

Order of Service 27th February 2022

Forgiveness as Flow

Welcome

Hello and welcome to Hearsall at Home for 27th February 2022. Today we reflect on something we freely receive from God, and are called to freely give away again to others: Forgiveness.

Call to Worship

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

Revelation 22: 1 - 2

Hymn (BPW 550) **Amazing Grace**

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.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.

My rebel soul, that once withstood
The Saviour's kindest call,
Rejoices now, by grace subdued,
To serve him with its all.

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

Yes, when this mortal flesh shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess within the veil
A life of joy and peace.

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've first begun.

Prayers of Praise & Confession

Holy God whose heart is love we wait before you once more.
We are not here to bargain with our own achievements,
nor to posture because of our own status.
We come simply to rest in you,
discovering once more
that peace which is nothing to do with our frantic thoughts;
that joy which is broader, deeper and older than our immediate circumstances;
that love which is so much more
than even the care of a good mother or the tenderness of a good lover.
Your love for us is the foundation of our universe.
We rest in you again;
we sense that this is nothing to do with our goodness or badness;
it is pure gift, and we turn to you now,
and we will turn to you again, like a flower to the light,
ever and always.
We bless you, Lord.
Amen.

We might encourage our children to sing our next song - but adults too, need to be bowled over by the mind-blowing bigness of our God.

Song **Our God is a Great Big God**

Chorus x 2

*Our God is a great big God,
Our God is a great big God,
Our God is a great big God,
And He holds us in His hands.*

He's higher than a skyscraper,
And He's deeper than a submarine.
He's wider than the universe,
And beyond my wildest dreams,
And He's known me and He's loved me,
Since before the world began.
How wonderful to be a part of
God's amazing plan.

Chorus x2

The Lord's Prayer

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.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.

Offering

How marvellous to be able to give a little bit like the way you give! Lord, may our donations to church and charity be effective ways of sharing your freely-given love. Amen.

Our next song declares that a little bit of love goes a long, long way. No one can argue with that!

Song A Little Bit of Love

A little bit of love goes a long, long way,
A little love, a little love.
A little bit of love and I'm on my way.
A little love, a little love...

Chorus

*A long way but we'll get there together,
A long way but we'll get there soon.
Along the way we can lean on each other.
A little love goes a long, long way,
A little love, a little love....*

A little bit of love and the sun comes shining,
A little love, a little love.
A little bit of kindness and someone's smiling,
A little love, a little love...

Chorus x2

*A long way but we'll get there together,
A long way but we'll get there soon.
Along the way we can lean on each other.
A little love goes a long, long way,
A little love, a little love....*

Our prayers this week are led by Linda Wallace.

Prayers of Intercession

Father, we come to you now and lift our prayers for the world and for your creation to your throne of grace.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Lord,

We pray for the world, your world, which you made for all creation to enjoy. Yet we have spoiled the environment on a worldwide scale and our image of the earth needs re-shaping in a radical way. We ask for a renewed sense of responsibility by multinational companies and a greater respect by us all for the fragile balance of our environment.

We pray for more compassion in this country and in world farming, especially in factory farms and dairy farms where conditions and animal husbandry leave a lot to be desired, just so that we can have cheaper meat, poultry and dairy products.

Animals are sentient and intelligent creatures that feel pain and fear.

Lord, please change the hearts of those responsible for animal welfare issues and husbandry, so that they are no longer treated as a product but as living breathing beings.

Father, we pray for those who are hungry for peace; many have witnessed the appalling impact of war and remain scarred by the horrors of violence, displacement and fear.

We ask that the situation between Russia and the Ukraine will reach a mutually acceptable solution so that they can live in peace with one another. We pray for those who are seeking to be peacemakers; for those who seek to bring hope and reconciliation around the world; for those who reach out to the lost and broken, the frustrated, the despised and rejected; for those who are willing to share their neighbours' hurt and burdens as part of their witness and service to Christ. We give thanks for those who stand with the tempted because they know from their own bitter experience just how hard it is to say no.

