

Sermon preached by Suki Coe, LLM from N W Hampshire Downs Benefice at Ecchinswell service on 16th July 2023

## **Sermon**

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Please sit down.

The theme I want to explore this morning is forgiveness.

At the beginning of any formal service of worship, we are invited as a church to bring before God all those things which we should have done but didn't and those things which we shouldn't have done. To bring before God all our sins. And we ask God for his forgiveness because we are truly sorry and to help us to be restored and to do better in the days and weeks ahead.

When we pray, I suspect that I like many of us, recall the Lord's Prayer, the prayer that Jesus taught us, here again is an opportunity to bring before God all our shortcomings, but also a more challenging prayer that perhaps we recite without fully acknowledging the full meaning of the words 'as we forgive those who trespass, or sin against us'. I wonder how well we do at this part of the prayerful life of a Christian.

How do you seriously forgive someone who has wronged you? Are you compassionate and patient with someone who is making you cross, pushing all your buttons? I wonder how well any of us do at stepping away, taking a deep breath, and seeking reconciliation and offering forgiveness. It is hard to do.

Some people who don't have faith may think that Christians are all soft and fluffy, we allow people to take advantage of our good will. We might be deemed to good doers! But I don't think we are weak or allowing people to take advantage of us or implying that somehow the avoidance of conflict is better. Not at all, to offer genuine forgiveness is far from an easy path.

As St Paul tells the Colossians in our first reading this morning, we need to develop skills such as compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Let us look at these in turn:

**Compassion:** a word that can mean pity with an inclination to help, compassion is therefore more than how you feel but is also about action, to seek to understand to come alongside someone, see things from their perspective and to help and support them – most certainly onto a different path.

**Kindness:** a word that can mean to be gentle, benevolent, friendly and considerate, here again is a word of action, calling on us to be benevolent and friendly towards each other even when crossed.

**Humility:** to be humble or meek, that does not mean to be weak, but to identify our own shortcomings, to be self-aware and modest, it reminds me of the teaching Jesus – to take the log from my own eye before attempting to take the speck from another's, but more than that to freely offer my loving service to others.

**Gentleness and Patience:** a type of calm endurance under provocation, maintaining an even countenance when weary or in pain because of another's actions.

Once we begin to unpack these qualities for us to embrace, we can begin to truly understand the depth of the challenge. In order to be strong as a people of God, we must be able to accommodate each other, to understand and be compassionate in order to forgive.

In the Gospel reading from Matthew, Peter shows how little we as human beings really understand about forgiveness, Jesus' response helps us to see that even when you offer your forgiveness it may not have the impact you expect, our reward is not necessarily received in this world. The parable of the master and the unmerciful servant, Jesus recalls the master who forgave the servant his debt, however the servant, lacked the compassion, humility or kindness to forgive those in debt to him. Jesus concluded this story by highlighting that there will be judgement to follow.

I would like to dwell on the final sentence, here there is another truth about forgiveness. Jesus effectively says 'that those who refuse to forgive from their heart will themselves be refused forgiveness'. Does that mean that our loving God will be harsh in his judgement of us, how does this sit with our understanding of the Gospels?

I believe that what Jesus is saying is that forgiveness when offered with our heart and soul is a bit like breathing, if we breathe in without breathing out, we cannot take in the next breath, and we would suffocate. And so it is with forgiveness, if we cannot truly forgive someone who needs our forgiveness, we not only harm them but also harm ourselves. We need to be open, willing and able, to offer forgiveness in order that we can be open to receive God's love and forgiveness. We can not grow in faith with out offering forgiveness to those that wrong us.

Therefore, recognising that forgiveness is difficult, we can start small, perhaps the next time we are wronged, be it that car that takes the last parking space in the car park, or someone with muddy boots walking on your nice clean floor, try not to get angry but to offer forgiveness, because you never know when you could be called to forgive something really significant. Are we ready for that, I believe we get better with practice, so daily practice to forgive those small misdemeanours will stand us in good stead. Let us remember that we have a model to follow, that offered to us by God, of Jesus on the cross, Jesus gave his life to forgive us for all our sins, of course forgiveness is not easy. Let us not suffocate our faith because we struggle to offer genuine forgiveness to one another.

Let us pray, Heavenly Father help us to be compassionate, kind and humble as we continue to learn to offer forgiveness of those to trespass against us, may your Holy Spirit be our guide through the challenges of this life, so that we may be restored to praise and glorify your name.

Amen.

Suki Coe, Sunday 16 July 2023