



ST JAMES AYR – SUNDAY REFLECTIONS – 27 Sept 2020



## Introduction

Dear all,

A warm welcome to our Sunday Reflections today. As always you can enjoy these reflections as video on our website and as audio through the telephone (01292-821277). Please make people aware

These reflections are meant for all, who cannot or do not yet wish to come to church. Could I therefore ask you to share these reflections with those who might be interested, in a safe way?

Please join me now in prayer and reflection

The apostle Paul says:

For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

## **PRAYER**

Loving God,

We come to you seeking your kingdom, seeking justice and peace, seeking the world as you intended it when you made us your image, when you gave us the ability and the freedom to decide what between good and evil and to understand what is right and just. Help us build your kingdom, we pray.

Gracious Father

We give you thanks for the guidance of your word, for your servants the prophets and apostles of old, who encourage us and warn us, who lead us ever closer to you, who show us that your ways are right and just for us, for our neighbours, for the world on earth as in heaven.

We give you thanks for your son Jesus Christ who showed us a glimpse of your kingdom in word and in deed, through his preaching and his healing, through parables and miracles, so that through him we can find our way to you and walk the path of righteousness as his disciples.

We give you thanks for your Holy Spirit, through which we live un you and through you, through which we are guided towards your kingdom in our daily lives, through which we know your ways, the ways of the living God, the ways of justice and peace.

Gracious God,

We know it is hard to work for your kingdom, to work for justice and peace in this world as you have asked us to in your commandments and through your prophets. It is confusing and exhausting to stand for what is right in words and in deeds, it makes us vulnerable and exposes us to criticism and ridicule and sometimes we are afraid. Grant us your courage, we pray.

We know it can be difficult to be your son's disciples, to love and to look after our neighbours, in a world where we ourselves are suffering, where we are isolated and afraid, where we are tempted to look to ourselves and to our worries. Grant us your compassion, we pray.

Loving God,

We know that we have failed you and each other in word and in deed and in what we have failed to do, but we also know that you have forgiven us before we were born through your son Jesus Christ and in this knowledge we bring before you all that moves us and we pray in our hearts and minds as your son has taught us. AMEN

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 today 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 forever. AMEN

Please scroll down

## READINGS

### *Lesson 1: Exodus 14, 19-25*

Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them,<sup>20</sup> coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long.<sup>21</sup> Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided,<sup>22</sup> and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.<sup>23</sup> The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea.<sup>24</sup> During the last watch of the night the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion.<sup>25</sup> He jammed<sup>[a]</sup> the wheels of their chariots so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."

### *Lesson 2: Matthew 18,21-33*

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>[a]</sup><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<sup>[b]</sup> 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.<sup>[c]</sup> 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?'

## Reflection

Virtual choirs and recordings of isolation songs are a pound a dozen these days and a new part of my job is to sift through them, to offer you all a good and poignant alternative to the hymns we cannot sing and the prayers we cannot say together these days. Not all of them are of equal quality or of equal spiritual value. In fact, finding a suitable you tube video, that we can use without infringing copyrights, can be a bit of a needle in a haystack. You will find everything online from pop songs like Leonard Cohen's Hallelujah to more rustic versions of you'll never walk alone, from professional West End and opera choirs to church congregations and high schools: everyone is doing it and those videos made up of tiny little squares have dominated the you tube music channels since the beginning of the lockdown.

But now and then a video stands out, a video I cannot wait to use in our services. And the video I have been hoping to show you this Sunday (fingers crossed the technology works and the internet is stable) is one of them. Fifty countries affected by the coronavirus sing one song: Amazing Grace, fifty nations are connected in a way they have never been connected before. And more than the musical and the technical quality, which in itself is on a high professional level I was impressed by two things: The way this video brings together nations that do not always see eye to eye and the way they bring together the nations that are suffering or were suffering the most and so a video from the Chinese Wuhan province follows directly the recording from New York, while recordings from Israel and Egypt are literally side by side and the Babylonian mixture of languages from all over the world somehow comes together as a harmonic unity. It seems to me that in so many ways, ways that cannot even be wholly expressed in words the video of this simple song "amazing grace" embodies what it means to be part of the kingdom of God, here on earth as it is in heaven.

The kingdom of God features prominently in almost all of Jesus' preaching, is the centre of almost every parable. It would not be exaggerated to say that the coming kingdom of God is the core of Matthew's gospel. Unsurprisingly, it is the core of today's scripture reading, too. Unlike our positive introduction and unlike many other Biblical parables, Jesus teaches us today, how the Kingdom of God will NOT come, gives us a negative example of who will NOT enter it: A servant who owes his master, the king, a substantial sum and cannot pay it back

is forgiven all his debt and so instead of having to sell everything, including his family into slavery, he is allowed to start afresh, with a clean slate, so to speak. The same servant is far less forgiving to his own debtor, throws him into prison and is deaf to his pleas for mercy. The other servants are naturally outraged at such behaviour, who would not be and the king himself when he hears of it is quick to rebuke him: "You wicked servant", he said. "I cancelled all the debts of yours, because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?"

