

Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!

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Sunday 13th September 2020 - Forgiveness

Introduction

Hello and welcome to this podcast. My name is Robin Allison and I am the Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church.

If you're listening to, or reading, this podcast on the 13th of September 2020 then the re-opening of Chalmers Memorial Church for worship is only a matter of three days away! After six long months out of our building we're making the first tentative steps back to it for a short series of midweek services before, in the first half of October, re-opening for what is likely to be a combination of a Sunday service and a Wednesday service. If you're a member or adherent of Chalmers Church, you'll be contacted directly about that in due course.

However, all our members and adherents should have already received details on how, in the first instance, they can come to our Midweek services and please know, that if you've booked you're place for that, then a very warm welcome awaits you – even if we will have to socially distance, wear face masks and avoid singing hymns! It will be strange, but it is my own prayer that simply being together – in the Lord's presence - will bring the strength and direct fellowship we have missed so much in these recent months.

If you've decided to wait a little longer before coming back to worship, then please also know that we understand and appreciate your decision. These are decisions we must make on our own. Please know too that these podcasts will not be stopping any time soon. That is our commitment to you.

Today, after several weeks of looking at various different themes and topics – such as the question “What is the Church?” we're going to re-join the set lectionary readings at a passage in which Jesus speaks about the need to offer forgiveness to others – one of the most challenging aspects of the Christian faith.

But more of that in a moment, however. Shall we, first of all, pray?

Let us pray...

Opening prayer and Lord's Prayer

Let's begin our prayers by hearing the words of the Psalmist at Psalm 103, “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love”.

Ever loving and living God, we rejoice to be in your presence today and to know that you love us and that you are, as the Psalmist says, like a Father who has a constant sense of compassion and patience with his children.

We rejoice in that patience and that steadfast love because we recognise that each day of our lives that we test your love, pushing things to the limits, testing the waters and exploring the boundaries in ways that would test the patience of even most the loving and caring parent.

Father, we rejoice that your love for us is such that, as the Psalmist says, that you take our transgressions and our failings and take them away from us as far as the “east is from the west”.

What can we do, loving Father, but to rejoice in your eternal love for us?

But as we rejoice we also bring our sense of shame and unworthiness when we recognise that we have not always lived as you would have us live.

We have allowed the behaviour of others to change our attitudes to them, judging them quickly rather allowing ourselves to delve into what in their lives has made them who they are.

We have said with our lips but failed to implement in our daily actions our belief that we are all special and equal in your sight.

And we have erred in our service of you – choosing paths that were easier to walk rather than trusting you to lead us in whatever path you have called us to walk upon.

Father, we do not sin – as St Paul says – so that we might know more of your grace, but we do rejoice that even though we sin, that we can still experience your grace. That is what we ask for this day – your forgiveness which draws us closer again to you.

Receive our worship and our praise this day as we renew our commitment to you and hear us now as we bring these our prayers to you in the words which Jesus has taught us to say in the Lord’s prayer:

Our Father

who art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom, and the power

and the glory, for ever, Amen.

Bible Reading – Matthew chapter 18 verses 21 to 35

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.'*

Amen and thanks be to God for this reading of His Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.

Reflection

As I mentioned in the introduction to this podcast the subject of forgiveness is one of the hardest to both understand and to implement in the Christian faith. The simple truth of the matter is that there are times when we are simply not sure whether it is the right thing to offer forgiveness to someone who has wronged us and, even if we have come to believe that offering them forgiveness would be the right thing to do, we are often even less sure whether we are ready to offer that forgiveness to them.

In fact, in one article I read in preparation for this week's thoughts, the author – an American Psychologist by the name of David Bedrick – asks the serious question about whether it is always appropriate to offer forgiveness to others, especially to those whom we feel have seriously wronged us.

The encouragement to forgive before we have fully been able to absorb the reality of the wrong or the hurt that has been caused to us might actually lead us to move through our emotions too quickly, he says..

