

Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. Good morning to you! I'm Sarah Hall, one of the ministers of the South-West Hants Group of United Reformed Churches in Southampton and Chandler's Ford. And today I invite you into God's presence in your home as we pray and sing and reflect together.

If you have not already downloaded the Word document giving details of this service from the website of Avenue St Andrew's URC, I'd encourage you to pause the video and do so. The address is www.asaurc.org.uk. Let us pray together:

All: Loving God, we thank you that you are with us, and that we may call upon you no matter where we are, or what we are feeling. Keep us mindful of your presence and trusting in your promise—that you are working with us in the moment-by-moment unfolding of our lives. Amen.

We sing our first hymn this morning: Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us - No 543 in Rejoice and Sing

Hymn R&S 543: Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us

- 1 Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us
 o'er the world's tempestuous sea;
 guard us, guide us, keep us, feed us
 for we have no help but thee;
 yet possessing every blessing,
 if our God our Father be.

- 2 Saviour, breathe forgiveness o'er us;
 all our weakness thou dost know;
 thou didst tread this earth before us,
 thou didst feel its keenest woe;
 lone and dreary, faint and weary,
 through the desert thou didst go.

- 3 Spirit of our God, descending,
 fill our hearts with heavenly joy,
 love with every passion blending,
 pleasure that can never cloy:
 thus provided, pardoned, guided,
 nothing can our peace destroy.

We come now to our prayers of adoration. Let's pray.
When we look over our shoulders
at fear shadowing us today,
you go before us into tomorrow,
pointing out a land of promise
just over the horizon.
When our hearts sink
from the effort of hoping for a better future,
you are at our side,
calling out our love and obedience.
Leader of our community,
we offer our lives to you.

When we turn our hearts
into deserts of stony bitterness,
you transform them
into oases of joy.
When we come up
with all sorts of rules
for those who come to us
seeking to find you,
you tear up the list,
stretching wide your arms
in welcoming grace.
Host of our table,
we offer our lives to you.

When we would clasp
old worries to our hearts,
you open our eyes to that truth
which lights up the path ahead.
When we spend each day
consumed with doubts and fears,
you remind us that this day
is the time to honour you,
by welcoming all your children.
Wisdom of our hearts,
we offer our lives to you. Amen.

Hebrew Bible Reading:

Deuteronomy 34:1-9

Deuteronomy 34:1-9

You may be wondering why in just a fortnight we've leapt from Passover, and that urgent need to leave Egypt, *right* to the moment before the Israelites are due to enter the land God promised. No crossing the sea, no grumbling in the desert, no water from the rock, no golden calf, no Ten Commandments, no losing their nerve and heading back out into the desert, no forty years in the wilderness.

Well, please don't feel deprived. In future weeks we may well be dealing with some of those highlights - or lowlights - of the Israelite experience of travelling from slavery to freedom, with a few Egyptians along for the ride. But this week I've taken liberties with the lectionary. Because next week one of our churches, Avenue St Andrew's, is hoping to hold a small-scale pilot service on the ground. But will we get there? And if we do, can we see over the horizon that promised land of back to normal, when everything will be OK again? Hmm...

The Promised Land looks different when we see it from afar, with a combination of nostalgia for all we've lost and rose-tinted optimism about what's to come, to when we get there for real.

For Moses the Promised Land was always a little further on, over the next horizon, after he'd got over the next crisis - right up to the moment God took him up on a mountain, said, See over there? *That's* the land I've been talking about, the land I promised to your ancestors. *You're* not going to make it. But your people are.

For Joshua, the land was *there* all right - but there were people already living there, who oddly enough didn't want to budge. And the dreadful consequences of millennia of that bloody game of God Gave Us The Land, No, God Gave *Us* The Land and We'll Fight You For It! are still with us today.

And for the Israelites? I think it's fair to say once they crossed Jordan, they found it wasn't all milk and honey, but hard work.

I don't mean to say the Promised Land doesn't exist. God's promises aren't like fairy wishes, fluffy and comforting but insubstantial. You can rely on their reality. But when you get there, the land may not look the way you imagined it would. For forty solid years the Israelites had been looking forward to that joyful day when their future home would be more than a promise. They hadn't bargained on arrival being overshadowed by the death of Moses, their leader of forty years, and the beginning of new ways under a new commander.

