Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church



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St Matthew's Gospel part 4
Wednesday 1st - Saturday 11th March 2023

Introduction

Matthew's Gospel is the first book of the New Testament and for millennia Christians believed it was the earliest of the four Gospels. Now, most scholars believe that Mark's Gospel was a source for Matthew - who repeats almost everything In St Mark. The editor of Matthew seems to have access to a body of material shared with the editor of St Luke but not known to either Mark or John and his own sources around the birth of Jesus - the stories of the Magi and of Gabriel's appearances to Joseph are only found in Matthew.

The Gospel is concerned with showing how Jesus' life and ministry was foretold in what we now call the Old Testament. Most scholars think the Gospel was written between AD 80 and 90 with a range of between 70 and

110 being mentioned. A minority think it was written before AD 70 which would make it the oldest Gospel. All these dates are at least 40 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. We have no idea who the editor was who drew these stories together - the earliest Church identified him as the Apostle Matthew but we simply have no idea who wrote it. Matthew is the Gospel that we will hear read in Church this year and so we will read through it between now and Easter - skipping the birth narratives as we've heard them over the Christmas services and Daily Devotions.

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It was a sermon that helped clear up my confusion. “Stop seeing things from the perspective of those hired first,” said the preacher, “and look at it from the point of view of those hired last.” For me, this changed the story from one where the owner/God short-changes me, to one where God/the owner is generous to me, despite the fact that I arrived later in the day.

‘So the last’ - like me! – ‘will be first,’ says Jesus, ‘and the first will be last.’ That’s seriously good news, except that in this world, I’m seldom one of the last. Economically, educationally, socially, politically, and religiously, I’m much better placed. Therefore, taking Jesus seriously here is a terrifying prospect..

The parable is not offered as a guide to best economic practice, but indicates how God works - by putting the last first. Is this also how God intends things to be in education, society, politics, religion, and other areas of my life? Those who are last in line will be as well-resourced as those accustomed to being at the front?

This would turn society upside down. It would remove so many of the life-advantages that I enjoy. I have good reason to be terrified. No wonder that back then society’s leaders were very ready to get rid of Jesus.

So in supporting divine intentions and practices, I’m a reluctant, late in the day worker, but one depending on God’s generosity.

Prayer

O God,
Make me grateful for what you give me
and generous in how I share that with others.
Encourage me to welcome a world
where your will is done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Wednesday 1 March 2023 St Matthew 17: 1 - 13

The Rev’d Sarah Moore, Transition Champion, National Synod of Scotland

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!’ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, ‘Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.’ And the disciples asked him, ‘Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?’ He replied, ‘Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.’ Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.

Reflection

There is little quite like the experience of climbing a hill or a mountain on a clear day and experiencing an awe-inspiring view of a world that really does seem to be at one’s feet. My experience living on the edge of the Highlands of Scotland is of being able to see other mountains as far as one’s eye can see. On other days the uplands of the world can be enveloped in mist with a cairn or an Ordnance Survey triangulation pillar the only sight to see. Venturing into the hills can be a very different experience too depending on the season and the time of day. It is a curious juxtaposition to be on a fell top in a snowstorm remembering that the last

time one was there was at the height of summer.

It is perhaps no surprise that Jesus takes some of his friends up a high mountain to a place where they might already expect to have some sort of powerful personal experience to confront them with an even more striking moment. In this story we are told of experiences of both being dazzled and in thick cloud. Mountain weather can change quickly but not usually in the instant as is described here. The story reminds us too how close the boundary can be between being amazed and being terrified. One minute feeling wowed and next cowering on the ground.

I wonder how the disciples who joined Jesus on the mountaintop processed their emotional and spiritual whiplash? They journeyed down knowing that their friend Jesus was someone amazing. In the gospels this event marks the transition point between Jesus' teaching ministry and his journey to the events of Easter in Jerusalem. I wonder how the memory of this day comforted and nourished Jesus' friends as they journeyed with him to the cross and beyond?

Prayer

Transfigured One, illumine us as we journey with you
towards Jerusalem through Lent.

We ask that we might have our own dazzling experiences of life and faith.
Dazzle us, catch us unaware, surprise us again and anew
with the light of your Gospel.
Amen.

Thursday 2 March 2023 St Matthew 17: 14 - 20

The Rev'd William Young, pastor Covenant Baptist United Church of Christ, Washington DC

When they came to the crowd, a man came to him, knelt before him, and said, 'Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; he often falls into the fire and often into the water. And I brought

he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last.' While Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and said to them on the way, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised.'

