

Circuit Service 29th May 2022
Prepared by Mr Tony Bell

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever (Hebrews13:8).

Let us worship him now and thank him for his goodness that never ends and has no bounds

StF51 Great is thy faithfulness

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTKlqmdfHSk>

<p>1 Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father, there is no shadow of turning with thee ; thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not ; as thou hast been thou for ever will be : <i>Great is thy faithfulness !</i> <i>Great is thy faithfulness !</i> <i>Morning by morning new mercies I see ;</i> <i>all I have needed thy hand hath provided.</i> <i>Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.</i></p>	<p>2 Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest, sun, moon and stars in their courses above, join with all nature in manifold witness to thy great faithfulness, mercy and love :</p> <p>3 Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth, thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide ; strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside !</p> <p>Thomas O. Chisholm (1866–1960)</p>
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Prayer

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father.
There is no shadow of turning with thee.
Thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not.
As thou hast been, thou for ever will be.

Lord, we thank you that these words are true. You are faithful to us when we are unfaithful to you. You do not turn away from us when we turn away from you. Your compassion never fails.
As thou hast been, thou for ever will be.

Lord, we come before you aware of our sinfulness. We confess that we have done wrong – sometimes by not thinking what we were doing – and sometimes willfully by our own decision. Again we ask your forgiveness and resolve to follow you more closely.

Lord, we come before you in thankfulness - that you are always ready to forgive. You gave yourself for us on the cross that we might find eternal life. You send your Spirit to lead us into your kingdom, to enliven our worship, to empower our prayer, to teach us, to deepen our fellowship, and to apply your salvation to our hearts. Thank you that you are with us now. Speak to each one of us and strengthen us for the coming week.

In the name of Jesus, we make this prayer. Amen.

StF20 Be still for the presence of the Lord the Holy One is here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKfyudrhGK4>

<p>1 Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One, is here ; come bow before him now with reverence and fear : in him no sin is found — we stand on holy ground. Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One, is here.</p>	<p>3 Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place ; he comes to cleanse and heal, to minister his grace : no work too hard for him — in faith receive from him. Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place.</p>
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<p>2 Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around ; he burns with holy fire, with splendour he is crowned : how awesome is the sight — our radiant King of light ! Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around.</p>	<p>David J. Evans (b. 1957)</p>
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Readings

Hosea 6:1-6 NIV

“Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence. Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth.”

“What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears. Therefore I cut you in pieces with my prophets, I killed you with the words of my mouth---then my judgments go forth like the sun.

For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.”

Matthew 9:9-13

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

On hearing this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’

For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Sermon: Mercy, not sacrifice



Here’s a picture of our garden hedge from the front window. It tells you a lot about me as a gardener. Look at the weeds in the lawn. See how the neighbours have cut their side of the hedge but mine is still waiting to be cut. Most alarmingly look at the colour of the hedge – but that’s not my fault – it’s the fault of the box caterpillar. The box moth first took hold in this country about 10 years ago and it has now reached South Reading. The moth lays its eggs on the underside of the leaves of box hedges. When the caterpillars emerge they devour all the sustenance out of the leaves. What were beautiful green leaves are now a brown mushy mess. It’s happened to our neighbours on both sides - and to many hedges up and down our road. It’s real shame. At times the hedges have looked like they’re recovering but they’re now beyond hope. I’ll give our hedge a few more months to recover, but it seems inevitable that the hedge will need to be taken down and replaced by a hedge that is resistant to the box caterpillar.

Which takes us to our reading from Hosea. I look at my hedge and think, 'What can I do with you, my hedge?' God looks at Israel, and says, '*What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah?*' The cutting back of dead branches is a common metaphor in the Bible – notably in John 15 and Romans 11.

And then there's the parable of the fig tree in the vineyard. The owner said to the man who took care of the vineyard, '*For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up this soil?*' That's the logical thing to do – cut it down. The keeper replied, '*Sir, leave it alone for one more year and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then I'll cut it down.*' Maybe that's good advice for me and my hedge.

Hosea takes a similar position. In the passage we read, God says the following through Hosea, '*Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears.* God had already taken dramatic remedial action. *Therefore I cut you in pieces with my prophets, I killed you with the words of my mouth.*' In an earlier chapter, the word through Hosea was more specific: '*There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery...*'

Clearly, Israel is a long way from following God, but God does not give up on Israel. Hosea spells out the way back, '*Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds... Let us acknowledge the Lord, let us press on to acknowledge him.*'

Then Hosea goes into an agricultural metaphor, '*He will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth.*' I wish the spring rains could cure my hedge – but I expect not.

You might think all this does not apply to us. This was the angry God of the Old Testament. And we're nothing like as bad as Israel in the time of Hosea. But it is this passage in Hosea that Jesus refers back to in our New Testament reading. He says to the pharisees, '*Go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."*' The words '*I desire mercy not sacrifice.*' are taken directly from the passage from Hosea. Jesus says, go back to Hosea 6 and learn what it means. Hosea's message to Israel was also the message to the pharisees.

