

**Christchurch 10:45 On-Line Service**  
**13<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

**Order of Service**

- ❖ Welcome
- ❖ Opening Prayers
- ❖ Hymn – StF 489 ‘All I once held dear’ (10/05/2020)
- ❖ Bible Reading – Matthew 18: 21-35
- ❖ Reflection
- ❖ Hymn – StF 611 ‘Brother, sister, let me serve you’ (28/06/2020)
- ❖ Prayers for Others
- ❖ The Lord’s Prayer
- ❖ Blessing
- ❖ Hymn – StF 407 ‘Hear the call of the kingdom’ (26/07/2020)

**Welcome**

Welcome to this morning’s service. My name is Helen Dearn and I am a Local Preacher in the North Hertfordshire Methodist Circuit. Welcome to those who are regular worshippers at Christchurch, Hitchin and Pirton Methodist Church, those within the Circuit and those from further afield, who have found us either because of personal contact or by chance. I am aware that some members of the church I grew up in, St Andrew’s in Halifax, have found us too, which is wonderful. Every one of you is very welcome and I pray that God will speak to you in all the ways you need today.

This service has been pre-recorded due to various people’s long-standing commitments, but grateful thanks must be given to Tony Edmonds for pulling it all together and also providing our Bible reading. The music comes from previous services, but again, a huge thanks to all the musicians involved who have enabled a library of works to be built up and be used in this way.

So, let us prepare for worship, and come before God in prayer.

**Opening Prayers**

Loving Lord God,  
We come before you to offer you our praise and worship.  
As we look back over the last week,  
Help us to see your hand in our lives  
Guiding us as we try to negotiate all the demands and challenges  
That we have faced.

As we prepare for the week ahead,  
Help us find time to stop and listen to you  
To hear your voice and listen closely

So that we follow the path you have set out for us  
And shine your light into the dark corners of this world.

Yet, Lord, so often we don't do what you have asked of us.  
We go our own way, or rush into the day  
Not seeking your wisdom and help.  
Forgive us for all the times we have hurt  
Not just others, but ourselves as well.  
Help us turn back into your loving presence  
And then look out at the world through your eyes  
So we can see need and respond to it  
With love, kindness and compassion.

In Jesus we find true and complete forgiveness.  
Thank you for this enduring promise  
That ensures a future spent with you.  
Thank you that you enable us, through the power of your Holy Spirit  
To share the knowledge of that love  
To all we encounter day-by-day  
Whether that be actually or, in these digital days, virtually  
So that all lives can be blessed and know  
The grace, mercy and love that is found in you.

Amen.

### **Hymn – StF 489 'All I once held dear'**

### **Bible Reading**

#### **Matthew 18:21-35**

#### **The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant**

<sup>21</sup> 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?"

<sup>22</sup> Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

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

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

<sup>28</sup> "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.

<sup>29</sup> “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

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

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

<sup>35</sup> “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

### Reflection

This parable from Matthew’s Gospel is one that I know I am very familiar with. Peter thinks he is being very generous about suggesting he forgive those who have hurt him in some way seven times. Rabbinic teaching, taken from passages in the Book of Amos, was that you forgave three times, but not the fourth. Of course, Jesus challenges this rigid ruling, saying that forgiveness is on-going and never-ending. It is not a one-off act, but will often need revisiting and repeating when we, as we so often do, feel that sense of grievance and hurt rising up again – something that can happen years after the original event. Forgiveness is hard, but as Christians we are a forgiven people, our Christian life is born in forgiveness and so it is a thread that needs to run through all we do in life and in our relationships with everybody we have contact with.

However, as I read through this passage another word kept coming to mind and that word was ‘compassion’. Because, what I see as so lacking in the character of the first servant is any sense of compassion or empathy for the need and wants of others. He is so focussed on his own situation, his own status and his own desires that he cannot see his fellow servant with any degree of humanity and grace. Kindness is nowhere to be found; he knows his rights and he will ensure they are upheld no matter what.

I was about 12 when I discovered one of my favourite books of all time – Harper Lee’s ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’. Through the book we see the main character, Scout, gradually learning to see the world through the eyes of others. Indeed, very early in the book Scout, having had issues at school that day, announces that she would rather not go back anymore, thank you very much. Having off-loaded her story with a sense of justified grievance, her father Atticus offers these words of wisdom;

*“...if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you’ll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view-...-until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”*

We then travel with Scout as she grows through the book and comes to see the world from the perspective of others, even those she is tempted to despise or be afraid of. By the end of the book, Scout is able to stand on the front porch of a man she and her brother Jem had made a monster of in their imagination, yet who had just saved their lives, and know him as a shy and gentle recluse who watched over

them with care and concern. Scout has learned to see the world through Boo Radley's eyes and see those around her with compassion and empathy.

And it is these skills that we are called to learn and which, I feel are so important in enabling us to work towards the free and full forgiveness of others. I have recently completed a course in Dementia Studies and this included looking at different communities and how they view dementia and those who are living with it. In many societies there can be a huge amount of stigma attached to the diagnosis of dementia, and some cultures don't even acknowledge that it exists. Yet, there is also a vast difference in how societies respond to those in their midst who live with dementia or other forms of cognitive challenge.

Here in the West we are encouraged to see the rights of the individual as paramount and the needs of community are secondary to personal freedoms and rights. Yet, societies such as the Aboriginal People of Australia and North America place the community needs centre stage, with individual rights and wants as less important than communal responsibilities to the care and support of others. The focus, instead of turning inwards, is turned outwards. Now, I acknowledge that this is extreme ends of a continuum and there are challenges within both philosophies. The individual rights perspective can leave society fractured and divisive. The community-is-all view means those who don't quite fit in can feel lost, isolated and even exiled.