Reflection

Once, a long time ago, I had to read this Gospel passage during school assembly. Afterwards, a fellow pupil commented, "Thanks for reading that story so clearly, but it still doesn't make any sense to me." At the time, I shared their puzzlement. Now, though, I'm not confused by Jesus's parable of payment for work in a vineyard – I'm terrified.

of a very small gate into the walled city of Jerusalem?

But does it matter? The point is still the same - being rich makes it difficult to get into heaven. Why? Because individual wealth is almost always the result of the exploitation of others. I'm typing this on my iPhone which was probably assembled by someone who was paid pennies per hour for their labour. Maybe you're reading it on a screen, or listening to the audio version on a device, which has a similar origin. Workers aren't paid enough so that others can ensure good profits and accumulate personal wealth. Profits are the unpaid wages of the working class

So what can we do? We can all make choices about what we buy. We can make ethical choices about what we wear. We can stand up for the exploited by using our own riches to make ethical choices - and an ethical choice as a consumer is almost always more expensive than the non-ethical option. It will make us poorer. I doubt it will make us poorer to the extent that we can comfortably fit through the eye of a needle and get into heaven. To get that poor, I'll need to buy the latest iPhone.

Prayer

Loving God, I don't want to be poor.
I've seen the misery being poor causes
I've seen homeless people and refugees
I'm aware of people struggling to pay bills or feed their children
I don't want that for me and my family.
Could you let me know of an easier way to get into heaven?
Please?

Saturday 11 March 2023 St Matthew 20: 1 - 19

The Rev'd Dr Trevor Jamison, Saint Columba's United Reformed Church, North Shields

'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When

him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.' Jesus answered, 'You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me.' And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, 'Why could we not cast it out?' He said to them, 'Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, "Move from here to there", and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.'

Reflection

Summit fever is a real condition, and it can apply to any situation where enormous time and resources have been spent on achieving a goal that you grow mentally or physically ill. An experienced sherpa for climbers to Mount Everest says: "Most people don't die on the way up the mountain or even at the summit. They die on the way down." This is because most climbers don't know how to conserve energy; there is much more energy needed on the way down than the journey to the summit.

Perhaps this is what the disciples are experiencing. I sometimes wonder if the disciples who had gone up with Jesus had time to tell the others what they had just seen. About 30 years later Peter would reminisce about the transfiguration in his epistle; but right now, perhaps they were all still trying to process the experience. I can attest to that: some pastoral situations that clergy and laypeople encounter can blow our minds and overwhelm us, no matter how much "religion" we have in us.

Perhaps the worried father of the epileptic child was expecting too much from the disciples, believing they could do what Jesus could do. We can all attest to that too, as the Church too often fails to live up to Jesus' reputation.

It's a powerful moment to process - the disciple's trip back to reality. The whole story comes with a staggering life lesson. There are some who think

that their spiritual experience warrants their authority. However, any religious experience that has no interest in reaching people and building community is, as Jesus articulates, not driven by faith.

Some use religious experience as an attempt to capture God, even hold God hostage. But God is always moving, so whatever we bottle up about God will always be surpassed by the new thing God is doing. True faith doesn't merely believe but believes enough to act, to bear witness, to get angry at injustice and imagine justice.

Prayer

God give us enough energy to use our experience with You in the world. May our encounters with you never blind and deafen us to the needs in the valley. Amen.

Friday 3 March 2023 St Matthew 17: 22 - 27

The Rev'd Ryan Sirmons, North West & Central Newcastle upon Tyne Pastorate

As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, 'The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised.' And they were greatly distressed. When they reached Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax came to Peter and said, 'Does your teacher not pay the temple tax?' He said, 'Yes, he does.' And when he came home, Jesus spoke of it first, asking, 'What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children or from others?' When Peter said, 'From others', Jesus said to him, 'Then the children are free. However, so that we do not give offence to them, go to the lake and cast a hook; take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a coin; take that and give it to them for you and me.'

Reflection

to have eternal life?' And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.' He said to him, 'Which ones?' And Jesus said, 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' The young man said to him, 'I have kept all these; what do I still lack?' Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, 'Then who can be saved?' But Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.'

Then Peter said in reply, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.

