schooldays when two captains chose teams from the rest of the class, lined up for the purpose. I stopped the practice when I was a teacher, because you could see the humiliation in the eyes of the last few children to be chosen – often with ill-disguised contempt from the captains and the favoured players. Nobody thrives if he or she feels unwelcome, or undervalued.

The parable is straightforward enough: the vineyard owner hired men at several times of the day, at the standard rate of a denarius – the amount due for a day's work. Presumably, there was much work to do and the owner wanted it done urgently. When he went to the marketplace at 5 p.m., the vineyard owner was aware that those he was choosing were not the best of workers, otherwise they would have been employed by other vineyard owners, yet he invited them to help finish off the harvesting. It was only when the labourers were paid that problems arose, for the men called at daybreak expected a greater reward than those who came with only a couple of hours to spare; yet everybody received a denarius – enough to allow a man to feed his family the next day.

Naturally, there was some grumbling from the first groups of labourers, for they had sweated for more than twelve hours, but had only received the same amount as those who'd worked just a couple of hours. Now before you rush to judgement, remember that each group was offered a denarius for its labour, so the owner cheated nobody. Indeed, as he told his workers, "Don't I have the right to do as I wish with my own money? Or are you jealous because I am generous?"

The moral of this parable is this: God loves us equally, irrespective of our background, or the time we have served him – BECAUSE HE LOVES EACH OF US TO THE UTTERMOST. This is what grace is all about. There is nothing we can do to make God love us a jot more or less than he does already. When Jesus died at Calvary, he died for everybody, not just for an exclusive group, so that all are open to his call to follow him. We are challenged to be open-minded in the way we stand up for the rights of all people, setting aside our prejudices. Some of us may not approve of asylum-seekers, or of economic migrants who seek to cross the Channel in barely sea-worthy inflatable boats – and may regard them as the 'enemy' rather than the true villains, the people-trafficking gangs – but God doesn't ask our approval when he calls us to campaign for a fair system to be introduced to protect them from being exploited and put in mortal peril. Even those who do not qualify for residence in this country should be treated with same consideration as we'd want in their place, not as criminals.

At a time when charities are appealing for funds to support victims of the earthquake in Morocco and the catastrophic flood in Libya, we may feel weary of contributing to Christian Aid, All We Can, or other relief agencies – perhaps blaming people in the Developing World for placing too many demands on us when disasters occur, rather than being grateful that the Lord has given us resources to share, rather like the chocolates I take to my services! Please, let us be as generous as we can.

Rabbi Hillel said that before we judge another person, we should walk a mile in his or her shoes. When we consider the desperate lives of refugees and our brothers and sisters in the Developing World, I am sure walking in their shoes would be more than we could bear. If you still aren't convinced why we should care for the poor and outcast, just think how often we ask God to forgive us, day in, day out. Where would we be, if he grew too weary to shower us with his forgiveness and grace? May God grant each of us generous love like his that cares for all human beings, irrespective of their background and lifestyles. Amen.

Our next hymn was written by John Newton, an ex-slave trading captain, who was converted to Christ when "The Greyhound", the ship he was travelling home in was nearly swamped in a terrible storm, during which he read "The Imitation of Christ" by Thomas a Kempis. He not only gave up the trade but became a priest in the Church of England and campaigned to have slavery abolished. It is no surprise that his most popular hymn is "Amazing grace – how sweet the sound –".

StF 440 – Amazing grace

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| 1) Amazing grace (how sweet the sound)
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see. | 4) The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures. |
| 2) God's grace has taught my heart to fear,
His grace my fears relived;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed. | 5) And, when this heart and flesh shall fail
And mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess within the veil
A life of joy and peace. |
| 3) Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
God's grace has brought me safe thus far,
And he will lead me home. | 6) When we've been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we first begun. |

John Newton

Prayers of Intercession

Heavenly Father, grant us the power of your Holy Spirit to give us the steadfastness, wisdom and compassion we need to serve our neighbours as you call us to and in circumstances where we know the best we can offer is not enough, we turn to you, for to you all things are possible.

Your kingdom come, **Your will be done**

Gracious God, hear our prayer for this church, the churches in our Circuit, the presbyters, local preachers, worship leaders, administrators and those who hold responsibilities in our churches. Grant them the spiritual grace, energy, compassion, courage and vision to lead where you want the Church to go. May we proclaim good news boldly and find new ways of engaging our community.

Your kingdom come, **Your will be done**

Heavenly King, we pray for the leaders of the world. Teach them to deal justly and mercifully, seeking peaceful resolutions when disagreements arise. Lead them in the ways of integrity, so they seek the well-being of all, rather than their vested interests.

Your kingdom come, **Your will be done**

Lord of creation, we confess that we have failed our collective responsibility to be stewards of our planet and the evidence is before our eyes: melting glaciers; wildfires; floods and droughts, increasingly strong storms and depletion of resources. Help us do what we can to rebuild the environment by changing our lifestyles and by supporting people whose lives are being ruined by extremes of weather. Remember victims of disasters and famines, thinking in particular of those affected by the earthquake in Morocco and the collapse of two dams in Libya in the past fortnight. Bless the work done by relief workers and charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid.

Your kingdom come, **Your will be done**

Lord of shalom, of healing and well-being, let the light of your love shine upon people who suffer from sickness, grief or trouble, as well as everyone who mourns the loss of a loved one. In a time of silence, we pray for people for whom we are particularly concerned, trusting that you will know their need and will reach out in compassion to them...[*Silence*]

Lord, help us to offer them practical support and friendship and may you embrace them in your love, which offers healing, courage, hope, strength and transcending peace.

Your kingdom come, **Your will be done**

Abba, Father God, we ask you to bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe from harm and help us lead Christ-centred lives, taking the light of the gospel to a sceptical and sometimes hostile world, in Jesus' holy name. **Amen.**

We conclude our worship with a hymn written by another husband and wife; this time Noel and Trish Richards.

StF 430 – My lips shall praise you

*Ch) My lips shall praise You,
My great redeemer;
My heart will worship,
Almighty Saviour.*

2) Love that conquers every fear!
In the midst of trouble You draw near,
You are the restorer of my soul.

1) You take all my guilt away,
Turn the darkest night to brightest day,
You are the restorer of my soul.

3) You're the source of happiness,
Bringing peace when I am in distress,
You are the restorer of my soul.

Noel & Tricia Richards © 1991 Thankyou Music CCL No. 515642

Benediction

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. **Amen.**