A fortnight ago I asked you to consider where you might see yourself in the Bible story. If we did that again today, I wonder what answers we might come up with. I have to admit that sometimes I feel like Moses.

I can *sort* of see what life might look like when we've got through all this. Some of it I welcome - like the new ways of worshipping online we've had to develop. But I can sometimes feel far less confident that 'normal' will be something we get back to in our time! Just this week the government has responded to an increase in the infection rate with restrictions on how we gather, restrictions that will stop our planned socialising after the service. It *looks* as if we'll still be able to gather for worship, but who knows how things may develop between now and then?

Sometimes I feel like Joshua, taking on a job that wasn't at all what I'd expected. He could reasonably have hoped for Moses' experience to guide him into his new role, but instead he was having to rely directly on wisdom from God. And while that's the best sort, it can leave us feeling uncomfortably exposed to the possibility of failure, like stepping off a cliff onto an invisible pathway.

But sometimes I feel like the Israelites, making up their minds to obey Joshua as the leader God had given them. For in spite of my trepidation, I *do* know really that God has promised to guide us, not just through the easy times but through days of anxious fears - and to lead us over Jordan into God's kingdom: a place, unlike modern Palestine, of justice and of peace; a place we can *all* call home.

We sing our second hymn: Guide me, O thou great Jehovah, 345 in R&S

Hymn R&S 345: Guide me, O thou great Jehovah (vv1, 3)

- 1 Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty,
hold me with thy powerful hand:
bread of heaven,
bread of heaven,
feed me now and evermore!
feed me now and evermore.
- 2 When I tread the verge of Jordan
bid my anxious fears subside;
death of death, and hell's destruction,
land me safe on Canaan's side:
songs of praises
songs of praises
I will ever give to thee!
I will ever give to thee.

New Testament Reading: Romans 14:1-12

One of the important things about our preparations for returning to services on the ground - whenever that turns out to be - is how that decision gets made. For while in some churches the minister, vicar, priest, pastor or whatever you call them is the one that calls the shots and makes the decisions, in our tradition it's the Eldership, the church leadership group, which carries that weight of responsibility alongside my colleague Mark and me. Yet it's each and every one of *you* who must decide whether for you it is right to gather with others, or whether for now it's wiser for you to participate in worship by screen or printed page. And gather or stay, you're still just as much part of us.

Churches have been having to take important decisions about their life together since the very beginning. In our reading from Paul's letter to the church in Rome we see just two of the ways in which Christians may differ and still be part of the one body, the church. And the very examples he quotes can still be found as ways churches differ from each other now, though our reasons may not be the same.

Take the question of eating or drinking. In *that* context, eating meat or sticking to vegetables was a theological, not an ethical issue. Most meat for sale came from animals slaughtered as sacrifices in some temple or other, so did eating meat constitute worship of that god? Paul thought not, but he advised his fellow Christians who agreed with him to give leeway to those of the faith who thought meat-eating *might* lay them open to demonic influences, not to call them out for dodgy theology. In the more recent history of our faith, a parallel concern has been the question of whether or not to use alcohol in Communion, given the damage it can wreak in some lives. Some denominations have historically chosen to use alcoholic wine for their celebration; others have preferred to use non-alcoholic wine or grape juice. Different parts of our own church tradition - indeed, till recently, different members of our group of churches - have gone down different routes.

Sticking with communion, what about the question of days and seasons to celebrate or to ignore? Within living memory, the Presbyterian tradition which is part of the URC would only celebrate Communion on Christmas Day if it was a Sunday; otherwise, they reckoned, it wasn't biblically special and could be ignored. And because Communion was so important, they would take it only twice a year. Services on the previous Sunday would prepare the people, and only those of good repute would be let in. For another of our strands, the Churches of Christ, Communion was so important they would celebrate it each and every week, and it was up to participants to examine themselves for worthiness. And the

Congregationalists? Each local church decided for itself.

So when the URC came together, what should happen? Should bread and wine - alcoholic or not - be shared weekly, twice-yearly, or somewhere in between? Since many congregations ended up with members from more than one tradition, we had to come to a common mind. And all these years later, most congregations - including ours - celebrate Communion monthly without worrying about what their spiritual ancestors used to do. Thus, over the years, questions of faith over which members might resign, churches might split or Christians might even kill each other, thinking they were doing God's will, have become matters of preference. No longer do we judge one another for our approach to life. Or do we?

