

## A Podcast for North Coventry Group – 13 September 2020 ('Fifteenth after Pentecost')

Hello and welcome to a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This has been prepared for the 13 September, the fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 2020.

Details of music and sources are in the online transcript, and I would like to thank Erica and Jill for their help in preparing this week's edition.

**Introductory Music<sup>1</sup>** – *Pavane* by Gabriel Fauré  
in the arrangement for the BBC World Cup theme, 1998  
played by the Radio Bratislava Symphony Orchestra  
conducted by Peter Dvorský,  
from the album *BBC Sporting Themes*

**Call to Worship:** we hear these words from Psalm 103:

*The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.*

*For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.*

**Hymn:** *O worship the King*, words by Robert Grant, 1779-1838  
sung by Maddy Prior and the Carnival Band  
from the album *Awake and Join the Cheerful Choir*

*O worship the King all-glorious above,  
O gratefully sing his power and his love:  
our shield and defender, the Ancient of Days,  
pavilioned in splendour and girded with praise.*

*O tell of his might; O sing of his grace,  
whose robe is the light, whose canopy space.  
His chariots of wrath the deep thunderclouds form,  
and dark is his path on the wings of the storm.*

*The Earth, with its store of wonders untold,  
Almighty, thy power hath founded of old;  
Hath 'stablished it fast by a changeless decree  
And round it hath cast, like a mantle, the sea.*

*Thy bountiful care, what tongue can recite?  
It breathes in the air, it shines in the light;  
it streams from the hills, it descends to the plain,  
and sweetly distils in the dew and the rain.*

*Frail children of dust, and feeble as frail,  
in thee do we trust, nor find thee to fail.  
Thy mercies, how tender, how firm to the end,  
our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend!*

*O measureless Might, ineffable Love,  
while angels delight to hymn thee above  
thy humbler creation, though feeble their lays,  
in true adoration shall sing to thy praise!*

## Prayers

We offer this time, together with our words and thoughts, to God in prayer; let us pray.

Dear Lord, another week has passed and again there have been changes. New and changed rules to live by.

And yet we gather in this virtual environment to learn more about **your** rules and pray that they may have the place they deserve in our lives and in the life of our community and our nation.

For we know that you have always guided your people and shown them the right direction to take. From the days your people needed real assistance in travelling through the desert to the promised land right up to these days when our wanderings need a **moral** compass we can rely on.

And we need your hand in writing our agenda, our to-do list for these days. Show us once again how to discern the difference between what we want and what we truly need. Give us the courage to insist on promoting the importance of people above a reliance on and a craving for material things.

We have so much from you, and at times seem so incapable of showing our gratitude in action. Forgive us and give us the precious gifts of time and inspiration, courage and confidence to turn from the mistaken but well-trodden footpaths of selfishness to regain the routes that lead us to be good stewards of your creation, better neighbours of all of your people.

In Jesus' name we ask this, and in his words we pray:

### **The Lord's Prayer**

*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 this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

**Scripture<sup>ii</sup>:** Romans 14:1-12

A reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, in chapter 14, verses 1 to 12

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

<sup>2</sup> Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. <sup>3</sup> Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. <sup>4</sup> Who are you to pass judgment 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

<sup>10</sup> Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. <sup>11</sup> For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." <sup>12</sup> So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

## Reflection (1)

Our scripture readings this week each relate to the formation of the early Church. In our Gospel reading, which you'll hear shortly, Jesus is effectively instructing Peter in how attitudes ought now to be. In Romans, Paul, in the words that Jill read, seems to be declaring his own manifesto, and many commentators think the letter to the Romans was effectively that – a statement of Paul's belief to put the record straight with the growing band of Christians in Rome, before he should visit them.

The message in each case might be summed up as one of tolerance.

Look first at the message of Romans. It reads as if Paul is ticking off a list of problems among the fellowship that he feels have to be corrected. Who is trying to impose particular dietary laws? Who is trying to suggest that only one pattern of worship, on a particular day, will do? Who is trying to impose their own standards – perhaps old standards - on the new way?

Whoever they are, it is an artificial division that should not be there. It is one side taking umbrage where none should be taken.

There are examples elsewhere in Paul's letters of early Christians introducing rules for themselves, or sometimes wondering what the rules should be. And as a result introducing the artificial divisions. To my mind it is like the situation in Corinth that Paul addresses in his first letter to the Christians there.

*"My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."*

Paul's response then was to ask – is Christ divided?

