

Circuit Service 2nd October 2022
Prepared by Revd. Jenny Dowding

Call to worship (*based on Ps 103*)

Wherever we are, whoever is joining us,
we are here to worship God, and to receive his merciful love.
So, you are invited to worship the God, who, the psalmist says,
crowns us with steadfast love and mercy,
bringing justice for all who are oppressed,
who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,
who does not deal with us according to our sins.
As a father has compassion for his children,
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.

Let us worship this loving, compassionate God.

Hymn - Singing the Faith 83 – Praise, my soul, the King of heaven

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sx1eMwIDFb8>, or

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82TukN-uyPQ>

*Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven;
To His feet thy tribute bring.
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Evermore His praises sing:
Praise Him, praise Him, praise Him, praise Him!
Praise the everlasting King.
Praise Him for His grace and favor
To our fathers in distress;
Praise Him still the same as ever,
Slow to chide, and swift to bless.
Praise Him, praise Him, praise Him, praise Him!
Glorious in His faithfulness.
Fatherlike He tends and spares us,
Well our feeble frame He knows;
In His hands He gently bears us,
Rescues us from all our foes.
Praise Him, praise Him, praise Him, praise Him!
Widely yet His mercy flows.
Angels, help us to adore Him,
Ye behold Him face to face;
Sun and moon, bow down before Him;
Dwellers all in time and space,
Praise Him, praise Him, praise Him praise Him!
Praise with us the God of grace.*

Prayer

Faithful, gracious God, we come to you in worship,
as those who have indeed been ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven.
We give you thanks and praise that you deal gently with us.

You know we are weak. You know our secret sins, yet you show us mercy and grace.

We do not deserve the kindness and compassion you have shown us again and again.

We praise you that in your son, our Lord Jesus Christ, we see the extent and depth of your forgiveness and mercy to us.

But even as the words of praise are on our lips, we also confess to you that we have failed you.

You know us intimately, and you know what in us needs to be forgiven and transformed.

Lord, have mercy on us.

Pause

Hear the words of Jesus: Go in peace. Your sins are forgiven. Come and follow me.

Introduction

I had begun working on the theme and outline of this service when I listened to June's thoughtful service for last Sunday. The gospel reading she chose was the one I, too, was studying, and for a moment, I wondered if I should start again. But perhaps God's Spirit had directed both of us to this passage for a reason.

What we'll reflect on today is hopefully complementary to the theme last week.

Today's service focuses on the word '**mercy**' and Jesus' teaching in Luke 6, to "**Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.**" (Luke 6: 36)

[**Optional exercise:** on your own, or with others, briefly think of words or phrases that come to mind when you think about 'mercy'.]

Bible readings

Micah 6: 6-8 (NIVUK)

⁶ With what shall I come before the Lord
and bow down before the exalted God?

Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?

⁷ Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of oil?

Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

⁸ He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the Lord require of you?

**To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.**

Matthew 18: 23-35

Jesus said, '[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.'

Hymn

The next hymn speaks of how "God, rich in mercy, came in Christ"

Singing the Faith 407 – Hear the call of the kingdom

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRoX3LlcXQs>, or

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5OdlpJZVs0A&list=RD5OdlpJZVs0A&start_radio=1&rv=5OdlpJZVs0A&t=4

Hear the call of the Kingdom
Lift your eyes to the King
Let His song rise within you
As a fragrant offering
Of how God rich in mercy
Came in Christ to redeem
All who trust in His unfailing grace
Hear the call of the Kingdom
To be children of light
With the mercy of heaven
The humility of Christ
Walking justly before Him
Loving all that is right
That the life of Christ may shine through us
King of Heaven we will answer the call
We will follow bringing hope to the world
Filled with passion filled with power to proclaim
Salvation in Jesus' name
Hear the call of the Kingdom
To reach out to the lost
With the Father's compassion
In the wonder of the cross
Bringing peace and forgiveness
And a hope yet to come
Let the nations put their trust in Him

