

Sunday 13th September 2020

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us, though separate let us worship together in God.

Hymn	Thy ceaseless unexhausted love	Tune St Botolphs
Thy ceaseless unexhausted love unmerited and free, delights our evil to remove, and help our misery.		Its streams the whole creation reach, so plenteous is the store, enough for all, enough for each, enough for evermore.
Thou waitest to be gracious still; thou dost with sinners bear, that, saved, we may thy goodness feel, and all thy grace declare.		Faithful, O Lord, thy mercies are, a rock that cannot move; a thousand promises declare thy constancy of love.
Thy goodness and thy truth to me, to every soul, abound, a vast, unfathomable sea, where all our thoughts are drowned.		Throughout the universe it reigns, unalterably sure; and while the truth of God remains the goodness must endure.
		CHARLES WESLEY (1707-88)

Prayer

Eternal God, we come before in awe and wonder. Gathering to worship together we bring you are week with all its ups and downs, its challenges and frustrations, its celebrations and thanksgivings. You are always with us and you know everything that has happened to each human being, but we offer you our experiences, we offer you our thanksgiving and praise.

We thank you for each new day that dawns with all its potential and praise you that each day is an opportunity to explore your creation and share with others the wonders we find. As the season turns and we look to shorter days we give thanks for the summer, in all its strangeness; we are here, we have journeyed, and you have been with us. We have feasted on the fruits of the summer harvest and now look to the fruits of the autumn and a thanksgiving for the wonder of your generous provision in creation. We thank you for all those who work to farm the land and enable us to enjoy the harvest, for those who work in shops and distribution centres so that we can access the food we need. We thank you for family and friends and our life together in fellowship and faith, and we thank you for the discoveries and inventions that have enables our gathering together in these extraordinary times.

Eternal God, when we stop to praise and thank you, we are staggered by all that you provide. As we worship together, we are reminded of your call to tell our story and the experiences that have drawn us together in faith. United in faith we share together the words Jesus taught the disciples:

The Lord's prayer

Readings Exodus 14:10-31
Matthew 18:21-35

Story The gift of grace

Once upon a time, deep in a forest at the foot of some mountains there lived an old man, all alone. He was quite content. Every day he walked up into the mountains and gazed in wonder at the beauty of creation and quietly gave thanks to God. Occasionally, travellers would pass his house on

their way up the mountain and he would pass the time of day with them and offer them refreshment.

One day, there was a knock at his door and when he answered it, he was faced with a man in a mask, who was pointing a gun at him. He motioned to the old man to stand back and he entered the house. Then, he asked the man to give him his money and precious items. The old man had little money, but he placed it in front of the robber and said he could take whatever he could find, he gave it freely. The robber was startled and grabbed the money and left quickly.

The old man also left the house and walked up the path into the mountains. The robber saw him leave and decided the old man must keep his treasure in the mountains and so he followed him. He hid as the man stopped then sat and began to pray. 'Loving God, today I was visited by a man who has nothing, and I offered him everything I had, but he simply took my money. I know he must have needed that money, but I pray that he will come back and that I can share with him all the treasure of the earth. The man hiding was startled this time, and wondered if he had missed something in the man's house, but then he began to think about the words of the prayer and realised that there was no panic he simply had to return and ask for the treasure.

The next day he returned to the house but without his gun, and he knocked on the door. The old man answered and asked him in. The robber asked the old man to show him his treasure. Together they left the house and walked up into the hills where the old man stood and gazed in wonder at the view. The robber gazed first at the man and then at the view and then he realised. The old man had given him everything in the first place, he had offered him love without strings.

Suggested Hymn

The love of God is broad like beach and meadow

See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5bM-5AfnZY>

Reflection

Exodus 14 relates one of the great rescue stories of the Bible. The Israelites are once again not happy, slavery would have been better than this, and we sense the dry humour of the narrator as he has them uttering the line – 'was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness'. As rescues go this one is quite 'bloody'. It was happy ever after for the Israelites but not so good for the Egyptians and many of us struggle with the concept of God revealed in this story. It is a reminder of the huge influence Jesus had on our understanding of God.

However, this story is also a reminder that we need to take care how we formulate our prayers. We need to recognise the effect our prayer requests may have on the lives of others. The film Bruce Almighty explores this, as Bruce, after raging at God, is told to take over while God goes on holiday and see if he can do any better. Wanting to impress his girl friend he uses his powers to make the moon closer and larger, she is impressed but the havoc that takes place with a change in the moons orbit is beyond anything Bruce might have envisaged. When, frustrated by the non-stop prayer requests that are coming into his head, he devises a computer program to answer yes to all requests, and he finds himself caught up in riots. Everyone prayed to win the lottery, and they did, but with so many winners the prize money is cents rather than thousands of dollars and people are not happy. The film is a wonderful study of prayer and worth a watch if you have not seen it.