We pray for a deeper sense of oneness with God and for a life-changing experience of reconciliation with the Lord of life and the bringer of peace.

We bring those who we know who are ill at the moment, whose peaceful lives have been shaken by the knowledge of serious illness, bereavement or bad news about their family's health and future. In a moment of quiet we lift them to you now. May Christ hold them gently in his hands and if it be your will Father, let them be made well and give them peace once more in their hearts and minds, and healing for their suffering bodies.

We pray, finally, for ourselves and the concerns that trouble our own hearts, minds and lives; for all we know we must face in the coming weeks and months, and for wisdom to know what to say and what to do; for strength to stand firm and for faith to trust the one who alone is trustworthy. Your will be done, Father.

The Lord hears our prayers. Amen.

Many thanks Linda for those prayers. We hear our Bible readings now. We have a challenging parable from Matthew and a comforting portrait of church life from Colossians.

Bible Readings

Matthew 18: 21 - 35

The parable of the unmerciful servant

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?'

²² Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

²³ 'Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵ 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.

²⁶ 'At this the servant fell on his knees before him. "Be patient with me," he begged, "and I will pay back everything." ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.

²⁸ 'But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. "Pay back what you owe me!" he demanded.

²⁹ 'His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, "Be patient with me, and I will pay it back."

³⁰ 'But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³² 'Then the master called the servant in. "You wicked servant," he said, "I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ 'This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

Colossians 3: 12 - 17

¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Today is really about passing on the love! Our next song reminds us that God's goodness is really something we simply experience. We can't deserve it or control it. Rather we enjoy it, and let others enjoy it too. Peace like a river...

Song (WT 345) **Peace like a River**

Peace like a river,
Love like a mountain,
The wind of your spirit is blowing everywhere.
Joy like a fountain, healing spring of life,
Come, Holy Spirit, let your fire fall.

Repeat x2

Lord, please let the love flow to us and among us and from us as we reflect on your Word together. Amen.

Sermon

Forgiveness as Flow

Imagine a man who had a pretty stream flowing through his garden. Exotic plants grow on its banks in the summer, and he even has an old tree drooping over his one-foot waterfall. How delighted and proud he feels, to have a stream - no, to have his **own** stream, flowing in his own garden!

But then he begins to focus his attention on his neighbours. He sees that his stream actually flows on into their gardens. This doesn't seem quite right. **He's** the one who really appreciates the stream, what with his tree, and his waterfall, and his plants, and the little bench he has strategically placed in such a position that he can see the stream in all its beauty.

It doesn't seem right to him now, that the stream flows on, so he hatches a plan to hold on to his own stream. He'll build a dam. He pours himself a nice G & T one sunny afternoon and begins to plot. He notes down the materials he'll need. He realises he'll have to build a little pool to retain the stream water and sets about designing its shape.

It slowly dawns on him that his pool is going to need to be pretty deep, so he thinks about hiring a digger, and excavating a deep pit to keep hold of his own stream water.

As he's sketching it out, his wife comes and joins him on the bench, sipping her own G & T. He explains his plan to her, and, fortunately, she gradually helps him to accept that there's no way he can keep the stream to himself. The water must keep on flowing. Why, he will end up flooding his whole garden, creating a drowning hazard for his children, and inundating his own house, were his crackpot scheme to succeed.

*Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.*

We can picture forgiveness as like a flowing stream. It comes to us, and then we must pass it on to others.

* * *

Just occasionally, when some heinous murder takes place, a family member is very quick to say that they forgive the murderer of their loved one. It seems astonishing that they can be so immediate, and, if we're being honest, perhaps rather unseemly. A murderer cannot and should not be forgiven on a whim. Culpability must be acknowledged. Some sort of legally sanctioned penalty must be paid. Lessons must be learnt. Hearts must be searched. Then, after a due process has been followed, the daunting task of forgiveness might be approached.

