

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Well, I'm not sure that I can really believe it but today is my last day of services here at St Mary's Richmond, part of our benefice of Richmond with Hudswell, Downhome and Marske. When we were setting out the rota a couple of months ago it seemed ages ago, and suddenly it's here. The benefice of Richmond with Hudswell and Downholme and Marske is special, and will continue to be so to me, and to us as a family.

What a privilege it has been to worship here as a family, and to help lead, and be part of a team for such a fantastic benefice. These last few years have been such a privilege – to be allowed, enabled, encouraged to play a part in the bigger picture of sharing God's love here on earth! And to do so amongst a wonderful group of family and friends of all ages. To be allowed, encouraged, and enabled to try out new things, make suggestions, make mistakes, run with things...you are a very forgiving and encouraging group of people. And so, Thank You!

Our readings this morning aren't the easiest, in some ways, but in other ways, they are very simple. They are talking about forgiveness – forgiveness by God for each of us, our forgiveness of others and a sense of unity.

Our reading from Matthew 18:21-35 tells us the parable of the slave who was released by his master of his debt, but when asked by a fellow slave to forgive him his debts he refuses. When the master hears about this, the slave who refused to forgive is facing a most unpleasant life. And then our reading from Romans talks about how we should not pass judgement on one another, but rather, leave the judging to God.

Forgiveness is not an easy concept and can mean different things to different people. Forgiving someone of something they have done wrong to us is not easy.

We are, each of us, made in the image of God – as such we are called to reflect God’s relentless forgiveness. As Micah says - “act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God”. We are called to be people who extend mercy as quickly as God. For such is the wonder and incredible love of our God for each of us that if we genuinely seek his forgiveness, he WILL forgive us. His love for us is so immense, so relentless – just look to the cross!

These last few weeks there have been messages between new starters like me who are starting at Durham – at Cranmer. And one of the group of messages shared photos of what the different buildings are that make up St Johns and Cranmer Hall – one photo showed the Learning Resource Centre (built on the site of the former Warden of Cranmer’s home – John Pritchard!). And the other is Etchells House – which prompted various questions of “who was Etchells”. Dr. Ruth Etchells was a former principle of St John’s College, Durham (1979 – 88). Dr Etchells, scholar, author and poet, was the first lay person and the first woman to be appointed to be principle of a Church of England training college and apparently a very special lady.

And that’s when I remembered the poem – which if we ever needed a description of what it is to forgive – then this is it!

The Ballad of the Judas Tree

In Hell there grew a Judas Tree
Where Judas hanged and died
Because he could not bear to see
His master crucified
Our Lord descended into Hell
And found his Judas there
For ever hanging on the tree
Grown from his own despair
So Jesus cut his Judas down
And took him in his arms
"It was for this I came" he said
"And not to do you harm
My Father gave me twelve good men
And all of them I kept
Though one betrayed and one denied
Some fled and others slept
In three days' time I must return
To make the others glad
But first I had to come to Hell
And share the death you had
My tree will grow in place of yours
Its roots lie here as well
There is no final victory
Without this soul from Hell"
So when we all condemned him
As of every traitor worst
Remember that of all his men
Our Lord forgave him first

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In these hugely uncertain times, it would be very easy to become utterly despondent, when we watch the news and read the papers etc. And tetchy and edgy with each other, and anxious about things that we might not normally be about. But maybe, and not in a blasé way, but rather in a grounded way, maybe it is time to go back to basics. As our lives journey on, even though you and I are on different paths, maybe we need to just remind ourselves that God is Love. And God's love for each of us is beyond our imagination, as is his mercy and forgiveness, his gentleness and his strength.

As we look to the future, let's try to live lives of service and love, of trust, with empathy and in unity, lives filled with forgiveness, lives reflecting hope, being imaginative, and courageous, and always praying for each other and for the world.

Whichever churches or groups of people we are in, family or friends, at home, or in church, in school or in work, on paper or on the phone, on the internet or face to face - wherever we are, whatever we are doing – let's continue to be people who are always thinking ahead, looking to the bigger picture, considering how to be inclusive and broad and always welcoming. For we are called to be people of love and of service – love of and for God and serving others for God.

We must always remain people of grace and love, mercy and hope, trusting in the transforming power of our God whose love is unstoppable. United in love and service of God, always holding on to that which is good. Trusting our future with our eternal God placing our lives and service to him and others in his hands.

As we look to the future, we give thanks for the past and hold on to that which is good.

And so today, in this strange and unusual and unpredictable and creative times may the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace as we trust in him, so that we may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.