

A service for 17th September, 2023 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 103 verses 8 to 12

The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. Amen.

Our opening hymn was hymn written by Noel and Tricia Richards. Noel was born in Llantrisant, near Cardiff in 1956 and was inspired to become a hymn-writer and composer after he saw Graham Kendrick at Colston Hall when Noel was fifteen. He married Tricia in 1978 and they have complemented one another in producing several albums of fine hymns and worship songs. Hymn number 430, 'My lips shall praise you'.

My lips shall praise you,

My great Redeemer;

My heart will worship

Almighty Saviour.

1. You take all my guilt away,

Turn the darkest night to brightest day,

You are the restorer of my soul. (*Chorus*)

2. Love that conquers every fear,

In the midst of trouble you draw near,

You are the restorer of my soul. (*Chorus*)

3. You're the source of happiness,

Bringing peace when I am in distress,

You are the restorer of my soul. (*Chorus*) © Noel Richards (1955) Tricia Richards (1960)

Let us turn to the Lord in prayer.

Almighty God all glory, honour, power and praise are yours, for you 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. Through your great faithfulness, you sustain us and all living things. In your love, you call us to you as your earthly sons and daughters, offering us a covenant of love and faithfulness.

You know everything about us our virtues and vices, our successes and our failures and you love us so much that you took human form and lived among us as Christ Jesus, so we might understand how you want us live. His death and resurrection broke the power of sin and death, offering us a special new relationship with you and the offer of everlasting life through faith in him.

We come to offer heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we have received from you: our lives; our work and rest; our homes, friends and families; the opportunities and experiences that have fulfilled us; for challenges that have tested us and shaped our character. Most of all, thank you for loving us even when we don't love our neighbours as we love ourselves and do not love and serve you wholeheartedly, as we know we ought. Forgive us when we say and do things that cause offence to and hurt our neighbours and help us to lead better lives, for Jesus said if we repent in his name, you will pardon us.

Merciful Lord, as you hear and answer our prayers, we believe that you have forgiven us and call us to follow you. May we do so, serving our neighbours joyfully and faithfully, in order that we may honour you always, in Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.

As our Saviour taught his disciples, we pray:

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.

“In blazing light your cross reveals / The truth we dimly knew, / How small the debts men owe to us, / How great our debt to you!” Wonderful words by a retired Leeds schoolteacher, Rosamond Herklots, composed when she was gardening. We shall sing hymn number 423, “Forgive our sins as we forgive,”

**1. ‘Forgive our sins as we forgive’,
You taught us, Lord, to pray,
But you alone can grant us grace
To live the words we say.**

**2. How can your pardon reach and bless
The unforgiving heart
That broods on wrongs, and will not let
Old bitterness depart?**

**3. In blazing light your cross reveals
The truth we dimly knew,
How small the debts men owe to us,
How great our debt to you!**

**4. Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls,
And bid resentment cease;
Then, reconciled to God and man,
Our lives will spread your peace.**

© Rosamond E. Herklots (1905 – 1987)

In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and for the needs of ourselves and others. When I say ‘Your kingdom come’, please respond with, ‘Your will be done’.

Heavenly Father, help us to respond to your amazing grace by serving you in whatever way we can. Grant us the power of your Holy Spirit to give us the courage, steadfastness, wisdom and compassion we need to serve our neighbours as you call us to, but for circumstances where we know the best we can offer is not enough, we turn to you, for to you all things are possible. We ask you to warm the hearts of and motivate people with power and influence who can really make a difference to the world.

‘Your kingdom come’, ‘Your will be done’.

Gracious God, hear our prayer for those who hold authority in the nations of the world. Guide them in the way of your righteousness, so that they seek justice and mercy in their dealings. Help us build a world where people stand up against poverty, here and abroad, where we see others as you see them, as your children who are to be protected and nurtured. Help us to be willing to work together in mutual trust, to always seek the common good, rather than our own selfish desires and to share justly the earth's resources, rather than fighting over them.

‘Your kingdom come’, ‘Your will be done’.

God of love, truth and justice, hear our cry of grief for the countries afflicted by famine and natural disasters. Warm the hearts of governments of wealthy countries to give assistance to victims of disasters and bless the work done by charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid.

‘Your kingdom come’, **‘Your will be done’**.

Lord of shalom, hear our prayer for peace throughout the world, particularly in Ukraine, Afghanistan and Sudan and for peace among Jews and Palestinians in Jerusalem. Bless the work of peacemakers and those who work with the victims of conflict, terrorism, persecution and prejudice.

