

## Sermon: 13 September 2026.

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.*

While the theme for our worship today is small drops of hope, for me, the overwhelming message of the scripture is forgiveness. But something else disturbed me, so forgive me if I procrastinate for a moment on the Psalm - Psalm 103 verses 8 to 13–

The good news is obvious – telling us of God's compassion, mercy, great kindness, slowness to anger and forgiveness of our sins. The bad news

*For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his mercy upon those who fear him. and As a father has compassion on his children, so is the Lord merciful towards those who fear him*

What's so bad about that you might ask? The bit that bothers me is fear. Why do we have to fear God for Him to love us. I think the seeming necessity to fear God has troubled me since I was a child. It just never jelled with what I was taught about His abounding love for me, His mercy and forgiveness. Then, as I was hunting through my not inconsiderable library looking for inspiration about forgiveness for this sermon, I came across a magazine called the Reader which is produced in the UK for Lay Readers. And there it was, an article entitled *Should we really fear the Lord?* It is a complex and detailed explanation of language and translation but, at its heart, it gave a definition of fear that made perfect sense. The fear of God in this context is not being frightened or scared, it is having great respect or reverence for God. An unexpected gift that I wanted to share with you.

But back to a sermon about forgiveness. As I usually do in preparation, I found the readings, psalm and gospel online and copied and pasted them into a word document. Then I read them and highlighted what seems appropriate for the theme. I confess that to start with, I skipped the Old Testament because I am very familiar with the story. But when I was considering where to start, I was trying to remember a biblical example of human forgiveness in the Bible. And then I got a nudge to read all the scripture again. Idiot, I thought, you forgot that the Old Testament reading is about Joseph forgiving his brothers who sold him into slavery. Duh.

What lesson have you or could you have learned if you see or saw something that has made you angry or hurt, **as God's plan?** Joseph is an example. He was sold into slavery by his own brothers because they resented the fact that he was his father's favourite. Joseph suffered many things but eventually flourished in Egypt – and when, at the peak of the famine, he revealed himself to his brothers and they begged his forgiveness, he said *Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.* And it was so - the people of Israel survived the famine because God's plan and the trust of his servant Joseph had made it possible.

In today's Gospel, dear clumsy Peter, asks Jesus how many times he should forgive a wrongdoing? Is 7 times enough? He doesn't suggest what he might do if he reaches the required number but Jesus answers him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. That's a lot of forgiveness.

And then there is the disturbing parable about mercy. A servant forgiven an unimaginable debt then refuses to forgive another who owes him comparatively little. The King condemns this hypocrisy with a violent response, revealing that those who receive God's grace are called to extend grace to others. And while God is slow to anger do not put Him to the test.

Tom Wright's commentary on today's gospel includes

*Peter's question and Jesus' answer say it all. If you're still counting how many times you've forgiven someone, you're not really forgiving them at all, but simply postponing revenge. 'Seventy times seven' is a typical bit of Jesus' teasing. What he means, of course, is 'don't even think about counting; just do it'. and*

*The key thing, .... is not that one should therefore swallow all resentment and 'forgive and forget' as though nothing had happened. The key thing is that one should never, ever give up making forgiveness and reconciliation one's goal.*

In the global news this week was the commencement of the trial of the men who are charged with murdering two young Australian men, on a surfing holiday in Mexico. And the parents of those who died, when interviewed, stated that they forgave the accused. Not the first time I have heard the same proclamation from people who have lost a loved one to criminal violence. How, I thought, how do you, in your grief, forgive an unforgivable sin?

How do we forgive what seems unforgivable? I confess that I have frequently proclaimed to members of my extended family, that I can never forgive my Aunt for her determination to destroy the relationship and love between my father and his brother, (my uncle and her husband). And, oddly enough, each time I do so, a little voice in my head has reminded me that every time I pray the Lord's prayer, I ask that God forgive me my sins, as I forgive those who sin against me. How's that for hypocrisy?

What's worse, I know that she is bi polar and an alcoholic and it has been suggested that as a child she was probably abused. Doesn't justify the harm but can I not, for those reasons, forgive her? What good does that do for her? I suspect she couldn't care less about what I think. Although, maybe, trying to understand the why rather than rail at the harm, is an attempt at justifying forgiveness. Perhaps in that I can do what Jesus asked of Peter – to forgive someone who has done wrong, not once, not seven times but countless times without judgement.

There was another extract from Tom Wright's commentary which made me think:

*Every time you accuse someone else, you accuse yourself. Every time you forgive someone else, though, you pass on a drop of water out of the bucketful that God has already given you*

Is that drop also a drop of Hope? And what is the definition of hope I ask and grab a dictionary which tells me that Hope can be defined as *desire accompanied by expectation of obtaining what is desired or belief that it is obtainable*. Interestingly though, the archaic definition is *To have confidence; to trust*.

We don't know, nor understand why people behave badly, what has driven them, what evil influence is governing their actions. What we do know is that God is in charge and that He has a plan. And we must be confident in our trust in that. Don't ignore the problem, certainly try to make things better if we can. But be prepared to forgive for our own sake. And this is where hope enters the equation.

Take heed. *Judge not and you will not be judged*. Leave the judgement to God, knowing that *He is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness* and by doing that, refresh your own soul with forgiveness and recognise the small drops of hope which are given to you in so many ways.