**Morning Praise @ Home 10th September 2023**

**Opening prayer**

Blessed are you, God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have blessed us with every spiritual blessing; enable us by your power to be true to our calling and live holy and blameless lives before you all our days, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. **Amen**

**Confession** Let us admit to God the sin which always confronts us.

**Lord God, we have sinned against you; we have done evil in your sight. We are sorry and**

**repent.** **Have mercy on us according to your love. Wash away our wrongdoing and cleanse us**

**from our sin.** **Renew a right spirit within us** **and restore us to the joy of your salvation,** **through**

**Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen** cf Psalm 51

**Absolution** May the Father of all mercies cleanse us from our sins, and restore us in his image

to the praise and glory of his name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

### Bible Reading Matthew 18: 15 – 20

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**Reflection from Sue Reconciliation**

Today’s passage from the lectionary comes from Ch 18 of Matthew’s Gospel, in which he gathers together Christ’s teachings about the kind of personal relationships he wanted his followers to demonstrate.

Through this chapter, Jesus explains the importance of humility, our welcome of others, our wholeheartedness, pastoral care, openness, forgiveness and freedom from resentment. These aren’t so much lofty aspirations as practical necessities for growing together as a fellowship. It’s almost as if the Son of God already knew what would be the issues and flashpoints for a motley group of sinners as they rubbed together in their common cause!

What we have to understand is that the context behind what the Lord expects of us, is what He has done for us.

* Created to be holy, humankind chose to become unholy; created to be at one with God, humans decided to go their own way.
* And that rejection, that sin, in effect made every one of us enemies of the Lord.
* We became outsiders, with an impassable boulder or massive locked gate between us and the Father who created us.

But

* God reached out, longing for the return of His children.
* When we were incapable of dismantling the barrier that our rebellion had created, Jesus, though his unmerited torture, execution but then resurrection, carried the boulder of sin out of the way so that our path back to God was open once more.
* As Romans 5 summarises it: ‘While we were still sinners, Christ died for us’. And the effect of that is that ‘we have now received reconciliation’.

Just think – we didn’t do this, but God did! Sinners have been made pure; aliens have been welcomed as family; mortals given immortality; outsiders become insiders. God’s grace and love and sacrifice just requires our repentance, our turning to Him in faith and saying sorry, and we are forgiven, we are restored!

In the face of all that Christ has done for us, the huge debt he paid for us, how can any of us withhold our own forgiveness of others or refuse to reconcile? Paul puts it clearly in his letter to the Philippian church: ‘if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, **2**then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.’

Today’s culture tells us that how WE feel is the most important guide dictating how we act. And we know that feelings are powerful things. But followers of Jesus have a different ‘operating manual’. If we are part of a Christian fellowship, we are all under a higher authority: that of Jesus’ commands, the wider teaching of the Bible and the ways in which our church has determined what is appropriate down the centuries. It is these which should determine how we react to one another, rather than us being driven by our ‘personal feelings’.

The passage is aimed at Jesus’ followers, His church. It talks of brothers and sisters because we are now family. Even in times of dispute, we belong to one another. What Jesus is outlining here are practical steps on how to avoid falling apart – the separation He mentions is only a last resort.

For the last 11 years, she has been true to her word. She and her children have avoided all encounters with me and I no longer feature on her Christmas card list.

Jesus doesn’t want that for His church. When there is contention, says the Lord, we need to face it. Of course it’s tempting to cut all ties, or, alternatively, try and paper over the cracks - desperate to be ‘nice,’ Christians might pretend it doesn’t matter or act like it didn’t happen – but that only drives the issue deeper, like shrapnel left in a limb, causing lasting damage. A church that ends up divided, full of lingering bitterness, is a victory for Satan!

Yet God doesn’t want us wounded but restored! He doesn’t want His church to limp but to function well. It matters to our Father when His people are damaged, so He provides what we need to flourish, as Jesus goes on to explain.

Firstly, God listens to us. We matter so much to Him that, far from being overlooked, our words and actions have eternal consequences – we heard a couple of weeks ago about the responsibility we have been given to help (or hinder) access to God’s heavenly throne. That’s why reconciling with – and forgiving - each other matters.