‘Your kingdom come’, **‘Your will be done’**.

Lord of compassion, 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.

‘Your kingdom come’, **‘Your will be done’**.

Lord of healing and well-being, let the light of your love shine upon people who suffer from sickness, grief or trouble: for neighbours who are lonely, anxious, overworked, or who feel undervalued and unloved as well as everyone who mourns the loss of a loved one. In a time of silence, we offer names of people for whom we are particularly concerned, trusting that you will know their need and will reach out in compassion to them.....

Lord, help us to offer them practical support as well as sympathy, but hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love, in which you offer healing, courage, hope, strength and transcending peace.

‘Your kingdom come’, **‘Your will be done’**.

Holy God, grant that this church, churches in our Circuit and, indeed, churches throughout the world may unite in love and action, so we may bear the Gospel light bravely in a sceptical and sometimes hostile world in Jesus’ name.

‘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 not only to lead good lives but to boldly take the light of the gospel to a sceptical and sometimes hostile world. In Jesus’ holy name. Amen.

The Old Testament reading is Genesis chapter 50 verses 15 to 21

When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?”

So they sent word to Joseph, saying, “Your father left these instructions before he died: ‘This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.’ Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.” When their message came to him, Joseph wept.

His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. “We are your slaves,” they said.

But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 18 verses 21 to 35

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked,

“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”

Jesus answered,

“I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before him.

‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him.

‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

Then the master called the servant in.

‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

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

Our next hymn was written by Carol Owens in Los Angeles for a musical, ‘Come Together’ in 1972 and was made popular by Pat Boone. Hymn number 424, ‘God forgave my sin in Jesus’ name,’

**1. God forgave my sin in Jesus’ name;
I’ve been born again in Jesus’ name,
And in Jesus’ name I come to you
To share his love as he told me to: Chorus:**

He said:

*‘Freely, freely you have received,
Freely, freely give;
Go in my name and because you believe,
Others will know that I live.’*

**2. All power is given in Jesus’ name
In earth and heaven in Jesus’ name;
And in Jesus’ name I come to you
To share his power as he told me to: Chorus:**

© Carol Owens {born 1931}

Sermon: “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?”– Mtt. 13: 21
In my years as a chaplain, I met many people whose later years were poisoned by broken relationships and bitterness that ate away at their souls like a corrosive acid. Forgiveness is not the same as forgetting: it is being able to let go of resentment and a

desire for revenge, of starting again. Forgiveness is not easy: victims of the Holocaust or of the destruction of the World Trade Building in New York twenty-two years ago last week will never forget what happened, but many have still found it possible to forgive, simply because they realise the futility of holding onto their anger when the perpetrators are long since dead. It is far better for them to witness to man's inhumanity to man and to try to prevent a repeat of the atrocity. Our readings consider the nature of forgiveness – even why we ought to forgive.

The Old Testament account of the death of Jacob is an uncomfortable reminder of strong feelings that can split a family when a parent dies. Some years ago, when I was asked to conduct the funeral of a resident at Waterside House, I was painfully aware of bad blood between her two daughters. They had not been on speaking-terms for years and it was very difficult to even arrange for both to come to a funeral planning meeting. In fact, I only achieved a meeting by gently pointing out that the occasion was a commemoration of their mother's life – not a continuation of their quarrel. It was to be a celebration of their mother's life and the love each had received from her. The sisters were persuaded to play equal parts in planning what was said and done, so the family was united in grief, if not love – at least until I left them in the memorial garden at Bushbury!

In Genesis, Joseph's brothers were understandably alarmed when Jacob died, for, years before, they had sold Joseph into slavery in a pique of envy, but he had prospered and by then had the means to exact a heavy retribution for their crime. Thus, they pleaded for forgiveness, not only in Jacob's name, but as servants of the God of their father, too. Clearly, Joseph recognised their fear, besides their repentance and he wept, for he realised that he had complete power of life and death over them. The brothers also wept and offered themselves as his slaves, but Joseph refused to judge them, saying, **“Do not be afraid! Am I in place of God?”** Instead, he pointed out that their malicious act had been turned to good by God, for the benefit of his chosen people. Therefore, he not only forgave them, but promised to support them. Joseph offered his brothers grace, **chen** (pronounced **‘kane’**) in Hebrew, unearned and unmerited love.

