

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

## Call to Worship

The Lord says:

“Cast away all the transgressions

that you have committed against me

“Get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!”.

Turn, then, and live.

*(from Ezekiel 18 .31, 32)*

Welcome to my reflection for Sunday 27th September 2020. Today our Gospel reading, which we'll hear in two parts, continues to focus on the ongoing dispute between Jesus and the religious leaders. They have a legitimate question to ask Jesus - by what authority are you doing and saying the things that you are. After answering Jesus then tells a parable that challenges the religious authorities about what they need to do in response - to leave their doubts and uncertainties and follow God. Let us pray.

## Opening Prayer

Gracious God,

guide of all who put their trust in you:

grant us in all our doubts and uncertainties

the grace to seek your will,

that your Holy Spirit may save us from all false choices

and that in your light we may see light;

through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

William Bright (1824 - 1901)

This is Kings Norton Stop Lock, or Guillotine Lock. It's a Grade 2\* listed structure on the Stratford-on-Avon Canal, near it's junction with the Worcester and Birmingham Canal. Both canals opened at the very beginning of the 19th Century and were separate private enterprises. Where the two canals joined there was often a slight difference of just a few inches in level. Water was a precious resource and one canal company wanted to stop their water flowing into another company's canal, while still allowing the passage of Here the Stratford Canal was a few inches higher than the Worcester and Birmingham Canal, the Stratford Canal Company built this stop lock, with guillotine gates, to prevent water constantly flowing away. When the canals came under one owner the flow was less important and the gates ceased regular use.

Unlike last week this weeks excursion into the industrial past doesn't do much to illustrate our Gospel, Except that today's passage, like these lock gates, is situated at a junction - in this case in Jesus' ministry. His Galilean ministry has come to an end. He has entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey and created quite a scene. The religious authorities are outraged and challenged by what he's said and done. In the first part of today's Gospel Jesus and the authorities go toe-to-toe. They have a question. Jesus has an answer.

**Matthew 21 .23-27**

23 When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' 24 Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?" 26 But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' 27 So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'

They've got a point haven't they. Jesus has incited a crowd disturbance by arriving in Jerusalem on a donkey, and the ancient scriptures say that's how the Messiah - God's anointed King - will arrive. He's gone into the holy temple and thrown the furniture around, while calling the temple traders thieves and bandits. He's then associated with some of the people hanging around the temple who the priests quite frankly wished weren't there. Then to cap it all the priests have been approached by an irate fig grower because Jesus has apparently taken a person dislike to one of his trees.

The priests of the temple ask Jesus, "Who gave you the authority to do all this?" A fair question. Jesus responds with a counter question about John the Baptist and where his authority came from. Which ever way they answered they were cornered. If they saw John's teaching as "of God" why had they ignored it. If they saw John's teaching as of solely humans origin they'd have a riot on their hands from John's followers.

"We don't know", they replied. "Then neither will you know about my authority", responds Jesus.

Jesus' call to us as disciples asks questions about ourselves, our lives and our behaviour to others. He invites us to something new, but to respond we need God's help. Let us pray:

**No easy way (based on Matthew 21 .23-32)**

O Christ  
whose wisdom and love  
are beyond compare ...

We confess  
that we are challenged  
by your questions  
with no easy answers ...

We proclaim newness of life  
whilst clinging to old ways of being ...

We want to share your love  
but struggle when it is revealed through unexpected people ...

Help us  
to listen,  
to understand,  
to change,

that we may act  
as your children,  
as your disciples  
and as your body.

*Rachel Poolman - Director of St Cuthbert's Centre, Holy Island, Northumberland  
taken from 'Prayers from the Heart', URC Prayer Handbook 2020.*

Jesus hadn't answered the question from the temple authorities directly. Instead he answers by way of a parable. We're in the vineyard again - as we explored last week the vineyard is an image of the Kingdom of God in both Old and New Testaments. No hired labourers this time - instead the owner asks his two sons to help out. They respond in very different ways both in their word and in their action.

### **Matthew 21 .28-32**

28 (Jesus said,) 'What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." 29 He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. 30 The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.'

Whether it's an invitation or an instruction, the father of the two sons, requests that they work in the vineyard. One says no, but then does so anyway. The other says yes, but then doesn't.

There's an ongoing conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders.