Indeed, most of us find forgiveness generally to be tough. It's a perennial theme in my ministry. Can a faithful wife forgive an adulterous husband? Can a person forced out of the business they themselves created forgive the members of the new board who ousted them? In more mundane matters, can we forgive the person who cut us up at the roundabout or slighted us at the coffee morning?

Ultimately, we know we **must**... We as Christians know the teaching of Christ: *forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us*. Remember the story of the Revd Julie Nicholson whose daughter was killed in the London tube bombings. She could not forgive, so she left her ministry. We want to forgive, but sometimes we just can't.

In the parable we heard read, a servant has an unpayable debt of ten thousand silver coins. He begs his creditor, the king, to release him for his family's sake. Having been forgiven his huge debt, however, he refuses to forgive the much smaller debt of his fellow servant.

Two observations about this story. **One, the forgiveness we may be called to give to another person is much smaller than the forgiveness Christ offers to us.**

Generally, this is clearly the case. Christ forgives us for rebellion against God, for a lifetime of selfishness and for the great summation of all of our sins. Thinking of the offences we are generally called to forgive in an ordinary life, even a relatively serious offence against us is small compared with the weight of the forgiveness we ourselves require from God.

A sincere believer can feel this - the nearer they walk with Christ, the greater sense they have of their own unworthiness. It can even be that, because a sincere Christian is deeply aware of their own shortcomings when they look into the perfectly merciful and holy face of God, they really do have the grace to recognise that their own failing is like the debt of 10,000 gold coins, whilst the offence against them feels more like that smaller debt of a hundred silver coins. So the more deeply we are aware of what Christ achieves for us on the cross, the more able we are to see another's fault against us more lightly.

And two, **forgiveness is like a river flowing, not a one-off decision reached.** The unmerciful servant has received forgiveness but has been unwilling to let it flow on. Because we are always sinners, we always need forgiveness. As we always need forgiveness, then forgiveness, like a river, must find an outlet beyond ourselves.

The harsh punishment described for the unmerciful servant can be seen in this light. It's not that God is cross with the forgiven sinner who doesn't in turn forgive. It's more that the nature of forgiveness is dynamic.

If we receive it, by its very nature, we must share it. Like the man who couldn't keep his own stream in his back garden, we cannot keep forgiveness to ourselves.

* * *

And yet for very serious offences against us, it's really hard to forgive. Drawing from the work of others, most notably R. T. Kendall and Haddon Wilmer, I have developed a model of forgiveness that talks of stages or steps of forgiveness, rather than seeing forgiveness as a one-off event.

Let's imagine that someone has sinned against you in some significant respect. Have you forgiven them? A simple *Yes* or *No* may not be helpful. Forgiveness flows; forgiveness is a process; forgiveness can be taken step by step.

Step one: Accepting the continued existence of the Offender

You give permission for the offender to carry on existing somewhere in the world. It's a low bar, but not one that everyone crosses.

That wicked person should be locked away and the key should be destroyed. He should rot in hell for all eternity.

If you think like this, you have not even got to level one of forgiveness. But, if you can quietly accept that the offender must be allowed to carry on living, then it is wrong to say you have *not* forgiven. Instead we might say, you have begun the process of forgiveness.

Step two: Bearing the offender no ill-will

You wish the offender no ill, though you may wish to have no contact with them. If you are still wishing ill-luck on your offender, you have not got to level two yet. But if, though you wish to avoid them, you wish them no harm, then well done - you have reached level two, and no one can accuse you of being unforgiving.

Level three: Polite social encounter

You can now behave civilly to the offender at any required social events. If you take action to avoid coming across your offender, you're not at level three yet! It may be tough to meet your offender at a family wedding or a coffee morning, but if you can, and if you can muster polite responses, then well done: you have reached level three.

Level four: Shared activity

At level four, you can engage with the person over some joint interest, or at least you would be willing to do so. If you're still at icy politeness and aren't able to plan a family event or sort out some finances with them, then you're not at level four yet. But if you could work on something together, say join a quiz team with them, even if for just an hour, then - well done! - you are well on the way to what we might call total forgiveness.