Sermon - Be merciful

Bryan Stevenson is a brilliant black American lawyer, the recipient of many major awards, and he was once described by the late Desmond Tutu as “America’s young Nelson Mandela.” When he was 16, his maternal grandfather was stabbed to death in his Philadelphia home during a robbery. The killers received life sentences, rather than the capital punishment that might have been expected. But Bryan Stevenson considered the sentences fair. He was influenced by the strong faith of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in which he grew up, and he said, “Because my grandfather was older, his murder seemed particularly cruel. But I came from a world where **we valued redemption over revenge.**”

A world where we valued redemption over revenge – this sums up Bryan Stevenson’s life, which he has dedicated to working passionately for equal justice for all, regardless of race. He defends the poor, the wrongly condemned, the voiceless and the vulnerable. He has successfully won relief for dozens of condemned prisoners, which he wrote about in a book “*Just Mercy: a story of justice and redemption*” which was later made into a film starring Michael B. Jordan.

The book and film focus on Stevenson’s first case as a young lawyer, representing Walter McMillan, a black man found guilty of a murder he denied committing. Stevenson was successful in exonerating Walter, who was released after 6 years in prison, most of them on death row. When Walter died some years later, Bryan Stevenson spoke at the funeral.

“I told those gathered in the church that Walter had taught me that mercy is just when it is rooted in hopefulness and freely given. **Mercy is most empowering, liberating, and transformative when it is directed at the undeserving. The people who haven’t earned it, who haven’t even sought it, are the most meaningful recipients of our compassion.**”

He famously speaks of the basic and humbling truth he has learned from his life’s work:

Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done.

One definition of mercy is “**compassion or forgiveness shown towards someone whom it is within one's power to discipline or harm.**”

For example, I might be badly treated by my boss and decide to forgive her. However, if someone working under me also behaves badly towards me, and I forgive them and let them start afresh, I have shown mercy, because it was within my power to discipline or even fire them.

Mercy is compassion or forgiveness shown towards someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm.

So much of the teaching of Jesus is counterintuitive – it seems to be opposite to what logic or common sense says, or what your intuition tells you.

Take teaching such as the Beatitudes –

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Did Jesus really mean for us take these upside-down values seriously and live by them?

Surely showing mercy to someone who's done something really bad is just going to make them complacent about doing wrong? Isn't showing mercy a sign of weakness? What about justice? As Bryan Stevenson has discovered, the teaching of Jesus, whilst seeming to us intuitively wrong, is of course, how God created things to work. Mercy actually results in transformation and empowerment. The world works best when mercy rather than judgement and revenge are primary.

(This does not mean that crimes and offences should go unpunished. But it is about the attitude towards the offender, and the motive, nature and extent of the punishment imposed.)

In a challenging passage in Luke's gospel, Jesus instructs us to love our enemies.

The Message version puts it like this:

Jesus said, "If you only love the lovable, do you expect a pat on the back? Run-of-the-mill sinners do that. If you only help those who help you, do you expect a medal? Garden-variety sinners do that. If you only give for what you hope to get out of it, do you think that's charity? The stingiest of pawnbrokers does that.

"I tell you, love your enemies. Help and give without expecting a return.

"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

Ah – there we have it. We are all *recipients* of God's mercy – we know and continually experience God's compassion and forgiveness. We are sinners who receive mercy from the One who has the power to punish us, justifiably, for the worst things we have done.

Thank goodness God shows us mercy! If God were to punish us for all the selfish, mean, arrogant, greedy, dishonest and uncaring things we do, we would be miserable wretches indeed.

Then there's the story, the parable, that Jesus told about the servant who received mercy from his master, but then denied it to another. When we hear that story, we might react with amazement at the servant's vengeance and cruelty. But in truth, we can easily be like that, judging others harshly, whilst enjoying compassion, understanding and forgiveness from God in Christ.

"You wicked servant," the master said, "I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?"

We are so often grudging and judgmental towards the weaknesses of others, whilst trusting God to be understanding and compassionate towards us. I know that *I* am more than the worst thing I've ever done. Do I extend that understanding to others? And our world has institutionalised systems that mean that some are more likely to be shown mercy than others.

