

Parish of Central Exeter

Morning Worship and Spiritual Communion
14th Sunday after Trinity 13 September 2020

Partnership and Prayer

Welcome everyone.



The period from Sept 1 to Oct 4 (commemoration of St Francis of Assisi) is celebrated by many Christian churches around the world as the Season of Creation, in which we celebrate creation in all its diversity and remember we are stewards of our planet. Our worship today will reflect this season, based mainly on a liturgy for creation produced by the Church of England, with some additional material from the United Church of Canada.

The readings this morning and for the next three Sundays are from Philippians, a short, joyful letter from Paul in prison to the small community of believers in the Roman city of Philippi. Paul and his companions visited Philippi in AD 48 or 49, recorded in Acts 16:11-40. Reflections are from Sheila. For Night Prayer we stay in Matthew's Gospel.

We begin our service this morning with 'Angel Voices' a well-known hymn of praise.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6DAWtFm7j8>

Words are on the screen.

Call to worship

O Lord, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.

The hand of the Lord has done this.
In your hand is the life of every living thing
and the breath of every human being.

Come let us worship.

Opening Prayer

Through our worship of you this morning,
may we find our hearts and minds
united with your Creating Spirit.
Help us to be worthy
of the gift of life you share with us.
Inspire us in this time together
so that we may care more deeply for your good earth.
Amen.



Penitence

[We confess our sin, and the sins of our society, in the misuse of God's creation.]

We confess to you, Sacred Creator,
that we have not always taken care of our environment.

We are sorry for the ways we've abused it:

wasting it,
hoarding it,
destroying it,
taking it for granted.

Forgive our foolish ways.

(A moment of silence)

For these and all our foolish ways, we pray,
forgive us, loving God.

Guide us to work diligently with our beloved Earth.
With faith and assurance may we find ourselves
in new relationships with all of your Creation. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

God is always willing and ready
to forgive us and to guide us.

As we strive to live in harmony
with the Holy Spirit,
our daily work and play yield
abundant fruit for all.

We are forgiven.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

Psalm

Come, let us sing to the Lord our God;
raise the roof to the Rock of rescue.

Come into the presence of the Lord with thanks;
raise the rafters with songs of praise.

The Lord is the great God, over all;
greater than every other power.

He holds the depths of the earth in his hands,
and the mountain peaks belong to him.

The ocean is the Lord's: it was made by God;
the land was formed by his own hands.



Come, let us bow before the Lord our maker;
with humble hearts we worship God.

The Lord is God and we are his;
we are the Shepherd's very own flock.
(*cf Psalm 95.1-7*)

Worship Song

We now hear 'May the mind of Christ my Saviour'. The words appear on the screen (with American spelling).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRTL0cMzTvs>

Liturgy of the Word

Prayer of illumination

Spirit of God,
who danced at Creation's birth,
dance with us now,
as we hear the Word read and proclaimed,
that we may be changed,
renewed
and empowered for mission,
Amen

Reading

Philippians 1:3-11, 19-30

³ I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷ It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. ⁹ And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Yes, and I will rejoice, ¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, ²⁰ as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honoured in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. ²³ I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ,

for that is far better. ²⁴ But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

²⁷ Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸ and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. ²⁹ For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, ³⁰ engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

English Standard Version (ESV) ® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.



Ruins of a large three-aisled early Christian basilica, end of 5th century, Philippi, Greece.

A basilica was originally the principal public building in a Roman town, used for law courts. Rectangular with a central nave, an aisle on both sides and a semi-circular apse at one end. In Christian times this became the pattern for many churches.

(Wikipedia)

Reflection

In Acts 16 we read how Paul and his companions are prevented from sharing the gospel in parts of Asia Minor and are led into Macedonia (Europe). They travel to the main city of Philippi and look for a place of prayer as there is no synagogue. Here a wealthy trader Lydia responds to the gospel and welcomes the group to stay with her household. Next Paul sets free a slave-girl who, it is assumed, joined the small community, and we read how a jailer and his household are baptised. Paul cannot stay to teach this varied group in person but entrusts them to God's protection.

This letter written from prison, possibly only 5 or 6 years later, begins with Paul, joyful and thankful as he remembers their turning to faith and partnership in the gospel. They have shared with him (in sending Epaphroditus 2:25 and gifts 4:16), and in sharing the good news of God's love in Jesus within their community. He knows that it is only through God's grace that any of this can happen and his confidence is in God: he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. He continues with a prayer for their growth in love, knowledge and discernment to produce the fruit of righteousness, that is holiness. That is quite a prayer.

In the verses not included here Paul describes his situation in prison, and how the message of the gospel is spreading despite his imprisonment and the fact that some preach as rivals to him. He is not concerned about how the gospel is proclaimed. Then we read of his rejoicing and trust in God. He cannot tell whether he will be released and able to continue his ministry or put to death. Paul knows that this small community will face opposition and he writes to encourage them to be united. There are tensions within the group and the theme of unity is one that runs through the letter.