You might say that we are not like the Pharisees any more than we are like Israel in Hosea's time. Are we sure? They were religious and committed. Paul actually commended the pharisees for being zealous. Jesus acknowledged the daily sacrifices that cost real money. We look positively on people who are committed - who give their time and money sacrificially. But Jesus says, '*I desire mercy not sacrifice.*'

And if we still think it's got nothing to do with us, think of the New Testament passages addressed to the church. At the last supper, Jesus passes this on to us through the disciples, '*If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.*'

And Paul writes to the Romans, saying don't think you are better than Israel:

Do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches.... Do not be arrogant, but tremble. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

Our hedge in our front garden is there for a purpose. In a crowded estate it separates our garden from the garden next door. It looked quite nice when it was green – not so great now it is brown and decayed – but at least it still does its job for the moment.

We as followers of Christ are here for purpose. We're not here just to look beautiful. By God's grace and love, God takes pleasure in us as we are. God watches over us and cares for us. But we are here for more than that. We are here to bear fruit.

The fig tree in the parable may well have looked beautiful and may even have produced gorgeous blossom every year, but the owner asked something more of it: '*For three years now I've been coming to look fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any.*' The fig tree was there to bear fruit – but it didn't. On this basis, the owner said, 'Cut it down'. Fortunately the keeper of the vineyard took a different view: '*Give it another year and I'll do what I can.*'

The two sides of the parable reflect two aspects of our relationship with God. God cultivates us, looks after us. God wants us to thrive and be cared for. But God also expects us to bear fruit. In Hosea, God metaphorically sends the winter and spring rains that we might grow. This is expected to lead to the fruit of 'mercy'. The words Jesus picked out from Hosea were, '*I desire mercy not sacrifice.*' Hosea and Jesus characterise the healthy community as having mercy.

So if Jesus desires mercy, what is 'mercy' in the context of Matthew chapter 9? The section begins with the calling of Matthew to be a disciple. Matthew was not an obvious choice for a disciple. He was a tax collector – which meant that he would be despised by most Jewish people as a Roman collaborator and a likely extortioner. And that's probably what he was before he met Jesus. In Jewish terms, Matthew was unclean. The general picture is clear from the story of Zacchaeus, another tax-collector who responded to Jesus. Zacchaeus promised to give away half his possessions and pay back four times the amount if he had cheated anybody. So he had obviously been overcharging the taxes before meeting Jesus.

Jesus approached Matthew while he was about his business collecting taxes at his booth. Jesus did not mess about. He said *'Follow me'*. According to the parallel story in Luke's gospel, Matthew left everything and followed Jesus. Matthew, or Levi as he is known by Luke, called a banquet at his house to celebrate. Many tax collectors and 'sinners' came and ate with Jesus and his disciples.

The story is told in Mark's gospel as well as in Matthew and Luke. Mark and Matthew, which were written before Luke, both end the story with Jesus saying, *'I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'* Luke appears to have felt this was not enough. Luke added to these words: *'I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.'*

Luke implies that 'repentance' is needed before tax collectors and sinners could be accepted. We'll never know which version is closer to Jesus's words, but according to the earlier two gospels, acceptance was unconditional. Jesus did not require sinners to reform before he would eat with them, and he went further than this – he did not require them to repent – or at least not immediately. Neither did Jesus wait for people to come to him. He didn't ask people to come and eat at Jesus's house. He went to Matthew's house. When Jesus called Zacchaeus he said, *'Zacchaeus, come down (from the tree) immediately. I must stay at your house today.'*

Jesus went amongst the tax collectors where they were. He went amongst those who were called sinners. And they came to Jesus. Tax collectors were not short of money so they weren't there for a free meal. They wanted to meet Jesus. They came to him.

In the year or so before I went off to university, I used to help out in a refuge for homeless men in Leeds where I lived. In the recession of the 1930s, the city-centre church I attended had cleared out its crypt and let the poverty-stricken in for food and shelter. By 1970, when I was there, poverty was not as extreme but the crypt was full each night. I used to help sign in the men and make them drinks. I thoroughly enjoyed it. As a late adolescent I felt more in common with the homeless men with their mental health problems than I did with the polite people in the church with their well-ordered lives. There were some real characters. There was Barnsley Bob who was well known round Leeds for his colourful shouting as he wandered the streets. He had been (in quotes) a 'normal person' until he had been injured in the war and had a metal plate inserted in his head. At his later passing he was given his own obituary in the Yorkshire Post.

What did those men make of me? I was this middle class boy about to go off to university. Who was showing mercy to who? On the face of it I was showing mercy by giving time to help those less fortunate than myself. The reality was that they showed mercy to me by accepting me and making me feel better about myself.

Mercy comes in many versions. There's the Lady Bountiful version that delivers mercy from above. Mercy delivered from a safe height is not mercy. Mercy from above leaves the giver untouched. Then there's the legal version of mercy, also delivered from above. Mercy in this legal sense has the merciful person standing over and above the recipients who accept mercy from below. Mercy from above humiliates the recipient. Jesus did not go in for humiliation.

