

*Please note that this is a written version of the video reflection rather than a transcript.*

## Call to Worship

The Lord is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. *(Psalm 103 .8)*

Welcome to my reflection for Sunday 13th September 2020. Last week we heard how Jesus encouraged his followers to be reconciled with those who had become separated due to behaviour. Today we hear Peter asking the question “How many times do we have to do that?” But first, our Opening Prayer:

## Opening Prayer

Our desire, our need, our yearning  
draws us together to worship God.  
Unexplainable, unimaginable,  
unbelievable, incomprehensible love,  
pulls at our heart strings,  
tugs at our emotions,  
turns our eyes beyond the seeing.  
All-encompassing God, just as we are, we come. **Amen.**

Over the last few weeks we've had geography, geology and history. This week - Maths! Well, don't panic, not really but we do start off with some figures. Following on from last week's focus on reconciliation and forgiveness - how to draw back into fellowship those who have sinned - Peter has a question to ask. He asks it on behalf of the disciples - and on our behalf - and it's the first part of today's Gospel reading:

## Matthew 18 .21-22

21 Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?'  
22 Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

Peter thinks he's doing well. After all, when talking about having to repeatedly forgive someone, other rabbis contemporary to Jesus taught that three times would be reasonable. Peter does the equivalent of “think of the number, double it and add one”. What does he get? Seven? He would have been proud of his generosity of spirit, and rightly so. But Jesus comes right back at him - “not seven times but seventy-seven times”. Actually there are two ways of translating the Greek. It might be seventy-seven times or it might be seventy times seven - which would be 490 times. Either way the meaning is the same. God is patient and forgiving with us, likewise our forgiveness of others is to be unlimited too.

Let us pray:

**Repeat Offending** (based on Matthew 18 .21-35)

When we are irritated  
for the seventh time  
and it feels like 70 times seven ....

**Help us to remember your patience with us.**

When we are asked  
to be patient  
again and again ....

**Help us to remember your pity for us.**

When our pity  
is taken for granted  
again and again ....

**Help us to remember your challenge to us.**

When we challenge  
unfairness  
over and over ....

**Help us to remember your love surrounding us all.**

*Rachel Poolman, Director of St Cuthbert's Centre, Holy Island, Northumberland  
(from 'Prayers for the Heart', URC Prayer Handbook 2020)*

Enough of the Math's. How about some drama? In the past I enjoyed taking part in several pantomimes at Wesley Church, West Bromwich. There's the obligatory funny photograph. There's usually a King or similar, there's always a baddie, there's always someone downtrodden who emerges a hero or heroine, and of course there's the pantomime dame.

Jesus reply to Peter, to illustrate the depth and generosity of God's forgiveness of us, is pure Pantomime. Yes, it's a parable, but we don't need to search for meanings with this one. Like any pantomime there's comedy, there's tragedy, but there's a challenge too.

Here's the cast:

A King: A powerful ruler, much feared, but not without mercy.

A Head Servant: A Chief Official. Greedy and selfish. The one who gets booed.

A Lowly Servant: The one who the audience love and cheer.

The Dame: The Head Servant's wife doesn't speak, but imagine her expression when she hears she's going to be sold along with her children.

Servants and Bystanders: Gossiping what they see and hear.

Let's ring the curtain up. The actors are ready:

**Matthew 18 .23-35**

23 (Jesus said), 'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. 24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25 and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. 26 So the servant fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." 27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." 29 Then his fellow-servant fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." 30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. 31 When his fellow-servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-servant, as I had mercy on you?" 34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. 35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

Jesus would have made a great scriptwriter. In this story Jesus uses deliberately exaggerated details.

A little bit about the money involved:

A talent was an enormous amount, equivalent to 30kg of silver, or 6000 denarii. Whereas a single denarius would be an ordinary days wage for a labourer.

In the first scene we're introduced to a high-ranking servant who owes the king 10,000 talents, 300 tonnes of silver! You know the word 'myriad'? It comes from the Greek for 10,000 and was the highest amount in accounting. The audience would have gasped at how much he owed. The king demands payment or prison awaits and his family face being sold. Time for some over-acting from the Pantomime Dame. Imagine the audiences shock when the king reacts to his pleas for mercy, pardons him and wipes out the debt of an unimaginable amount of money

In scene two we meet a junior servant who owes his colleague 100 denarii, about four months wages, a large enough sum by any standards. He bumps into the high-ranking servant who, despite being forgiven his enormous debt, acts like a proper pantomime baddie, grabs his junior by the throat demanding he pay up. The audience would have booed as he threw junior servant into prison.

In the final scene the high-ranking servant gets his come uppance because the king gets to hear about his behaviour. The audience cheer as he's thrown into the deepest darkest prison cell.

All vastly entertaining, until that is Jesus utters the final line:

“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart”. (*Matthew 18.35*)

And as Matthew’s version of The Lord’s Prayer says:

“Forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors” (*Matthew 6.12*)

Like the high-ranking servant, through Christ we can experience a forgiveness that passes all understanding. We are called to extend that forgiveness to others - and are enabled by the grace of God to do so. Forgiveness isn’t easy and it comes at a cost, but the grace of God is there for all of us, to help us forgive as we are ourselves forgiven.

## **The Cost of Forgiveness** (based on Matthew 18 .21-35)

In speaking the truth,  
uncovering lies, deceit and hypocrisy,  
give us the courage to name evil.  
God of judgement and grace,  
**help us to face the cost of forgiveness.**

In standing up against evil,  
confronting it in others and owning it in ourselves,  
give us the strength to pursue justice.  
God of judgement and grace,  
**help us to face the cost of forgiveness.**

In the fulfilment of justice,  
repenting wrongdoing and accepting the consequences,  
give us the gift of forgiveness.  
God of judgement and grace,  
**help us to face the cost of forgiveness.**

In forgiving and being forgiven,  
released from shame and able to begin again,  
give us the growth of healing.  
God of judgement and grace,  
**help us to face the cost of forgiveness.**

*Jan Berry, a URC Minister teaching practical theology at Luther King House, Manchester  
(from ‘Bare Feet and Buttercups’ Resources for Ordinary Time, Wild Goose Publications)*

## **Closing remarks**

Thank you for joining me for this reflection today. As always there’s a written version on the resource site. Next week we have a parable of the of God’s love - a love with a generosity that defies all expectations.

For now, take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!