

Prelude: The King of love my shepherd is, by Healey Willan

Words of welcome:

When we come to God, we come with thanksgiving and praise, and with penitence as well. Christ, who is the light of the world shows up the wrongs in the world and in our little lives as well. And so this morning as we think about the life of obedience, we begin by singing or listening to the hymn

Hymn: Dear Lord and Father of mankind (485)

Prayer:

Lord God, we come to you, taking time out of our day, and out of our week to sit quietly with you, to listen, to reflect, to pray and to worship you. Sometimes our days can seem monotonous and we long for you to do the dramatic and spectacular – and we forget that you do that each morning when the sun rises and each evening as it sets. We long for you to make noise and draw attention to yourself, but you come to us in stillness and quiet, and in the small voice of calm.

Thank you that you know better than we do. Thank you that you know how best to come to us, your restless, sensation-seeking people, to transform us into your image and likeness, your presence in the world. So as we sit quietly with you, may we hear your voice and may we become the people you made us to be, not drawing attention to ourselves, but quietly doing your bidding and so transforming your world.

And hear us as we pray as you taught us, saying:

Our Father who art in heaven hallowed by 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 debts as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever. Amen

Reading: Matthew 18:23-35

This story of the unforgiving servant is one I have acted out with the school pupils more than once. They get the point very easily. The king lets the servant off paying a very large debt. He is let off. His debt is forgiven, not postponed. He isn't given a payment plan, but his bill is torn up and the slate wiped clean. And then that same servant wants to throw a fellow-debtor into prison for a much smaller amount which he is owed. This isn't one of Jesus' more subtle parables. This story has an obvious moral. And the idea, the bit we have to work at, is that we should apply it to ourselves.

The message about life in God's kingdom is two-fold here. First of all there is the really, really good news, that we are forgiven. Whatever we owe God, whatever we have done or not done which hurts him and offends against his perfect law of love, God forgives us. He doesn't say that he will give us a chance to make good. He doesn't say that we can pay our debt in instalments of extra niceness. He forgives us, lets us off, sets us free from the burden of carrying that debt. Just as for that forgiven servant this was unreservedly good news, so it is for us. We should be running and leaping and shouting for joy.

But there is something else we should be doing: we should be passing it along. In the kingdom of heaven God forgives us fully and freely. But in the kingdom of heaven God also expects that those who are forgiven should also forgive. And that is not easy. But then if it is hard for us we should understand that our forgiveness was and is not easy for God either. It's

not the case that for God everything is easy. For God nothing is too difficult, especially physically. But the emotional part of forgiveness is one of the hardest things to master, and our forgiveness cost the life of God himself, in Jesus. It wasn't easy for Jesus and that means that it wasn't easy for God, because they are one. So when we find forgiveness hard, it won't wash if we turn to God and say "It was easy for you." It wasn't.

In the parable, the idea is that when confronted by someone who owes him some small thing, the forgiven servant should have remembered that he *is* a forgiven servant – he is a servant, so no higher, socially, than the one who owes him, and he is forgiven – he has just had all his unpayable debt wiped out. And this is supposed to make him more willing to pass the forgiveness along. When we act it out with the children, they see this. They see, and we see, why we ought to be forgiving – we of all people, who know how much we are forgiven. But too often we don't, to the injury of ourselves and others, of society and to the injury of God's kingdom.

Forgiveness is the hardest of all things. How can you forgive someone who has hurt you, physically or emotionally? All of us know why people take revenge on those who injure them, even if we know that it is not a good idea, as it will only escalate a cycle of hate. How do you forgive? Only through love. If you love a person it is possible to forgive them, no matter what they do. It isn't easy, but it is possible. Parents forgive children, and grandparents grandchildren over and over again. Sometimes it works the other way as well, and children forgive their parents. And this is possible because of love that is strong and important.

In the kingdom of God we are all bound into God's family and Jesus tells us to love one another, and to love our enemies. Love and forgiveness are part of the same thing. Neither of them are easy; both of them are important. And as this parable shows, it is by our forgiving that we show that we understand the wonder of the forgiveness given us by God in Jesus.

Hymn: Forgive our sins as we forgive (486)

Reading: Matthew 21:28-32

This little parable, almost too short to be a real story is a great illustration of what really matters in the kingdom of heaven. It is not about saying the right words, but about doing the right thing.