Philippians has been a favourite letter for me with many memorable verses. I trust that whatever messes I make God who started working in me will continue and complete the work. The phrase partnership in the gospel is one that resonates as we share in various ways with other Christian communities. We learn and receive from others both from the past and from different traditions today. We pray for other Christians locally and further afield and we give donations to different groups. I wonder if we give thanks to God for these partnerships and if we can strengthen any of them.

The parish has supported Kimbilio, working with street children in Lubumbashi, both through a CMS Mission Partner and then Local Partner as well as through Congo Children Trust. The CMS link at Kimbilio is coming to an end and our CMS giving will be redirected to Ruth Sayers in Devonport. Then our relationships with other Anglican churches in the city centre is likely to change in the future, as well as how we continue links with our ecumenical neighbours. The future ministry of the city centre chaplains is also at a critical stage of development with the retirement of Norman Wallwork and other experienced chaplains, the uncertain state for retail and the unknown timescale of social distancing and face coverings in shops.

This all leads to the question of how do we pray for other Christians and for their ministry? Can I use the prayer that Paul uses? If I struggle to pray for situations where I have little knowledge, can I pray more deeply for individuals and situations where I have a relationship? Paul knew the Philippians and hence he prayed from his friendship and love for them.

I close with a prayer which is a personal challenge for me and maybe one for you.

Lord Jesus, saviour, servant,
Help me to dream again.
Rekindle in my heart that fire of the disciple
who sees his calling everywhere,

hears your invitation everywhere,
reaches out to your children
in great need everywhere.
I really do want to live your life in mine -
to serve, to care, to give, to sing your song
- for your glory and pleasure. Amen.

(Prayer by Brennan Manning from 'A Ragmuffin Gospel'.)

Hymn

We now have the hymn: Fill thou my life, O Lord my God, in every part with praise. Words are on screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2mpY0NahNQ>

Affirmation of faith

We believe in God the Father,
from whom every family
in heaven and on earth is named.

We believe in God the Son,
who lives in our hearts through faith,
and fills us with his love.

We believe in God the Holy Spirit,
who strengthens us
with power from on high.
We believe in one God;
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Prayers of the people

God in creation

Let us pray for our own needs and for the needs of others,
following the pattern which Jesus gave
when he taught us to pray to God our Father.

Through our love of our city,
through our care for the welfare of its people ,
through our care for its buildings, open spaces and roads which link us,
through our respect for the melting pot of cultures, races and languages
that make your city sing:

Father, hallowed be your name.

In our work places and in our homes,
in our centres of commerce and learning,
of industry and services, law courts, sports grounds and art centres,
and where policy is planned:

Father, your kingdom come.

By our seeking your guidance,
by our keeping your commandments,
by reducing our consumption of energy and resources,
by our living true to our consciences:
Father, your will be done.

For the millions who live in poverty and hunger,
for our own needs, and the requirements of our neighbours,
by cooperation, sympathy and generosity:
give us today our daily bread.

Because we have broken your commandments,
doing what we ought not to do and neglecting
what we ought to do:
forgive us our sins.

If any have injured us by injustice, double dealing or exploitation:
we forgive those who sin against us.

When prosperity lulls us to false security,
or hard times prompt us to despair,
When success makes us boastful,
or failure makes us bitter:
**lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.**

In the assurance of faith,
in the confidence of hope,
in the will to serve,
in the seeking of safe and sustainable cities,
help us to love Christ as Lord,
and our neighbour as ourselves.

**for the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and for ever.
Amen.**



The Peace

If alone, smile and hug yourself (God does). If otherwise, share the Peace as appropriate.

A short Spiritual Communion

The Book of Common Prayer reminds us that if we offer ourselves in penitence and faith, giving thanks for the redemption won by Christ crucified, we may truly 'eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ', even when we cannot receive the sacrament physically in ourselves.

Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

O God,
help me to trust you,
help me to know that you are with me,
help me to believe that nothing
can separate me from your love
revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

An offertory prayer

We may not be in church, but we can still offer ourselves and our talents to God.

Blessed are you, God and creator of the universe,
as we offer you our activities, thanksgivings and our life.
We present ourselves, and our world, as we are and as you can make us,
for everything in heaven and on earth is yours,
and of your own do we give you. Blessed be God for ever.

As we prepare for communion you might like to access the Taizé chant 'In manus tuas, Pater
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xff4PIGIBlk&list=PLAFC3BF61F242A1C6&index=36>

In manus tuas Pater, commendo spiritum meum,

Father, into your hands I commend my spirit,





Because there is no Breaking and Sharing we can have only Spiritual Communion with Christ. I'm sure you can find a way to use a few minutes of silence or conversation to enjoy this, and make it a sacramental moment.

