

Study following Sunday September 6th

Prepare: Think about the incredible diversity of the worldwide church.

Praise: Spend some time giving thanks to God for our gathered worship together.

Passage: Read Matthew 18.15-20

Ponder: We have seen before how Matthew gathers Jesus' teaching into five 'sermons' akin to Moses' five sermons in Deuteronomy. It began with discipleship (Matt 5-7), mission (Matt 10), and the kingdom of heaven (Matt 13), and now we enter the fourth collection of sayings on life together in the *ekklesia*, and the last (Matt 24-25) will focus on the end of all things. '*Ekklesia*' is a Greek word in the New Testament meaning assembly, people called together. This links to an Old Testament concept of a congregation of people. Although in our English translations '*ekklesia*' is often translated as 'church', as it is in verse 17 of our passage, we need to be careful not to assume this is all we understand about church. We can get caught up in understanding church as a building, its structure and organisation, its leaders and hierarchy, its rules and rituals. For Jesus the '*ekklesia*' or church is a community of people called to share fellowship and worship together.

- How did you first encounter 'church', how do you see it now?

Verses 15-17 show that these early gatherings of Jesus' followers were far from perfect. Hopefully it encourages us, when people makes mistakes and relationships are strained in our time, to see that things have not changed much. But when there is criticism, gossip or wrongdoing in the church it is important to know how to handle it. The first thing Jesus encourages is direct communication, if this is possible. The emphasis is 'between the two of you', this may well be a difficult conversation, but is a crucial first step. Of course Jesus didn't have to worry about choosing between a phone call, email, or text message, but if he did I am sure he would've said to do it in the most personal way possible - preferably a face to face meeting.

- Can you recall a time when you faced a difficult discussion with someone else? How did you choose to communicate with them? Was that effective?

We need to be careful about the motivation for confrontation. The NIV Bible ends verse 15 with 'you have won them over', this might make it seem as if the goal of our conversation is 'winning the argument', or 'beating them down' but other translations may help us get a more fuller meaning 'you have won your brother or sister back.' (GNT), 'your relationship is restored.' (TPT).

Jesus explains that the goal is not to win an argument but to win back your brother or sister into fellowship with you. This might mean you still do not see eye to eye with them, but the strength of the Christian community is not in a uniformity of thought but a unity of purpose and motivation.

- You may like to recall those who worship in different ways to you or who prefer to pray in ways that you are not comfortable with, such is the richness of the Church.

The recurring word in verses 15-17 is 'listen' mentioned once in each verse. The ultimate goal of this process is to help the person to weigh up any criticism brought to them, and for them to see things from someone else's point of view.

- How can you 'listen' more deeply to others today?

Pray: Pray for our church, that the people who are drawn from different walks of life will grow strong relationships and have healthy conversations. Pray that we can find ways in this current time, to have good conversations. Pray too for those who struggle to listen, that their ears would be open to others' views.

Study following Sunday September 13th

Prepare: Think about the evils of slavery, where people are bought and sold for a price.

Praise: Spend some time giving thanks that each new day can be a new start with God.

Passage: Read Matthew 18.21-35

Ponder: We saw last week that this chapter of Matthew's Gospel is focussed on the 'ekkllesia', the gathered community and how they might live well. Peter comes to Jesus with what, to him, seemed a really generous suggestion. Rabbis of the day suggested forgiving someone three times was enough, so Peter's offer to forgive seven times seemed very generous. Jesus, however takes things to a whole new level, as he often does. The quote from Jesus becomes an antithesis to the seventy times seven mentioned in Genesis 4.24. Forgiveness is a big topic in the Bible. Firstly, in verses 21-22 the focus is on our forgiveness, our repeated forgiveness. Ian Paul suggests that 'we need to forgive not just 77 times for 77 different sins, but 77 times for the same sin until we truly live in the forgiveness of the king.'

- Why is forgiveness such an important ingredient of Church life?

- Think about a time when you may have had to forgive someone something serious, consider how difficult it is to really let go, especially repeatedly forgiving someone.

It was CS Lewis who once stated that everyone thinks forgiveness is a wonderful thing until you personally have something to forgive. Following Peter's lesson in forgiveness, Jesus teaches about forgiveness and resentment through a parable. Unforgiveness and resentment are the weeds that, if allowed to grow, can stifle a community and strangle relationships with one another and with God. It is said that unforgiveness can even lead to physical effects as well as spiritual consequences. Jesus' parable explains the topsy turvy world of his kingdom, but also a warning against resentment.

- Have you owed money that was difficult to pay back? How did it feel?

The first servant/slave owes millions, he will never be able to pay it back however much he pleads and begs. He is shown compassion and set free from this debt. The second servant/slave owed much less, he pleads in the same way but does not receive compassion from the first servant/slave. It seems the first man has been brooding over the debt he is owed and it has consumed him with resentment for the second. But the Kingdom of Heaven is like the King - he is to be our focus - he is the source of compassion and freedom. The principle Jesus is showing us is straight from the Lord's Prayer, especially Luke's version, "And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." (Luke 11.4)

- What do you see as the problem Jesus is tackling in the parable?

The King has the power to bring grace and freedom, but he also can take it away,

- How do you understand the 'God' character handing over the first man to be tortured because he refused to pass on a blessing he had received?

The freedom we gain is a freedom to live under God's rule and reign. Paul reminds us that we are not our own but God's (1 Corinthians 6.20) and so, as such, we are forgiven and free to respond with love towards others. This forgiveness needs to start within the 'ekkllesia', the community, and to radiate to others as a blessing.