Jesus is associating with tax collectors and sinners. In their lives up to now they have seemingly rejected the call to the vineyard, God's Kingdom. But now they respond because they've experienced it in the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is confronted by religious leaders. In their lives they've outwardly responded to God's call, by observing the rituals and feasts. But, in confronting and opposing Jesus, they are rejecting God's grace and love, and their place in the vineyard.

In another vineyard story last week we heard of workers paid the same wage regardless of the amount of work they had done. God's grace is their for all, sufficient for our needs. It cannot be earned we simply have to accept it.

Today's parable is about acceptance. It has to be more than outwardly saying yes, like the second son and those who opposed Jesus. We are called to be like the first son, and the tax collectors and sinners, it's never too late to accept the call.

God's grace is there for all of us. It cannot be earned, it is not a reward, we are simply invited to accept it by opening our lives, hearts and hands. Whatever we have done in the past, by accepting God's grace freely given we are welcomed home.

Let us pray:

### **Open Hands**

Open hands;  
to receive  
to offer,  
not clinging  
or grasping,  
accepting  
and passing on.

Open hands;  
not controlling  
but unique  
and vulnerable,  
marked with life.

Open hands;  
holding past  
and present  
and future  
together,  
with love  
with hope.

*Julia Brown*

### **Closing remarks**

Thank you for joining me for this reflection today. As always there's a written version on the resource site. Next week as the conflict between Jesus and the authorities deepens, Jesus tells another parable about a vineyard and this time there's blood among those vines as it's a scene of murder and mayhem.

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

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## **Call to Worship**

Call your labourers who woke early,  
Call your labourers who came late,  
Call your labourers who feel wronged,  
Call your labourers who feel overlooked,  
Call your labourers who can't feed their children with this wage,  
Call your labourers who use their wage to increase your love,  
Call all your labourers, O God,  
Tell us to roll up our sleeves  
For we know that we have work to do.  
Let us find you in the work we share here and now,  
in Christ's presence we pray. Amen.

— adapted from a prayer on the United Church of Christ website

Welcome to my reflection for Sunday 20th September 2020. Today I'm where I was born and grew up - Pelsall, to the north of Walsall. As you can see it's right at the edge of the West Midlands conurbation. But the area behind me, which borders onto Staffordshire, hasn't always been that green. In 1832 Richard Fryer, a Wolverhampton banker and MP, built an ironworks here, utilising the pre-existing canal network to bring together coal, iron ore and limestone, all of which abounded locally. What this has to do with today's Gospel we'll explore shortly.

But first let us pray.

## **Opening Prayer**

Jesus, you were a storyteller,  
you talked about money, wages and taxes,  
you told stories about integrity and forgiveness,  
you helped people who were in trouble,  
you listened to people who were sad.  
You call us to live as you did -  
to listen to each other,  
to be forgiving,  
and to love our neighbours as we love ourselves.

(from 'A Service for Justice and Peace' in the Iona Worship Book)

Boaz Bloomer is about as Victorian name as you can imagine and his appearance matched. But he was born before the Victorian era, in 1801 in Dudley. In 1846, together with a business colleague, he bought Pelsall Ironworks from the estate of the now late Richard Fryer.

The works were immense and at their peak would include two blast furnaces, forty puddling furnaces, seven mills and forges, a gashouse and gasometer, and a large tramway with locomotive and wagon sheds. It employed several hundred men and

women producing bar and sheet iron of the highest quality and exported to the USA, China and India, and nails to Canada, Norway and Sweden. When a pub opened nearby it was called The Free Trade Inn accordingly.

With the acquisition of several collieries the business became Pelsall Coal and Iron Company. Several generations of my ancestors - Hollands and Coopers - worked in collieries and as puddlers in the ironworks. A puddler is involved in the process that converts brittle pig iron into strong and workable wrought iron.

Most of the ironworks closed in the 1890s and these maps, dated 1884 and 1902, show that demolition then took place. But even in the 1960s I remember playing on The Cracker, a great mountain of ironworks waste, that was gradually removed to be used in road building.

As well as being a successful industrialist, Boaz Bloomer was also a philanthropist. Driven by a strong Christian faith he cared for his workers and their families. He was a Methodist and donated the land for and paid for the building of the Wesleyan Chapel and school in Pelsall. At the ironworks he opened a reading room with newspapers and periodicals for his workers to read. He established a 'Tommy Shop' where workers could buy essentials at reasonable prices. He contributed money towards children's education and, by 1868, ensured that all the children of employees were receiving good education.

Bloomer was one of many philanthropist industrialists whose faith guided them in providing welfare for their employees. Today's Gospel reading uses a story about a benevolent employer to tell us something about the Kingdom of God.