Now when Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive somebody who sinned against him and suggested that seven might be enough, he must have thought he was on safe ground, for rabbinic teaching stipulated that only three offences ought to be pardoned. Imagine his surprise when Jesus replied, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” Indeed, some translations say ‘seventy times seven’, though if you are thinking that you'll exact revenge when somebody offends you for the four hundred and ninety-first time, what Jesus really meant was ‘Keep on forgiving without keeping a record of wrongdoing.’ The reason is to give everybody the chance to repent – to try to put matters right, not just saying ‘sorry’ – right up to the fifty-ninth minute of the eleventh hour!

Remember that when he was nailed to the cross, suffering the worst kind of abuse we can do to another, our Lord prayed, “Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing!” At Calvary the penitent thief received forgiveness at the point of death, showing God gives us every chance to repent. Jesus offered grace to a man who had acknowledged that his crucifixion was deserved: that same grace is available to every sinner, but as the Lord's Prayer reminds us, we are called to offer forgiveness to those who offend us.

The parable of the unforgiving slave – servant in some versions of the Bible – starkly reminds us that our need of God's forgiveness far exceeds the forgiveness we

need to offer people who have wronged us. A talent was a silver coin worth three thousand shekels, or approximately £1000 today. Thus ten thousand talents represented £10 million, though as 10000 was the highest number in Greek calculations, Jesus could equally have said £10 billion! Whatever the actual equivalent, it is more than you or I could afford to repay! Although the king took pity on the slave, his grace was not mirrored by the debtor, who had a fellow slave thrown into prison because he could not repay the hundred denarii he owed to the forgiven man – a five hundred thousandth of the original debt! Little wonder that the king was so outraged by the unforgiving slave that he imprisoned him until the debt had been paid in full.

Although it is sometimes difficult to forgive an offence, Christ calls us to show mercy, pointing to the price he paid for our forgiveness at Calvary. Corrie Ten Boom sets an example for us all. She and her sister, Betsie, were arrested after trying to smuggle Jews out of occupied Holland in the Second World War. They were sent to Ravensbruck Concentration Camp, yet managed to smuggle a Bible into that terrible place, so the sisters held secret acts of worship, comforting their fellow-prisoners. They endured great hardship and saw appalling cruelty meted out to others. Shortly before the end of the war, Betsie fell ill and she was so starved and weak that she died. Two days later, Corrie was freed by mistake, but she was well away from Ravensbruck by the time the error was discovered. Later, Corrie discovered that all the women of the same age as she and her sister had been killed, so she saw God's hand in her salvation. As a result, she travelled around Europe, telling about her experiences in a concentration camp.

One evening, at the end of a talk, a man approached Corrie and asked her to forgive him. He explained that he had been one of her guards at Ravensbruck, but had found it almost impossible to live with himself afterwards. Corrie's first reaction was to push him away, to shout and scream at him. Instead, she prayed for strength to forgive from the One who had asked his Father to forgive his killers at Calvary! Slowly, she took the former guard by the hand and offered him unconditional forgiveness.

If Corrie Ten Boom could act in such a way, so can we. Let us not allow our anger to fester within our hearts, to poison our souls with its bitterness, to prevent us from moving on. Instead, may we seek the strength to rebuild broken relationships, to become a channel of God's peace. Indeed, may Christ Jesus grant us the faith and trust to forgive, in other words to let go of our grievances and move on, which is not the same as to forget them which can be almost impossible. If we find doing so very difficult, bring to mind that Jesus gave his life to offer all of us a fresh start, so anything we have to do – swallow our pride, or set aside the pain and loss we have experienced – pales into insignificance, when we consider the agony, humiliation and death borne by our Redeemer for miserable sinners like us, for he overcame the world's hatred with redemptive grace, not recrimination. Amen.

We close our worship with one of Charles Wesley's great hymns which was first published in 1762. We shall sing hymn number 438, 'Your ceaseless, unexhausted love'.

**1. Your ceaseless, unexhausted love,
Unmerited and free,
Delights our evil to remove,
And help our misery.**

**2. You wait and you are gracious still
And will with sinners bear,
That, saved, we may your goodness feel**

And all your grace declare.

**3. Your goodness and your truth to me,
To every soul, abound,
A vast, unfathomable sea,
Where all our thoughts are drowned.**

**4. Its streams the whole creation reach,
So plenteous is the store,
Enough for all, enough for each,
Enough for evermore.**

**5. Faithful, O Lord, your mercies are,
A rock that cannot move;
A thousand promises declare
Your constancy of love.**

**6. Throughout the universe it reigns,
Unalterably sure;
And while the truth of God remains
The goodness must endure.**

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Benediction

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