



The
United
Reformed
Church

The United Reformed Church in Lion Walk
Christ Church United Reformed Church
The United Reformed Church at Chappel

Sunday 18th September 2022

Call to Worship:

All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord,
for they have heard the words of your mouth.
They shall sing of the ways of the Lord,
for great is the glory of the Lord.
For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly;
and from afar he humbles the proud.

Prayer/Meditation:

We come to you now, loving God..
You are the Lord who is beyond time and change.
Through all the myriad courses of history,
you have been the one constant
that has enabled our wayward humanity
to follow a safe pathway.
And as we think of our native land
and the twists and spirals of its journey to this hour,
we are grateful for your care and endless love.
And bright among the multitude of your blessings
through so many years
has been the presence of our sovereign.

So this time of loss touches deep,
and with our sadness uncertainty comes to snap at our heels.

But then comes your word calling us to stand fast
in the faith that our Queen knew and which sustained her through all her days.

So we turn to it,
knowing well that it will uphold and nourish us through this time.
Forgive us if ever we forget ourselves and look to another rock than you,
or another quarry from which to draw our security.
For in you alone is our hope,
from you alone is our comfort,
through you alone is our nation made whole and strong,
and by you alone is our future made secure.

Healer of the world,
In our loss, replenish our spirit,

In our pain, restore our health,
In our anger, remove our rage,
In our fear, remove our uncertainty,
In our arrogance, remove our self-centredness.

For what we have said, that has wounded, bring forgiveness and healing;
For what we have thought, that has soured, send sweetness;
For what we have done, that has scarred, soothe gently.

Lord,
In the brokenness of this world,
And the often tarnished fragments of our lives,
We turn to You for solace and release,
From all the worries, stresses and regrets of this day.
When ages shift,
And generations change,
And times move on,
We turn once more to You, the source and centre
Of our existence.
When we are fearful to step forward
Because we are unable to let go of the past,
Ease us into the future,
Reassured by the truth that You have already
Mapped a way ahead,
And hold each day, each night
In the hollow of Your Creator hands.
In this fragile time,
When the future is in our hands, yet is uncertain,
Give us the courage and the faith
To trust, once more, in You.

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. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. Amen

Reading: Romans 14:1-12

Hymn 32: God is in his temple

Reading: Matthew 18:21-35

Reflection:

Some of the things Jesus says are counter-intuitive, that is, they seem to go against what we believe to be natural and right. Jesus teaching about loving enemies, for example, or about the way we treat the poor and needy. And above all, perhaps, the way we should think about forgiveness. The parable we address today is like that - counter-intuitive to the point almost of being offensive.

The story emphasises for us in a very vivid way the gulf between the world of God's kingdom and the world we live in today. Yes, we often rejoice and celebrate when we catch glimpses of God's Kingdom in our own world, but we acknowledge also that much of the human activity of the world runs contrary to the world - the kingdom - that Jesus speaks about in his parables.

The first act of the story begins in a world that looks like this world. It's a world of finance, of debts and repayments; a world where justice is about repaying what is owed, about getting what you deserve, no more and no less; a world in which the defaulter's possessions can be sold to settle his debt and if that's not enough he and his family can be sold too; a world in which it's possible to accumulate such a mountain of debt that it becomes impossible to repay. It's a world of balances, of credit and debit. It's a world very like our own where money and possessions and savings and loans are central to the functioning of society.

But then Jesus reveals that it's not really this world at all, it's a different kind of world where the transactions and balance sheets count for less than compassion and forgiveness. This world, this room, the king's counting-house, is actually the Kingdom of God, for here it is possible to find forgiveness.

So the debt is forgiven, and no doubt with a sense of relief as overwhelming as was his fear a few moments before, the former debtor leaves the king's counting-house that has been revealed as the kingdom of God, and goes back out into the world of money, possessions, savings and loans. And there, it seems, one of the first people he met was someone who owed *him* money - a very small amount of money in comparison with the huge amount that he has just been forgiven. But actually, the amounts of money involved are not a factor in the story. The point here is that we have moved on to the second act, and it is not set in the king's counting-house - the Kingdom of God. This act is set in the world of human society, and is built, not upon the justice of God but upon the whims of human nature.

Slipping easily back in to the old ways, the protagonist of the story falls upon his unfortunate acquaintance who owes him money, and demands repayment. It can hardly be here that he has already forgotten his narrow escape from debtors' prison, or even that he even has any sense that he should be behaving with the grace and compassion that he has so recently received. Rather - and I'm sure this is the point that Jesus is making - he has walked out of one world into another. The rules and conventions of the King's counting-house just don't apply to what he regards as the 'real' world of trade and commerce. Jesus at this point in the story is drawing a stark contrast between the two worlds, the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of weak, misguided human nature.

And that distinction is one that is true of our world today. It's not that the character in the story is being particularly ungrateful or sinful, or that he's being deliberately wicked or even evil in his dealings with his poor fellow-slave who owed him money. It is simply part of the world he was now inhabiting to know that debts must be repaid. It is only fair. If you borrow, you must repay. That is only justice.

If you borrow, you must pay. If you transgress, you must be punished. If you work hard, you will be rewarded; if you are unwilling or unable to work, you may struggle. If you are hurt, you may seek revenge. That's the human world which - we have to confess - we often translate into the world of faith too: if you are faithful you will be rewarded; if you are sinful, you will be punished; if you are hurt, you may seek revenge; an eye for an eye etcetera.

