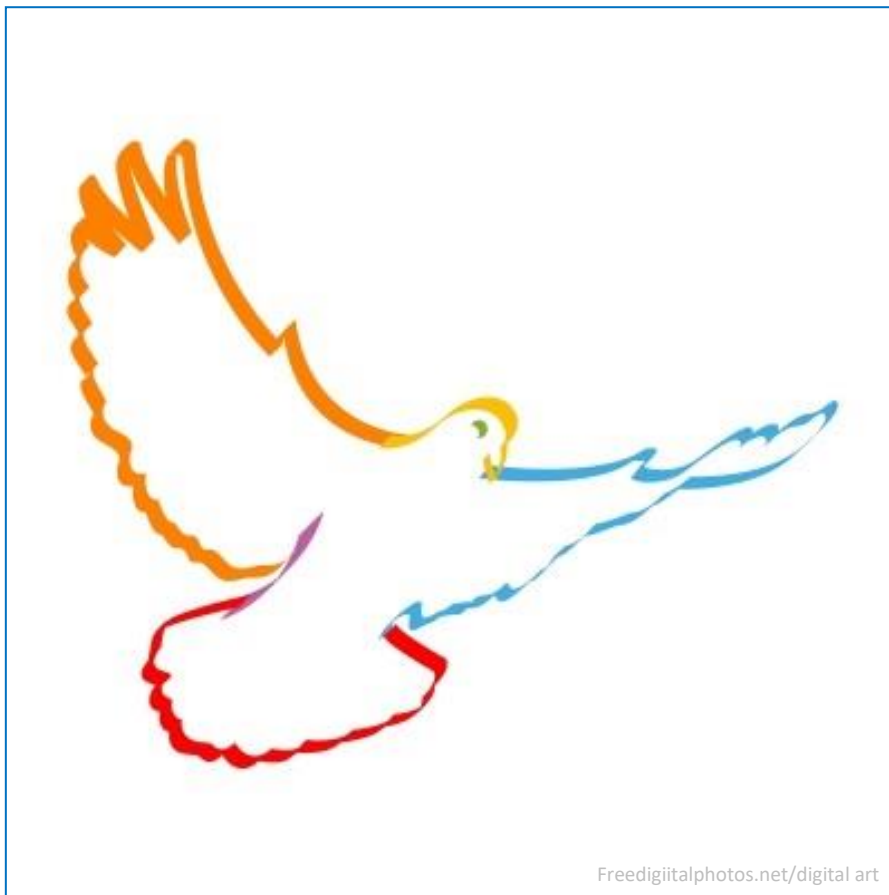


Peacemaking Sunday

Prayers and worship resources for Peacemaking Sunday, 21 September 2014 – updated September 2014

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Theme: The Politics of Praying for Peace

Too often we hear the Christian message of peace as the promise of an inner peace, available to those who live their lives in Christ. However, the 'Spirit of Peace' that Jesus breathes on his troubled disciples (John 20:21-22) is the same Spirit that sends them out into the world to see the kingdom of Christ's peace come into being on earth, as it is in heaven. So these prayers for Peacemaking Sunday 2014 bring a world of violence, power, and politics before the God whose in-breaking kingdom challenges all other powers, and we are invited to see in Christ's cross the end of violence, and the opening of the path to peace.

Prayer of Approach

Great God of all peace, we give you thanks and praise that you never abandon us, that you never desert us. May we never forget your steadfast love for us, may we never forget your mercy shown to us.

You are merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and we thank you that your love for us stretches to the heavens and down to the depths. We thank you that you have released us from our sins, and that you have compassion on us all.

As we gather here in worship today, may we catch a renewed vision of your faithfulness to all that you have made, and may we be granted once again a renewed strength of purpose to live as *your* people, bringing life to the hungry, hope to those in despair, release to those in captivity, good news to all who live in fear, and peace to all peoples.

God of peace, you have delivered us, you have forgiven us, and you love us.

So also you send us as your people to live the new life you have given us, that the kingdom of Christ's peace may come on earth, as in heaven.

The Lord's Prayer.

