

Call to Worship

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits--

who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,

who redeems your life from the Pit,

who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

who satisfies you with good as long as you live

so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

Psalms 103: 1-5

Prayers of Approach & Confession

Praise be to you, our God, for your steadfast love and mercy, poured out upon us...
beyond our deserving, beyond our imagining,
beyond our capacity to reciprocate to you or to those around us.

Praise be to you, Lord Jesus Christ, in whose life and death
we see most clearly steadfast love and mercy...
reaching out to those we might avoid, embracing the untouchable
and feasting with those beyond the bounds of acceptance...

Praise be to you, O Holy Spirit, enabling us to inhale steadfast love and mercy
wherever hatred and revenge seek to suffocate us with their poison.
Without your aid we neither know ourselves forgiven or find ourselves able to forgive.

Praise be to you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit!

Yet though we praise you for your steadfast love and mercy
we also confess that we have not always embodied a willingness
to extend that same love and mercy to others.
When others have hurt us all too often we have resorted to revenge.
We have found refuge in resentment and bitterness,
drawn the attention of others to our wounds,
delighted in defaming those who have wronged us
and have allowed all of this to infect and consume us.
Cleanse the depths of our souls, we pray; expel resentment from us;

and enable us to know ourselves set free by forgiveness
and renewed in our willingness to forgive others.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

(Inspired in part by Rosamond Herklots' hymn,
Forgive our sins as we forgive)

Here are words we may trust – words that merit full acceptance:
God is a God of steadfast love and mercy.
Your sins are forgiven. **Thanks be to God.**

Prayer for Illumination

Grant that as we listen to words of scripture
and ponder their meaning for us
we may be both inspired and equipped
to be living embodiments of the Word. **Amen.**

Readings

Genesis 50: 15-21 | Psalm 103: 8-13 | St Matthew 18: 21-35

All Age Activities

The URC Children and Youth team have created [these activities](#) based on Joseph's family being reunited in Egypt and [these activities](#) based on the parable of the ungrateful slave.

Sermon Notes

Geoffrey's sermon can be found [here](#).

Andy offers these exegetical notes:

Genesis 50 15-21

RN Whybray in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* noted the fear of Joseph's brothers who, having sold him into slavery, were worried how he would treat them now the tables were turned. It is not clear if the brothers were lying about their father's dying wish that Joseph might forgive them – they were clearly panicking. Joseph's example of leaving God to take revenge is a good start to restoring their relationship – and a model for us to follow. Dennis T Olson in *The New Interpreter's Bible One Volume Commentary* comments on the deep remorse the brothers have due to their actions and evidenced by weeping. A cynic might wonder if they were sorry for what they'd done or sorry for being in the situation they found themselves in. Genesis starts with Adam and Eve wanting to be like God, and

ends with Joseph asking “am I in the place of God?” (v20) as he refuses to wreak revenge. Olson comments that this response may not be appropriate in every case of suffering but given Joseph’s wealth and prosperity it was fitting albeit it was generous. Mark S Smith in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century (3rd Edition)* notes Joseph’s generosity to his father – paying for the funeral and having him embalmed – an Egyptian practice which he orders for himself (v26) indicating at least part of him identified as Egyptian.

Themes to Explore The passages today all concern forgiveness. There is much weeping and expression of sorrow in the Genesis passage and we often confuse sorrow with repentance. Yet in order to be truly sorry we have to change; weeping is never enough but might be a good start. We don’t know if Joseph’s brothers changed their lives or simply saved their skins. I’d like to think it was the former. In our age we often have mealy mouthed conditional apologies rather than attempts to change lives. From a Creationtide perspective it’s all very well being sorry that our actions degrade the earth – repentance is needed not sorrow; turning around and changing is what we’re called to do, not just weeping and wallowing in guilt.

Psalm 103: 8-13

The Context and Passage The extract from the Psalm concerns God’s loving kindness. God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and rich in mercy. It reflects, beautifully Joseph’s actions in our Genesis passage and links well with Jesus’ words on forgiveness in the Gospel reading. The Psalms are difficult to date; they were, and are, the hymn book of the Jewish people and have been sung by Christians throughout the ages too. It’s impossible to discern authorship with many attributed to David but as nothing of David is known outside the Old Testament it’s simply not possible, with any certainty, to accept a Davidic authorship. The opening of this Psalm, is rather more personal than the others leading people to see it as a song of praise written after a period of illness (v3).