Bruce made mistakes, just as we all do, and our reading from Matthew reminds us that God's mercy is never-ending. It is a familiar story but is probably one of the most misunderstood stories in Matthew. Some versions entitle it the unmerciful slave, but Susan Durber suggests that it needs to be The Merciful King. Forgiveness is something of a challenge to many, particularly when associated with unconditional love. We pray regularly 'forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us as if it were some kind of deal that is being made. However, God's mercy is not dependant on any

deal and this story underlines that. The debt the slave had accrued was beyond imagination there was no way he could ever have paid it back in his lifetime, even a rich man would have struggled with this debt. The slave begs for time, as we might expect, but instead the King cancels the debt in full, he does not ask for a penny.

So far, so good, but then we find the story takes a turn as the forgiven slave then seeks to exact payment from a fellow slave who owes him money – ‘forgive us our sins AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO SIN AGAINST US’, we are suddenly back in the transaction mode. How often do we read this story and raise a cheer when the mean slave is caught and punished? This is the misunderstanding, the second half of this story should act like a mirror, we have heard of the wonderful unconditional mercy of the King and this mirror reflects our poor attempt to follow that up in our own lives. The moment we are tempted to cheer tells us we have missed the point. The merciful King will not punish he will forgive again, and again and again, not seven but seventy times seven and more.

This is why when we are told to fear God, it is not the shivering shaking fear of a revengeful God but the wondrous fear of a meeting someone we are in debt to but whose love is more than we can ever imagine, a love that goes beyond transactions and deals and opens the path to new beginnings.

Knowing God is an epic journey, knowing God takes us to places of wonder, knowing God changes us as we receive this unconditional love and mercy and slowly change our ways in response, seeking always the best path, the most forgiving action. We may not always succeed but we can always try. We will be saddened when we recognise we have messed it up again but we can know that no matter how much we mess it up God is merciful. When we struggle to forgive, to even think about forgiving let us remember we are forgiven and that gift is given freely.

Song Forgiveness Matthew West <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1Lu5udXEZI>

Prayers of concern and commitment

Sit quietly and reflect on the times you have been slow to forgive. The times you have nursed righteous indignation, when you may have favourably compared your actions against those of others failing to recognise that you were denying a gift of love. THEN, Sit quietly and consciously feel the forgiveness of God wash over you, removing your failings and offering you a chance to be different.

Merciful God, through your loving forgiveness may we be healed, and the world be refreshed.

In the world and in our lives, we recognise that a lack of forgiveness prevents healing. We offer you the places in the world where a lack of forgiveness has led to conflict and pray that we may help others to see the difference that forgiveness can make in our experience of life. When we share with others may we think before being quick to condemn, instead through our experience of mercy may we be open to possibilities.

Merciful God, through your loving forgiveness may we be healed, and the world be refreshed.

In a world where holding grievances and blaming others seems a way of life, help us to show a different way through our words and actions. We offer you the places in the world where grievances have escalated from injustice and unfairness, where blame is causing a distortion in the reality of your love, and communities feel held to ransom by things over which they have no control. May we find the strength to let go of our grievances.

Merciful God, through your loving forgiveness may we be healed, and the world be refreshed.

In a world where too many people are hurting help us recognise where wounds arise from unforgiveness and inspire us to sow the seeds of forgiveness in people's minds. When we deny forgiveness, we stifle hope and you offer hope through your generous mercy and love. May we seek to be a positive influence, offering healing through our words and actions.

Merciful God, through your loving forgiveness may we be healed, and the world be refreshed.

In a world where difference often seems negative, and world leaders seek to build barriers rather than relationships, help us recognise the need for forgiveness in our approach to unity. In you there is no race or creed, we are humans, all travelling towards the fullness of humanity, some taking different paths and some travelling at different speeds but one in you and in creation. May your Spirit inspire us to live in the reality of oneness, embrace your presence and your love and mercy for all people, and work to build the kingdom.

Merciful God, through your loving forgiveness may we be healed, and the world be refreshed.

Amen

Our offering to God.

As we continue to worship apart but together, we pledge our commitment to sharing in the work of our church through our continued offering and by exploring new ways of living generously, and may we know your blessing on all we do. Amen

Song The Lord's my shepherd Stuart Townsend

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pN4tPkX0MG0>

Blessing

May the blessing that is the knowledge of God, source of all being, the love of God discovered through Jesus and the inspiration of the Spirit which binds us together be with us on our journey this day and every day. Amen.