There's been a lot of bad feeling recently between younger and older people: whose fault is this upturn in infection rates? But even before Coronavirus our common life wasn't all sweetness and light. Remember Brexit? Our attitude to those holding the opposing point of view wasn't always a kind one. And both sides of *that* debate were represented within our faith and in each of our congregations.

Now you could argue: that's a matter of politics, or culture, not faith. But carry on reading Paul's letter, and you'll see he's not just arguing that people should let others hold differing theological positions. He's saying God welcomes people who come to faith from different cultures and practise it in different ways: Jews, with God's laws in the Hebrew Bible to draw on, covering pretty much the whole of life; and Gentiles, with *none* of that background. Paul's *not* saying Gentiles should turn into Jews, or vice versa. He's saying: You're different. But God loves and accepts *both* your ways of living and believing. Get over it! Looking back with the advantage of hindsight, that may seem obvious to us as Gentiles, but it certainly wasn't to begin with. That division nearly caused the church to fold before it began. And it wasn't easy for either side to accept that God loved the others just as much.

Forgiveness isn't a problem when nobody cares that much about the topic of division. As our Bible study group concluded this week, it's much more challenging to forgive somebody who really *has* been your enemy. And while you might not go to the barricades over Brexit, you'll know better than anybody else - apart from God - what differences of opinion really get your goat, get in the way of your seeing your opponent as somebody God loves just as much as God loves you.

Yet mutual forgiveness for division, past or present, is the only way Gentiles and Jews then, and all of us now, can become one in Christ's body. And such forgiveness is only possible when we get off our moral

high horses and recognise just how much God has had to forgive *us*, for - amongst other things - our attitude to those with whom we disagree. Forgiveness can be hard. It takes a lot of energy. It may only happen over the course of years. And it's only made possible through God's grace. But it's the only way we get to see our opponents as they truly are: people whom God created; people for whom Christ died.

Our group of churches used to differ in whether they used alcoholic or non-alcoholic wine. The congregation where alcohol had been the norm was the one that changed. And their reason for changing? To welcome *everyone* at God's table, including any who have or have had problems with alcohol, on the same basis. And that welcome includes you too, whatever *your* theology, whatever your life choices. In the promised land to which Christ is leading us, *each* of our lives belongs no longer to us. For we all belong to God.

We sing our third hymn, which is also a prayer: Jesus, Lord, we look to thee. You'll find it at 564 in R&S.

Hymn R&S 564: Jesus, Lord, we look to thee (vv1,2)

- 1 Jesus, Lord, we look to thee,
Let us in thy name agree;
Show thyself the prince of peace;
Bid our jarring conflicts cease.
- 2 By thy reconciling love,
Every stumbling-block remove;
Each to each unite, endear;
Come, and spread thy banner here.

Words: Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

We come to our prayers of confession. Let's pray.

Prayers of confession

- 1 O Christ, our Lord, we meet here as your people,
and pray that we may now accept your grace:
forgive us when we seek an earthly kingdom
in which we hope to find an honoured place.
- 2 Forgive us for our arrogant assumptions
that we alone have found Christ's holy way;
forgive us for the cowardly evasions
that modify your challenge to our day.
- 3 Forgive us for the mixture of our motives
when we are confident our love is pure;

- forgive us for our unforgiving judgements
when of the Father's will we sound so sure.
- 4 Forgive us, Lord, for all our wilful blindness
to human suffering and to human need;
forgive us for our casual unkindness,
the hasty word and the begrudging deed.
 - 5 And in forgiving grant us of your Spirit
the grace to lose our selves, and in the loss
to find redemption through a true devotion
that dares reflect the passion of your cross.

Listen: here is good news. Christ Jesus came into the world to forgive us in our failure, to accept us as we are, to set us free from evil's power and make us what we were meant to be. Through him God says to each of us: You are accepted. You are forgiven. I will set you free. And we respond: through Jesus Christ our Lord:
Amen. Thanks be to God.

