

Theme: Looking at the window, and through it

Call to Worship: Psalm 114

When Israel came out of Egypt, Jacob from a people of foreign tongue,
Judah became God's sanctuary, Israel his dominion.

The sea looked and fled, the Jordan turned back; the mountains leaped like rams, the hills like lambs.

Why was it, sea, that you fled? Why, Jordan, did you turn back?

Why, mountains, did you leap like rams, you hills, like lambs?

Tremble, earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob,
who turned the rock into a pool, the hard rock into springs of water.

HYMN StF 137 New every morning <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkPXz3tvA5M>

1. New every morning is the love
our waking and uprising prove;
through sleep and darkness safely brought,
restored to life and power and thought.

2. New mercies each returning day
around us hover while we pray,
new perils past, new sins forgiven,
new thoughts of God, new hopes of heaven.

3. If on our daily course our mind
be set to hallow all we find,
new treasures still of countless price
God will provide for sacrifice.

4. The trivial round, the common task,
will furnish all we ought to ask,
room to deny ourselves, a road
to bring us daily nearer God.

5. Only, O Lord, in thy dear love,
fit us for perfect rest above,
and help us, this and every day
to live more nearly as we pray.

Prayers of Approach and Confession

This is what love really is: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his son to put us in our sinfulness at one with him.

Dear God

We think today of how you are present in our lives, and of how we feel your presence; of how you let us know what is right; how, when we let you in, you guide us.

You touch our lives with hope; your forgiveness brings us opportunities within ourselves, yet often we are blind to the things you provide for us, and we let grace go by.

We confess that we have turned away from you, that we have sometimes ignored you even when you prompt us; that we have pressed on regardless, in a way told you to wait, that we are busy, that we have not time. And then perhaps we have not come back to that inner message later, after all. And when we have let you go by, we have gone wrong, been unkind, unjust, unworthy of you.

Let us not be so pre-occupied with the tasks of the day, or the hurry we're in, or some worry, that we do not listen to that inner voice which is not only

our better self, but is your voice speaking within us. That voice is a precious part of our being; let us give it its full importance, and live as you would have us live.

And we gave you thanks for all we have; for our families, our friends, those whom we love and cherish above all. We thank you for all that is good in our lives; for our well-being, for our health, for all the kindness we receive. We thank you for the world about us, in all its variety and beauty; for these early days of autumn, which just tinge the greenness of the land; for the mature harvest, and for new life, new love; for the brilliance of a smile, for kind words, for helping hands; for the life about us, the birds, the animals of park and hedgerow; and for the people, old and young of this town, and particularly for the children, we thank you.

For these and all thy mercies given
We bless and praise thy name O lord;
May we receive them with thanksgiving
Ever trusting in thy word.

And now, we say the prayer Jesus himself taught us.

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.

Junior Church (James Allen introduces this section)

Address – Crossing the Red Sea <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQDmwLvoY5E>

HYMN chosen by Junior Church

Junior Church Blessing

Readings

Genesis 50:15-21 Joseph reassures his brothers

¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" ¹⁶ So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: ¹⁷ 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept.

¹⁸ His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.

¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. ²¹ So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

Matthew 18:21-35 Debt and the unmerciful servant.

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

²² Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

²³ “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

²⁶ “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ ²⁷ The servant’s master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.

²⁸ “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

²⁹ “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

³⁰ “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³² “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

HYMN StF 668 Teach me, my God and King

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGzxLDpRJg0> or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dByo0q3pNj8>

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| 1. Teach me, my God and King,
in all things thee to see,
and what I do in anything
to do it as for thee. | 4. A servant with this clause
makes drudgery divine:
who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
makes that and the action fine. |
| 2. A man that looks on glass,
on it may stay his eye;
or if he pleaseth, through it pass,
and then the heaven espy. | 5. This is the famous stone
that turneth all to gold;
for that which God doth touch and own
cannot for less be told. |
| 3. All may of thee partake;
nothing can be so mean,
which with this tincture, "for thy sake,"
will not grow bright and clean. | |

Sermon

The man that looks on glass – a window, as we have heard in the hymn, can either look at the glass itself, or through it. The inner meaning of this is that we can look at life on the surface, or we can look through life and see God within it or beyond it.

This is a way of understanding our reading from Matthew, when Jesus describes the servant who cannot pay his debt to his master. The master responds to his plea and does not foreclose. The man promises to pay, and then goes out to call in several debts from others and is ferocious and unmerciful in doing this. In other words, he takes advantage of the generous disposition of his master, but acts quite differently himself. When he hears of it, his master – the King – brings down dire consequences upon him.

