

*This short act of worship has been produced for you
by the Revd Dan Haylett.*

*If you are well enough and able, why not spend a few
moments with God knowing that others are sharing this act
of worship with you.*

Opening Prayer

God of love and compassion,
God of truth and beauty,
God of majesty and mystery:

We turn our hearts to you.

All within us yearns for you
Jesus, draw near.

We turn our hearts to you.

In our songs of praise
and in our tears,
Holy Spirit be known among us.

We turn our hearts to you.

This and every day, God of love:
Receive our praise and worship.

Hymn: STF 684

Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words or listen to it here

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Here on the threshold of a new beginning,
by grace forgiven, now we leave behind
our long-repented selfishness and sinning,
and all our blessings call again to mind:
Christ to redeem us, ransom and restore us,
the love that holds us in a Saviour's care,
faith strong to welcome all that lies before us,
our unknown future, knowing God is there.

May we, your children, feel with Christ's compassion
an earth disordered, hungry and in pain;
then, at your calling, find the will to fashion
new ways where freedom, truth and justice reign;
where wars are ended, ancient wrongs are righted,
and nations value human life and worth;
where in the darkness lamps of hope are lighted
and Christ is honoured over all the earth.

So may your wisdom shine from Scripture's pages
to mould and make us stones with which to build
God's holy temple, through eternal ages,
one church united, strong and Spirit-filled;
heirs to the fullness of your new creation,
in faith we follow, pledged to be your own;
yours is the future, ours the celebration,
for Christ is risen! God is on the throne!

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Prayers

Let us pray together.

God of life, we praise you. We rejoice in your love for all you have made and marvel at your grace at work within and around us.

God of compassion, we praise you. We wonder at the magnitude of your mercy and the costliness of grace poured out.

Self-giving Christ, you hold nothing back from us. Your presence makes the difference in our lives, in the Church and in the world. We seek to respond in love and in offering our all for your kingdom.

Holy Spirit of God, gentle power at work within us, we celebrate your ongoing work in us and around us. You open our hearts as we seek to follow in the way of Christ. You empower our living.

God of all, as we worship, we recognise our failings and sin. We acknowledge our need for you and seek your forgiveness for the harm we have caused others. We ask for grace to reach to us when we consider the ways in which we have harmed our relationships, and our world. We know we are a work in progress and we pray for your enduring love and compassion to transform our hearts, choices and living.

For the sake of Christ, hear our prayer and renew us in faith.

May your grace lighten our path today.

Thanks be to God in Christ. Amen.

Today's Gospel Reading: Matthew 18:15-20

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."

Time to Reflect

Here are some home truths for us as we mark the beginning of a new connexional year and new terms in education and in workplaces in a continuing backdrop of uncertainty. People fall out. Words are sometimes used as weapons and actions designed to hurt rather than to build up or support one another. We do not live in a perfect world, or an ideal society, or even exist as a Church that is free from mistakes or conflicts. Indeed, we know that there can be danger in chasing after the creation of the ideal community or Church in ways that fail to take our humanity seriously. We quickly

find we are creating something in our own image and history is filled with examples of how the chase after the wrong sort of perfectionism can lead to the evils of inhumane and unloving attitudes and behaviours.

None of this will come as a surprise to us, I guess. But perhaps the striking thing about the passage we read in Matthew's gospel is that it needed saying in the Gospels; that it needed to be reflected on in the early Church. I have to say that I find that thought hugely helpful; in one of Jesus' few references to "the Church" (a clear sign of a later pastoral context in Matthew), he has to deal with two church members who have fallen out and Matthew presents Jesus' words as if it is advice that is not infrequently to be called upon. Here's realism alright: someone has done something, or said something that has caused hurt to someone else. We do not need to make any great hermeneutical jumps to begin to apply this text to our own experiences and to our own lives. We know how easily we can cause hurt in trying to live in community.

What we are given in the passage then is a process that is akin to pastoral guidance for reconciliation. Some have been quick to point out how closely this guidance relates to some of our contemporary practices in mediation and reconciliation work. Yet we note too, surprisingly, that in Matthew's presentation the burden on "sorting out" the issue rests firstly on the one who has been wronged. They are the ones charged with the responsibility of engaging the person who has messed up. They are the ones who have

the responsibility for relating well, in their hurt, within the wider community. This seems harsh, and yet is a bit of an indication of how the kingdom is supposed to function: that the dichotomy of victim and oppressor is to be transformed in ways that allow for there to be absolutely no tolerance of abusive or oppressive behaviour.

It is quite a challenge. Do you see what I mean? Jesus' guidance doesn't say, for example, "if a member of the church sins against you, immediately write an anonymous letter to the Minister telling them to sort it out". Neither does Jesus advocate that "the best way forward in a dispute is to write an angry email (preferably all in capital letters) and copy everyone in the office into it"; nor even, "let it be known that you are miffed by talking about the person who has harmed you, and gossip about them as much as possible".

Of course, in the cold light of day, we see the folly in these ways of responding and relating to one another. We need to acknowledge too that there are huge assumptions being made in Matthew's retelling of the church in conflict. These verses are not of course designed to prevent the abused speaking out freely and loudly nor are they there to forestall the Church from naming and calling out evil and injustice within and outside our own contexts. Far from it, as in fact, these verses encourage the safe telling of our own story. Perhaps it is the case for Matthew, and even for Jesus, that an assumption is also made that people of faith will not willingly abuse or hurt another and will always want and

seek the best, in love, for one another. We know to our shame, and perhaps from bitter personal experience, that this is not always a safe assumption to make.

