

## **Recorded Service – Sunday 13 September 2020**

**for Church of Scotland Congregations in Upper Tay Valley and Tenandry**

**(Rev. Robert Nicol at Fortingall)**

Welcome to this week's broadcast service for the congregations of the Upper Tay Valley and Tenandry. Although we watch in different places and at different times, the God who is outside of time and space unites us through his Spirit.

Our opening hymn is:

### **"Bring to the Lord a glad new song" (CH4 106)**

If you are familiar with the Book of Psalms you will know that if you read through from beginning to end you will encounter a full range of emotions: confidence and fear; faith and doubt; depression and ecstasy; joy and sadness; celebration of the past, trepidation at the future. All of this and much more can be found in these pages – the prayer book of the nation of Israel and the people of Jesus. But as you reach the last few Psalms, they turn to pure praise, coming to a crescendo in the last two, when the Psalmist throws everything at it – every instrument and every voice.

This hymn is an adaptation of Psalms 149 and 150. You may not be familiar with the words, but you will certainly know the tune. It is led for us by the Scottish Festival Singers, conducted by Ian McCrorie and with John Langdon on the organ.

### **Prayer**

Let us pray.

"Let every creature praise the Lord."

Our God, our Father, we bring you our glad new songs this morning. We rejoice to be your children of grace – called out from where we were, dead in our sins, to be ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven; and appointed to a place in your kingdom. All this we have through your grace and mercy, and not through anything we have achieved by our own efforts. We come to you humbly, knowing we deserve nothing, but ever so glad that you found us when we were lost.

We know we have let you down in the weakness of our faith; our lack of trust in your promises; our disobedience to your instructions.

We ask you to forgive us, as we come to you in sorrow for our past failure. Cleanse and renew us now, so that we can refocus on you and your purposes for us, undistracted by the guilt which has been weighing us down.

Be with us now, we pray, as we meet, physically distant, but joined together by your Spirit to each other and to Jesus, in whose name we meet. We ask you to receive our praise, to hear our prayers, and to speak to us through your word in Scripture. Amen

**Reading: Matthew 18:21-35** (read by James Duncan Miller)

### **Sermon**

Peter is beginning to learn about his master, Jesus. He has come to expect that Jesus will demand far more than other teachers. "Go the extra mile; give more than is asked of you; look upon others as better than yourself; serve others, don't lord it over them". So, when he comes to Jesus with a question about forgiveness, he already knows the answer will be tough, and he anticipates what Jesus will say. The Jewish rabbis taught that, if someone is persistently causing you trouble, you should forgive them three times; after that, you can't be expected to keep on forgiving them. That would amount to being walked over, and

the offender would never learn the error of their ways. Peter reckons Jesus will demand more, so he asks; "Should I forgive seven times?"

Seven is a great number to choose. Like three, it is a perfect number, a holy number – the number of days in the week; the eras of creation; the colours of the rainbow; to name but a few. It's also a lot more than three. But poor Peter still hasn't got it. Jesus replies that seven isn't nearly enough. He has to forgive seventy-seven times, or seventy times seven in some translations. In other words, more than you can count. Then Jesus goes on to tell a story, a parable, to illustrate the point.

Before we get into the parable, we need to understand what lies behind Peter's question. He isn't thinking here about the really big challenge of forgiving a gross injustice or hurt. I'm sure we all have enormous respect for the likes of Gordon Wilson of Enniskillen, or Corrie ten Boom, who could speak of forgiving through the terrible pain of loss and suffering. Most of us, thank God, get through life without having to face that extreme challenge, though we can all learn from those who have, and who have found it possible to forgive.

That's not the sort of thing that's in Peter's mind. Jesus had been teaching his disciples things they would need to know as they became the first Christian church. And Matthew passed it on in his book for the churches he knew. Jesus had been speaking about how to deal with someone who was disrupting the church through their bad behaviour, and how that must not be allowed to destroy relationships. The emphasis is all on trying to restore the person to the church, but in the end, if there is no response, then the person has to be excluded. In doing these difficult things he reassured them that they would have his guidance and support: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Peter's thoughts follow that line, and he asks Jesus: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?" He is thinking here of his fellow disciples.

I wonder what's between the lines here. I wonder if he had a specific person in mind. Scripture doesn't tell us, but it seems to me quite likely.