Prayer of Confession

Revelation 1:5-6 To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, we come before you today as your beloved people.

We thank you that you have called us by name, and that because of your calling we have become part of

your great family, joining those from every tribe and language and nation as your holy people.

In a world of violence and bloodshed, we recognize our own complicity in the sins of the world.

We acknowledge that, directly or indirectly, we are party to the systems of oppression and domination which feed and perpetuate the global cycles of hatred and poverty.

We confess our implicit complicity in corruption, and with horror we see the blood stains on our own hands.

The blood of our sisters and brothers cries out from the earth for justice.

And so we turn to the cross as the end of violence, and there we encounter you, Lord Jesus Christ, our lord and our saviour.

In your shed blood we see the blood of the innocent, the blood of the martyrs, the blood of the oppressed, the blood of the enslaved. In the horror of the cross we meet the worst excesses of humanity, and find the end result of our own sinfulness.

And yet, at the point of condemnation, at the moment of judgment, we encounter mercy and forgiveness. At your cross our guilt is atoned. By your blood we are freed from our sins. The stench of death becomes the promise of new life.

So, resurrected Lord, breathe new life into us today. Make us and remake us to be the people of your kingdom. May we be those who, through naming you as Lord, find freedom and forgiveness. May we, as the redeemed people of God, be those who draw others into your kingdom of peace and forgiveness.

To you be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Prayer of Intercession 1

Based on Mark 4:24-34

Response:

Your kingdom come, your will be done
on earth, as in heaven

Great God of small beginnings and hidden revolutions, we bring before you now the needs of our world, and the concerns of our hearts.

We pray for those countries where peace and justice are threatened and diminished, where those who would seek to live the values of your dawning kingdom are persecuted, and where violence and fear control the hearts and minds of citizens and subjects.

We recommit ourselves to the ideal that, in the name of Christ, it does not have to be this way. And so we pray for those small and subversive voices who dare to speak your alternative into being.

We pray for those seeking peace between unreconciled peoples, for those who stand up for values of justice and equality, for those who live out in their lives the conviction that all are created equal. We pray especially for... [*name current concerns here*].

Response

We pray for those countries where economic circumstances are leading to inequality and instability, where the rich and powerful are acting in self interest while the poor and vulnerable are once again required to make the 'necessary' sacrifices.

We recommit ourselves to the ideal that, in the name of Christ, it does not have to be this way. And so we pray for those small and subversive voices who dare to speak your alternative into being.

We pray for those who are advocating the alternative economics of the kingdom of God, for those who promote the kingdom values of equality, and care for the disadvantaged; for microfinance initiatives; for credit unions, cooperatives and friendly societies. We pray especially for... [*name current concerns here*].

Response

We pray for those who lead our own country. For our politicians and community leaders. May values of truth and honesty triumph, and not be lost to the values of spin and self-interest. We pray for those

seeking to see our cities transformed, for street pastors walking the risky path of our night streets. We pray for those who champion restorative justice in the face of the hard logic of retribution and punishment.

Response

We pray for our church. May we be delivered from self-deception. May we be resistant to the insidious mythologies of success and status, and instead may we become the dissident disciples who live by the alternative stories spoken in the name of Christ in the face of those false truths that appear so self evident.

May we have the imagination to hold lightly to our certainties, and may we be ready to creatively lay aside our fear of change as we find ways of welcoming those unwelcomed by many. We pray especially for... [*name current concerns here*].

Response

We pray, finally, for ourselves. May we become those with the imagination to see the world differently. May we become those whose sense of our own value has been transformed. May we become those who are no longer paralysed by the scale of the problems before us, may we be no longer diminished by our sense of our own smallness. May our lives be transformed by the kingdom taking root in and through us. May we become those who take our place and play our part in the transformation and salvation of the world.

Response

Amen.

Prayer of Intercession 2

Based on Hebrews 11:32-40

*Faithful God, in faith we pray for your world,
**in faith we pray for the better future of your coming
kingdom.***

We pray for those who conquer kingdoms (v.33), for those who pit themselves against the principalities and powers of this world, dedicating their lives to the establishment of your alternative kingdom of justice, peace, and equality for all.