Back in the letter to the Romans, we see the solution to the problem whose nature we really have to just guess at. What about the food, what about the meeting times?

*Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions."*

That is an interesting one. It would surely be very un-Christian to initiate someone into our fellowship just to act as a verbal punchbag, just to give us a juicy topic for debate. But it seems to have happened in Rome.

*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 judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them.*

This is one of the few passages I have ever quoted at a fellow-Christian to justify my own stance. It was at college in 1995, when I was once the only abstainer at a service in Holy Week when everyone was invited to join in a sequence of foot-washing – on Maundy Thursday, obviously. We had been invited to join in or not, as we felt moved, and I was the only one who **didn't** move. All eyes turned. We were working by candlelight, so they maybe thought I had fallen asleep. There was a pause I can only describe as awkward. I just didn't move. And eventually they carried on. I've since used the experience as a benchmark, an object lesson for how **not** to invite people to do something potentially unwelcome in worship.

For there are innovations that don't suit everyone. There are times when not everyone feels able to join in, or not yet.

And so there are those who eat everything, those who want to join in the footwashing. Those who enjoy sharing the peace, those who keep their eyes open during the sharing of the Grace, those who know all the latest songs. In these difficult times we are going very soon to encounter groups of those who are content to return to church buildings under all the special conditions appertaining to virus protection, and others who are more reluctant.

None must despise, or laugh at, or seek to drag along with them... the others. And I am sometimes among the others. Those who are perhaps not moving with the fashion, not so up to date, those who are not so confident.

And why must this intolerance not happen? Because of two things.

Because of the question that Paul asks the Romans.

*Who are you to pass judgment 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.*

This intolerance **must not be**, because of that question – *who are we to pass judgement?*

And also this intolerance must not be, because of God. Whose person, whose three person-ed nature is tall enough and broad enough and deep enough to welcome all of those who turn to him, whatever their superficial differences and different preferences.

Before we hear our Gospel passage, here is a short piece of music...

**Song/Music:** *Variation 4*, from the album *Variations*  
by Andrew Lloyd-Webber, with Julian Lloyd-Webber on cello

As prophesied last week, this week's Gospel passage begins with a famous question from the apostle, Peter:

**Scripture:** Matthew 18:21-35

A reading from Matthew's Gospel, in chapter 18, verses 21 to 35.

<sup>21</sup> 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?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

<sup>23</sup> "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup> When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; <sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' <sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

<sup>28</sup> But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.'

<sup>29</sup> Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' <sup>30</sup> But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

<sup>31</sup> When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup> Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' <sup>34</sup> And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

<sup>35</sup> So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

## **Reflection (2)**

Even if I gave it a mention last week, let's look once more at our Gospel passage, and the lesson that Jesus taught Peter after his question about forgiveness.

The story is a fairly simple one.

The king was going through his accounts and calling in debts that he was owed – one of them was for the enormous sum of 10,000 talents. How someone who is referred to as a slave in the passage gets to owe 10,000 talents is a very good question. In spending power this seems to have been an astronomical sum, since even one talent is said to be a number of years' wages. The debt, or the obligation, has gone way beyond all possibility of repayment – perhaps this is the point. So, and because it is just a story we shouldn't try to psychoanalyse too much, the king lets the servant off.

And the servant's next move is to tackle someone who owes him a trifling sum, and to have them thrown into prison until they could pay up. It always strikes me as rather counter-productive to put someone in prison because they owe you money. Taking away their liberty also involves taking away their earning power, it would seem. But never mind. The king gets to hear about this ingratitude and punishes the unforgiving slave.

Tolerating and forgiving the behaviour we show to one another is something that ought to flow from the way we ourselves are treated by God. And next to what we owe to God, what we owe to each other is like the 100 denarii compared to the ten thousand talents.

We can afford to be generous. We can afford to be tolerant. We can afford to be forgiving.

And so, once again, it all hangs together in one wonderfully complex yet simple set of rules for behaviour that Jesus brought to us. Love God, love each other. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Love your neighbour as yourself.

What we do have, however, is a right to respond when others do not follow the basic rules. We have a right, and even an obligation, to try to bring about a better world.

How we go about *that* is a challenge. It's the challenge of responding to ever changing rules for our Covid pandemic lives. It's the challenge of hearing of human failings that make this, that or the other situation worse than it might have been – I'm thinking of the Ariana Grande bombing inquest. It's the challenge of responding to the hurt that comes to a head in the Black Lives Matter movement. It's the challenge of seeing centuries-old woodland sacrificed to transport policy.

