



Prepared by Revd Jean Quick.

Call to Worship

Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; Psalm 37:7

STF 20

Be still,
for the presence of the Lord,
the Holy One, is here;
come bow before him now
with reverence and fear:
in him no sin is found -
we stand on holy ground.
Be still,
for the presence of the Lord,
the Holy One, is here.

Be still,
for the glory of the Lord
is shining all around;
he burns with holy fire,
with splendour he is crowned:
how awesome is the sight -

our radiant King of light!

Be still,
for the glory of the Lord
is shining all around.

Be still,
for the power of the Lord
is moving in this place;
he comes to cleanse and heal,
to minister his grace:
no work too hard for him -
in faith receive from him.
Be still,
for the power of the Lord
is moving in this place.

Prayers of adoration and confession

Father, quieten our hearts and minds before you. Help us to wait patiently before you and to meditate on your love. Godly patience is derived from the confidence that you are real and the one who ultimately holds all things together. Help us in our times of waiting and stillness to meditate upon your the confidence we can have in you.

Lord Jesus, we praise you that You are our Saviour. You are truly our “stronghold in times of trouble”. Thank you that the ultimate purpose for our, joy, contentment, and satisfaction lies in you. Thank you that you are “the way, the truth, and the life”. In you, and you alone do we find purpose, fulfilment, and life. In you we can truly find stillness, peace and tranquility.

Holy Spirit we thank you that we can trust in you to comfort and guide us. For you are pure goodness. May our hearts truly delight in you and your wonderful ways.

Lord God, grant us your forgiveness for the things we do that we know are not right, and are unacceptable in your sight. When our trust and faith are lacking, please forgive and help us. We know when we step away from you, life becomes confusing and painful. We hurt ourselves and others. Grant us courage, stamina, and strength so that we may trust in you in everything and to do what is good. Help us to be confident in your words that you will forgive our shortcomings and act in our best interests. Forgive us and renew our faith and commitment to your ways through the love that we share from your gracious heart . **Amen**

Bible reading. Luke 6:27-38. Love for Enemies

“But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

Reflection

Have you seen the film *Wicked* (part one)? I watched it twice it's definitely an epic masterpiece. With amazing costumes, visual effects and songs that are captivantly performed. They get into your head and go around and around. Unfortunately one that sticks in my head is the opening dramatic lyrics, "no one mourns the wicked..." The story is a precursor to the events in the Wizard of Oz fairy tale. The story begins with the background story to Elphaba who becomes known as the Wicked Witch of the West for her opposition to the Wizard's regime. She starts off life as the unfortunate product of her Mother's wickedness. Hence born green. Her Father blames her for all the families misfortunes and yet she seems to be a loving and caring person. Maligned and mistreated for the mistakes of her family. During the film you see how she is trusting and caring and yet a victim of, to quote the lyrics; "something bad in Oz". It's a fairy story but it makes you look at what happens to people who turn into those we call bad. Even our enemies.

Do you have any enemies? Our reading is challenging and there's some very difficult things to asked of us, if we do have enemies. Our mission to forgive enemies can seem impossible, in the light of what we must do! So someone has taken your coat and you are to say, "just a moment you can have my shirt too". If someone slaps us in the face whether physically or metaphorically, we are to turn the other cheek! ..That is hard. It reminds me of another work of fiction that became a popular musical. *Les Misérables*. An escaped convict is caught stealing the candlesticks from the Priest's house. The law would have locked him up and thrown away the key. But the Priest insisted that he was giving the goods to the robber and in fact he had forgotten to take the best pieces. The back story is that the robber was locked up originally for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his family. The Priest implores him to take the valuable's and to use them for good which of course he does. All of these are just stories and is life really like that? Are those who we perceive to be wicked made that way because they have such unfortunate consequences in their lives and that has turned them into what they have become? If we could be as big hearted as the Priest wouldn't they just mock us as a soft touch? However Jesus' instructions are quite clear even if they seem impossible. Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. I guess to do that you have got to have identified someone as your enemy and perceived that they hate you. Putting it that way, you do have some part in the negative aspect of this which is identified as we read on. "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you." We have to have judged someone to be our enemy for them to be recognised by us as that. Have we condemned them? "They are a bad lot", we say all too easily. We might to justify why they are bad, as our two novels/musicals lead us to consider. However this is still not right. We are not to judge, or to condemn, but to forgive.

There are many phrases we say as Christians without too much thought and if we did think about them, how chilling they are! After our prayers for those who are in need, we often say in response, the Lord's Prayer. We say it without even thinking about the words we have known them for so long that they are just words that are comfortable and trip off the tongue. What is your earliest memory of saying that prayer?