But there are also aspects of both that are positive and healthy. In the last few months we have seen communities come together in a way that I have not really known in my lifetime (I was born in the 1960s). I have spent more time chatting to my neighbours in lockdown than I did in probably the last 5 years and there is a sense that anyone of us could call out for help and someone would be there. Oh, and we are sharing the produce of our gardens – apples, plums and tomatoes so far!

We are also far more open about talking about mental health issues and the struggles and challenges people can face simply living day-to-day. We are openly talking about issues such as the 'Me Too' and 'Black Lives Matter' campaigns. We are questioning societal values and norms and, although there is debate, discussion and argument about these at least we are talking.

But, are we talking with the voice of Jesus, or are we talking with the voice of the unmerciful servant? Are we looking at those with whom we believe we have a disagreement and doing all we can to justify our own beliefs and actions, to force our point of view on others and not accept that there is any other way of thinking about things. Or, do we try to step into the shoes of others and seek to see the world through their eyes? Do we seek to see them as Jesus sees them and understand their perspective? Are we open to reviewing and maybe even changing our own mind-set or are we going to be so sure of our rights and privileges that we will actually cause harm to others, just as this servant did?

Forgiveness is hard work and it can often be really painful because it requires us to face up to the hurt we have endured or caused. It is an on-going process that requires effort, commitment and perseverance. Yes, there will be times when we slip up, take steps backwards, seek revenge rather than justice. But these are the days when we need to turn to Jesus and ask him to help us; to fill us with the power of his

Holy Spirit and to help us climb into the skin of our adversary, to try and understand them and their perspective. For this is when we can learn compassion and empathy – where we enter into their pain and struggles and realise that we have a part to play in their restoration and healing, which in turn leads towards our own restoration and healing.

I know this is hard – I am still struggling with issues from my own life and, like the unmerciful servant, want to grab those who I see as having hurt me, choke them and throw them in prison. But I also know that is doing neither me nor them any good. Nor does that example reflect well on those around me. Remember, it was those around him who witnessed his actions and reported him to the master that led to the unmerciful servant's imprisonment and torture.

My actions, your actions are visible to others. We can hold onto our grievances and resentments and the wounds that were caused will stay sore and open – festering even. Or we can repeatedly seek to journey towards the free and full forgiveness that is found in Jesus so that the wound can be cleansed and start to heal. The scars will always be there, but remember that we worship a Saviour who wears the scars of sacrifice on his hands and feet and side. And that journey is one of compassion, of empathy, of kindness – of stepping into the skin of others and seeking to see the world from their point of view, because that opens us up to seeing the world from Jesus' point of view. And what a view that is going to be!

Amen.

### **Hymn – StF 611 'Brother, sister, let me serve you'**

#### **Prayers for Others**

*There will be short periods of silence where I invite you to offer up your own prayers.*

Lord, our faith is born out of forgiveness, compassion and hope.  
Accept these prayers we bring before you  
And show us how we can be your servants in this world,  
Full of mercy and grace, of light and love.

We pray for the world and all of creation.  
Our stewardship has been lacking, destructive even.  
We cause harm through selfish and unwise use of resources.  
Help us see your wonderful creation with the eyes of compassion  
Seeking your forgiveness and hope by our words and deeds.  
*Pause...*

We pray for all governments;  
For those who are in positions of power,  
Globally, nationally or locally,  
And whose decisions can have such an impact  
Upon the health and well-being of others.

Open the eyes of those who lead, who decide, who dictate  
And help them see those they govern with the eyes of compassion  
Seeking your forgiveness and hope their words and deeds.

*Pause...*

We pray for our country;  
For all who contribute to the diverse and rich communities we have,  
For those who need our care and compassion  
For those who have much, for those who have nothing  
And for all those who need to come to know you  
As their Lord and Saviour.  
Help us to see all people with the eyes of compassion  
Seeking your forgiveness and hope by our words and deeds.

*Pause...*

We pray for our local communities  
Of town and city, of church and work, of family and friends.  
Help us to reconnect with those around us  
And seek to re-open channels that might have become closed.  
Help us to talk, debate, discuss and learn from each other  
So we can journey towards seeing each and every one  
Through the eyes of you, Jesus.  
Help us to see our neighbours with the eyes of compassion  
Seeking your forgiveness and hope by our words and deeds.

*Pause...*

Finally, Lord, we pray for ourselves.  
We bring to you the hurts and wounds we bear  
And we bring you the hurts and wounds we have caused others.  
Lead us along the paths of compassion and kindness  
As we shine your light of love, grace and mercy  
In the dark corners of this world.  
Help us to see ourselves with the eyes of compassion  
Seeking your forgiveness and hope by our words and deeds.

*Pause...*

Amen.

### **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  
And forgive us our sins  
As we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial  
And deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours  
Now and for ever.  
Amen.

### **Blessing**

Lord, we came seeking your compassion, forgiveness and hope.  
Send us out refreshed and renewed.  
We came in search of your eternal love and mercy  
Lead us into lives of joyful discipleship and witness.  
We came to meet you and rest in your peace and grace,  
Empower us now to go out into the world as your people:  
People of compassion, of kindness and of forgiveness  
Seeing the world from your view  
And sharing your love to all we might meet.  
Amen.

### **Hymn – StF 407 ‘Hear the call of the kingdom’**