

Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, 11 October 2020

Welcome to the joint worship for Christ Church and The Bridgwater Drive Church. Today we celebrate Harvest. None of today's lectionary readings really spoke to a harvest theme, so I will be using other readings, although we will read the Gospel from Matthew set for today. Our theme is food poverty and we are supporting with gifts of food and money HARP and Hopeworx. Our prayers will also touch on creation and World Mental Health Day which was yesterday and Challenge Poverty Week which starts tomorrow. The Christ Church Faith and Life Group has written a letter to our local MP, Mark Francois about Action on Climate Change which will be read out today, and we hope you will all feel able to sign it. The Methodist Church have said they will join with us in that action.

Isaiah 24: 4-6

The earth dries up and withers,
the world languishes and withers;
the heavens languish together with the earth.
The earth lies polluted
under its inhabitants;
for they have transgressed laws,
violated the statutes,
broken the everlasting covenant.
Therefore a curse devours the earth,
and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt;
therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled,
and few people are left.

'Cherish this earth that keeps us all alive'

Either we hear you, or we don't survive. (Refrain, from Malcolm Guite's sonnet on Hildegard of Bingen)

Call to Worship (inspired by Isaiah 25:6-9)

Hurricanes and floods and environmental havoc;
cancer and heart disease and COVID; poverty and injustice and oppression.
The ways of death in this world are many. The words of death surround us.
The fear of death envelopes us.
But we come now to hear a different Word, a true Word, a life-giving Word.
We are here on Isaiah's mountain where tears are wiped away,
where a banquet table has been set, where death has been swallowed up forever.
We do not fully understand it. We may not fully believe it.
And yet here it is: the power of Christ's life within us and among us.
So let us be glad and rejoice!

(by Joanna Harader, amended)

Hymn All creatures of our God and King (R&S 39) v1-4, 7

All creatures of our God and King,
lift up your voice and with us sing,
alleluia, alleluia!
Thou burning sun with golden beam,
Though silver moon with softer gleam:
*O praise him, O praise him,
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!*

Thou flowing water, pure and clear,
make music for thy Lord to hear,
alleluia, alleluia!
Thou fire, so masterful and bright,
that givest us both warmth and light:

Thou rushing wind that art so strong,
ye clouds that sail in heaven along,
O praise him, alleluia!
Thou rising morn, in praise rejoice;
Ye lights of evening, find a voice:

Dear mother earth, who day by day
unfoldest blessings on our way,
O praise him, alleluia!
The flowers and fruits that in thee grow,
let them his glory also show:

Let all things their creator bless,
and worship him in humbleness;
O praise him, alleluia!
Praise, praise the Father, praise the Son,
and praise the Spirit, Three in One:

Opening prayer

Lord Jesus, you say that when someone gives food to the hungry,
when someone gives a drink to the thirsty,
when someone welcomes a stranger,
when someone clothes the poor,
when someone cares for the sick
and when someone visits a prisoner, they are really doing it for you.

Enable us, with the wealth of our society, to do these things,
but help us first to listen to the voices of those we desire to assist and to welcome,
those who are on the margins, because, in their strength and love and endurance,
they are your voice, your words for us today. Lord Jesus, we pray in your name. Amen

(Revd Nick Jowett, Church Action on Poverty in Sheffield)

Offertory. (HARP & hopeworx) We give thanks for the generosity both in giving to the church and to HARP and Hopeworx. We dedicate these gifts that they may help those who do not have enough food. All that we have comes from God, and in gratitude we give in return. We do not live to ourselves, we live to the Lord. We bless gifts of money, but also of time, service, patience and compassion, in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

This hymn, written by URC minister John Campbell, talks about harvests across the world and is set to a traditional tune. (R&S 495, Father hear the prayer we offer)

Hymn

All across the world there's harvest
gath'ring food we're glad to eat;
though we'll never meet the farmers,
keep us thankful for their feat.

Where rewards divide unjustly,
workers struggle to survive,
may we act to make trade fairer,
play our part, keep hope alive.

Foodstuffs gathered, packed and processed,
shipped and trucked and sold and bought;
for all people who supply us,
may we show the thanks we ought.

God who cares for all who harvest,
God who cares for all who eat,
Keep us thankful, keep us acting
'til your justice is complete

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Bible reading: Matthew 22:1-14

Luke 16:19-31 (rich man and Lazarus)

SERMON From Church Action on Poverty

If we can find a way to recover the voice and speech of Lazarus, we can uphold the worth and value of his life, both before and after death. Can the voiceless speak? Yes, the voiceless can speak, for those that have ears will listen to their stories.

Here is the voice of Lazarus: "When we were dying of hunger and poverty, this rich man was insensitive to the needs of the people around him and lived a complacent selfish life in pomp and pleasure," remembered Lazarus, on his deathbed with a terminal illness, for he lived as a homeless

person at the gates of this rich man's villa, and fed on the crumbs of this man alongside the dogs, and the dogs even licked his sores. A few days later Lazarus died, and since he was an outcaste, no one came forward to bury his polluted corpse, leaving it unburied. But fortunately, the angels carried Lazarus to be with God, where Abraham also found a refuge. Afterwards the rich man also died, and tens of thousands of rich people came to his ceremonial funeral service paying tributes to him, praising him for what he was not. Eventually the rich man was taken to Hades, where he was tormented, a price for his being rich and for creating poverty around him. He looked up, saw Abraham at God's side, and was startled to see Lazarus by Abraham's side. "Can a homeless, poor 'slum dog' be at the side of Abraham, the father of the faithful?" exclaimed the once-upon-a-time rich man. (For in the kingdom of God, the rich man's position is reversed.)