We think of those who campaign for equal rights; seeking to conquer the insidious narratives of segregation and superiority. We think of those who campaign for peace; seeking to conquer the deceptive ideology of violence to end violence. We think of those who campaign for justice, seeking to conquer the treacherous dogma of retributive justice with your divine justice of restoration.

*Faithful God, in faith we pray for your world,
**in faith we pray for the better future of your coming
kingdom.***

We pray for those who administer justice and the common good, for those who make and obtain promises on behalf of us all (v.33).

We think of those who work within the legal systems of our world, and we ask that those entrusted with the task of determining the lives of others would be granted the gifts of impartiality, honesty, and integrity. We pray especially for those situations known to us where justice is not being done, and where justice systems are failing the weak and the righteous, to the advantage of the powerful and the corrupt. We think also of our political leaders, both national and local. May they discover within themselves the capacity to resist the corruptive lures of power, and to remain true to their calling as servants of the people. May they choose wisely, listen carefully, and act responsibly.

*Faithful God, in faith we pray for your world,
**in faith we pray for the better future of your coming
kingdom.***

We pray for those who close the mouths of lions and quench raging fires, for those who face danger in the cause of right, and do battle with the forces of evil in our world (vv.33-34).

We think of those who are active in working to establish peace, and whose calling to confront violence leads them to places of personal danger. We think of those who walk alongside the downtrodden, the threatened, and the marginalised. And we pray for those who refuse to devalue those whom others have declared valueless, standing in solidarity with those facing danger and death. May they be granted courage and audacity, as they call the roaring voices of violence to account, and quench the fires of ferocity with the living water that comes from you.

*Faithful God, in faith we pray for your world,
**in faith we pray for the better future of your coming
kingdom.***

We pray for any who face a martyr's death (vv.35-37).

May they receive the assurance of eternity and the promise of resurrection. May they discover the gospel truth that death does not have the final word on life, and that suffering and fear are not eternal powers. May the voices of the martyrs continue to cry out from the ground, as the truth of their witness endures undiminished and un-silenced.

*Faithful God, in faith we pray for your world,
**in faith we pray for the better future of your coming
kingdom.***

We pray for those who wander the world in poverty and homelessness (v.38)

We think of those who live as refugees, of those who have become displaced peoples, making lives apart from security and stability. May their wandering end, and may their children know peace. We think also of those in our own city who live without homes. We pray that they might know the living presence of the son of man who had nowhere to lay his head. We pray for the agencies that work to provide people with stable living conditions, both in this country and abroad.

*Faithful God, in faith we pray for your world,
**in faith we pray for the better future of your coming
kingdom.***

All these our prayers, we offer in the name of Christ, who calls us in faith to live and work for the peace of the coming kingdom.

Amen.

Prayer of Intercession 3

*Your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven
Through our lives and by our prayers,
your kingdom come.*

Great Christ of all love,
in whose cross all power and authority finds
its ultimate end,
we come to pray now for those earthly powers
which determine and dictate the lives of
people.

We lay before you
those powers which present as our governing
authorities.

We pray for those who work in our government and
the civil service,
and for all others at a national and local level
who hold their delegated power on behalf of
us all.

We pray also for those governments around our world
which have put aside any notion of
appropriate representation,
and whose actions are perpetrated from base
motives.

May they see through you and in us a way of being
human
that respects the other, holds authority lightly
but responsibly,
and is ever alert to the temptation to selfish
misuse of power.

Grant them eyes to see, ears to hear,
and the courage to act with compassion and
mercy.

*Your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven
Through our lives and by our prayers,
your kingdom come.*

Great Christ of all love,
in whose cross all power and authority finds
its ultimate end,

We lay before you
those powers which present as military might.

We pray for those in our armed services,
for soldiers and generals,
for peacekeepers and tactical forces
for law-enforcers and legislators of law,
and for all others whose power relies on the
application of force.