Giving thanks for Christ's death and resurrection you may wish to say

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.
(after the Prayer of St Richard of Chichester)

Post Communion Prayer

We have gathered to seek the Presence,
to hear Christ's word,
and to give praise for God's gift of Creation.
As we go out into the world,
may we work together
in our homes, work-places, and city
to ensure Creation is protected.
And may we take time this week
to enjoy its beauty and thank God for it.

Dismissal

Go in eager and refreshing hope.
Work with Christ risen from the dead,
to fulfil the promise of a new creation.
Thanks be to God.

Benediction

May the blessing of Jesus,
who announced God's righteousness,
of the Creator, who fills Earth with beauty,
and of the Spirit, who nurtures awe,
bless, inspire, and empower you. Amen.

So let us go in peace,
to treasure and to tend the world God made and loves.
In the name of Christ. Amen.

Our final hymn: 'Now thank we all our God'. It is sung here by a choir from the New Apostolic Church of Cape Town, South Africa, together with an imposing orchestra. It begins with quite a powerful musical introduction (to say the least), arranged by John Rutter. The words are below.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSIFFFLOWpo>

Now thank we all our God

1 Now thank we all our God
with heart and hands and voices,
who wondrous things has done,
in whom his world rejoices;
who from our mothers' arms
has blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love,
and still is ours today.

2 O may this bounteous God
through all our life be near us,
with ever joyful hearts
and blessed peace to cheer us,
to keep us in his grace,
and guide us when perplexed,
and free us from all ills
of this world in the next.

3 All praise and thanks to God
the Father now be given,
the Son and Spirit blest,
who reign in highest heaven
the one eternal God,
whom heaven and earth adore;
for thus it was, is now,
and shall be evermore.

Scroll down for Coffee Break

Coffee Break

We have come back to the Holy island of Lindisfarne again. Helen sent me another poem about it – not one of hers, but written by Jackie Kay, who is the Makar, the title, as you doubtless will know, of the National Poet for Scotland.

HOLY ISLAND

All winter I was waiting
for something to give
and today I felt it,
a small crack,
the sun on the sandy dunes
by the Causeway,
the feel of the land
so close to the sea.
Nick and me and the dog
striding along
by the old Benedictine monastery
till we walked into
a new vocabulary
hope, benevolence, benediction
after the long wintering
of false starts,
the same day over and over,
the spring at last here
I said a small prayer,
the wind on my hair.



Scroll down for Night Prayer

Night Prayer

If you are able to do so, you might wish to light a candle near a window.



Forgiveness

Preparation

May the Lord almighty grant us a quiet night and a perfect end.

Our help is in the name of the Lord
who made heaven and earth.

A period of silence for reflection may follow calling to mind the fragile earth, our home and our calling to be stewards of God's creation.

We confess to you our lack of care for the world you have given us.
Lord have mercy,
Lord have mercy.

We confess to you our selfishness in not sharing the earth's bounty fairly.
Christ have mercy,
Christ have mercy

We confess to you our failure to protect resources for others,
Lord have mercy,
Lord have mercy.

May God who loved the world so much
that he sent his Son to be our Saviour
forgive us our sins
and make us holy to serve him in the world,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

O God, make speed to save us.
O Lord, make haste to help us.

Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now
and shall be for ever. Amen.

We now have the song: 'The Spacious Firmament on High', sung by the Choir of Trinity College, Cambridge. Words by Joseph Addison, music by Haydn
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hrEraKffwYQ>

Reading Matthew 18: 21-35

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

²¹ Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

²³ "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.¹ ²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.

³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. ³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."



'The parable of the unforgiving servant' by Jan van Hemessen, a Flemish artist, painted c 1556.

The painting illustrates the parable we have been reading. Jesus's story has three distinct acts, which we can see here if we look carefully.

Act 1 is in the foreground: a clustered office. In a triangular symmetry are seated four men, all with highly expressive faces. The first is the Flemish king as recognized by his crown. His heart shaped facial feature is suggestive of unconditional love and mercy. He forgives the huge debt of the servant pleading from across the table with hands anxiously writhing together.

The two other characters are good burghers of Antwerp. The first is engaged in counting the coins. The second has his eyes fixed on the king who points to the book into which he is to record the King's decision. However, the King's gesture also calls to attention something beyond the closed frame of the room. Our gaze moves to the cityscape outside the window. Time travels from the inside out to Act 2. The servant who received the forgiveness of the king goes on show the contrary to his colleague.

However what skips his attention is the witnessing presence of the king's courtiers above the small mound, which is Act 3. Hard to see them, but they are there. They report the unjust attitude of the servant to the king.

Reflection

Today's reading proposes two ideas about how we should behave towards each other. The first idea in Jesus's reply to Peter's question is that disciples of Jesus must forgive one another "seventy times seven" - in other words, always, without limit. The second idea, found in the parable, is the communal dimension of forgiveness.