And so, the scene is set, and the theme is clear: this parable is about mercy, about forgiveness. And that may sometimes be easier said than done. The servant of our parable seems an unpleasant fellow enough and we would like to think that we would never act quite like him. His unforgiving, unmerciful stance after all causes the just outrage of fellow servants and master alike. It is obvious what he has done wrong. So why is Jesus telling the story? Why is he pointing out the obvious? There are two answers to this, I think:

The clue to the first lies in Peter's question at the beginning of today's reading: "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" and in Jesus' answer to it: "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. So, it is not so obvious after all what it means to forgive, what it means to be merciful. Peter needs to ask, needs to quantify forgiveness. That seems to implicate that at some point he reckons, enough is enough, that forgiveness and mercy only go so far. Forgiveness and mercy seem obvious in Jesus' story, they are not that obvious in real life, not for Peter and not for us. This is why the video I talked about earlier is so special: In a song, in a piece of art New York and Wuhan seem united, Israel and Egypt sing together. In reality these nations meet with suspicion and mistrust, and in the former case blame each other for carrying the virus we live with around the world. In reality mercy and forgiveness, even generosity and the willingness to listen to each other, are few and far between, are a utopia, a dream, wishful thinking, in reality the world is not governed by mercy and forgiveness. This is why Jesus needs to point out the obvious: because it is not obvious in real life, in our lives, in our communities. Criminals, drug addicts, the poor and the marginalised, how often are they met with mercy and forgiveness, how often are they met with judgement?

The second reason is equally obvious: mercy and forgiveness are the pillars of God's kingdom, on earth as in heaven. And so the cruelty and greed, the

merciless and ruthless show of contempt and lack of compassion of the wicked servant have no place in God's kingdom, just as the merciless persecution of the Israelites through the Egyptians, that we hear of in our old testament reading, had no place in God's kingdom or with his people. Because God is biased towards the oppressed, the poor, even the guilty. God is biased towards all who are in need of mercy and forgiveness and to build the kingdom of God here on earth as it is in heaven, it is essential that we follow Jesus teaching, it is essential that we forgive our debtors as God forgives our debts, that we do not forgive once or twice or even seven times, but seventy seven times and that effectively means that the word unforgivable should not be in a Christian dictionary.

Again, this is easier said than done. I for one find it hard to forgive when people on trains and in shops do not wear their mask, risk my health and yours as well as their own, may well force us to close our church doors again and put small local businesses in jeopardy. And yet, although my anger is probably shared by many, I am asked to forgive seventy-seven times. That does not mean to let people get away with it, of course not, that would be dangerous. But it does mean not to hold a grudge, not to seek revenge or punishment, to forgive as we are forgiven. It means to build a kingdom of God, where we can trust that he is with us as he was with his people from the beginning of time, as the Egyptians in our Old testament reading experienced to their cost, as I believe we will experience to our benefit. AMEN

### **Intercession**

Gracious God,

We give you thanks for your love to your people, for the knowledge that you are with them in trouble and in strife, in fear and in worry. We give you thanks for the hope that you give, that you will lead your people through the valley of tears to new, green pastures. In giving thanks for your presence with us we remember in prayer those who cannot see your kingdom.

We will always remember in prayer all who suffer from war and terror, from violence and unrest all over the world, be that in the towns and cities of Syria, in the deserts of Yemen, in the plains of Afghanistan, we remember every man woman and child who grieve for the untimely loss of those they love, we remember all who struggle for survival amid gunfire and bombs

Lord, hear their cries.

We continue to pray for all, who are held in the grip of a global virus, for those who battle for survival in hospitals and in care homes across the country, across the globe, for all who lost a loved one to a virus, grieving alone and in isolation, for all whose mental health and economic security is threatened, for all who long for normality and know it is a long way off.

Lord, dry their tears

We pray for every man, woman and child who live in deprivation and squalor in this town, in this country, in this world, for all who cannot feed and clothe their children, who have to make the anguishing decision between a hot meal and a warm house, for all who are worn down by poverty and fear.

Lord, see their pain

We will always pray for each and every member of our community and congregation, for all who are lonely and bereaved, whose pain is raw, for all who are ill and frail at home or in hospital, for all who suffer alone in isolation and in fear, for everyone who cares for someone they love, cannot visit those they love in care homes and in hospitals.

Grant them your peace.

For this we pray in Jesus name. AMEN

### **Benediction**

And the God of peace guard you and guide you in this coming week. And the almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us all, now, and forevermore.