There are strong hints in the Gospels that the disciples didn't always get along. That's only to be expected – they were a disparate bunch. There was the group of Galilean fishermen, but the rest of them were drawn from different walks of life, with different backgrounds, and inevitably different, and maybe incompatible, personalities. So, let's just say Peter had a problem with Matthew – the disciple, probably not the same one who wrote the Gospel. Matthew had been a tax-collector, and we might imagine Peter had a few run-ins with the tax-men over the right amount to pay arising from the quantity of fish caught. But Jesus had said that the others must accept Matthew on equal terms. So, that's one forgiveness.

Then maybe Matthew was from the south, and spoke funny, and didn't understand the ways of Galileans, so he was continually causing upsets. So, thinks Peter, I can remember two significant occasions where Matthew has caused me trouble, and was clearly in the wrong. That means I have already forgiven him three times in total, so I have fulfilled the rabbinic ruling. Four more seems more than necessary, and surely enough to satisfy Jesus that I have really tried. Four more, then as far as I'm concerned, he's out.

But that's not nearly enough for Jesus. As Paul would write later: "Love keeps no record of wrongs". Whether Jesus meant 77 or 490, it doesn't matter. The whole point is that Peter is told not to keep a count.

To illustrate the point, Jesus tells a story, as he so often did. It helps us to understand it if we know what the first hearers would have known. There's a couple of things which will help us. Firstly, slavery was not always the same as we tend to picture it. In the Roman Empire, quite a high proportion of the population went into a kind of voluntary slavery, or servanthood, for a period, to pay off a debt or some other obligation. So, it was common for slaves or servants to be in debt to their masters.

Then the way an economy of a kingdom might work is that the king would appoint people who owed him loyalty to look after provinces. These governors were required to raise money for the king, one way or another, taking a cut for themselves so the king didn't have to pay them a salary. One of these governors could get into serious trouble if they took too big a slice of the cake for themselves, or if some disaster, such as a harvest failure, meant they couldn't raise the revenue the king demanded.

What we have in the story is a king who called his governors in to account for themselves. One of them owed him a vast amount of money. The amount quoted is 10,000 talents. We can't exactly translate such a sum into our currency, but this is really big. A talent was a weight of silver or gold, and 10,000 of them would represent the income of a country. To give an idea, in 4BC, the Jewish historian, Josephus, recorded that the tax take for Judea and the surrounding region was 600 talents. The 10,000 was about the biggest sum most could imagine, and maybe it was beyond imagining. It's like when we hear on the news that the UK's national debt has gone over £2 trillion for the first time. That's about the same as the annual GDP. It's not a number most of us can relate to, it's just so enormous.

Jesus uses hyperbole here to emphasise the point: this servant couldn't have repaid the debt even in thousands of lifetimes, so his request for patience so he could repay everything was ridiculous. But yet the king takes pity on him, and writes off the whole of the debt in an outrageous act of grace.

However, this does nothing to change the servant's attitude. He is owed a comparatively tiny sum – a hundred denarii – by a more junior servant. A denarius was what a labourer could earn in a day, so this was 3 or 4 months' income. Difficult, but not impossible, to repay. But the senior servant wouldn't wait, and got his debtor thrown into prison. The other servants were shocked at this injustice, and went to the king to tell him what had happened. The king was furious and summoned back the first servant to reimpose his impossible debt, and throw him into prison where he would be tortured. The unjust servant falls victim to his own code of injustice and unforgiveness.

When we listen to a parable like this which has a number of characters, we can ask ourselves "Where am I in this story?" My first reaction is to think I would have been one of the fellow servants who were outraged at the injustice and took action to put things right. That would be nice, but I don't think it's what Jesus intends us to do. The sting of the parable comes when we recognise ourselves to be the unforgiving servant, who has been forgiven more than he can ever hope to repay, but yet refuses to pass on a tiny proportion of that forgiveness to others.

This is a lesson for our church. The church of Jesus is to be characterised as a people who love each other; who work together in harmony; who see the best in each other; who are ready to give others the benefit of the doubt; who are quick to forgive.

But – where two or three are gathered, expect trouble.

During lock-down and the closure of our churches we haven't been doing much working together or even meeting face to face. It's like James was describing on the farm – people who have been used to working together in a team have had to adjust to a different and more difficult, and no doubt less productive, way of working. And it's been like that for us in the church.

But, in some ways, it has maybe been easier to get along. It's when we have to organise things that the trouble can start.

I've been involved in many different churches over my lifetime, and one thing I can say is that congregations which only meet together for an hour on Sunday have few difficult issues. It's when congregations do lots of things that sparks can fly, and that's when it is most important to heed the instructions in Scripture about how to be church. Central to that is the way we treat each other, and that has to be founded on an attitude of forgiveness. This parable tells us why it is so important.