We pray also for those armies and militia forces
around our world,
which have put aside any notion of
appropriate force,
and whose actions are perpetrated from base
motives.

May they see through you and in us a way of being
human
that respects the other, holds authority lightly
but responsibly,
and is ever alert to the temptation to selfish
misuse of power.

Grant them eyes to see, ears to hear,
and the courage to act with compassion and
mercy.

*Your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven
Through our lives and by our prayers,
your kingdom come.*

Great Christ of all love,
in whose cross all power and authority finds
its ultimate end,

We lay before you
those powers which present as economic
might.

We pray for those in our banks and businesses,
for those who have personal wealth,
and for those who handle great wealth on
behalf of others.

We pray also for those economic forces around our
world

which have put aside any notion of
appropriate distribution,
and whose actions are perpetrated from base
motives.

May they see through you and in us a way of being
human

that respects the other, holds authority lightly
but responsibly,
and is ever alert to the temptation to selfish
misuse of power.

Grant them eyes to see, ears to hear,
and the courage to act with compassion and
mercy.

*Your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven
Through our lives and by our prayers,
your kingdom come.*

Sermon: What good does forgiveness do?

Matthew 18:21-35 Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. ²³ "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Imagine two children sat in the back of the car, setting off on a long journey. The chances are that it won't be long before the chanting begins of 'are we nearly there yet, are we nearly there yet?'. But it probably also won't be long before this refrain is replaced by more anguished cries: 'MUM, she's over *my* side' leading inevitably to 'DAD, he's hit me', in turn eliciting 'but she started it' followed by 'but he was asking for it', and so on until journey's end, or until a frustrated parent intervenes to try and bring some peace back to the car, by reminding the children that 'Two wrongs don't make a right'.

This scenario could easily be a parable for the world we find ourselves in, and on the 11th September, in New York City, a powerful punch was thrown from one side to the other, the effects of which remain with us to this day. But the 9/11 atrocities were not the first punches to be exchanged, and neither have they been the last. This year we mark one hundred years since the start of the 'war to end all wars'. From the great war to the cold war, from Palestine to Afghanistan, from Iran to Iraq, from crusade to jihad, from London to Madrid, from Bali to Sharm el Sheikh, the cycle of punch and counter-punch has defined the relationship between East and West for over a thousand years.

Those of us who live in the Western world, and who enjoy and laud all the many benefits and freedoms which it grants to us, cannot escape the troubling fact that our so-called 'free world' is also locked into a destructive cycle of violence and counter-violence. Whether in defence of honour, or territory, or wealth, or freedom; or whether in search of justice or retribution, we all find ourselves complicit, willingly or unwillingly, in the spiralling world of retribution, violence and unforgiveness.

The question before us, is what on earth are we to do? Indeed, we might ask, what on earth *can* be done? Who on earth has the power to intervene, to bring peace, to a world which seems hell-bent on fighting its way to journey's end?

The situation was not so different in the first century. Nations had been trading punches for centuries. From Assyria to Babylonia, from Greece to Rome, from the Seleucids to the Maccabees. Conquest, violence, terrorism and revolution had become endemic. Then, as now, the world was inextricably wedded to the myth of violence and counter-violence.

And it was to people all-too-familiar with the vicious cycles of retribution that Jesus told a parable, not about two children fighting in the back of a long car journey, but about two servants and a king. His parable provides a perfect example of the destructive nature of the cycles of retaliation and unforgiveness.

Let's spend a moment with the first servant in the story. He is both a debtor and a creditor. He is owed money by someone who is below him in the social hierarchy, but he also owes money himself to someone much higher up the ladder than he is. He's a middle man, and he's in all sorts of financial trouble. He owes an unpayable debt to his king,

far more than he's ever likely to earn in his lifetime; but he's also owed a much smaller debt by another. He is, by the laws of debt and justice, entirely within his rights to demand repayment from the one who owes money to him. He's entirely within his rights to extract his just dues, and if he chooses to do so by exercising violence against the second servant he is, by the law of his day, entitled to do so.