Reflection

Working with children and young people this passage always confuses them. What an odd analogy! Who on earth would even bother trying to get a camel through the eye of a needle? It obviously won't fit! It seems to have confused and confounded Biblical scholars throughout the ages too: Is 'camel' a mistranslation of the word 'rope? Was 'The Needle' the name

He shows care for children in this and other passages; think of when he heals children from disease, demons and even death. The practice of parents blessing children is seen throughout the Old Testament. In Jesus' time there was a practice of fathers taking their children to the local synagogue and joining in prayer over the child with the elders. However the scribes and Pharisees would never physically touch anyone in the belief it would defile them. Jesus lays his hands on the children and prays. What does he pray? – well, the Jewish tradition still kept today is for parents to bless their children every Shabbat evening with the words from the Aaronic blessing in Numbers

May God bless you and protect you
May God show you favour and be gracious to you
May God show you kindness and grant you peace

He teaches humility – as a child relies on a parent for daily needs we should humbly depend on God. He challenges the belief at the time that God's favour was to be earned by good works and keeping undefiled, when he says the Kingdom of heaven belongs to children who were not old enough to do these things. Instead he is demonstrating a radical idea of grace: the gift of God's favour that is undeserved.

For all the children known to us, in our families, churches, work, schools, youth groups and wherever we meet them, let us pray:

May God bless you and protect you
May God show you favour and be gracious to you
May God show you kindness and grant you peace

Friday 10 March 2023 St Matthew 19: 16 - 29

Leo Roberts, Children and Youth Development Officer, North Western Synod

Then someone came to him and said, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do

After the first time I heard this story I went fishing with my grandad. I checked the mouth of the first fish I caught. No coin! Over the years the fishing in those lakes became worse. Summers would go by where I didn't catch a single fish. Sitting in tackle shops, many blamed it on overfishing by commercial fleets. While no one was literally pulling coins out of fish's mouths, those fleets were harvesting fish to make money that fed and sheltered working people's families. Others blamed the decline on invasive species and pollution. It turns out that it was all of the above. As the fish became sparse, big fleets disappeared. Fewer tourists came. The tackle shops closed. Fewer coins circulated.

When Jesus proclaimed that he would be killed by human hands, he was telling his friends that a gift of God—indeed, God's very self—would be killed by the cycle of violence that dominated human life. This distressed them, but they knew he spoke truth. We know it, too: that cycle of violence continues today. Our acts of even passive-seeming violence, such as environmental degradation, destroy rich gifts that God has given us which, with good stewardship, can feed and house families and communities.

Jesus reminds Peter that violence will always be the way of earthly kings (or rulers). They, like the collectors of the Temple tax, have little interest in having a relationship with people or how they steward resources. They just want the coins. But we, who live and move in this world, can have a relationship with Jesus and a creation which provides more than enough resources for all. And we know that even if the rulers try to compel us to destroy it all for coin, there will be a resurrection. Thanks be to God for that.

Prayer

God,
help us not to see people or creation
as things from which we extract for gain.
Save us from co-option in that which destroys creation.
Help us to see how God's resurrection gift of life

can be found in relationship the way Jesus is in relationship with us,
as he was with his disciples. Amen.

Saturday 4 March 2023 St Matthew 18: 1 - 9

The Rev'd Elizabeth Gray-King, North Western Synod Pastor, St Columba's URC Oxford

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. 'If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of stumbling-blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling-block comes! 'If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire.

Reflection

Years ago I created a painting called Striving for Righteousness. A man sits in an ancient church, staring into a hand held mirror. The other side of the mirror, a stained-glass window lets light shine on the man's face, but it doesn't get through the mirror. Beside the man, on a table at the end of the pew, sits an offertory bowl holding the man's cut off hand. Oddly, the man isn't in agony, but looks hard at the mirror as if to say, "Well I've done it. Am I good enough now?" Occasionally seeing these moments literally throws a very different light on a Jesus tirade.

Gracious God,
thank you that you seek to end the alienation
that damages and divides us all.
All healthy relationships project the image
of the Three-in-One God who lives in perfect unity.
This is no less true of marriage.
May we seek to preserve this institution and relationship
which, at its best, seeks to end alienation
by bringing two people together as "one flesh".
May we resist social pressures and legislation
to deconstruct or relativise it.
May we also have compassion and mercy
for those who have been hurt by marriage or stigmatised by it.
In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Thursday 9 March 2023 St Matthew 19: 13 - 15

Ruth Tompsett, treasurer, Newport Pagnell URC

Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.' And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.

Reflection

In this simple passage, conjuring up memories of Sunday School pictures, we see Jesus doing several radical things.

He challenges the disciples' views in the same way he confronts opposition in many Gospel stories. Perhaps the disciples saw the pushy parents as wanting to waste Jesus' time: the passage is at the start of Matthew's Passion narrative when tension would be high. Jesus gives a model for putting people and their needs high on the agenda and making time for pastoral care.

instability of this upbringing - which inevitably imploded. My brother and I eventually chose a different model of relationship that was better for our mental health.

