



Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life.
Amen

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Think of a time where one person has held a grudge against another and refused to forgive. How did this situation arise and play out?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

God of forgiveness and compassion,
your Son, Jesus Christ, shared our human life
and showed us what it means to be fully alive.
We thank you that we can come to you as our whole selves:
you know our sins and offer us forgiveness;
you help us to take responsibility and make amends;
you know the ways in which we have been hurt by others;

you help us to reshape our world after the pattern of justice.
May we embrace the life your Kingdom,
putting your radical and reckless love into action,
and rejoicing in your endless goodness and mercy.
In your holy name, we pray. **Amen**

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 103:1 – 13

Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and all that is within me, bless his holy name.
Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits,
who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle.
The Lord works vindication and justice for the oppressed.
He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.
The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger for ever.
He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.
As a father has compassion for his children,
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.
Amen

Sermon

Today's reading concerns a vitally important but tough and emotive topic: forgiveness. Vitally important, because without forgiveness, it is all too easy to become trapped in anger, bitterness and pain, and for cycles of violence to continue. Tough and emotive, because true forgiveness is one of the hardest things that a human being can do; it involves real risks and can be deeply costly, especially in a culture prone to put vengeance on a pedestal and forego mercy. One of the most moving, inspiring and memorable stories of forgiveness I have come across in recent times is from an excellent BBC documentary series, called *Once Upon a Time in Northern Ireland*, which tells the story of 'the Troubles' from people on all sides of the conflict. Shortly after Bloody Sunday in May 1972, Richard was running about in the playground of his primary school, within a staunchly republican area being patrolled by the British Army. A soldier was under attack, and in aiming to hit the assailant and protect his colleague, Charles shot Richard in the face, leaving him completely blind.

It was far from an easy decision, but about three decades later, after the Good Friday Agreement had brought some calm to the province and it seemed possible, Richard reached out to Charles and the two men met. It was very hard for the latter to apologise because he felt it would imply that what was a dreadful accident had been deliberate and callous, and Richard was nervous because he realised he must risk taking Charles as he was, rather than how he wished him to be. However, the pair have subsequently been on a remarkable journey of reconciliation. Richard said, 'I could nail Charles to a cross and it wouldn't make any difference whatsoever to my life; it wouldn't give me back my eyesight, or make me any happier. But what has made me happier is to try and find a way we can become friends'. Charles in turn reflects on how goodness has come from something horrific,

and it is clear they now have a very warm relationship, despite some of the scepticism of others.

Seeing the two men talk about their experiences highlights some of the complexities and the tensions present in seeking reconciliation, which in their case involved crossing some of the boundaries still all too evident in Northern Ireland. That type of process will not always be viable or safe; it is possible, for example, for somebody who has been abused to embark on a journey towards forgiveness whilst not ever wishing to be in the same room as their abuser ever again. We need to take care in how we speak of forgiveness, and keep in mind that pressuring someone to forgive can be deeply harmful, and form an abusive pattern of behaviour in-of-itself. However, when the hurt caused can be named, and honestly addressed, and when all those involved are willing to take the risk and do the hard work, profoundly unexpected and wonderful things may happen, as with Richard and Charles. In today's reading, Jesus told his disciples a story enabling them to see the power and importance of forgiveness within the life of the Church, and unlike many of the parables he told, the meaning on this occasion is very clear.

The phase of Jesus' public ministry centred on the region of Galilee was drawing to a close and he was to be found deep in conversation with his disciples, as they prepared to head out towards Jerusalem. They had asked him a question about who would be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven (18:1), which sparked teaching about God's care for the apparently least significant among the community of the Church, culminating in a reminder of his constant presence with the gathered people of God (18:2 – 20). Now, the subject shifted again, as Peter followed up on the advice given about dealing with siblings-in-Christ who had sinned against others and asked how many times he should forgive. In rabbinic thought, forgiveness was to be offered generously but should also be prudent, so that two or three chances being given was quite reasonable. Perhaps Peter was beginning to

grasp what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah (16:13 – 20), so he suggested that forgiveness should be offered up to seven times and probably felt this was extravagant enough (18:21). However, Jesus' response went much further; it does not matter whether we translate his answer as 'seventy times seven' or 'seventy-seven', as the point here is that we should forgive too often to keep count (18:22).

The parable that follows poses an even more exaggerated contrast. We are told that a servant owed the enormous sum of ten-thousand talents to his boss (18:24). A talent was a measure of the weight of gold or silver equivalent to fifteen years' income for a typical worker, and was apparently worth 5,475 denarii – each of which was a day's earnings – so we talking about a debt the size of a vast Euromillions rollover jackpot! Yet, when he told his boss he could not pay (18:25), and begged on his knees for more time (18:26), he was immediately forgiven this outrageous debt in its entirety (18:27). One would think he would be full of gratitude and predisposed to be kind to others in turn, when he bumped into a fellow servant who owed him a smaller sum. A hundred denarii was not insignificant and would probably be equivalent to a few thousand pounds today, but it was small change compared to the vastness of his own debt. Yet, he violently set upon the second servant (18:28), and when in turn begged for mercy cast him into debtors' prison (18:29 – 30). Unsurprisingly, when told what had happened, the boss was furious and threw the book at the cruel and unforgiving slave (18:31 – 34).

The point is clear: we have been forgiven so much by our God, who in Jesus Christ loved the world enough to die on the cross to liberate all creation from sin and its consequences, that to withhold heartfelt forgiveness from a sibling-in-Christ is to go against the values of the Kingdom of Heaven (18:35). Again, we need to remember that God views every person with love and compassion, and the damage that is caused by abuse is – to frame it in the story's terms – much larger than a debt of one-hundred denarii. This is just one example of what

Jesus is *not* talking about here, I think, and we have already pointed to the damage pressuring another to forgive can do. Yet, as Richard came to realise when the time was right for him, forgiveness has an incredibly liberating power. Most of us will have seen what happens when someone holds onto a grudge and withholds forgiveness from a genuinely sorry person who is trying to make things right, perhaps as a sort of revenge or out of a misplaced conviction that 'letting go' of anger is the same as saying that what happened does not matter. Forgiveness is about being real, not pretending.

Today's reading is a vitally important but tough and emotive text, on a subject which is all those things. How you feel about it will depend on what is weighing upon your heart. Perhaps all this has prompted you to bring a particular prayer of confession to God or to take steps to make something right with another person. Maybe you have been reminded of a painful episode you find hard to forgive, in which case please do keep in mind that God's love for you is infinite and Jesus's life, death and resurrection reveal the immense divine compassion. Possibly, you have been inspired by Richard and Charles to pursue reconciliation with one who has hurt you or do something to address systematic sin and injustice in our society. Whatever feelings all this has brought to the surface, may you know God's love upholding and surrounding you, this day and every day, as you continue upon your own journey of discipleship. Both forgiving and being forgiven aren't easy, but we do not grapple with either of them alone, and our God's love goes with us every step of the way. Amen

Prayers of Renewal

You are invited to bring your own prayers to God in response to the sermon, and then to pray:

God of forgiveness and compassion,
forgive us our sins and heal our wounds,
so that we might be set free to follow you. **Amen**

Recommended Resource of the Week

Tom Wright's *The Lord and his Prayer* looks at the Lord's Prayer in detail and offers a fresh perspective on its vision of a transformation in how our world works.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord's Prayer

Blessing