But, and here's the catch, he is also in a position where the king has every entitlement to do exactly the same to him, but more so, because the debt he owes the king is so much higher than the debt he is owed. Think about it for a moment: If Jesus had simply told a story about a servant who was owed some money, and who then took his payment by force, the chances are that we would say – well, fair enough. Some might speculate that he was a bit harsh, throwing the man into debtors prison, but some might also reflect that the man clearly had it coming and that he shouldn't have got into debts he couldn't repay.

The real power of the parable comes from the fact that the servant's actions are contrasted with the treatment he himself received at the hands of the king. In the light of the forgiveness he received for his own unpayable debt, his imprisonment of his debtor suddenly appears both hypocritical and shocking. He is, it turns out, a man who is happy to *receive* forgiveness, but is unwilling to *offer* it.

Of course, the twist at the end of the story is that his decision to withhold forgiveness comes back to bite him, and he ends up tortured for his lack of forgiveness. In the gospels, and particularly in Matthew's gospel, where this story of Jesus is recorded, the language of debt and the language of sin are presented as two ways of talking about the same thing. Sins are not personal moral failures in Matthew's gospel, rather they are *debts*, or obligations, that cry out for repayment. So if I were to say to someone that they had sinned against me, I would be saying that they *owed* me, and that they must therefore be made to pay. We still use the language of sin and debt in a similar way today: Imagine the gangster whose honour has been slighted, leaning forwards in a sinister manner and pronouncing in a deep voice: 'you're gonna *pay* for that'.

So much of the violence we encounter in our world, both at an interpersonal and international level, is about making the other person 'pay' for some perceived sin or injustice. From terrorist bomb, to punishment beating, to tactical invasion - violence and 'repayment for sins' are intertwined.

We even meet this language of sin and debt in the Lord's prayer. The version we are used to saying in Church says, 'forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us'; or if we're using the more modern version, 'forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us'. But if we turn to the version of the prayer recorded in Matthew's gospel, we meet not the language of sin and trespass, but the language of debt. Matthew 6:12 reads, 'forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.' And in Luke's gospel, the only other place the Lord's prayer appears in the Bible, the language of sin and the language of debt are intermingled: Luke 11:4 'forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us'.

We might say, therefore, that sins committed against God are debts to God that cry out for repayment. And that forgiveness for these debts owed to God is inextricably linked to the offering of forgiveness to those who in turn owe debts to us.

This is the point of the parable told by Jesus: The servant has not learned the lesson that if his own debts have been forgiven, he must also forgive those who owe him a debt. He has forgotten the debt he owed to the king, and has become fixated with justifying the debt owed to him. Or, to put it another way, he has forgotten that he is himself a sinner, and has become fixated with the fact that he has been sinned against.

In this servant's action, we see clearly the violent and destructive outcome of non-forgiveness. The consequence of his actions to extract of his just reward is that he himself ends up a tortured soul, unable to pay his own debts, unable to justify his own sinfulness, even though forgiveness has been offered to him.

We live in a world that is so often dedicated to the extraction of just dues: 'You hurt me, I'll hurt you!' 'You bomb my city, I'll bomb yours!' The cycles of violence and counter violence are so ingrained within us, and appear so seductively just and righteous. Like children in the back of the car we cry: 'she's over my side', and 'he hit me' and

'she started it'. All too often there is seemingly no way out this spiral of punch and counter punch, which can only ever end in mutually destructive results. And yet Jesus points us to the intervention of the loving parent.

Our own desire for justice and retribution, however righteous it may be, needs to be set against the forgiveness offered to us by the one to whom we ourselves owe an unpayable debt. When others sin against us, either individually or nationally, as they do, sometimes in terrible ways, we need to measure our response by the response of the loving God to those who have sinned against him.

Before we jump on our high horse and start to demand justice from those who have sinned against us, we need to recognize that there may be others who might well be entitled to do the same from us. I'm not just thinking here about the international response to terrorist actions. I'm also thinking that each of us, as individuals, will have incurred debts from others, each of us has, in different ways, sinned against others, just as others have sinned against us.