I remember my parents meeting after years apart; the alienation between them was so pronounced they could have come from different planets.

We are all on journeys, including the cultural norms around us. The model of marriage in Jesus' day has evolved over the centuries. But at its core marriage tells a story that is encompassed by relationships, rituals, and mythology. Jesus quotes Genesis 1.27 showing how woman and man are created in the image of God. The connection of this to marriage, further implying that "two becoming one flesh", demonstrates that marriage also projects the image of God.

Jesus' description of marriage is that of a journey. A child eventually leaves the nest and travels until they find a companion for life , forming a new travelling relationship. I find this idea or journeying ideal for today's fluid and diverse society. We're all on different roads with different experiences of family and relationship. For many of us embracing such an exclusive relationship might be painful. Jesus seems to imply wiggle room regarding the "burden" of this commitment, although he distances himself from Moses' teaching regarding divorce. Other roads are open to us.

But please can I conclude with this point. Jesus' victory over sin primarily ends one thing - alienation. It ends the alienation between ourselves and the divine, between each other, and within our own tortured inner lives.
The rites, rituals and mythology of marriage should always tell this story. Marriage is a journey that should be lived out in a manner that seeks to end alienation, rather than exasperating it. Two people's lives become so intertwined that they choose to identify as "one flesh" - for this reflects the image of God.

Prayer

This story is in the midst of dialogues about Jesus' identity, relationship in the Trinity, what it means to understand people's relationship to God, and the depth and strength of God's forgiveness. In this moment, Jesus is calling people to step back from their acquired bias, exceptionalism and greed. Before they'd learned to be selfish or afraid, they were trusting, as children are before they learn otherwise. Jesus is asking us not to do dramatic things, but to breathe and renew our childhood trust – and to not stop others trying to do the same. We can let go of stumbling blocks and put our trust where it is safe – in God, seen in Jesus' example of inclusive love, growing in us by the Holy Spirit.

This is no easy ask for many of us who've had our trust injured or been misled to put our trust in the norms of the cultures in which we live. It's hard work letting go of all that learning to allow our trust to be revived and focussed in God. But it's worth a try. It's more effective and less painful than picking away at sins. Rich new life awaits.

Prayer

God of all forgiveness,
We can so often know why you shouldn't love us.
We can name our sins speedily.
If you could truly see us, your love would not shine our way.
Forgive these misconceptions.
Forgive us for the arrogance that we could know better than you.
Gently urge us to trust you and to receive your life.
Gently urge us to trust those whom you give us to trust.
You are our eternal joy-giving Love. Alleluia, Amen!

Sunday 5 March 2023 Psalm 125

The Rev'd Dr Susan Durber, World Council of Churches President from Europe and Moderator of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC

Those who place on God reliance so embraced are God's beloved.
in despair shall not be moved.
As the mountains hug the valley, 9 2: Everlasting is Mount Zion,

from creations' dawn till night;
so eternal is God's promise
to all those who live aright.

3 God's good blessings shall be given
to all those who do God's will.
Just rewards shall be their fortune;
God is with us, with us still.

4: Those who work against God's healing
have their ill with ill re-paid.
All the faithful of the kingdom
find their full redemption made.

Michael Morgan, traditional Hebrew tune,
© Faith Alive Christian Resources CCLI licence number 1064776
You can hear the tune here https://hymnary.org/media/fetch/152427

Reflection

There is a thread in the Bible, and in human thinking more widely, that says that the good will be rewarded and the wicked will be punished. This thinking underpins most soap opera plots – in the end (even if the end is a long time coming), the misdeeds of the protagonists are found out and there is a reckoning. There is something in us that wants to know that good will be rewarded and that ill (in the sense of bad) will be repaid with ill. Psalm 125 seems to be there too. God's promise is eternal for those who live aright (in this version). All the faithful will find their full redemption. But the first verse of this metrical version recognises that this isn't in fact our experience of how the world is. Those who place their reliance on God sometimes fall into despair, and need to be embraced by God and be comforted. 'Just rewards' are not always our fortune. If they were, we would not despair or need God's comforting embrace.

Perhaps there is another theme in the witness of the Bible, another way to understand how goodness and wickedness are (or aren't) related to reward. Is there a message, embodied perhaps most perfectly in Jesus himself, that righteousness, goodness and loving justice are not always rewarded? But, even if they are not rewarded, they are worth living. No matter what happens to you it is always right to pursue goodness. Goodness, if you like, does not need a reward. That is why those who lean on God do not despair, because they know that however unbalanced and

should not be forgiven. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Wednesday 8 March 2023 St Matthew 19: 1 - 12

Daniel Harris, Community Minister with the Rochdale, Bury & North Manchester Missional Partnership.