All of this is in aid of answering Peter's question about the limits of forgiveness. Peter is trying to be practical; should he forgive once, twice or even as much as seven times? You can sense that he thinks that seven times would be extraordinary. And Jesus replies, "not seven, but seventy seven", which means that you just don't stop forgiving. You carry on until the cows come home.

The servant who received forgiveness but did not grant it is a surface thinker. He just says to himself, "I need to get my money back from this man, in order to pay my master". So, he uses threats and violence. Either he just does not think of the mercy which he himself has received, or he discounts it. He does not sense the love within it. He is not guided by the divine thinking, that seeks out the greater good, but just goes for what is cheap and easy. He thinks that power is the ability he has to force a solution.

When I try and think this through, I cannot help but think how countries and international organisations behave. Are they forgiving? I think, not very, nor are they expected to be. That would be called weakness. No, if people (and organisations) do wrong, they must be held to account, and justice must be done. 'Justice', here and in press-reporting generally, can be a weasel word which is largely to do with retribution, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". And as we can observe this on the international stage, it is also true at a personal level; we should stick up for ourselves, we should stop people from getting away with their misdeeds.

We know that Jesus is not impressed by that sort of thinking. His strong advice is not to react in that way, but to continue the relationship as though no offence had been offered. You know the quote about offering the other cheek.

So, what we have in our reading from Matthew is the combination of 'other cheek' thinking (not responding to a difficult situation in a hostile way), with the idea of God in judgement. God is generous to us, and gives us a second chance. As we are all sinners, this is something frequently needed, and frequently done. What is required is for us to act in a similar way with those who are subject to us, those with whom we interact.

Let's now turn to the reading we had from Genesis. It forms a marvellous parallel to the Gospel reading. Joseph is a very powerful man, with almost kingly power, and his brothers have reason to be fearful of him, because they wronged him severely in the past, and he is now in a position to make them pay for it. They try to influence him through a bogus report of their father's last words, but it is all unnecessary, because Joseph is gracious and not only lets them off – does not hold them accountable – but acts as though the attempt on his own life had never taken place.

The point I particularly want to pick up on is that Joseph asks his brothers, "Am I in the place of God?" the implication here is that Joseph sees himself as a player, a pawn, in God's purposes. He understands what God is trying to achieve, and sees his own function as facilitating God's purposes. And what God is trying to achieve is the saving of many lives. Within that, Joseph is in a position to provide for his greater family, and he does this, generously. By preserving all his brothers and their

dependents he paves a way for the emerging kingdom of Israel, since the tribes which comprise Israel correspond to the descendants of those brothers.

This pair of readings, symmetrical as they are, form an important lesson for us, and for every age. They also give us pause for thought and make a sad reflection on the state of our own culture, two thousand years after Jesus's time on earth. Forgiveness is something we talk about, but are not necessarily all that good at doing. For instance, we do not have anything resembling the old Jewish concept of 'Jubilee'. This is something which is both precise and regular. It is the year at the end of seven cycles Sabbatical years. This means it occurs after seven times seven years, which is a figure which has some resonance with our reading. Also, according to biblical regulations, it had a special impact on the ownership and management of land in the Land of Israel. According to the Book of Leviticus, Hebrew slaves and prisoners would be freed, debts would be cancelled, and the mercies of God would be particularly manifest. This is what Leviticus actually says:

“You shall count off seven Sabbaths of years, seven times seven years; and there shall be to you the days of seven Sabbaths of years, even forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land. You shall make the fiftieth year holy, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee to you; and each of you shall return to his own property, and each of you shall return to his family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee to you. In it you shall not sow, neither reap that which grows of itself, nor gather from the undressed vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you. You shall eat the produce direct from the land. In this Year of Jubilee each of you shall return to his patrimony. When you sell or buy land among yourselves, neither side shall drive a hard bargain. You shall pay your fellow-countryman according to the number of years since the Jubilee, and he shall sell to you according to the number of annual crops.”¹

Please notice how structured this all is, and how the life of Israel was woven around a cycle of forgiveness. If we had a similar tradition today, it would not be possible for poor nations to be impoverished in the long term by the repayment of loans. Bondage of any kind (and we have lots of them, including financial ones) could not persist beyond a given term. The power of individual and corporate wealth would have a break-point, and each would return to “his own land”. I know, our arrangements for property ownership just don't permit any such return, but there are other things within the concept of Jubilee that we could do.

The idea of a year of Jubilee is used as a fence to contain behaviour which really should not be happening anyway. What Jesus says is, tackle the problem at the root. Do not allow the bad things of the world, greed, selfishness, injustice and a lack of mercy, take hold. Instead, ward them off not with hostility but with generosity and mercy. And by doing this, let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. These are the words of Amos², who so neatly and completely sums up the hollow nature of conventional measures of well-being, and the corruption inherent in so many human schemes, even those of religion.