## **Matthew 20 .1-16 The Good Employer**

1 (Jesus said) 'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; 4 and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went.

5 When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same.

6 And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" 7 They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." 8 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first."

9 When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12 saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." 13 But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you

no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? 14 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" 6 So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

This isn't a message of "equal pay for all!" Rather it's a message that "The last receive good reward!" To understand it we need to remember that 'the vineyard' is a frequent image in scripture for God's people.

In the first part of the parable labourers are hired at various points in the day. Those hired at 6.00am agree on the daily wage - one denarii. Sufficient to keep them and their family for a day or so. Not particularly generous but the going rate for a twelve hour day. Others are hired at 9.00am, noon, and 3.00pm - and then, surprisingly, some at 5.00pm with just an hours work to do. With all of those hired during the day no wage is agreed other than "what is right". At 6.00pm it's time for pay and surprisingly those who've barely raised a sweat, having only worked an hour, are summoned forward first. Which means that those waiting in the queue are about to get a good view of what happens next.

Astonishingly, those who had only worked an hour received a full days pay. A silver denarii pressed into their palm, a days pay for one hours work! Surely some mistake? But then all who've worked whether for one, three, six, nine or the whole twelve hours receive the same - a single denarii. Those who'd worked long hours were outraged. Why, they say, can those 'Johnny come lately's' get a full days pay.

An hours pay wouldn't have fed the worker, let alone their family. But a days pay will be sufficient for a family's basic needs. The kind, compassionate employer wants to ensure that all their needs are met. The vineyard owner is a philanthropist like Boaz Bloomer and others such as the Lever Brothers, Cadbury, Fry and Rowntree - all guided by their faith and beliefs.

This is a story, that tells us something about the values of The Kingdom of God.

### **God is Generous**

To those without food

**God is generous**

To those with out work

**God is generous**

To those away from home

**God is generous**

To those who ask for help

**God is generous**

Today, here, and where we live,

**God wants to be generous through us.**

*Ruth Burgess (in Bare Feet and Buttercups, Wild Goose Publications)*

Jesus tells this parable to target those who are grumbling about him welcoming tax-collectors and sinners and saying that they will inherit the Kingdom of God. Those who are grumbling include some scribes and pharisees who reckon they've worked long and hard keeping the law. They are outraged that Jesus says tax collectors and sinners can just turn up and get the same reward.

But the key is that it isn't a reward. The employer in the story includes all within his benevolence. He acts with compassion to ensure needs are met. No one needs to be left out of provision. God's grace in its fulness is there for all whether we are old hands to the Christian faith or newcomers.

### **Closing Prayer**

Go out from here  
as workers in God's upside-down kingdom,  
where the last are first and the first are last,  
where needs are met in miraculous ways,  
and there is grace enough for all!

And may the blessing of God,  
the love of Jesus Christ,  
and the presence of the Holy Spirit  
surround you and sustain you in the coming days.  
Amen.

### **Closing remarks**

Thank you for joining me for this reflection today. As always there's a written version on the resource site. Next week the religious authorities challenge Jesus about his teaching and he responds by telling a parable that challenges them to accept what God offers.

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

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## 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!

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## Call to Worship

Owe no one anything, except to love one another;  
for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. (Romans 13 .8)

Welcome to my reflection for Sunday 6th September 2020. This is the 25th reflection and this week we'll be tackling a passage from Matthew's Gospel that hints at how the early Christians sought reconciliation with those who had become separated from the others due to their behaviour. We pick up this theme in our opening prayer:

Lord Jesus, our mediator,  
judge us with love and rebuke us with mercy,  
and mediate between those of us who disagree.  
Today we pray for all homes, workplaces and nations  
where accusations lead to conflict,  
that each side will listen to the other  
and learn to love again. **Amen.**

*Gazing on the Gospels (Year A) by Judith Dimond*

Those of you who know the area will already have noticed that I've popped down to St Nic's this week. For those from further afield I'd better explain that is St Nicolas, Kings Norton. Within the churchyard here stands this magnificent early-15th Century building. Built originally as the Priest's House it is known, from its later use from the 16th Century as "The Old Grammar School". Nearby are several other medieval buildings including the church itself and the Saracen's Head.

Today's theme is about conflict and reconciliation. This building knows more than a bit about those as its stood here through tumultuous times.