When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. Large crowds followed him, and he cured them there. Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?' He answered, 'Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning "made them male and female", and said, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.' They said to him, 'Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?' He said to them, 'It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but at the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.' His disciples said to him, 'If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.' But he said to them, 'Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.'

Reflection

Regarding matters of marriage and family I confess to wearing conservative colours. I grew up in a "progressive and open" family environment of the 1970s and 80s. My parents held secondary relationships outside of the family unit. There was little married bliss and us children were deeply scarred by fighting, jealousy, and the general

taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

Reflection

This is a story about Gentiles. It has a king - only Gentiles had kings. The man in debt begins to grovel or fall down worshipping - something a Jew would never do. And finally, Jewish law forbade a mother and child being sold into slavery to pay off a debt. This story confirmed the stereotype at the time, of how vicious and cruel Gentiles could be. The King's action becomes a huge surprise to the crowd because he has chosen mercy. By linking this parable with a discussion about sin, Jesus must be saying that unforgiveness is a sin and we pay a terrible price for it. In fact, it creates baggage in our lives which holds us back and can even cause us to stumble. Perhaps the most difficult thing Jesus calls us to do is to forgive, and yet it is absolutely essential for our lives and our wellbeing.

We need to realise the power of forgiveness. When the king forgives this man of his debt, he wasn't just forgiving the debt - he was giving this man his life back. Not only could a debt this large never be repaid, but it was in the right of the king to throw the man and his family into a debtor's prison until he paid it back. The point that Jesus is making is when the king forgave the man, he was releasing him from a life of misery. The same is true for us when we show mercy and forgive. The only difference is, when we don't forgive, we're the ones in prison. Unforgiveness is a prison. When we won't forgive, we become that man.

Prayer

God our Father, give us the will to forgive those who have wronged us, and to move on in love – even to those who it is difficult to love, lest we too

unfair the workings of the world are, God is with them. I'd like to think I could hold onto that wisdom, and welcome God's embrace, as I seek to be and do what is good, for no reward but knowing that I do God's will.

Prayer

Eternal God,
as I pray today,
embrace me with your love
and let me find in your arms,
whatever I need to face the day.
I relinquish the search for rewards
and welcome instead your unexpected blessings.
I ask forgiveness for all I have done amiss
and your mercy for my mistakes.
I offer to you my hope to do what is good
and my intentions to live a better life today.
Redeem me this day and every day,
from your grace and for your world. Amen

Monday 6 March 2023 St Matthew 18: 10 - 22

Dan Morrell, Founder of Media for Ministry, currently attending St Thomas Crookes, Sheffield.

'Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost. 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed

by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.' Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

Reflection

This passage contains several of the 'classic' quotes we often hear individually ("For where two or three are gathered", the lost sheep, seventy-seven times). Often, I find short Bible quotes quite difficult to hold. They can be used, for ill, out of context. Sometimes, quite literally, out of the verses that surround them. The overarching theme of these quotes, and the passage on the whole, is a focus on the individual. The uniqueness that one brings and the importance of their presence amongst a community. As a church, it can sometimes feel like Life of Brian when the crowd ironically chorus: "Yes, we're all individuals!" It can be easy to keep the status quo, blend into the crowd rather than stand out.

But how often do we take time to listen to someone one-to-one, stepping out of our comfort zone as we do so? To care for that one lost sheep? In the busyness of our lives, and in our churches where we feel lumbered with more and more, it can seem difficult to prioritise individuals.

I recently completed some safeguarding training through my part-time job. I was reminded that at the very core of safeguarding, is care for the individual. Since then I have found myself spending more time praying and caring for individuals than ever before. As John Bradbury eloquently expressed back in 2020 at the Safeguarding Symposium: "At the heart of

the Christian story is an abused individual, Jesus. Ignoring this risks us becoming 'those' people who wish to go straight from the Hosannas of Palm Sunday to the Alleluias of Easter Day".

So how will you weep with those who weep, and celebrate with those who celebrate, this day?

Prayer

Safeguarding God,
Thank you for creating me in your image.
Forgive me when I fail to recognise the beauty of individuals,
Empower me to step out of my comfort zone,
To support those who feel lost,
To care for those who feel hurt,
To grieve with those who feel alone
Help me to remember to care for myself too.
To take time for self-care and replenishment. Amen.

Tuesday 7 March 2023 St Matthew 18: 23 - 35

Ann Barton, Lay Leader at Whittlesford URC in the Eastern Synod

'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had