Themes to Explore An ecological reading would focus on God’s faithfulness as a model for how we should care for and keep the earth. God’s patience with humanity is a model for how we should exercise care, compassion, and restraint with creation. v14 which you might like to include reminds us we are dust – the same organic material as the rest of creation. This kinship might move us from a position of arrogance to one of ecological humility, respect and guardianship.

St Matthew

The Context The Gospel we call Matthew does not claim that, or any name, for itself. The tradition that it was written by the disciple of Jesus, dates back to the 4th Century when the Church historian Eusebius noted a bishop, Papias, writing in 125 had said Matthew wrote the Gospel in Hebrew. Scholars, however, don’t see evidence of a

Hebrew first draft and see the work as originally Greek but written with a strong knowledge of, and attachment to, Jewish scripture, life, and belief. Scholars believe it was written after the destruction of the Temple (mentioned in 12:6 and 22:7) in the year 70 and so suggest a date of between the years 80 and 90. It is listed first in the New Testament due to its popularity in antiquity but is thought to have used Mark as a source – meaning it's older than St Mark. Literary phrases in the Gospel suggest a great familiarity with rabbinic thinking and an understanding of how Jewish people interpreted the Law. Yet passages about the Vineyard, the Wedding Feast, the invective against the Pharisees as well as the self-curse of the Jewish people before Pilate suggest a difficult relationship with those Jews who had not accepted Jesus as Messiah. Aaron M Gale in the *Jewish Annotated New Testament* suggests that after the destruction of the Temple a new leadership class was needed in Judaism – a class that the rabbis came to be as they interpreted the Jewish Law for a new generation in new circumstances. At the same time the nascent Church was also struggling for survival. Gale thinks the conflicts within the text between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders provide a look into a later conflict between Jewish Christians and traditional Jews after the destruction in 70CE.

Today's Passage Gale notes that the rabbis suggested one needed to seek forgiveness only three times – so Jesus, again, offers something rather more strict than the Law. The 77 times Jesus demands might echo back to the Cain and Abel story in Genesis where in 4:24 there is seven fold vengeance for Cain and “seventy-sevenfold” for Lamech. Stephen Westerholm in *The New Interpreter's Bible One Volume Commentary* notes that love does not permit the Church to turn a blind eye to sin – quite a contrast to a modern resentment of the Church “pontificating” on moral issues! The steps (in the verses before this passage) are pastoral and designed to produce restitution to the community. Westerholm notes that humans have a capacity to limit forgiveness but the seventy times table mentioned by Jesus is designed to show the limitless love of God. Ian Boxall in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century (3rd edition)* notes that Matthew repurposes the parable of the Lost Sheep. In Luke this is used to illustrate care for marginal folk like tax collectors and “sinners” whereas in Matthew it's used about wayward Church members. The binding and loosing was a rabbinic privilege given not just to Peter but, in this passage, to all the disciples. It's less about interpretation of the Law but about forgiving, or not, sins, with the community's decision ratified by God in heaven; such ideas are rather alien to modern folk – and to Protestants – and should be tempered with the extravagant demand of Jesus to forgive even seventy fold times. Boxall notes that divine forgiveness is extraordinarily generous. In the parable of the unforgiving servant there's a link between debt and sin – something seen in different translations of the *Our Father* where, in Scotland, we plead forgiveness for our debts and are urged to forgive our debtors whilst the English do similar things with trespasses and tresspassers. Dale C Allison in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* notes the instructions to correct another (in the lead up to this passage) have a long tradition in Jewish literature (Lev 19: 15-18, Sirach 19:13 – 20:2); he notes that in the Dead Sea Scrolls the Leviticus passage underlines a formal process which is similar to the one Jesus outlines in today's passage. The limitless love of God must be replicated in communal forgiveness; without

it the wayward cannot be corrected, and the presence of Christ in our midst cannot be discerned.