So when we pray, 'forgive us our debts, as we forgive the debts of others' or 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us', we are praying that a new way of being human, and new way of relating to others, will come into being in our midst and by our actions.

In this place we speak of the forgiveness offered to us by God, and we say that we are those who are forgiven. So in the wake of those moments when others do to *us* a great wrong, rather than automatically biting back, punching back, might we not instead be those who will seek an alternative response? Might we not be those whose lives will bring into being the new way of relating to others that Jesus talked about? A way of relating built on forgiveness rather than retribution?

So what is the just and righteous response at such times? What is to be said today, on Peacemaking Sunday a hundred years after the start of the first world war, and thirteen years since 9/11? Is it to ask 'how can we stop this happening again?' - possibly. Is it to ask 'who is responsible, and how can they be brought to justice' - possibly. Is it to assert that 'we must hunt them down and destroy them, those like them, their children and their parents and their communities, all in the name of national security' - possibly this too is a just response. But will it break the cycle of violence and counter violence? I very much doubt it.

I can remember watching the rolling news reports thirteen years ago, and in horror asking of myself a key question: 'what have we done that they hate us this much?' And yet the temptation was to jump up and self-righteously prepare for war. Difficult though it is, especially when someone has intentionally committed a great evil against us, to see the terrorist atrocity as the latest in a long cycle of violence and oppression, imprisonment and subjugation, repression and retaliation; to do so is to learn to see it as it truly is.

When we retaliate in the name of righteousness and justice, when we meet violence with escalating violence, when we demand our pound of flesh from the other in return for wrongs committed against us, we are committing ourselves to a spiral of retribution that can only end in torture and terror.

Is there another way? Yes. It's called forgiveness. The title of this sermon is a question: 'What good does forgiveness do?' And here we have the answer: It breaks the cycle of violence. Christian living should be a continual dispensing of mercy and forgiveness, mirroring God's own character and treatment of his people. If we pray for God's kingdom to come on earth, as it already is in heaven, then we have to start living as the people of the coming kingdom. And this means living as people of forgiveness, forgiving the debts of others as we ourselves have been forgiven.

Society will often view such behaviour as weakness, and even in our churches, forgiveness and mercy are all too often lacking in our dealings with one another. But as Mahatma Gandhi reportedly said, 'only the strong can forgive.' The cost of forgiveness should never be trivialised, and when we offer someone forgiveness for their debt of sin towards us, we will always count the cost of this action in our own selves. We must never abusively ask of another that which they are not able to give. Forgiveness is not easy, it does not come lightly, it does not come easily, and for some it remains out of reach.

But... Jesus' parable shows us that we can never give up making forgiveness and reconciliation our goal, and there are many ways in which we can be active in forgiveness of sins and debts, as through our actions and by our prayers we bear testimony to the in-breaking kingdom of peace.

So we might consider becoming active in supporting those who work for peace between those nations caught in vicious cycles of violence. We might become involved in campaigning to end torture and oppression through the work of organisations like Amnesty International or Action by Christians Against Torture. We might build conversations and friendships with those from other faith communities, both as a church and as individuals, and by doing so we might play our part in bringing together diverse religious and cultural communities in relationship and shared understanding even when so much that is going on in our world makes such relationships uncomfortable or problematic. We might involve ourselves in campaigning for the forgiveness of debts owed to the West by countries that can never repay. We might change our purchasing practices, subverting the global system of debt and oppression by buying fairly trade products. We might choose to become involved in local initiatives aimed at alleviating the burden of personal financial debts through the offering of debt advice or the establishment of a credit union. We might simply seek lift up those who have fallen on our doorstep in poverty and need.

Jesus' parable about forgiveness speaks down the centuries to the world in which we find ourselves in today, and it challenges *us* to be those who find ways of living forgiveness in a world which seems hell-bent on violence. Peter asked Jesus: 'How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' And Jesus replied, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.' Don't count it, just do it, and heaven knows what good forgiveness will do.

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The Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) is changing its legal status from a charitable unincorporated association to a charitable incorporated organisation (CIO). From 1 January 2020, BUGB will operate as a CIO with registered charity number 1181392

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