I invite you now to join with me in our affirmation of faith:
**We believe in God, creator of all,
whose word sustains our life, and directs our history.
God is our life.***
We believe in God's Son,
born amongst the poor, light in our night,
first-born from the dead.
He is alive.***
We believe in the Holy Spirit,
who gives birth to God's new life,
who breathes life into the struggle for justice,
who leads us to hope.
Who is a living force.***
We believe in the holy universal Church,
herald of God's Good News
which frees people and brings new life.
We believe in the coming of a new world
where Jesus Christ, our Lord,
will be all in all. Amen.**

We sing our Communion hymn, by Isaac Watts: Jesus invites his saints;
no 434 in R&S.

Communion Hymn R&S 434 (vv1-3)

- 1 Jesus invites his saints
To meet around his board;
Here pardoned sinners sit, and hold
Communion with their Lord.
- 2 For food he gives his flesh,
He bids us drink his blood;
Amazing favour, matchless grace
Of our descending God!
- 3 This holy bread and wine
Maintains our fainting breath,
By union with our living Lord,
And interest in his death.

Words: Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

Narrative of the institution

Jesus often shared food and drink with those he loved. Outcasts and ne'er-do-wells, fishermen and tax-collectors, deniers and traitors, his friends and family. Today, Jesus wants to share bread and wine in your own home with you. So I invite you to pause the video and prepare yourselves to eat and drink with each other and with him.

Eucharistic prayer

Lift up your hearts

WE LIFT THEM TO THE LORD

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God

IT IS RIGHT TO GIVE OUR THANKS AND PRAISE

Generous host, you made the whole world for us to enjoy and to share.

You came in Jesus to teach us how to be your guests.

Your Spirit joins us together in the joy of hospitality.

So we praise you, saying:

Sanctus and Benedictus

All: Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.

Leader: Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

All: Hosanna in the highest.

Come to us where we are, God our Host,
Worshipping, may we meet around your table
as we remember Jesus, who, on the night before he died,
took bread and wine, blessed them and gave them to his invited guests,
saying: 'This is my body; this is my blood.
Eat and drink to remember me.' And we say together:

**Pour out your Holy Spirit,
on this bread and this wine; and on these your people.
May we worship you with body, heart and soul
Gathered around our screens and in the whole of our lives. Amen.**

Let us proclaim together the mystery of faith.
Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.

As Jesus taught his friends, let us pray together:
**Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth,
as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us,
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
For ever and ever. Amen.**

Among friends, gathered around a table, Jesus took bread [take bread] and broke it and said, 'This is my body, broken for you.'
Later he took a cup of wine [raise cup] and said,
'This is the new relationship with God made possible because of my death. Take it, all of you, to remember me.'
Eat this bread. It is the bread of life [eat]
Drink this wine. It is the cup of blessing [drink]

Prayers of thanksgiving and concern

As we come to our prayers of thanksgiving and concern,
I invite you to pause the video as you pray.
If you were to finish the sentence:
In spite of Coronavirus I thank God for...
how would you end it?
Give your thanks to God.***

We have been asked to pray for Barbara Marsden and her family, with Peter's funeral coming up this week.***

If you were to say the sentence:

These people, this place, this situation,
needs God's healing touch: how would you begin it?

Give God the concerns of your heart.***

All our prayers, all our fears, all our hopes,
we give to God, to whom we all belong. Amen.

We sing our final hymn this morning, a statement of trust in God's
guidance: Thy hand, O God, has guided thy flock from age to age. You'll
find it at 567 in R&S.

Hymn R&S 567: Thy hand, O God, has guided

- 1 Thy hand, O God, has guided
thy flock, from age to age;
their wondrous tale is written,
full clear, on every page;
thy people owned thy goodness,
and we their deeds record;
and both of this bear witness;
one Church, one faith, one Lord.

- 2 Thy heralds brought glad tidings
to greatest as to least;
they summoned all to hasten
and share the great King's feast;
Their gospel of redemption,
sin pardoned, earth restored,
was all in this enfolded:
one Church, one faith, one Lord.

- 3 Thy mercy will not fail us,
nor leave thy work undone;
with thy right hand to help us,
the victory shall be won;
And then, by all creation
thy name shall be adored,
and this shall be our anthem:
one Church, one faith, one Lord.

Words: Edward Hayes Plumptre (1821-1891)

Thanks to Pam and Richard who gave our readings today,
and to David Herring of Wheatley URC
who recorded the accompaniments to our hymns.
Let us end this gathering by saying the Grace together:

The Grace

**May the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the love of God and the
fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, evermore. Amen.**

Music: R&S 549: One more step