Jesus, being who he was could easily have stood above everybody else. But by his actions, he exuded a kind of mercy that placed no one person above another. All are accepted without immediate requirement for repentance or change. Jesus could easily have stood above the tax collectors and sinners, but he didn't. This was what the pharisees could not understand. Jesus said to them *'Go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy not sacrifice"'*.

Hosea chapter 6 is well known. Graham Kendrick turned the words into a song. I suggest listening to it and joining in if you wish, making the words your own. Unlike many of his songs it hasn't caught on. It doesn't feature in hymn books. Maybe it's the words *'Though he tore us'* that put people off. Give Graham Kendrick his due. He doesn't ignore the disturbing bits. But it's important to see all sides. The full line of the song is, *'Though he tore us, he will heal us.'* and it's the healing aspect that wins in the end. There's plenty to think about – how it all fits together. More important is how we respond and how we act. The overarching message is the call *'Come let us return to the Lord.'* And we respond by taking on board what Jesus said, *'Go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy not sacrifice"'*.

Hymn: Come let us return to the Lord (Kendrick)

Can be found on YouTube; and on the CD, 'No More Walls'

Alternative hymn: StF471 Lord, I come to you

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSi-9PPPGnI>

<p>1 Lord, I come to you, let my heart be changed, renewed, flowing from the grace that I found in you. And Lord, I've come to know the weaknesses I see in me will be stripped away by the power of your love.</p> <p><i>Hold me close, let your love surround me ; bring me near, draw me to your side. And as I wait, I'll rise up like the eagle, and I will soar with you, your Spirit leads me on in the power of your love.</i></p>	<p>2 Lord, unveil my eyes, let me see you face to face, the knowledge of your love as you live in me. Lord, renew my mind, as your will unfolds in my life in living every day by the power of your love.</p> <p>Geoff Bullock (b. 1956)</p>
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Prayer (note that some of these prayers may be out of date by 29th May)

Lord, we have heard how you desire mercy not sacrifice. Help us to learn what this means as we look at the pattern of the life of Jesus. Immerse us in your Spirit that mercy may become our nature and our way of living.

Lord, we pray for mercy in the world – especially in Ukraine. May there be mercy for civilians – and also for the soldiers. May there be mercy for refugees and those mourning the dead. In the face of such suffering and aggression we can only be silent because it is more than we can bear.

Jesus shared meals with those looked down on others. He did not despise people or give up on them. Help us to order our society and the community of nations according to your principles of justice and care for all. We hold before you those wrestling with the cost of living and the fear of worse to come. We pray for carers struggling to look after others with insufficient resources, for those who are vulnerable physically or mentally, for parents unable to provide for their children as they would wish. Lord, how did we come to this? Help us to learn from Hosea how to build a society based on mercy. Help us as your church to do our part.

Lord, in all of this we thank you for the comfort of knowing you and being part of your people. Thank you for friends and family. Bind us together in love, especially where we are separated by distance.

We especially thank you for Queen Elizabeth and the example she sets in serving others. Grant her peace and good health during the Jubilee celebrations.

We pray for those we know who are on our minds at the moment – those for whom we have a particular concern. We ask you to bless them and watch over them.

And we pray for ourselves. You know us better than we know ourselves. Teach us to remain in your love and find our strength in you.

In Jesus's name we make these prayers, assured that in the end your love will conquer all. Amen.

Let us join in saying the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples:

Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, they 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

The offering

Lord we ask you to bless the offerings we make – offerings of money, of our service, and of our very selves. Accept our offering and use it for the coming of your kingdom.

StF351 In Christ alone my hope is found

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gax8GL7EViE>

<p>1 In Christ alone my hope is found, he is my light, my strength, my song ; this Cornerstone, this solid Ground, firm through the fiercest drought and storm. What heights of love, what depths of peace, when fears are stilled, when strivings cease ! My Comforter, my All in All, here in the love of Christ I stand.</p> <p>2 In Christ alone ! — who took on flesh, fullness of God in helpless babe ! This gift of love and righteousness, scorned by the ones he came to save : till on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied for every sin on him was laid ; here in the death of Christ I live.</p>	<p>3 There in the ground his body lay, light of the world by darkness slain : then bursting forth in glorious Day up from the grave he rose again ! And as he stands in victory, sin's curse has lost its grip on me, for I am his and he is mine — bought with the precious blood of Christ.</p> <p>4 No guilt in life, no fear in death, this is the power of Christ in me ; from life's first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny. No power of hell, no scheme of man, can ever pluck me from his hand ; till he returns or calls me home, here in the power of Christ I'll stand !</p> <p>Keith Getty (<i>b.</i> 1974) and Stuart Townend (<i>b.</i> 1963)</p>
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Blessing (from Hebrews 13)

The God of peace, who by the blood of the eternal covenant brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, that great shepherd of the sheep, equip us in every good work, working in us that which is pleasing and good, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. And may the blessing of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – be with us all now and always.