

Sunday 13 September 2026 – ‘Getting on with one another’ – Michael Bayley

In this season of Creationtide, Michael Bayley uses the experience recounted by Florence Allshorn, a missionary in Uganda, to illustrate what God's transforming love is all about.

Readings:

Romans 14:1-12. Matthew 18:21-35

Sermon: ‘Getting on with one another’ – Michael Bayley

Both the gospel and the epistle for today are essentially about how we get on with one another, especially within the Christian community. Paul in Romans is giving some sane and sensible advice: “One person may have faith strong enough to eat all kinds of food, while another who is weaker eats only vegetables. Those who eat meat must not look down on those who do not, and those who do not eat meat must not pass judgement of those who do; for God has accepted them... Again, some make a distinction between this day and that; others regard all days alike. Everyone must act on their own convictions. Those who honour the day honour the Lord, and those who eat meat also honour the Lord, since when they each they give thanks to God; And those who abstain have the Lord in mind when abstaining, since they too give thanks to God.” [14: 2, 3 ,5, 6]

In the gospel from Matthew, Peter is asking Jesus: “Lord, how often am I to forgive my brother if he goes on wronging me? As many as seven times?” Jesus replies: “ I do not say seven times but seventy times seven”. Jesus then goes on to tell the story of the servant who was forgiven an enormous debt and then refused to forgive a fellow servant a totally insignificant debt.

Repentance and forgiveness are not necessarily straightforward. Getting on with one another may in some cases be extremely difficult. But forgiving seventy times seven, and learning to love our enemies, can be one of the most creative and life affirming things we can do in our journey of learning to follow Christ.

There was a remarkable woman called Florence Allshorn, who died in 1950. In 1920 she went out to Uganda as a missionary. When she arrived there she was sent to a hot, steamy and oppressive place called iganga where she was put in charge of the girls school. There was only one other missionary there, Matty Ganga. She was in charge of the hospital. She was a tough, wiry, old woman missionary who had survived the bad climate for many years at the expense of her temper. She had a vitriolic and violent temper which had driven away 8 younger missionaries who had come to work with her. None had lasted more than two years. Florence soon found relations with her colleague very difficult. Once she wrote home: “Sometimes she doesn't speak at all for two days. Just now we've finished three weeks of never a decent word or a smile”. She said how “when I get resentful and horrid it's just unbearable”. Florence was brought almost to the point of despair. She felt that she had reached the limit of her endurance and it seemed she might just as well go back to England for all the good she was doing.

The bitterness between the two missionaries poisoned the atmosphere of the school and the children felt it. Florence had come to the crisis of her life then she said in her own words: “one day the old African matron at the hospital came to see me when I was sitting on the veranda crying my eyes out. She sat at my feet and after a time she said, ‘I have been on this mission station for 15 years and I have seen you come out saying you have brought a Saviour to us, but I have never seeing this situation saved yet’. It brought me to my senses with a bang”. Florence continues: “I was the problem for myself. I knew enough of Jesus Christ to know that the enemy was the one to be loved before you could call yourself a follower of Jesus Christ, and I prayed

that this same love might be in me and I prayed as I have never prayed in my life for that one thing”.

Florence saw that Christ was speaking to her through her bitter twisted relationship with her colleague. It was a challenge to her to learn more of Christ. She decided to stay at Iganga and to love and to let Christ save the situation through her. For a whole year she read the 13th chapter of first Corinthians [Paul's great hymn of the love of God] everyday. Life became an adventure in learning to love instead of the agony of hate and bitterness which it had been.

Florence writes: “slowly things lightened... As we two drew together in a new relationship the whole character of the work on the station changed. We had some little real love to show the people on it: they were freer with us and less uneasy of what sort of attitude they would meet in us when they came”. Though it often wasn't easy but these two came to fashion a good working relationship and the older missionary became very fond of Florence, and Florence was able to write in later letters of “my colleague whom I have come to love very much indeed”. That experience suffused the rest of Florence’s life. She had a major influence on the training and support of missionaries and she was the key person in the founding of Saint Julian’s community.

I have been inspired by that story ever since I first read it. Indeed if you had attended evensong in St Mark’s sometime in August 1968 you would have had the opportunity to hear it then. However now I want to consider whether what she has to say can help us us, faced as we are by a climate emergency. This seems appropriate as we are observing Creationtide this month. The situation with which I wonder if she can help us is this. I find it very difficult to understand people who simply deny that there is any climate crisis at all - climate deniers. What I find especially difficult is to establish any common ground on which basis we can have a useful conversation. I find it very easy just to become angry which, of course, only makes the situation worse. But there is only one world and all of humanity has to share it. How can we learn to listen to one another, talk to one another and arrive at a common understanding and way of living on and cherishing the earth together. Of course it is difficult but surely we have to try and do we as Christians have a particular part to play?

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