Back in 1640 a man by the name of Thomas Hall came to Kings Norton as both Curate at St Nicolas and also Headmaster here. Those were stormy times in both religion and politics and Thomas Hall had strong opinions on both. Two years after he arrived here the English Civil War broke out. Thomas Hall wasn't afraid of disagreement, which was just as well because Kings Norton, as the name implies, was a Royalist stronghold. Thomas Hall was an ardent Parliamentarian. He suffered abuse and criticism, but held strong.

The Civil War was as much about religion as it was about politics because it was a time of religious turmoil too. Although Hall was ministering in the established Church of England, he was at heart a presbyterian. He believed that the church should be governed by elected elders, not by bishops.

Some presbyterians were royalists and others, like Hall were parliamentarians. Because they had a lot in both camps many presbyterians were willing to negotiate with King Charles I and try and avoid war. But other Christian groupings, together called Independents, wanted to pursue a harder line and force their demands on the king. This latter group included Oliver Cromwell, a member of groups from which the congregationalists would soon emerge.

The presbyterians favoured a church with strict doctrine, whereas the diverse Independents wanted greater toleration of the belief of non-conformists and, of course, Quakers.

The history of the church is bloody. Over the centuries one group or another has often accused others of heresy, blasphemy and general sinful behaviour. Nothing is new and our Gospel reading reminds us that division has been part of the church since its beginnings.

### **Matthew 18 .15-20 (NRSV)**

15 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. 18 Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

There is some doubt as to whether those words were spoken by Jesus. They don't 'sound' like Jesus. Mention of "church" is obviously a later addition. More troublesome, are those words about treating someone as a "Gentile and tax-collector" if they can't be reconciled. The implication that they somehow become outsiders is contrary to the way Jesus always encountered them with sympathy and love.

This passage instead seems to reflect the discipline of the early Christian Church - and is more about rules and regulations than forgiveness and love. It's more the stuff of Acts of the Apostles than the Gospel. But there's Jewish scriptural roots to it all. The need for two or three witnesses for example is firmly based on a requirement in Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 19 .15).

Matthew places this passage immediately after the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Matthew 18 .10-14). God's love searches out the one who is lost - even when it seems to make little sense to those that remain in the fold. But reconciliation is at the heart of Jesus ministry. Reconciliation that is driven by love - a word missing from today's Gospel passage. Instead we can turn to today's passage from Romans tells:

### **Romans 8 .8-10 (NRSV)**

8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments .... are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Thomas Hall survived the horrors and turmoil of the Civil War. But he remained no stranger to being affected by conflict and disagreement. In 1662, when the monarchy had been restored, Parliament and the King passed an Act of Uniformity. It required anyone holding office, including clergy, to sign up to its requirements. Clergy were required to assent to, and use only, the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. That book was so new that most clergy had never seen a copy! It also reintroduced Bishops to the church hierarchy. Hall refused to accept it and was one of over 2000 clergy who did likewise and were ejected from their parishes. Reduced to great poverty Hall was supported by friends for the remaining three years of his life. He died in 1665, aged 55, and is buried here in Kings Norton.

By the way it wasn't the end of the Old Grammar School's 'walk on parts' in national disagreements. In 1909 two suffragettes broke into the school with the intention of burning it down. They didn't. Instead they left a message on the blackboard: "Two Suffragists have entered here, but charmed with this old-world room, have refrained from their design of destruction."

Whatever our divisions a God in Christ commands us to love one another. That is a challenge we face today. Even within the life of the church we still see disagreements littered with accusations of heresy, blasphemy and calling each other sinners! Loving those we disagree with can be costly but God's love embraces all. Jesus called tax collectors and sinners, Jew and Gentile, those loved by others and those who were despised, he calls you and me.

God's love which in Christ has reached across the chasm that separated us from him compels us to make every effort to reconcile differences between God's people. For all are welcome, because all are loved.

### **Love has everything to do with it** (based on Romans 13 .8-14)

Friends, God is with us.  
And, as we leave this place  
go, knowing these things  
- that love does no one any wrong  
- and love is our saving grace.

As we go through the week,  
owe nothing,  
except to love one another  
- for love leads to salvation  
- and salvation is nearer to us now than ever before.

Go through this week recognising that love  
has everything to do with justice and right living.

What's love got to do with it?  
Everything!  
So go in love.

**Amen.**

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## **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'll be hearing how Peter asked Jesus if there was any limit to forgiveness. Jesus responds, as he does so often, with a parable that is both challenging and reassuring.

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