God doesn’t just listen, but commits to being with us as we unite in fellowship: ‘where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them,’ declares Jesus in v.20. He encourages our unity, promising to act on the prayers offered by humble, like-minded hearts. It is never easy to confront fractious church relationships, but Jesus is with us as we do so and has also placed us alongside each other for encouragement.

Lastly, we also need to hold on to our assurance that God has accepted us, which should offset our anxiety about confrontation. We shouldn’t fear that our standing may be destroyed by criticism. We are securely in Christ’s embrace and that foundation is rock solid.

That joy and sense of security is what we want the whole church to experience. So how to face wounding, wrong behaviour?

* Firstly, instructs Jesus, try and deal with it privately and with dignity. It is often easier to reconcile one to one, before an issue is blown up by others. The alternative, letting it be known around the houses about how X has affronted you, does not honour our high calling as Jesus’ followers.
* Jesus mentions four times the importance of being listened to – we need to hear each other and accept that we ourselves may have contributed to the problem. When a painful issue needs to be addressed, we need to listen carefully and humbly apologise if we have added to the problem.
* What if the person concerned will not listen or acknowledge that they have played a part in the difficulty? Involving a couple of trusted people can provide a reality check on the judgements of both sides, as well as clearly establish what is being said and done, to counter any gossip going forward. When an offender knows that others are involved in the scrutiny, it can change their attitude.
* If the whole fellowship is being damaged by false witness or false behaviour, Jesus tells us that it is important that the truth is established by bringing the issue into the open. It is a difficult, and mercifully rare step to need to take, but ultimately, the health of Christ’s body needs to be prioritised.
* It is really hard to trust someone who twists the intentions and words of others. It is natural to want to block them from our lives. But actually, Jesus’ final guidance, to treat someone who will not reconcile as an outsider, in fact means that, as the Message translation puts it, we: ‘start over from scratch, confronting that person with the need for repentance, offering again God’s forgiving love.’ We are to love them just as we are called to love all those who aren’t yet in Christ’s embrace.

Confronting someone who has sinned against us can be scary. Reconciliation can be costly. It needs courage, prayer and humility. But we have to persevere in real hope: when it works, it can be beautiful, as God’s spirit of power and love is further released.

And let’s remember that, at huge cost, God has enabled us to be reconciled with Him. Can we really refuse to be reconciled with others? **AMEN**

**Affirmation of faith**

Do you believe and trust in God the Father, source of all being and life, the one for whom we exist?

**We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Son, who took our human nature, died for us and rose again?

**We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Holy Spirit, who gives life to the people of God and makes Christ known in the world?

**We believe and trust in him. This is the faith of the Church.**

**This is our faith. We believe and trust in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

**Prayers of intercession led by Ron**

In the knowledge of all God has done for us, let us bring to him our concerns for the Church, and the world.

Thank you, Father, for the love which forgives again and again, the same love that is prepared to trust us with the care of your people, even after we have let you down many times. Teach us to minister to one another’s needs with compassion and understanding, so that all are affirmed and encouraged.

Lord in your mercy: **Hear our prayer**

Thank you, Father, for all that humankind is able to do; may all these gifts be used wisely and well, for the good of all, including those yet to be born.

Thank you, Father, for your forgiveness and for the opportunities we have each day to learn the joy of forgiving others. Break through our self-righteousness, and keep us learning in humility at your feet.

Lord in your mercy: **Hear our prayer**

Thank you, Father, for all those who care for the sick, the unstable, the ungrateful, and the difficult. We pray for all who are on the receiving end of hate or abuse and for those who cause others pain and distress of any kind. We pray for your healing and transforming.

Thank you, Father, for those whose living and dying has taught us so much about love. Freed from their pain and restrictions of age or injury, may they enjoy the sweet life of heaven for ever.

Lord in your mercy: **Hear our prayer**

Thank you, Father, for disturbing our complacency, and challenging us to move forward with you, assured of your company and your love.

**And a** final prayer for ourselves: - As you so freely gave of yourself help us to use our God-given gifts freely in the service of others and to do so with joy in our hearts.

Merciful Father, **accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen**

**The Lord’s Prayer** As our Saviour taught us, so we pray

***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 trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen***

**Closing prayer**

God give you grace to become the people He has called you to be, that you may live and work to his praise and glory, and the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us and remain with us always. **Amen**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. **In the name of Christ. Amen**