If, for example, we offer forgiveness too soon after we have been wronged, we haven't, he suggests, always had the time to take it all in. When we are wronged – or when we feel we have been wronged – the emotions that are produced can be immensely deep seated meaning that it can take several steps to get to the place in our lives where we can actually forgive others. That means a lot of reflective thinking before we are ready to move on. On other days those self-same thoughts point us in the completely opposite direction of forgiveness.

Here's what Bedrick writes, *"The truth is that many people don't forgive because it is not time to forgive - and taking the time to proceed at their own pace can be empowering, intelligent, and worthy. Simply put, (he concludes) it is alarming how un-psychological many psychologists can be; forgiveness is not the best medicine for all people all the time".*

Now, my job today isn't to say whether Bedrick is right or not. We all have our own ways of looking at these things but what we can all at least agree on, I am sure, is that the decision on whether to forgive someone for what we believe they have done to us - either deliberately or

just by the sheer consequences of un-thought through action – is one of the most personal that we can ever make. We wish there was an easy answer... a one size fits all solution.

After all, isn't that what Peter was trying to lure Jesus into when, at the beginning of our reading from Matthew Chapter 18 and verse 21, that he comes to Jesus with a question about how many times we should forgive someone for their so called transgressions.

Here's what Peter says, *"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?'"*

The ancient Rabbinic law, according to William Barclay, often taught that around three times was enough... It seems a generous enough arrangement. Not just once... but twice... and even a third time.

In the first couple of chapters of the old Testament Book of Amos, the prophet uses a repeated phrase in which he refers to God not forgiving the nations for their fourth transgression... the fourth time they got it wrong... the one time more than the three times that they had already sinned against God.

Amos is implying that perhaps even God has his limits. There are times when the right thing to do is to forgive... once, twice, thrice... but, come on, if we have to forgive a fourth time surely someone's having a laugh at our expense. Surely, there is a time to draw a line in the sand.

So, knowing all of this – and understanding all this ancient teaching – Peter probably thinks that he's been pretty generous in his proposal that we forgive 7 times more.

Without being too cynical do we hear Peter's mind surmising that even Jesus might be impressed by his generosity when it comes to matters of forgiving others?

Perhaps, before going on to look at how Jesus' responds to his words – and what that might mean for us – it might be worthwhile asking the question as to why Peter asks what he does when he does.

What has made him ask about the number of times that we must forgive?

Well, it surely has something to do with the passage that lies just before this one where Jesus seems to be discussing how we should deal with the matter of those occasions when a fellow believer – a church member - has offended us.

If someone offends you, says Jesus according to Matthew, it is better to speak privately to them to see if you can make amends. A gentle chat... a wee word... an honest but compassionate response. If that person, says Jesus, doesn't seem to listen, then try again and this time take someone with you. Get a witness... not someone who will fight your corner for you but someone who will bear witness to what is being said. And if that doesn't help, then take it to the whole Church. Let everyone know what has happened and let the others try and convince them. Three times the attempt must be made and, if that fails, then it's time to lay aside that relationship altogether.

Was this, we wonder, the moment when even Jesus says that there are times when forgiveness has its limits...? Three strikes and you're out...? Is that what Jesus' means here?

Now, it has to be said that William Barclay wonders, in his own commentary, about that whole passage. At one level it doesn't sound much like Jesus' normal way of talking. Not only does it run against the sort of image that we have of him from the gospels as being the sort of person

who seems to have everlasting patience and compassion, but he also questions the way in which Jesus seems to refer, in that passage, to “*the Church*”...

How, Barclay wonders, could Jesus refer to the “*Church*” when the “*Church*” didn’t even exist until after Jesus had ascended to heaven and the Holy Spirit had filled God’s people with the divine spirit at Pentecost?

It’s a good question...