And from an ecological perspective...the huge debt the servant accrued might be seen as akin to the unpayable ecological debt the Global North has extracted from the earth through overconsumption, pollution and the exploitation of the Global South. Forgiveness here requires action. Pope Francis [noted](#) "To link reconciliation and ecological conversion emphasizes the conviction that the reconciliation we are called to promote, is a reconciliation with creation and our Creator, with the others and with ourselves. Conversion here means to stop reducing Creation as an instrument, only to produce immediate profits, and pulling limits in our economy and use of natural resources. It is the same respectful consideration of land, all living being and human community we are called to protect and to promote..." The debt might also be seen as the crushing financial debts owed by developing nations even as their natural resources are over exploited - forgiveness there means the rich ceasing to exploit the poor. Then there's the other servant shown no mercy by the forgiven servant; even as rich countries get in more and more debt, they extract more from the poor. A welcome move in England to limit bus fares to no more than £2 is to be paid for by the removal of ecological grants to developing countries turning them, instead, into loans. The low bus areas are good – they encourage people to use buses rather than cars – but comes at a cost to the poorest.

Themes to Explore Forgiveness is key to our lives as Christians and our life as a church, yet forgiveness can be used as a weapon. We will only grow if we learn to forgive but some things are very hard to forgive especially when those who have wounded us do not express sorrow or a desire to put things right. For many forgiveness is the last step in a journey of growth and grace; it never means we forget. It might mean not letting the person who has wounded us have power over us any more. Of course, our challenges in forgiving others have to be held in tension with the desire we have to be forgiven by God. The hymn Geoffrey suggests *Forgive Our Sins As We Forgive* has wonderful poetry to help with these ideas. A congregation that has not learnt to forgive will not embody Christ and will not attract people striving to be whole. If you are following a Creationtide theme then the parable of the unforgiving debtor has much to offer as we look at the huge debts the Global South owe the north, and the way the indebted North itself treats the south.

Prayers of Intercession

God of Joseph, source of steadfast love and mercy,
we pray for all who, like Peter, have cause to ask,
'How often should I forgive?'

We pray for all for whom retaliation and revenge feel justified:
the victims of the injustice of power ...
those who live in war-torn territories ...
the displaced and the desperate ...

those abused and wrongly-treated by forces set against them.

Silence

God of Joseph: **may your steadfast love and mercy inspire us.**

We pray for the Church:

that we may more truly practise what we preach;
for all who have been hurt by the words and actions of those claiming
to be followers of Jesus...

for all who are wracked by the guilt of regret...

those haunted by memories of hurt they have caused others ...

and those who are unable to believe and trust that they are forgiven.

Silence

God of Joseph: **may your steadfast love and mercy inspire us.**

We pray for any known to us who struggle with their 70 times table:

those who can pray the Lord's Prayer yet find it hard to pray the words,

'Forgive those who sin against us' when particular people and particular hurts
continue to hold them captive...

for those whose health is impaired by bitterness and resentment ...

those whose relationships continue to be affected by past hurts ...

Silence

God of Joseph: **may your steadfast love and mercy inspire us.**

Enable us, God of Joseph, to offer the bread of kindness,

even to those we see as our enemies

and make us willing to see your goodness

even in the most challenging of circumstances.

We offer these prayers in the name of the One through whom
we know your loving acceptance of us, Christ Jesus. Amen.

Offerings

We offer all that we have and all that we are

with the prayer and pledge that your name be glorified

and your steadfast love and mercy are known and shared. Amen.

Benediction

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.

He does not deal with us according to our sins nor repay us according to our iniquities.

For as the heavens are high above the earth,

so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him.

Psalm 103: 8-11

Go, as forgiven people, and practise forgiveness and may the blessing of God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit rest upon you now and always! **Amen.**

Hymn Suggestions				
	RS	CH4	StF	MP
Praise, my soul, the King of heaven	104	160	83	560
Praise to the Lord, The Almighty	74	124	88	564
O God Our Help in Ages Past	705	161	132	498
This is a day of new beginnings		526		
Forgive our sins, as we forgive	84	486	423	
There's a Wideness in God's Mercy	353	187	416	683
God when human bonds are broken	652		649	
All Creatures of our God and King	39	147	99	7
Freely, Freely			424	181
God, How Can We Forgive?			613	
Make Me a Channel of Your Peace	629	528	707	456
Help us accept each other	646			
Morning glory, starlit sky	99		12	

RS – *Rejoice & Sing* | CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* | StF – *Singing the Faith* | MP – *Mission Praise*