

**Hymn:** Paraphrase 30 (CH4 482) vs 1,3,4,5,6  
Come let us to the Lord our God

*Kilmarnock*

**Prayer**

Let us pray  
Merciful God,  
Before Your throne of grace,  
Before our brothers and sisters,  
Amongst our friends and these strangers,  
Mindful of the hurt we have caused  
Through our thoughts and words and deeds,  
Forgive.  
Just God,  
When weighing the broken promises  
And half-lived lives that mark our existence,  
When assessing our lacklustre faith  
And faithless gestures,  
Forgive.  
Forgive, not because we are worthy,  
But because You love us nevertheless.  
Forgive not because we are deserving,  
But because Your whole being reaches out,  
Despite us, with mercy.  
Our lives are not always littered with the big sins,  
But with the little, tripping, recurring faults  
That make a mockery of what we profess to believe.  
We do not look for an cheap grace,  
We do not presume on an easy mercy,  
But backing in to Your presence,  
Because still we are uncertain about how You will receive us,  
Forgive.  
Soothe hurts, heal wounds, restore minds, gentle hearts.  
Forgive us Lord, when we have known,

As well as when we have not known  
What we do.  
Through Jesus Christ, forgiveness incarnate,  
Who taught us when we pray together to say:  
Our Father  
Which art in Heaven  
Hallowed be Thy Name.  
Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth  
As it is in Heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil.  
For Thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory.  
Forever.  
Amen

Assembly Choir: *There is a balm in Gilead*

Reading: **Job 19:23-27**

Revd *Louise Mackay*

### **Reflection: Word of Life – Forgiveness**

In August 1621 the minister and elders of Perth summoned the town's penitents for what would become a regular Saturday evening meeting in the Church. The elders were concerned that Sunday penitential appearances on the stool of repentance were not having their desired effect because of the inappropriate behaviour of those seated there. The majority of penitents were not learning their lines and could not 'make

confession of their sin and declare their repentance...and required instruction of the minister what to confess and say.’ The script was not the only problem. There were concerns about some using their shawls to hide their faces from the disapproving scrutiny of the congregation.<sup>i</sup> In the East Lothian village of Innerwick the Kirk Session ruled against men and women wearing over-large bonnets because it was important the congregation could see the sinners’ faces. Public visibility was absolutely essential to effective penance.<sup>ii</sup> I am suddenly somewhat nervous about turning round to see if there are any big hats in the gallery behind...

How do we go about making apology? How do we go about saying that we are sorry? Is it the case that, as Elton John once sang, “Sorry seems to be the hardest word”?

In the Christian story, there is no future without forgiveness. How much forgiveness is needed in our world today? If forgiveness is a word of life where do we start? Do we point accusatory fingers at our detractors, our enemies, those who

mock and ridicule and marginalise us? Do we recognise with a cheek-mantling blush that we might better start by sorting ourselves out before we presume to sort out others?

There is an art in the forgiveness *of* others. There is also an art in the ability to accept forgiveness *from* others.

In amidst the searing awkwardness that is the Book of Job, Job utters his confession of faith that is rooted in a belief in forgiveness. “I know that my Redeemer lives.” Job finds himself reaching out for mercy and that whatever it is that is wrong with him, or with the world in which he lives, forgiveness and acceptance and redemption will come.

“What we believe about God affects what we believe about ourselves.”<sup>iii</sup> God is a forgiving God, and requires us to forgive also. Do we want to live as forgiven and forgiving communities and be together as a people, or are we intent on reinforcing divisions and building up walls, unwilling to accept to be accepted? Do we set limits to our forgiveness? Are there

always people who, because of what they have done, or what they are, will always remain beyond the pale?

Bryan Stevenson is a black American lawyer. He trained at Harvard, and works now in Alabama. His great-grandparents were slaves. His grandfather was murdered in a race-connected crime. Desmond Tutu has likened him to a young Nelson Mandela, though he's now in his mid-fifties. In a description of him it was said that Bryan Stevenson 'cares for difficult things.' His work is in civil liberties. He takes up the rights of children in prison, some of them who have been convicted of serious crime, even murder, and with life sentences, are only aged 13 or 14 years old. He is involved with race related issues. One in every three black men in the United States is likely to face a spell in jail. Stevenson challenges a society ravaged by the politics of fear and anger. Bryan Stevenson also appeals death row cases. He confessed that it is hard to work for people who have done terrible things. People who have been condemned and judged to have no

moral redeeming features, and are deemed to be beyond hope. Stevenson says he's never met anyone who was beyond hope, and he said, "Someone who tells a lie is not *just* a liar; someone who takes something that doesn't belong to them is not *just* a thief; someone who kills someone else is not *just* a killer." And then he went on to say, "Each of us is more than the worst thing that we have ever done."<sup>iv</sup>

Forgiveness because I know that my Redeemer lives.