But as individuals we can begin to respond to every challenge by putting to one side the kind of reckoning up that Peter had in mind when he made his suggestion of the number of times another person should be forgiven. As many as seven times? Jesus' reply means either seventy-seven, or seventy **times** seven. Another large number chosen for effect, which means that we should never stop forgiving. Keeping a tally of wrongs should become something we **used** to do. "One last chance" should become a phrase we **used** to use. For with God there will be always be one more chance, if we ask.

## **Prayers of Intercession**

Our prayers for the Church and the world are based on UK and international headlines on Thursday 10 September.

Lord, our world is suffering – and not just the people who inhabit it. From all round our planet come stories of damage and destruction to species and their habitats. And the family of your people, the human species, is also under threat.

We are the only residents on Earth with power to change its future – bless us with a sense of what is right to do not just for ourselves and not just for humanity but for the whole of your creation.

At the heart of every news broadcast is the coronavirus pandemic. We pray for those who are researching ways to slow it down and contain its effects. We pray for patience for ourselves and all who must modify behaviours from one week to the next. We pray for those who have returned to education as students, teachers and administrators, for those gearing up for the consequences of beginning a new university year soon.

Your Church struggles to respond to the challenge of being Christ's body on Earth. Send your Spirit to embolden and inspire all who bear his name and help us to achieve and maintain the right presence both in our churches and online.

Lord, your ancient people saw a balance in creation that they believed was part of your purpose. Your human creation has brought about an imbalance that we struggle to understand, even to measure. A report details a huge fall in more than 20,000 populations of mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and fish in our world since 1970. The wildfires in California burned 1000 acres every half hour and over two and a half million acres in all.

May we not hide from these truths in our own comfort zone, but keep them in our prayers and accept our share of responsibility.

As our government contemplates breaking the terms of a treaty, may values of integrity and honesty be the ambition of all in authority.

In all of this we want once again to hold up to you in prayer those we know who are ill, who are receiving treatment, or who are anxious about delays to checkups and consultations. Be with those who work for us in the NHS and as key workers in so many other sectors.

Lord we still struggle with counter-intuitive thoughts of showing care by not touching, not meeting, not being close to our families and friends. Be with them and be with us – we pray for a future in which policies and strategies have emerged to give us back the ways we want to share your love in your world.

In Christ's name we offer you our prayers.  
Amen

**Hymn:**

*And can it be*, words by Charles Wesley, 1707-88  
Sung by the Easter Hymns Band,  
From their album *20 Favourite Easter hymns*

*And can it be that I should gain  
An int'rest in the Saviour's blood?  
Died he for me, who caused his pain?  
For me, who him to death pursued?  
Amazing love! how can it be  
that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?  
Amazing love! how can it be  
that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?*

*'Tis mystery all! The Immortal dies!  
Who can explore his strange design?  
In vain the firstborn seraph tries  
to sound the depths of love Divine!  
'Tis mercy all! let earth adore,  
let angel minds inquire no more.  
'Tis mercy all! let earth adore,  
let angel minds inquire no more.*

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay  
fast bound in sin and nature's night;  
thine eye diffused a quickening ray,  
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;  
my chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.  
My chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.*

*He left his Father's throne above,  
so free, so infinite his grace;  
emptied himself of all but love,  
and bled for Adam's helpless race:  
'tis mercy all, immense and free;  
for, O my God, it found out me.  
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;  
for, O my God, it found out me.*

*No condemnation now I dread;  
Jesus, and all in him, is mine!  
Alive in him, my living head,  
And clothed in righteousness divine,  
bold I approach the eternal throne,  
and claim the crown, through Christ my own.  
Bold I approach the eternal throne,  
and claim the crown, through Christ my own.*

**Blessing**

May God give us grace to tolerate and forgive, even as we seek to influence and change, through loving God and all of his creation.

And may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with us all today and for ever. Amen

**Music:**

*Will and Anna's Theme* by Trevor Jones  
performed by the London Symphony Orchestra,  
conducted by Geoffrey Alexander and  
taken from the soundtrack album of the film *Notting Hill*

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**Credits**

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*Variation 4*, from the album *Variations* by Andrew Lloyd-Webber, featured Julian Lloyd-Webber on cello

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<sup>i</sup> All music included in this podcast is made available for download under the terms of the PRS for Music Limited Online Music Licence number LE-0019067

<sup>ii</sup> Bible quotations are all taken from the New International Version, Anglicised Edition