I remember we must have been learning it at infant school and encouraged to get our parents to help us say it and learn it. My Mother refused and glibly passed it off by saying she had never learned it. The teacher spoke to her, probably offering some assistance. All I recall is Mum being very embarrassed. It was only when I grew up that I learned how she had gone to a Catholic boarding school after her Mother died. She told me how she had been cruelly treated by the Nuns, so she wanted nothing to bring back those memories. I could understand how praying "forgive us as we forgive those" would have been so difficult for a child who was bereaved in the early 1920's and yet was caned for things like sleep walking! So those are such demanding words to ask us to forgive but the next part of the phrase gives the demand a whole new definition. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us".

One of the best quotes on this very difficult topic comes from the Iona community, "when we kick God in the teeth, he is concerned that we might have stubbed our toes". Oh to live a blameless life but we don't and we know we have in our memories times when we have done or said things that must have given God such pain. What is His response? He sent His son to atone for our sins. Not just in the past but also for those things we just keep on doing, because try as we might we are human and we go on making mistakes. However God forgives us so completely when we turn to him. He also tries to help us learn to live a better way of life. Do we do the same with those who have wronged us. "I'll forgive, but I will never forget!" Or we say we have forgiven and forgotten but all too easily we trip out people's mistakes, whether in just reminiscing or in 'joking'. Whatever way the memories are recalled, it signifies we have never forgotten. It doesn't bear thinking about if that was how God chose to forgive us. The disciples often struggled with this question of forgiveness, in Mathew 18:9 we read, '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?" Jesus' answer reflects a number that represents that our forgiveness has to have no limits.

Another challenging question for you to consider as we look at this difficult question about forgiveness and not condemning. What are the most chilling words that a Christian could say? I am sure we have heard them many times and possibly even been guilty of saying them ourselves.

"I just want to say this to you, in all Christian love!" Oops! What is coming? So often it is anything but 'Christian love'! It's judgemental, critical, condescending and condemning.

I read about a person reaching their hundredth birthday and bragging that they had no enemies because they had outlived them all!

When I was interviewed as a potential candidate for the ministry. I remember what I thought was the weirdest question to put to someone going into the ministry. "What will you do when people are unkind to you and don't like you?". I was offering for candidature from being in the military for many years. An environment where you work and live very closely with others and getting along well is just second nature and a given. As much as I tried to explain to the people asking the question that that would not be an issue so the scenario grew until the people they described would hate me, not speak to me, falsely accuse me and so on.

I remember thinking how sad that they could imagine being in a church like that. Mmm 🤔 isn't that what frequently happened to our Lord Jesus Christ?

My first few church councils taught me to symbolically put on my tin hat and visualise being under the council table as the words loudly and strongly were spoken, "Madam chair I just want to say this in Christian..." I hope I never saw the petitioners as 'enemies'. But people with strong opinions that sadly didn't always reflect the love they proclaimed to be Christian. Not every church council or church was like that. However we often hold onto strong opinions and believe that we have the right to uphold those views in whatever manner we choose. Over the years I have seen the same kind of scenario's played out in all sorts of different community meetings. The management of various groups and societies. Choirs, amateur drama groups, bridge clubs etc etc. However as Christians we are committed to a higher standard and sadly we often fall short whether as a church or as individuals. Although we sing the song "They will know we are Christians by our love" most often, people know we are Christians by our hate, by our prejudice's, by our judgemental attitudes.

I am not saying that this is easy at all. This is a difficult process. Perhaps our enemies deserve the same kind of response to the harm they may have caused us or our loved ones. Do we even owe them any kind of response at all? The gospel teaches on judgment that it's not up to us to decide what they deserve. However boundaries are important and will definitely differ depending on the kind of harm one has caused. We need to protect ourselves and others from harm that could be avoided. The disciples were instructed that if they were mistreated they were to shake the dust off their feet in both Matthew and Luke's gospel. But what I am saying is that even if our enemy really does deserve our loathing and hatred, isn't it worse on us when we sit around and stew in it? Some people have the wonderful ability to perhaps blow up over something, say their peace and move forward as if it is forgiven and done with. Others tend to stew over things.

I think Desmond Tuto, Nobel Peace Prize recipient and the first black Archbishop in South Africa, explains this well in his book: The Book of Forgiving. He says: "Without forgiveness, we remain tethered to the person who harmed us. We are bound with chains of bitterness, tied together, trapped. Until we can forgive the person who harmed us, that person will hold the keys to our happiness; that person will be our jailor. When we forgive we take back control of our own fate and our feelings. We become our own liberators. We don't forgive to help the other person. We don't forgive for others. We forgive for ourselves."