Pray: Pray for those in slavery, whether physically enslaved or enslaved by what someone has done to them that they cannot forgive. Pray that God would break through and bring healing and hope in their situation.

Study following Sunday September 20th

Prepare: Think about different jobs of work you have done and the pay you've received, how valued did you feel in each?

Praise: Spend some time giving thanks for the purpose God gives us, working through us in our working life, our home life, in the community and in church.

Passage: Read Matthew 20.1-16

Ponder: Jesus continues to teach about the Kingdom, which in Matthew's Gospel is known as the Kingdom of 'Heaven' probably to protect the predominantly Jewish audience from having to mention the name 'God'.

Green points out that the story is very Jewish - the reference to a vineyard links back to the image of Israel as God's vineyard in the Old Testament

- Read Isaiah 5.1-7

The grape harvest was important to Jewish villages and timing was crucial to avoid losing the harvest. The story seems straightforward and would have been familiar to Jesus' listeners - a landowner employs some workers for an agreed amount of pay, other workers were hired from the marketplace during the day to ensure the harvest is gathered in. The surprise and challenge comes at the end of the day when all the workers receive the same amount regardless of the amount of work they have done.

- Have you experienced injustice in payment for work done? How did it make you feel?

The hardest working labourers display a frustration similar to that of the eldest brother in the parable of the prodigal son. We can imagine those who worked the shortest time would be so grateful like the younger, 'prodigal' son.

- Think for a moment of those employed last. They would've spent most of the day not expecting to put any food on the family table that day.

- Read 1 Samuel 30.21-25

There are some parallels in this story from the Old Testament. David shares his spoil with those who fought and those who wanted to fight but were too exhausted and a statute is declared. I expect we can sympathise with the hardest workers who felt hard done by. But Jesus' point is that God's Kingdom does not function like the world, the grace of God is not given to people on their own merit. God's grace is given on Christ's merit, and the first shall be last if they reject this compassion. St Paul reminds us that

'Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins.' (Romans 3.23-24 NLT)

The landowner is generous and compassionate, and he recognises that what irks the longest workers is not that they have been swindled out of what they agreed and deserved. No, he sees that what they are upset about is his generosity (verse 15). He literally says to those accosting him 'is your eye evil because I am good?'

- Have you been on either side of undeserved, unconditional generosity?

Jesus paints a wonderful picture of a good God who gives good gifts to those he loves. In turn we are called to imitate the generosity and compassion of the God we worship in whatever way we can. We know God is a God of justice, but Jesus wants us to recognise that God is, first and foremost, a God of love. So let us fix our eyes on him.

Pray: Pray for those without jobs or who are facing unemployment in these difficult times. Pray for an attitude of generosity, compassion and acceptance in the church and among Christians, that we can each recognise God's grace at work in all our lives.

Study following Sunday September 27th

Prepare: Think about who has authority over you? A boss, a family member, a leader of some kind? Who do you have authority over?

Praise: Spend some time giving thanks to God for those who are called to carry Christ's light into roles of authority and the corridors of power.

Passage: Read Matthew 21.23-32

Ponder: Jesus is now in the final week leading up to his death, the lectionary has leaped us over the Palm Sunday passage and entered us into the thick of Jesus' final week of teaching, now in the temple courts. So the context of these conversations are that Jesus has been heralded by the passover pilgrims in Jerusalem as the 'Messiah' (Matt. 21.1-11), he then entered the temple and turned over the tables (Matt. 21.12-13). So the phrase 'Jesus entered the temple courts' (Matt 21.23) is dripping with anticipation and drama. As Tom Wright points out, the question the chief priests really want to ask is 'Are you the Messiah?' but they spend then next few days avoiding asking the crucial question.

- What is your experience of being 'under authority'?

- How to handle being given authority over others?

The Chief priests and elders are at the top of the human authority tree, they rule in the temple under God's authority. Now Jesus has come in and is acting as if he owns the place, a young upstart from the countryside. They are understandably concerned but then try to trap him into blaspheming or contradicting his own actions. Jesus' answer is brilliant as he turns the tables and puts them on the spot, calling for them to show their hand in front of the interested onlookers in the temple precinct. Jesus is challenging their integrity - they are God's teachers and guides, but when John came preaching a message from God they ignored him and then allowed him to be killed.

- Look back at John's first encounter with Jesus in this Gospel Matthew 3.13-17. There is a sense in which Matthew is confirming what he stated in the very first verse of his Gospel, as Jesus the messiah (literally the 'anointed one') is anointed by the Holy Spirit in verse 16.

In the parable that follows Jesus paints the Chief priests as the son who says all the right things, but then doesn't actually live up to them. Whereas the tax-collectors and prostitutes may have lives that seem to say 'no' to God, but they were in fact responsive to John's call to repent and so entered the Kingdom.

- How have we experienced those whose words speak louder and differently to their actions?

The rebellious second son 'changed his mind', he literally 'repented', and we are called to do the same when challenged by Jesus' teaching. The question for us is to consider where we may have readily said 'yes' to God but then our actions seem to head in the opposite direction. Just before our passage Jesus and the disciples encounter a fig tree (Matthew 21.18-19). The fig tree is full of leaves but has no fruit so Jesus curses it. In the fig tree we see a picture of the Chief priests lives that are all show but ultimately produce no good fruit. Jesus' words challenge us today to examine the fruits of our lives, to look closely at what it is we have control or authority over and to let God guide us.

Pray: Pray for all in authority, especially in nations where corruption and injustice are commonplace. Pray, too, that the Holy Spirit will help us discern where our own words and actions do not match up before God.