The parable is set within a community – say the king's court. The servant is in money debt to the king. The amount is astronomical. The talent was the highest unit of money and ten thousand the then highest number in Greek, and represents a sum impossibly large for anyone to pay off. The king is merciful, but the servant does not show the same attitude to his colleague. It is the other servants, the community of the king's staff that react, and in fact whistleblow on the situation. The community itself is saying this is morally unacceptable behaviour, and take the case back to the community justice system, that is to the king. No doubt they applauded when the servant was 'delivered to the jailers'. We often show a similar reaction when we hear that someone has been imprisoned for whatever we consider to be a shocking crime. The relationship between forgiveness and justice is a tangled one!

Nevertheless, so far the message is clear: we should treat each other as God has treated us. But how easy is that in practice?

Let's think more closely about the debt owed to the servant: 100 denarii. A denarius was the standard daily wage for a labourer. So 100 denarii represent almost a third of a year's wages – say between £8-10,000 in today's money. In our terms, the forgiven servant is not trying to get back a couple of pounds lent for a bus fare.

So here is a modern scenario. You have decided it is time to have a new kitchen. You've been to the showrooms, had plans drawn up, and paid a deposit of well, let's say £9,000. But the firm goes bankrupt, before any work is started. Would you be interested in recovering somehow what you have paid out?

We live in a money-driven economy, in which we have separated out financial debts from other types of obligations. We would use words like 'written off his debts' to describe what the king had done. Forgiveness is something we associate with the transgressions between one person and another, or sin. But in the world of the average person in Christ's time and place, people thought of sin in a similar way to debt. This is why in the traditional rendering of the Lord's Prayer we ask God 'Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors'. No wonder we use 'trespasses' instead. In our money-driven economy, debts almost always imply money owed.

We are led into the question of at what point do we write off debts, not just in financial terms, but in moral terms too? We can easily name any number of issues that cause us offence: some we will have experienced personally, others we will recognise in the community: all forms of abuse and neglect, racial discrimination, sharp practice, and so on. At what point should we, or do we forgive those who are carrying out these practices?

There are a lot of people out there who are very hard for us to forgive. I wonder if God finds it any easier?

Intercessions

We pray justice
for the falsely accused,
freedom for the wrongly imprisoned,
healing for the tortured or abused,
care for the orphan and widow,
concern for the refugee and dispossessed,
and above all forgiveness
for our emotional detachment.

May we weep as you weep,
love as you love,
and not be afraid to be angry
for the sake of your children,
wherever they might be.

In our helplessness we ask,
Lord, enfold them in your love.
(on faithandworship.com)

Lord's Prayer (Matt 6: 9-13 New Revised Standard Version)

Our Father in heaven,
 hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial,
 but rescue us from the evil one.
For the kingdom and the power and the glory
 are yours for ever.
Amen

Meditation

Seventy times Seven

To forgive any more
 than the once
 sounds tough
and seven times seems crazy.
Yet to stretch the score
 to seventy
 times seven
becomes profoundly easy.

We only travel well
 on the paths
 of mercy,
when we have made the choice
to break from the prison
 of “our own rights”
 and to find pleasure
in the unfenced grounds of love.

(Copyright © B.D. Prewer 1995, posted on Bruce Prewer’s Homepage)

Prayer

So just how many times should we forgive?
We need to know: we want to get it right.

But if we read the story aright, Lord,
your kingdom is not a numbers game.

Endlessly outpouring, your mercy defies
our feeble efforts to quantify, which
in the end only amount to rationing.

We think along the lines of “plus one.”
You multiply exponentially.

We parsimoniously offer forgiveness case-by-case:
sometimes, but not every time,
and usually with qualifications.

Yours is limitlessly dispensed,
over and over, again and again, forever and forever.

(Adapted from Revgalsblogpals)



Closing

As you have been forgiven,
now go into a world that needs your forgiving, healing touch.
Bring peace and hope to others,
sharing God's love with them. Amen
(Nancy C. Townley, posted on Ministry Matters website.)

Reflective song

Our closing song is Lux Aeterna, sung for us by Voces 8 at the Gresham Centre, London.
Music is by Elgar. I think you may recognise it!
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwdeqVmXlHk>

The words are in Latin given below with the English translation.

Lux aeterna luceat eis, Domine,
cum sanctis tuis in aeternum,
quia pius es.
Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine,
et lux perpetua luceat eis.

May light eternal shine upon them, O Lord,
with Thy saints forever,
for Thou art kind.
Eternal rest give to them, O Lord,
and let perpetual light shine upon them.

Thanks

Thanks to everyone who has contributed to these services: Especially Sheila for the morning's reflection. Other material taken or developed from various websites and blogs is normally identified in the text.