But Tuto also reminds us that "forgiveness is not easy... it is not forgetting... and it is not quick – it can take several journeys through the cycles of remembering and grief before one can truly forgive and be free." Love your enemies is a tall order. Paul Wadell wrote "Love doesn't sound so dangerous until you've tried it". The book of Job is a testament to how one man despite every attempt to make him reject God and the multitude of terrible things that happened to him, he stood firm in his belief in the love of God. A very high standard of faith despite everything he endured. Here, the standard is not so much a feeling of love. It's actually an even higher standard: to act out that love. It's to take specific actions toward those who have offended us that are the opposite of how we would normally react: to do good to them, to bless them, to pray for them.

We often use terms to describe those who are our enemies and not too friendly terms either. There's a book called 'Well-Intentioned Dragons'. It's a very good book. It's written for people in ministry but it really applies to everybody. It talks about the people who treat us badly and it calls them dragons. The whole book can really be summarised in one sentence: in responding to dragons, don't become a dragon yourself. That's easier said than done. I find that when I'm dealing with somebody who is a dragon I want to breathe fire back. Jesus says, instead of treating them as badly as they treat you, bless them. You won't feel like it, but pray for them. Do good to them. Amazingly, I've found that after I start to act this way, my feelings eventually change toward them. Pope Francis comment on this gospel reading reminds us that there are some folks who are incredibly evil and yet...! "It will do us good today, to think of an enemy. I think we all have someone who has hurt us or who tries to hurt us. The Mafia prayer is: "you will pay for it", the Christian prayer is : Lord bless him and teach me to love him. May this be our prayer and our desire. Amen.

STF 613. *Tune Leoni often sung to the hymn the God of Abraham praise.*

God, how can we forgive
when bonds of love are torn?
How can we rise and start anew,
our trust reborn?
When human loving fails
and every hope is gone,
your love gives strength beyond our own
to face the dawn.

When we have missed the mark,
and tears of anguish flow,
how can you still release our guilt,
the debt we owe?
The ocean depth of grace
surpasses all our needs.
A priest who shares our human pain,
Christ intercedes.

Who dares to throw the stone
to damn another's sin,
when you, while knowing all our past,
forgive again?

No more we play the judge,
for by your grace we live.
As you, O God, forgive our sin,
may we forgive.

Prayers of Intercession

Let us begin with, the Lord's Prayer. May I invite you to pause after the words 'forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us,' Take a moment to think of those it's hard to forgive and offer a prayer for them. Then continue with the lord's prayer ... "and lead us not into temptation....."

Heavenly Father you alone understand true suffering. We pray for all who suffer today. For those suffering from the injustices others have inflicted. We pray for the abused, the injured or neglected. We thank you for the many courageous hands that try to rescue and restore the victims and vulnerable in our world. Give to them your strength and love. We pray for those known to us who might be unwell or struggling with some difficulty.

Jesus, Prince of Peace, you have asked us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We pray for our enemies and those who oppose us.

We pray for the places of our world where warfare and hatred destroy all that is good in humanity.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, may all people learn to work together for that justice which brings true and lasting peace.

Holy Spirit our source of inspiration. We thank you for your presence and prompting when we need to make right decisions. We pray for all in authority that they might be guided to make the right decisions for the betterment of all people. Sometimes those decisions will lead to their unpopularity but to the best outcomes for situations that are far from simple. We think of what has concerned us in the news whether global or at home this week and we ask for your support and guidance.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, We come with empty hands. We have not been able to love our enemies. As a rule we have never even seen them. We have avoided them. When we saw them, we felt only fear and anger, not love. So we come to you, not as the children of your love, but as the enemy of our enemies, beseeching you for ourselves and all the others;

Bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you. Forgive us for what we have failed to do for our enemies.

You lead us out of the constriction of fear and out of the prison of hate, into the wide space of freedom. Let us see your sun, which rises upon the evil and the good, and rejoice in its warmth, together with our enemies. **Amen.**

(Based upon a prayer written by Jurgen Moltmann, in a sermon entitled "Revolutionary Love of our Enemies")

STF 636

O love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee:
I give thee back the life I owe,
that in thine ocean depths its flow
may richer, fuller be.

O light that followest all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to thee;
my heart restores its borrowed ray,
that in thy sunshine's blaze its day
may brighter, fairer be.

O joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee:
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
and feel the promise is not vain,
that morn shall tearless be.

O cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee:
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
and from the ground there blossoms red
life that shall endless be.

The Blessing

Heavenly Father Grant us the patience and endurance to journey with You, to allow ourselves at times to stumble, to live into the hard way so that we might fully experience Your love, grace and peace in this world, by becoming a people full of love and grace and forgiving others. And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the inspiration of your Holy Spirit be with us now and forever more. **Amen.**