We have all been the child who means well and tells the parent – or tells God – that we will do something, but when the day ends, we find that we have not yet done it. Some of us have been the child who has said no – to our parents or to our Father God. No, I won't do what you ask. No I don't believe in you. No, I want to do things my way. And then as time has gone by - minutes, hours, days, weeks, maybe even years, we find that our "no" has become rather silly, and we put on our boots and do what was asked of us: we lay the table, we gather the harvest, we walk with our Heavenly Father.

Jesus told the story because then as now, there were lots of religious people who could say the right things. He is talking to the chief priests and the elders at the time, shortly after he had driven the money-changers and others out of the temple. They certainly knew the right words, but he told them that it was the people they looked down on who were entering the kingdom of heaven, because the right words were not being aligned to the right deeds. Jesus cleansed the temple to make the point that the practices, the things that were being done there, were in fact detracting from worshipping God, from hearing God's word, from doing what God asked. They were all about the right words, the right rituals, but not

about the right way of life. And they were making it harder, not easier, for those outside the inner ring of the priesthood, to come close to the God who was their Father.

So we, who read this little illustration today need to remember that it is our deeds, not our words that matter. It is what we do, not what we intend to do that God notices. When Jesus tells us to love God with everything in us, do we actually do it – or do we just say the words? When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, do we try to apply this to ourselves, or do we try to apply it to someone else instead? When Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek, to make peace with our accuser, to love our neighbours as we do ourselves, do we say “I go, Sir” but never get around to actually making the changes in our lives or in our church that obedience demands? Or have we enough honesty to say, “That is hard.” And then work out what it means.

There are people who think that the kingdom of heaven is for those who know the right words, who believe the right things. But Jesus says otherwise. The kingdom of heaven is for those who do what God asks, however inconvenient. It is for those who love God enough to really put him first, and who look for his will in every situation, They may not know all the right theology. They may not be able to quote Paul chapter and verse, but they seek to love their heavenly Father and they know that love means obedience. And this is where our two parables come together this week. In both of them the kingdom of heaven is for those who respond to God with love: forgiving as we are forgiven, obeying because we want to please God. It is for the doers, not the sayers; the people who know that they are forgiven and that this is the best good news, and who respond to that forgiveness with love for God and for others.

And don't forget that Jesus ends this story of the two sons by saying that the people who the sayers thought least likely were those who were finding the kingdom of heaven first – because they knew that they needed forgiveness and in finding it, they were moved by love and gratitude to give to others what was given them. May we be these people, grateful and giving, and obeying.

Hymn: Make me a channel of your peace (528)

These weeks we are trying to work out what it can be like when we meet together as church again. And it is hard. We are not going to rush into it just because we may because in doing that, we may lose more than we gain. But when we do, when we gather in a space which we know and love and find we can't sit in our usual seats because of social distancing, when we have to wear masks and not sing (you should sing the hymns in these recorded services, because we won't be able to sing in church for a while) will we complain and lament for what we have lost or seek to discover what are the opportunities that God is giving us?

Prayer:

Lord God who did and does the hard thing and forgive and forgives and forgives, loves and loves and loves, we come to you knowing that we need you, knowing that we can never repay you, knowing that we are forgiven and so with our hearts dancing with inner joy.

We praise you that we can bring to you all that troubles us, and so we pray first of all for those who do not know this. We pray for families and neighbours who struggle to get through hard times and do not know that they can call on you for help and know you at their side. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for our church community as we seek to live in your way, not just in word but in deed. Help us to show by the way that we are prepared to change that we love others in your

name. Help us not to grumble when we need to remain at a social distance for people, or wear masks in inside spaces, but to do it willingly as a way that we can show love and respect to those around us. Give us the grace to do that hard thing for love of you. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for the people around us who are stressed. We pray for those who must make wise decisions to lead the country when people are getting tired and fratchetty. We ask that your peace and grace would be known in our public life as well as in homes. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for your Spirit to fill our hearts and to flow from us through our community and beyond. Bless your church in this time, Lord God, the large congregations and the small, the traditional people and those who worship you in ways we might find strange. Bles our friends in the Czech Republic. May this time of change and decision be a time when your kingdom comes and your will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

We offer our prayers in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Hymn: One more step along the world I go (530)

Benediction:

May grace, mercy and peace
from God the Father,
God the Son
and God the Holy Spirit
rest on you and remain with you
now and evermore. Amen.

Postlude: Gavotte by Samuel Wesley played on the Laggan organ.