However we choose to look at it though, Matthew has put the passage there for a reason, if only to contrast this idea of the three fold nature of forgiveness with what Jesus is now about to say to Peter at verse 22 of our reading... the answer which creates just about every issue and problem we have with the act of forgiveness... the moment when Jesus says, “*I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times*”

I am sure we get the point here... the numbers are irrelevant... 3 of this... 4 of that... 7 of this... 77 of the other... This isn’t an exercise in mental arithmetic. We can understand what Jesus is meaning here even if we can’t remember our times tables as once we did... 11 times 7 makes – well it makes a good bit more than 7... and that’s the point that Jesus is making here...

That’s why Jesus decides that a story is in order, a story about a man who owes a whole lot of money that he cannot afford to pay back. 10,000 bags of gold – there we go with big numbers again, but that’s all they are – big numbers... a whole pile of debt... and a whole lot of things that need forgiving.

The man to whom he owes his debts threatens to make his life an absolute misery unless he pays up... stumps up the moolah... But, of course, he can’t - leaving the debtor with no choice but to beg for forgiveness. His tears and his plea do not go unnoticed and the man to whom he owes the debt forgives him.

The only problem is that the man who has now been forgiven does not show a similar compassion to the man who owed him only 100 silver coins... a mere pittance in comparison from the debt that he has just been released from.

So, when the original man who had forgiven the huge debts finds out he blows a proverbial gasket... He has steam coming out his ears because he truly believed that the compassion that he had shown the man had been transformative and life changing.

It turned out he was wrong. Nothing had changed. The compassion and forgiveness he had been shown had not softened the hardness of his heart nor had it made him realise the extent to which he personally sat in constant need of forgiveness.

And through this Jesus seems to answer the question about forgiveness by, as he often did, throwing the question back to us... by a simple reminder that, one way or another, we all live in constant need of divine forgiveness – even if there are days when we find that hard to put into action when it comes to the sins of others.

Here’s what one commentator says on this subject: “*Each and every one of us needs to be forgiven by God, and by others, every day. We need to be forgiven about as often, if not more often, as we need to eat. True, most days we are not guilty of anything huge... But there are always a slew of smaller sins, lapses, and faults. There are always those dark thoughts we’re glad that no one else can see*”.

Peter tried to find the formula. He starts to add up the numbers... do the maths... But Life is simply too complicated to make the maths do the work for us.

Jesus, on the other hand, asks us to search our hearts, to delve deep into the recesses of where God has forgiven us.

As we do that – in the muddiness and awkwardness of life - we may very well find that the words “*I forgive you*”, painful as they so very often are to say, start to cross our lips for in being forgiven, we have also learned to forgive.

Let us pray.

Closing Prayer

Father, we thank you for the love which forgives us again and again and is prepared to trust us with the care of your people, even after we have let you down so many times. As we rejoice again in your forgiveness of us, we come to seek ways in which we might – in turn – minister to one another’s needs with compassion and sensitivity so that all are affirmed and encouraged.

We thank you Father, for what we have been forgiven for and for the opportunities we have each day to learn of the joy of forgiving others. Squash through our self-righteousness and keep us learning in humility at your feet.

We thank you Father, for all those who care for the sick with a steadfast patience. But we also thank you for those who care for even those who are, like the character in our bible story today, ungrateful and unmoved by the compassion of others.

Equally, we pray for those who are on the receiving end of abuse of whatever kind from others as well as for those who cause pain to them – knowingly and unknowingly.

Into such situations we pray for healing and transformation, as well as the ability to reflect on your forgiveness to us and our need to forgive others as Christ has shown us.

Lord, it is not easy to forgive and you know that, for your forgiveness came at a cost – the price of the cross itself. Help us, as we pray for others and their needs this day, to recognise the compassion of our God who would do that for us.

And hear us now as we bring these our prayers to you in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, Amen.

Benediction

As we have been forgiven, let us now go into a world that needs our forgiving, healing touch.

Bring peace and hope to others, sharing God’s love with them and may the blessing of almighty God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – be with you, with all whom you love and all those whom you ought to love this day and forevermore, Amen.