Level five: Total forgiveness

At this level, you accept the offender completely and unconditionally, loving them as does God, with steadfast agape love. This is a heavenly level of forgiveness! If you could plan arrangements for a family Christmas but not pray fervently for them as a brother or sister with whom we will spend all eternity, then we are not quite at level five. Perhaps for most of us, level five does belong in heaven and belong with God. Yet, some may be ready to reach this level of forgiveness even in their earthly lives.

* * *

No one can be forced to forgive another. Forgiveness takes time. To forgive may be like trying on a suit of clothes. At first it doesn't fit, but then, as time goes on, we grow into it, and are able to wear the clothes of forgiveness more and more frequently, till one day they become our permanent garb. As Paul put it to the Colossians: **clothe yourselves** with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bear with each other; forgive as the Lord forgave you.

Forgiveness is much easier if the offender admits their error. But even if someone does not, we can at least begin working through the levels of forgiveness I have described.

Why should we do this? One answer is simply **self-interest**. Unforgiveness hurts you much more than it hurts the offender. It leaves a place of bitterness and pain which can only be healed when forgiveness starts to flow. The one who is liberated by forgiveness is not the offender, but the offended.

Another answer is simply this: We forgive **because that's just the way things work with God**. We come to God not because we deserve his love, and not because we don't deserve his love. Deserving has nothing to do with it. We come to God simply because he freely bestows love. It's the way of the kingdom. It's all about grace.

Of course, a serious offender needs to learn from their errors and develop a better way of living. We are not talking today about serious offenders getting off scot-free. A convicted criminal most certainly needs to pay their penalty in legal and social terms. But we **are** saying that, spiritually, there is always a way back for even a person who has committed the vilest of crimes. If they choose to respond to God's grace, the way of heaven can be re-opened to them. And we are saying that this spiritual truth can give a criminal the hope and energy and framework they need in order to rebuild their lives on earth — even if that life must be spent in prison.

According to Jesus, forgiveness is not a limited resource. The apostle Peter thought he was being super-Christian when suggesting he might forgive a sinner as much as **seven** times. Jesus says **seventy-seven** times - or even seven times seventy times. Forgiveness is not a side dish on the menu of faith; it's the main course. Forgiveness is not a decorative touch on the house of the church; it's the very foundations.

* * *

- Look into your own heart.
- Consider the forgiveness God gives you in Christ.
- Receive it again now in the stillness of your heart.
- It's like a freshwater stream flowing into you.
- It's like a freshwater stream flowing out of you.
- Is there anyone you still need to forgive?
- If you can't forgive them totally, could you make one more step on the path of forgiveness?
- Can you try on even total forgiveness for a short while, and see how it fits?

God's amazing love is both a mystery and a reality... Let's celebrate that in the words of our closing song.

Song **Your Love for Me is a Mystery**

Verse

Your love for me is a mystery
And I don't understand
How You can keep on loving me
Exactly as I am.

Though I may not understand You,
One thing I know,
You are all my heart desires,
Lord, don't ever let me go.

Verse

You're precious, always near to me,
And I am feeling sure
That You will never ever let me down;
I know that I'm secure.

Though I may not understand You,
One thing I know,
You are all my heart desires,
Lord, don't ever let me go.

Bridge

In those times when I have let You down,
You're never standing far away;
All I've had to do is turn my face to You
To find where love and mercy lay.

Verse 3

And Your forgiveness floods my being;
A river deep and wide.
A stream of living water
Flows from deep inside,
And I still don't understand You,
But this I know,

You'll always be my heart's desire;
I can't ever let You go.

Lord, don't ever let me go. x2

The Grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ;
And the love of God;
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
Be with us all, evermore.
Amen

Sung Blessing

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you
Wherever he may send you;
May he guide you through the wilderness;
Protect you through the storm;
May he bring you home rejoicing
At the wonders he has shown you;
May he bring you home rejoicing
Once again into our doors.