We're going to miss the imperative though if we don't think enough about the first bit of the story. If we don't grasp just how much mercy God has shown us, we won't really get the point about it being so important that we show mercy. That means recognising how much we and our world are damaged by sin – sin being disbelief in God and disobedience towards him who made us. That has caused such a chasm between us and God that we have no hope of getting back to where we should be, which is the precious, loved children of God who were made to know him and worship him. The disastrous story of humankind is that we have gone wrong, and can't put it right. Sin is not an old-fashioned concept that the modern church can live without; nor is it something we shouldn't mention in polite society. Until we acknowledge the wicked power of sin and the damage it does, we can't understand the depth of God's mercy when he took action himself, at enormous cost, to do what we can't do, which is to bridge the gap and invite us back to

him, to be his loved and precious children. The enormous, unpayable debt we owe to God has been written off in full by Christ's action on the cross.

Knowing that, how can we not pass on some of the mercy we have received?

There was a hope during the lock-down that this episode might usher in a kinder, gentler age, when people would appreciate one another more; when everyone's contribution to society would be honoured and properly valued. There was some of that, but sadly there are signs it isn't continuing. What we are hearing is that there is pent-up anger and frustration being released; a sense of entitlement evidenced by some of the dirty camping which has been going on in our area; complaints by restaurant staff of unreasonable aggressive customers. I admit I have been enraged at some of our leaders and their actions and words. None of that bodes well. We must take care this mood does not infect the church.

How could that happen? Here's one way. We are having to have difficult discussions about re-opening, or not. There are inevitably differing views. As we try to restart some of our activities there may be tensions about the best ways to do it. We must be careful to listen to the concerns of others, and not assume we are the ones with the right answer. We must be tolerant, and kind, and forgiving.

I am not saying that we are all going to fall out with each other. It's just that sometimes we need reminding of the basics of Christian community. Jesus had to tell his disciples; Matthew had to tell his church. We shouldn't think that we know better.

Another thought. Maybe for someone watching this, the message is that it is about time you forgave yourself. We all mess up sometimes; and maybe you did, and you know that the person or people you hurt have forgiven you. You have asked God for forgiveness, and your faith tells you that you are forgiven. But still you hang onto the sense of failure, and disappointment in yourself. Make this the day you let that go, and forgive yourself.

There's one final thing about this passage that I'd like to draw your attention to. It's the sort of thing I find exciting because it shows how the whole Bible links together, and how seemingly unimportant and irrelevant details can suddenly come to life, and reveal the big picture of God's plan of salvation.

It comes right at the beginning of our reading – where Jesus says "not seven times, but seventy-seven times". This is taken from Genesis 4. The words for the numbers here are exactly the words in the Greek translation of the Scriptures that were widely used by the Jews at that time. Chapter 4 tells the story of the first murder, when Cain killed his brother Abel. Cain feared that he himself would be killed, but God told him that, though he would be punished, he would be safe because "whoever kills Cain will suffer a seven-fold vengeance." One of Cain's descendants, Lamech, said to his wives "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold".

What Lamech is boasting of is the cycle of unforgiveness and revenge. The Law that Moses announced was in part intended to put a limit on this – "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth". That put a reasonable limit on the retribution an offended party could seek. But now Jesus says that, amongst his people, the cycle of unforgiveness and revenge is stopped. It stops when we forgive, as we have been forgiven. And as we do, we are ushering in the kingdom of God on earth. This is the big picture of what is going on here; the new thing that is announced in this parable.

Thanks be to God who has made this possible through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

**"There is a hope"** (Aberfeldy Praise Band)

**Prayers of Intercession** (Kate Conway)

Our final hymn is: "**Christ, of God unseen the image**" (CH4 453)

It was written by Church of Scotland minister and member of the Iona Community, Leith Fisher, who set out to write hymns about things he felt weren't properly covered in the hymnary. This hymn has wonderful words which speak of who Christ is, and what he has done for us.

It is sung in this recording by the Edinburgh University Singers, conducted by Ian McCrorie, with John Kitchen on the organ.

### **Benediction**

As we enter this new week, may we know for ourselves the reality of God's forgiveness and loving-kindness, and in response let us live in a spirit of forgiveness and loving-kindness towards everyone we meet and speak with.

And the blessing of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – be with each of you, this day and for

Ever more.