We still have so much to do in directing our course toward the Kingdom of Heaven. Let us take lessons from our readings this morning. They will help us.

¹ Leviticus 25:8-15

² Amos 5:11-24

Hymn STF 409 Let us build a house

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPQJ3HXAoHo>

- 1 Let us build a house where love can dwell
and all can safely live,
a place where saints and children tell
how hearts learn to forgive.
Built of hopes and dreams and visions,
rock of faith and vault of grace ;
here the love of Christ shall end divisions :
*All are welcome,
all are welcome,
all are welcome in this place.*
- 2 Let us build a house where prophets speak,
and words are strong and true,
where all God's children dare to seek
to dream God's reign anew.
Here the cross shall stand as witness
and as symbol of God's grace ;
here as one we claim the faith of Jesus :
- 3 Let us build a house where love is found
in water, wine and wheat :
a banquet hall on holy ground
where peace and justice meet.
Here the love of God, through Jesus,
is revealed in time and space ;
as we share in Christ the feast that frees us :
- 4 Let us build a house where hands will reach
beyond the wood and stone
to heal and strengthen, serve and teach,
and live the Word they've known.
Here the outcast and the stranger
bear the image of God's face ;
let us bring an end to fear and danger :
- 5 Let us a build a house where all are named,
their songs and visions heard
and loved and treasured, taught and claimed
as words within the Word.
Built of tears and cries and laughter,
prayers of faith and songs of grace,
let this house proclaim from floor to rafter :

Marty Haugen (b.1950)

Prayers for Intercession

Lord, your world seems sometimes to be on a knife-edge; the climate seems to spin out of control, with accumulations of storms, and forest fires. All round the world, there are droughts, torrential rains, floods and hurricanes; ice-fields adrift, the poles melting; and our human world mimics the turmoil of nature: the economy overstretched to the point of collapse; the superpowers back at loggerheads again; wars drag on, the casualties mount; and epidemics eat away at their human meal, leaving scraps of families, reducing healthy communities to husks.

We hear news of these miseries like distant thunder, and hope it will not come closer, that it will not be our turn to be swept away or flooded out, that it will not be our mortgage lender which fails, or our bank which runs out of money; that we will not be struck down by some bolt from the blue.

Lord, we pray for those for whom the thunder is all too close, who face disaster, who live with their world collapsing round them.

We pray for all caught up in conflict, on whom violence comes like a whirlwind, on whom disaster descends like a hailstorm, around whom the flood waters rise, whose livelihoods are swept away, whose very lives are consumed in terror.

We pray for those with whom help does not connect, those for whom international aid is provided, but who never receive it; those who need help and support, but don't get it because they are too remote, or not considered, or because in a corrupt system, someone else has stolen it.

And, moving closer to home, we pray for all who, even in this rich country, do not have enough; for the 25% who face fuel poverty, for the unemployed and the dispossessed. And we pray particularly today for all those here in the UK who are suffering from the present floods, whose homes and businesses are out of action, who face hardship and loss.

And we pray for the sick and weary, for the suffering and the sad, wherever they are; in the silence, we call to mind all whom we know who are languishing. We commend them to your care, and we pray for your grace to guide us, and for others to help wherever they can.

We also pray for the very old, whose strength now fails, who lose vigour of body and mind, and whose troubles increase. Be with them, lift them up and bless them. And we pray also for all who are no longer with us, the parents, kin and friends whom we loved and whom we miss. May they be at peace with you.

We cannot measure how you heal, or answer every sufferer's prayer, yet we believe your grace responds where faith and doubt unite to care.

And finally, we pray for ourselves, for this holy house, and for all who come into it. Lift us up; make us your good servants, and give us the strength and the grace to do your work on earth;

Bless the lord, O my soul. He pardons all my wrongdoing, and crowns me with love and compassion.

Amen.

HYMN StF 548 Blessed Assurance <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8BE1a6K56Lo>

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| 1 | Blessèd assurance, Jesus is mine :
O what a foretaste of glory divine !
Heir of salvation, purchase of God ;
born of his Spirit, washed in his blood :
<i>This is my story, this is my song,
praising my Saviour all the day long.
This is my story, this is my song,
praising my Saviour all the day long.</i> | 2 | Perfect submission, perfect delight,
visions of rapture burst on my sight ;
angels descending bring from above
echoes of mercy, whispers of love : |
| | | 3 | Perfect submission, all is at rest,
I in my Saviour am happy and blest —
watching and waiting, looking above,
filled with his goodness, lost in his love : |

Frances Jane van Alstyne, (Fanny Crosby) (1820–1915)

Blessing

We arise and go forth on the journey before us,
Knowing that where Christ leads,
Life is a journey home.
Therefore we travel in faith, in hope and in love.
In the name and in the blessing of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Amen.