So, what are we to do with this? Is Matthew's presentation of Jesus' pastoral guidance for personal relationships within the community of faith still relevant in any meaningful way? I suspect it is. In the passage Jesus responds to that ancient underlying Biblical question, "Am I my sister's/brother's keeper?" with a resounding "Yes!". All our relationships need to be transformed to better reflect the truth and compassion we see in Jesus for one another. All our relating needs to become characterised by real grace and where needed, costly forgiveness. There has to be a way that our communities of faith can model the sort of kindness that we have found in Christ for a society that is now finding it harder to stretch out kindness and compassion in a time when enduring uncertainty and pain has pushed us all to the limit. We need to be and become communities that are sustained by truth-telling to get to compassion and forgiveness as a Methodist way of life. After all, "The idea that truth sustains community while deception destroys it is woven into the very notion of truth that we encounter in the biblical traditions". (Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p.258).

To live this truth telling out, Volf suggests we need to live with double vision: the willingness to accept and own that we have our particular viewpoint and way of seeing things:

forged out of our personal history and choices and moulded by our social and economic circumstances. We cannot help but bring that even to our reading of Scripture and to our understanding of faith. Crucially though our own vision must be expressed and explored in dialogue with the "other", where we seek to understand the views and starting positions of those around us. It is only in this willingness to live with double vision that we are able to seek truth as we confer together, and that lies at the heart of our understanding of what binds us as a Methodist connexion.

The truth is that we belong together, accountable to and for one another. Our Methodist structures continue to be a living expression of this. John Wesley famously didn't ever give instructions for Methodist Societies regarding quorums for meetings. It seems he simply couldn't imagine a time when people's enthusiasm for the work of God would ebb and there would not be enough people to make decisions and to do the work of the Church. He assumed people would flock to meetings of all sorts (I don't think even he anticipated Zoom or Microsoft Teams), but he rather liked the concept of some no-holds barred truth-telling as we express that accountability to and with one another!

I'm not sure we can always make the same assumptions today. We find it hard to know where to put our energies and, if we are honest, our enthusiasm isn't always best served by all of our meetings together. Some of our agendas are too long and too dull; some are focused on the

wrong things. Sometimes we don't bring our best to our encounters with one another. Sometimes we are mindful that we have been disappointed or hurt before and we become jaded or embittered.

The assumption that Jesus makes in the Gospel reading is that it doesn't have to be this way! We can relate well with one another; we can offer and receive forgiveness; we can live with compassion and vision and we have the language and the capacity still for truth-telling in our communities. We can be sustained by this as a way of life; of conferring well, disagreeing well, and loving all the same. We can live with the double vision of sharing who we are and how we see the world and yet be open to one another, and crucially to God through all of this.

In another brilliant book filled with practical advice about our personal relationships, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes about our calling to "bear with one another" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, (London: SCM Press, 1954), pp. 77-80.). It is this, Bonhoeffer says, that will lead to breakthrough to new life, through the Cross of Christ. We need to find the grace to go on doing this.

In this new connexional year, as we make new starts as a Circuit, welcoming Deacon Jacqueline Esama-John and our new Pastoral Worker, Helen Lunn, we recommit ourselves to the discipline of truth-telling and of seeking breakthrough in Christ's promised new life.

What will this mean for you? What does truth-telling require of you, in love today? What relationships need to be put right or addressed? To what is God calling you now?

A time of prayer

God of love and grace, we thank you for your work of reconciliation towards us and across all creation. Help us never to lose sight that you are making all things new in Christ. When we are tempted to despair of our situation:

Renew our hope in you.

God in whom there is no tolerance of injustice, we pray for all who have been harshly treated today. We pray for people misused and abused at home, at school, at work and in the Church. Where relationships have been tainted and have become broken:

Renew our trust in you.

God who encounters pain, be close with those who suffer today. We pray for all who are unwell, or anxious, or lonely. We pray for those who are frustrated by life at present and for those who wonder what their future holds. We pray for all who care and for all in their places of work, whether paid or voluntary. When pain threatens to overwhelm:

Renew our strength in you.

God of new beginnings, we pray for those in our lives where relations have become strained, or non-existent. We ask

you to show us how to transform those conflicts that are resolvable and how to call out and stand against injustice and abuse of all kinds. We pray for all making new starts, not least Deacon Jacqueline and Helen Lunn in their new work in the Enfield Circuit. God who calls us to the work of reconciliation:

Renew our love for you and one another.

The Lord's Prayer

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.**

Give us today our daily bread.

**Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.**

**Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.**

Amen.

Hymn: STF 611

Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words or listen to it here

www.youtube.com/

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttW9oQ-yiuU>

Brother, sister; let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace
to let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey,
and companions on the road;
we are here to help each other
walk the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christ-light for you
in the night-time of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping;
when you laugh I'll laugh with you;
I will share your joy and sorrow,
till we've seen this journey through.

When we sing to God in heaven,
we shall find such harmony,
born of all we've known together
of Christ's love and agony.

Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you;

pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.

Richard A M Gillard (b.1953)

A prayer of blessing

Go to make amends, where that is in your gift.

Go to live a life of grace in giving and receiving.

Go to make peace and to transform this world.

God be with you in all you say, and do this week. May the
blessing of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be
with you today and for evermore. Amen.

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