If Lazarus spoke in this text, all the evil things that the rich man did to become even richer by making the poor poorer would have been exposed. If Lazarus spoke, he would have narrated how he was pushed by the rich empire into poverty, homelessness and hunger. If Lazarus spoke, he would have testified what an impossibility it would be for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. If Lazarus spoke, he would have disclosed that the real meaning of life is in sharing and caring for one another, for life cannot be quantified into monetary value. If Lazarus spoke, he would have emphasised the spirituality of dispossession, where each individual is called to give up greed and bridge the gap between rich and poor, by identifying with the poor. If Lazarus spoke, he would have said, "Look for the divine among the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God." If Lazarus spoke, he would have called his listeners to practise what has been preached by Moses and the prophets. If Lazarus spoke, he would have emphasised that being grounded in one's faith traditions like Moses or the prophet(s) leads us to be inclusive, faithful and tolerant, looking for truths in other faith traditions. If Lazarus spoke, he would have called on the rich to repent, seeking reparations from rich to poor, so that the world would become a better place to live. If Lazarus spoke, he would have affirmed the continuation of God's revelation in the activity of the life and death of Jesus Christ, who was sent back to life by God in resurrection. If Lazarus spoke, he would have said that he died while he was still living, and is still living while he is dead. When Lazarus speaks, the divine is located in his voice, for in the speech of the voiceless, echoes the voice of the divine. Those that have ears, let them listen.

Our gospel reading for today from Matthew 22, usually has different interpretations, and there are many options for what to focus on, but it struck me that the wedding feast part has similarities with the story of Lazarus and the rich man. Those who were invited, those with a seat at the table, people like us who are privileged and do not need to worry where our next meal is coming from, those people did not want to attend the banquet. A big feast held no appeal for them because they were used to it, so they went off to do other things. The slaves went out into the streets and found whoever they could – good and bad. Undesirables perhaps, the homeless, the poor, those not dressed appropriately and they went willingly to the feast. It reminds me of the story of Amelia Anne

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Stiggins who went to a party and filled her umbrella with cakes to take home to her many brothers and sisters who were ill at home!

We could say that we, that is rich western societies were the ones invited to the wedding feast, but we had better things to do. We have squandered our invitation and our wealth of food. We have destroyed the planet, and throw away about 40% of our food (this is in general, I hope no one here throws away any food!). Developing countries are the ones who are late to the banquet – now that there is little left they are being asked to make sacrifices – not grow their economies, not grow their populations, and they are the ones, for the most part, suffering the consequences of climate change in storms, fires and rising sea levels.

There is so much to be concerned, if not depressed about in our world. Someone said to me this week – one sees so many appeals from charities, how do you decide who to support? We can't give to everything! Neither can we realistically support every cause. But there are things we can do. They may feel small, but they can make a difference. For fans of Black Adder, I hope we will soon be able to soon announce plans for a big new Christmas project to provide food and gifts and going forward debt relief. Today specifically we are giving gifts of food and money to help those locally who for many reasons cannot afford to buy food. And we are signing a letter to encourage the government to take action on climate change. I will read that letter now.

Read Climate Change letter (sent separately)

Prayers of intercession

Holy One, we pray for the world You created, and the people who share it with us:
for countries caught up in war or violent conflict,
for regions of the world recovering from hurricanes and flooding,
for the areas experiencing devastating wild fires,
For these and all the other areas in our world where there is need and despair,
Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for our country and for its people:
for our government, MPs, advisors and civil servants
for our judicial system, police forces and NHS,
for our cities, towns, and rural communities,
for farmers and farm labourers and all who bring our food to us
delivery drivers and supermarket workers
For all who are part of this great country,
Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for our local community
for those who are unemployed, for those in prison,
for those who are hungry, and need assistance from foodbanks
for those who are alone and afraid,
For all our neighbours, both known and unknown to us,
Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for this congregation and our brothers and sisters at Bridgwater Drive,
for those who are ill, or awaiting results of medical examinations and treatment
for those who are anxious about the future, especially those with mental health issues
for those struggling with their faith,
for those who minister among us, **Lord, hear our prayer.**

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Pour out Your Spirit on us! Fix our hearts and minds on what is true and honourable and right.
Give us the joy and peace that comes from knowing and doing Your will.
Keep us faithful to the call we have received in Christ Jesus, our Lord, extending Your loving invitation to the world around us, so that all may sit at the banquet and eat their fill.
In Jesus' name we pray, saying
Our Father.... **Amen.**

Hymn God in his love (R&S 85)

God in his love for us lent us this planet,
gave it a purpose in time and in space:
small as a spark from the fire of creation,
cradle of life and the home of our race.

Long have our human wars ruined its harvest;
long has earth bowed to the terror of force;
long have we wasted what others have need of,
poisoned the fountain of life at its source.

Thanks be to God for its bounty and beauty,
life that sustains us in body and mind:
plenty for all, if we learn how to share it,
riches undreamed of to fathom and find.

Earth is the Lord's: it is ours to enjoy it,
ours, as his stewards, to farm and defend.
From its pollutions, misuse and destruction,
good Lord, deliver us, world without end!

Blessing

God who weeps at injustice and oppression, genocide and crucifixion:
we grieve the state of our world – so much brokenness and violence,
so much pain and unfairness.
God who aches for a different way,
a peaceable respect, a community of equals and a realm of love:
we ask for hope in order to work for change;
we ask for courage to resist in the face of opposition;
we ask for faith to believe in the possibility of peace. Amen

A blessing from the United Church of Canada