The late Norma Ronald DCS MBE, whose feisty faith and work enriched my life, was Pastoral Assistant in my parish. When she came for interview it was noted that much of her experience had been in some of the more challenging areas of Scotland, including prisons. How would she cope in the leafy environs of Morningside? "Oh, I've worked with plenty of white collar criminals too", she told us. She told me about the door to the chapel at Cornton Vale prison for women in Stirling where there are these words:

*"We cannot change yesterday,*

*We can only make the most of today,  
And look forward with hope towards tomorrow.”*

Forgiveness, a word of life, because we know that our Redeemer lives.

Forgiveness for the troubles and unease in your home and within your family. Forgiveness for the sniping and backbiting that goes on in the workplace. Forgiveness for the conflict in politics in this country and across the world. Forgiveness for leaving the poor, poor and the lonely, lonely. Forgiveness for the poisoning of the earth and the rape of its depleting resources. Forgiveness for the wars, and the human rights abuses, and the social injustices, and any phobic behaviour you might care to mention.

God's forgiveness does not come to paper over the cracks and divisions in fractured human relationships and in the broken places of our world. We have been disappointed so many times and feel disillusioned. We see the lack of forgiveness not only on the world stage but also in some of our most intimate relationships.

Repentance and forgiveness means more than being sorry, it means being different. It means realising that God does not give up on any of us. It means accepting that, "...there is nothing I can do to make God love me less."<sup>v</sup> But it means that we have to do something and be something different.

Forgiveness is not being sentimental,<sup>vi</sup> forgiveness means finding that even place in life when we neither look down in judgment nor look up in fear. Forgiveness means knowing that our Redeemer lives and that God's mercy extends even to us, as it does to everyone, whether that makes us comfortable or not. Subsequent theologies may bridle at the universalism of Christ's sacrifice, but when dying on the cross, Jesus did not use that high place as a vantage point to judge or condemn. "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."<sup>vii</sup> At the point of death, for us, forgiveness becomes the word of life. Beyond the cross, we know that our Redeemer lives, and forgiveness stretches through the calendars of time, and into the darkest places of human experience.



Canon Mark Oakley, Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral, was brought up by his grandparents. His grandfather had flown with the RAF in World War Two, and had been in the raid that had bombed Dresden. Mark was invited to preach in the reconstructed Frauenkirche in Dresden. On the way to the railway station after the service his taxi driver asked him why he was in the city. Mark plucked up the courage to say that he had always wanted to come, and being asked why he said, "Because my grandfather was a navigator of a Lancaster bomber and I knew he flew here on 14<sup>th</sup> February 1945 as part of the bombing raid and he could never talk about it." The man was quiet and then said, "Ah, that was the night my mother was killed." He pulled over car over and turned the engine off. He then turned round to Mark, put out his arm towards him and said, 'And now we shake hands.'"<sup>viii</sup>

Word of life. Forgiveness. I know that my Redeemer lives.

**Amen**

## **Prayer** (including Prayer of Constitution)

Holy God,

None here is so broken they cannot be mended;

None here is so lost they cannot be found;

None here is so dirty they cannot be cleaned.

If we are to find life, we must lay down our fear of death;

If we are to find hope, we must lay down our despair;

If we are to change the world, we must lay down our  
indifference;

If we are to share Jesus, we must lay down our guarded  
hearts.

Our world is not entirely broken, but it is cracked.

Our world is not entirely dark, but it needs light.

Our world is not entirely deceitful, but it needs honesty.

Come, Lord Jesus,

To our country and to our world,

To our communities and to our Churches.

Lift us up, raise us up.

Show us what we have been and what we might be,

When we see our reflection in Your forgiving eyes.

And in those eyes of mercy,

Help us find the courage to set things right.

We pray today for those who feel broken

By their sense of sinfulness in themselves,

Or the effects of the sinfulness of others.

We pray today for those whose hurts

Are visible and invisible,

In the body and in the mind.

We pray today for those whose hunger or homelessness,

And whose struggle in places of fear and war and persecution,

Are indictments of our inconstant faith.

We pray for the work of Christian Aid,

And for all good causes where men and women

Work for good, to lift people out of emptiness into fullness,

And our darkness into light.

Through how we live today – let us reveal we too  
Are forgiven and set free, and reach out to those around us  
In faith, and in hope, and in love.  
God save our Queen, and keep her safe.  
God bless Her Grace,  
God empower this General Assembly, which now we  
Constitute a court of Christ's Church,  
That on this day, accepting forgiveness,  
We may engage our minds and commit once more  
To the work of the Kingdom.  
And all for Christ's sake.  
Amen

**Hymn:** 352 vs 1,2,3,6 O for a thousand tongues, to sing  
*Desert (Lyngham)*

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<sup>i</sup> Margo Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland*, p127

<sup>ii</sup> *ibid* p148

<sup>iii</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, p247

<sup>iv</sup> Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy*, p17

<sup>v</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, p75

<sup>vi</sup> *ibid* p219

<sup>vii</sup> Luke 23:34

<sup>viii</sup> Mark Oakley, *The Splash of Words, Believing in Poetry*, p26