Bryan Stevenson says that "We have a system of justice in [the USA] that treats you much better if you're rich and guilty than if you're poor and innocent. Wealth, not culpability, shapes outcomes." ... "The opposite of poverty is not wealth. The opposite of poverty is justice." Although he's talking about the USA, I suspect that, in this insight there is much truth about our own society.

Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done.

God's mercy is offered freely to us and to all people, because **God desires redemption, not revenge**. God's mercy is empowering, liberating and transformative. God knows that each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done.

In Jesus Christ - who lived a human life as it is meant to be lived, who was hounded and tortured and executed, but who willingly gave his life for us - in Jesus Christ, we see the mercy of God.

We are to be merciful because we have received mercy. Therefore, **be merciful, just as your Father is merciful**. May God's Spirit help us to be merciful. Amen.

Hymn - Singing the Faith 416 – There's a wideness in God's mercy

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnRkCJulhuY&list=RDVnRkCJulhuY&start_radio=1&rv=VnRkCJulhuY&t=61 (*this is the tune usually sung in Methodist churches, but with different verse selection*) or

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p014pxmf> (*this version is sung to the second tune in our hymnbook, and the verses are in different order*)

1. There's a wideness in God's mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in God's justice,
Which is more than liberty.
2. There is welcome for the sinner,
And more graces for the good;
There is mercy with the Savior,
There is healing in His blood.
3. But we make God's love too narrow
By false limits of our own,
And we magnify its strictness
With a zeal God will not own.
4. For the love of God is broader
Than the measures of the mind,
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.
5. If our love were but more simple,
We should rest upon God's word,
And our lives would be illumined
By the presence of our Lord.

Prayers of intercession

[There is a response during the prayers. It can be said or sung: **StF 761 – Merciful Lord**]

*Merciful Lord,
in your loving-kindness hear our prayer, listen to our intercession.*

[from the current circuit prayer card:]

Adventurous God, you call us to be
creative and willing to take risks in our vision;
courageous in our decision-making;
and unafraid of failure.

As we hold [*name of your church*] before you,
we ask that your Holy Spirit direct and encourage your people,
giving them confidence in your faithfulness,
and discernment of your purposes for them.
In the name of Christ,
Amen.

God of mercy, we pray for the life of the world, especially
We pray for those in power, that they may that there may be justice and peace for all

*Merciful Lord,
in your loving-kindness hear our prayer, listen to our intercession.*

God of mercy, we pray for those cannot forgive themselves, or forgive others, and
who need to know themselves forgiven and restored, that they might offer mercy and
forgiveness to those who have harmed them.

God of healing, we pray for those known to us who are sick in body, mind or spirit.
As we name them in our hearts, we ask you to heal them of all that harms them

Pause

We pray for ourselves, that we may be so filled with the knowledge of your mercy
towards us, that we may be empowered to be merciful towards others.

*Merciful Lord,
in your loving-kindness hear our prayer, listen to our intercession.*

We ask our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray “Our Father
...

Lord’s Prayer

Hymn

The closing hymn links justice and mercy. In the second verse we ask God to “Teach
my heart to treasure mercy, whether given or received”.

StF 713 – Show me how to stand for justice

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8CIU66oFMQ> (with voice)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YN70Vwz6jDA> (organ only)

Show me how to stand for justice:
how to work for what is right,
how to challenge false assumptions,
how to walk within the light.
May I learn to share more freely
in a world so full of greed,
showing your immense compassion
by the life I choose to lead.

2. Teach my heart to treasure mercy,
whether given or received –
for my need has not diminished
since the day I first believed:
let me seek no satisfaction
boasting of what I have done,
but rejoice that I am pardoned
and accepted in your Son.

3. Gladly I embrace a lifestyle
modelled on your living word,
in humility submitting
to the truth which I have heard.

Make me conscious of your presence
every day, in all I do:
by your Spirit's gracious prompting
may I learn to walk with you.

Blessing

May the blessing of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be with us now and for evermore. Amen.