By the end of the second act of this parable, then, we have seen the way of the Kingdom of God, and we have seen the way of the world, and Jesus has drawn a sharp contrast between the two. And so in the third act we are returned to the Kingdom of God for what are the most problematic verses in the story. The king who has been so generous and compassionate is now furious. He points out the obvious lesson that one who has been treated with forgiveness and compassion should surely learn to offer the same grace to those who are indebted to them, and

if they're not going to learn that lesson... 'And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my Heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

We are obliged to seek the meaning of all this beyond the literal. For one thing, the ending seems to contradict the beginning. Jesus has instructed Peter to forgive seventy times seven (or seventy-seven times) but now seems to be suggesting that God will give only one fresh start before condemning the sinner to torture. For another, such a punishing God seems contrary to most of what Jesus teaches throughout the rest of the gospel. Maybe this last verse was inserted by a church already beginning to revert to the human standards of the world....

Yet for all its difficulty, this final act of the drama still speaks the truth which is, quite simply, that refusal to forgive leads to torture. Many of us probably know the truth of this from personal experience, hopefully in a fairly trivial way. If someone has offended or upset us, we will brood on it, perhaps think about getting them back, even if it's just by not speaking to them, until we realise that we are allowing our refusal to forgive to torture us. And we do forgive; and the burden is lifted; and we can resume our relationship.

But we sometimes hear of those amazing people who are able to offer forgiveness to criminals and terrorists who have committed terrible atrocities against them and their loved ones, who have stabbed and killed and terrorised, robbed families of their children in murder, abuse, drink-driving or terror attack. Amazing people who are able to forgive even when the perpetrators seem to feel no remorse. And often part of their reason for being able to offer forgiveness is simply that for their own sakes, they do not wish to consume the rest of their own lives by carrying a burden which would only compound their loss.

Forgiveness is not easy - if it were, Jesus would not have been so insistent about it. But 'I forgive you' doesn't mean, 'there, there, just forget about it, what you've done doesn't really matter'. Of course it matters! If you've committed an act of theft or violence against me or someone I love, it matters all the world to me, and I shall never forget. But forgiveness offers the beginning of healing, not of physical wounds but of hatred and bitterness and guilt and revenge. Forgiveness offers a way forward to a better world for both victim and perpetrator.

That's why God's kingdom is a place of seventy-times-seven forgiveness. And that's why we must pray without ceasing and seek again and again the grace to forgive one another, no matter how difficult, or impossible, it may seem.

I conclude with these words of the late Queen Elizabeth:

The true measure of Christ's influence is not only in the lives of the saints but also in the good works quietly done by millions of men and women day in and day out throughout the centuries. Many will have been inspired by Jesus' simple but powerful teaching: love God and love thy neighbour as thyself - in other words, treat others as you would like them to treat you. I know just how much I rely on my own faith to guide me through the good times and the bad. Each day is a new beginning. I know that the only way to live my life is to try to do what is right, to take the long view, to give of my best in all that day brings, and to put my trust in God.

Hymn 84: 'Forgive our sins as we forgive'

Prayer:

Generous God,
Who engages with the world in which we live,
We give You thanks that all is known to You,
And blessed by Your eternal presence.
God of the past, the present and the future,
For the bed-rock of faith,

For the deep roots of faith,
Receive our thanks this day.
In times of change and transformation,
Where we miss the familiar,
And long for stability,
Reassure us with the steadfastness of Your love.
Hear our thanks for this nation of ours:
Its people and its places,
The human tapestry of young and old, women and men,
The city-dweller and the country folk,
One people.
Enhance our respect for each other,
Trusting in the inherent goodness that each child of the universe
Offers to a broken world.
Hear our thanks for Elizabeth, our late Queen,
Blessed by grace,
Resolute in service,
Modest in person.
For the years of her reign,
And the sweep of history through which she provided
Both anchor and springboard.
We thank You for her dedication to this nation and Commonwealth,
And for all the rich gifts of wisdom, kindness and inclusion
She brought to her long decades.
We give You thanks for lives her life touched,
For the radiance of her smile
And the encouragement of her words.
We thank You for the sparkle of her humour
That eased the tensions she encountered,
And for the determination of her life
To see its duties through.
King of kings and Lord of lords,
We thank You for the families she united
Through her person.
Those near and dear to her in her home life;
Those brought together by the union of this kingdom;
Those spread throughout the Commonwealth of nations
So dear to her heart.
For our nation at this time we pray,
Asking for comfort in our loss,
And hopefulness as we step forward into the days ahead.
As our thankfulness mingles with our sadness,
May we support each other
And be, together, communities of tenderness and kindness.
Sustain us with the strong memories of the past,
And prepare us for joyfulness in the days before us.
In the dignity of our time of grief,
May we find in each other encouragement
To share our tears, and be consoled by remembering laughter

That eases emptiness and speaks to us
Of life continuing in generations to come.
God save our King,
And bless him in these days of preparation.
Imbue him with the strength of character,
The openness of heart,
The suppleness of mind
And the generosity of spirit
That will anoint him in the coming days.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

I invite you now to spend a few moments with your own prayer, in words or in silence; or simply in reflecting upon the stories we have read and the words we have heard in our worship today.

Hear our prayers. loving God, which we offer in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Hymn 654: We turn to you, O God of every nation

Benediction

As we have been forgiven,
let us now go into a world that needs forgiveness and healing.
Let us strive to bring peace and hope to others,
sharing God's love with them.
And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with each one of us and with all those we love, today and for ever more.
Amen