

Call to Worship Psalm 103: 1

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

Hymn StF 83

Praise, my soul, the King of heaven;
to his feet thy tribute bring.
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
who like thee his praise should sing?
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise the everlasting King!

Praise him for his grace and favour
to his people in distress;
praise him, still the same for ever,
slow to chide, and swift to bless.
Praise him! Praise him!
Glorious in his faithfulness.

Father-like, 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!
Widely as his mercy flows.

Angels in the height, 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 with us the God of grace!

Henry Francis Lyte

Prayers of Praise and Confession

Eternal God, we praise you for your steadfast love towards humankind. You created us, provided for us, watched over us. But although we disobeyed you, although we chose to do wrong, although we chose to leave you, you did not leave us, you continued to call us and guide us, always longing for our return.

Eternal God, we praise you for your steadfast love towards humankind. For speaking to us through prophets and evangelists and offering us chance after chance to hear and obey your word. For although we closed our ears to you, you do not stop speaking to us, you continue to challenge and comfort us, always longing to be heard.

Eternal God, we praise you for your steadfast love towards humankind. For sending your Word of Love in human form; the undeserved gift of the life of our Son. So, although we still disobey you, and find it hard to follow in Christ's way, yet we know you forgive us and will help us, always longing to live in us, always longing for our love. Amen.

Lord's Prayer – please pray whichever version in whatever language you prefer

Introduction

The set readings for today are from Genesis chapter 50 verses 15 – 21, in which Joseph forgives his brothers for selling him into slavery, and the Gospel of Matthew chapter 18 verses 21 – 35 in which Jesus tells his disciples that they should forgive not 7 x 7 times but 70 x 7 times, followed by the parable of the unforgiving servant who is forgiven a debt, but refuses to do similarly for a debtor. It would seem that today's theme is strongly about forgiveness, which we will explore through hymns and prayers.

Hymn StF 423

'Forgive our sins as we forgive,'
you taught us, Lord, to pray,
but you alone can grant us grace
to live the words we say.

How can you pardon reach and bless
the unforgiving heart
that broods on wrongs, and will not let
old bitterness depart?

In blazing light you cross reveals
the truth we dimly knew,
how small the debts are owed to us,
how great our debt to you!

Lord, cleanse the depths with our souls,
and bid resentment cease;
then, reconciled by God to all,
our lives will spread your peace.

Rosamond Eleanor Herklots

Reading Romans 14: 1 – 12

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. For it is written,

'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God.'

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Reflection

Forgiveness is a personal matter, you can choose to forgive someone, by telling them so, or from afar if you need to, you don't even have to inform the recipient, although I think it helps if they know. We can also ask for forgiveness for ourselves from someone that we have wronged, and from God, if we have realised our wrong, and are humble enough to sincerely seek it.

But forgiveness is usually a transactional process, someone does or says something unkind and unnecessary, realises, and seeks forgiveness. The recipient can then forgive, or not, with simply an apology, or something more material, if appropriate.

But when Paul is writing to the church in Rome, he goes further back in the process, and seeks ways for people to not fall out, offend or be offended, judge or be judged. He calls such people weak in faith, but insists that they are welcomed, presumably so that faith can grow in time with encouragement. He uses two direct examples that are still so relevant today. The first is about what people eat. Now in a world where there are so many different dietary requirements for medical, health, or personal reasons, we often find that people come to loggerheads about how others should live and are not afraid to speak it out loud, whether invited to or not.

I am gluten intolerant and dairy intolerant, with a digestive condition that does not like too much fruit or vegetables, so I have to be really careful about what I eat, especially if I happen to be out, at someone's house or a restaurant. But I am not an idiot about it. I know what I can and cannot eat and am grateful when others make accommodations, but I do not insist that others can't eat what I cannot, that would not be fair. But similarly, I would not want anyone who was, say vegan or vegetarian, telling me I could not/should not eat meat, especially if they did not know me. We can consume what we want (unless a doctor or dietitian tells us otherwise) without having to explain to anyone else, because, basically, it is none of their business. Everyone, on any kind of eating regime, is welcomed by God, it is not up to us, as people, to judge them, else we would need to seek forgiveness.

And again Paul admonishes those who think that keeping one day different is superior to making all days special/the same. This will rankle with the Keep Sunday Special people, and I don't disagree personally, but for many others may feel that Saturday is their day that is different, or, if they work weekends, a midweek day. It doesn't, or rather, shouldn't matter, and no one should be made to feel wrong or inferior because of their work life and/or home life – God welcomes everyone.

What I get from Paul's letter is that we should concentrate on our own relationship with God, how we will be judged by what we think and say and do, particularly to other people, and how we welcome them, rather than judging those others, with different lives and lifestyles to our own, in our heads, by our words, and by our actions.

This letter, written nearly 2000 years ago, reminds us to mind our own, and give honour to God in all we are and do, and welcome anyone and everyone who may be a bit different to ourselves in looks, diet, work life or lifestyle. And may we ask, sincerely and humbly for forgiveness from them and God when we do.

Hymn StF 485

When we are living, we are in the Lord,
and when we're dying, we are in the Lord;
for in our living and in our dying
we belong to God, we belong to God.

Each day allows us to decide for good,
loving and serving as we know we should;
in thankful giving, in hopeful living,
we belong to God, we belong to God.

Sometimes we sorrow, other times, embrace,
sometimes we question everything we face;
yet in our yearning is deeper learning:
we belong to God, we belong to God.

Till earth is over may we always know
love never fails us: God has made it so.
Hard times will prove us, never remove us;
we belong to God, we belong to God.

Roberto Escamilla –
English version John L Bell

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We can never give enough thanks and praise for the life we live in you, Loving God, and in the forgiveness and redirection you offer time and time again, as we mess up over and over. We thank you for the opportunities to make things right between our sisters and brothers, and ourselves, and the relief of knowing that you are our only judge, as our lives belong to you. So in this we pray for others that they may know the same in their lives.

We pray for those things in our world that result in the destruction of life:
Warfare...

Crop failure resulting in starvation...

Fires in the countryside and in urban areas...

Diseases, especially those that can be managed...

Climate change wreaking havoc...
Natural disasters...

We pray for those things in our world which deny the value of every person's life:
Injustice...
Discrimination by looks and lifestyles...
Exploitation, especially in the world of work...
Oppression, deliberate or casual...

We pray for those people in our society who find life difficult:
Prisoners...
Unemployed people and low waged people...
Addicts and recovering addicts...
All who are housebound, home tied, and lonely...

We pray for those people in our society that are finding everyday life a struggle:
Through illness, temporary or long term...
Those bereaved, recently or long past...
In sadness...
In anxiety...

We thank you, our God, for your gift of abundant life. We pray that your world may be filled with your Spirit, united in your Love, and may witness to one another the joy, richness, and peace of life lived in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Hymn StF 613

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, 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.

Ruth C Duck

Blessing

Bless us all, as we live for you, our God,
Bless us all, as we love for you, our God,
Bless us all as we forgive and are forgiven,
Bless us all as we welcome in your name. Amen.