

Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, 15 November 2020

Welcome to the joint worship for Christ Church and The Bridgwater Drive Church. This was supposed to be our first Communion Service back in the church, but the best laid plans... Please have bread and wine or juice ready for us to share in the Lord's Table each in our own homes as we have done for the last few months.

Call to worship (based on Psalm 123)

Great and Glorious God, we gather to worship you.
We lift our eyes to you, in reverent awe before your majesty.
Great is the Lord our God, and greatly to be praised!

Generous and Merciful God, we come to worship you.
We lift our eyes to you, giving thanks for your compassion.
Gracious is the Lord our God, and greatly to be praised!

Welcoming and Empowering God, we worship you.
We lift our eyes to you, and we celebrate your faithfulness.
Holy is the Lord our God, and greatly to be praised!
We lift our eyes, seeking to worship and praise our God. Amen.

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Hymn Praise to the Lord (R&S 74)

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!
O my soul, praise him, for he is thy health and salvation!
come ye who hear,
brother and sisters draw near;
praise him in glad adoration!

Praise to the Lord, who o'er all things so wondrously reigneth,
bears thee on eagle's wings, and through all troubles sustaineth:
has thou not seen
all that is needful hath been
granted in what he ordaineth?

Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper they work and defend thee!
Surely his goodness and mercy here daily attend thee:
ponder anew
all the Almighty can do,
who with his love doth befriend thee.

Praise to the Lord! O let all that is in me adore him!
All that hath life and breath come now with praises before him!
Let the amen
sound from his people again:
gladly for aye we adore him!

Opening prayer from the URC Prayer Handbook (based on Psalm 123)

Loving God, today I am tired, I am tired of holding out
for what is true, just and good.
People who sit lightly to such things and mock them,
seem to have the upper hand.
Their voices are prominent and loud; the land tilts in their favour;
their journey, easier and less impeded.
Loving God, today I am tired, and if no miracle
of truth and justice is to hand, come close, enough at least,
to hold me up and soothe my weary soul. Amen

Prayer of Confession

God of justice and forgiveness,
we confess that we live in a world
in which some are hungry even for bread,
many people are sad or hurt,
and there is much that is unfair and unjust.
We confess that in our own lives
we do not always do what is right
or turn away from what is wrong.
We ask your forgiveness, we claim your love and mercy,
and we ask for courage to make a new beginning.
In the name of Jesus Christ. **Amen**

Christ Jesus came into the world to forgive sinners. To all who turn to him, he says: 'Your sins are forgiven.' He also says: 'Follow me.' Amen

Offertory

Especially now we are back worshipping online, you are reminded to send in your gifts for the work of the church and for the Christmas appeal, by cheque or bank transfer. A dedication based on today's Gospel reading:

God, whose giving knows no ending,
we offer up the treasure that you have entrusted to us;
we offer up the skills and time that you have graciously given to us;
we offer up ourselves in service and praise.
Receive these gifts by your grace.
Multiply and use them through the power of the Holy Spirit
to accomplish Christ's work of love in the world. **Amen.**

written by Joanna Harader, <http://spaciousfaith.com/>

Bible reading: Matthew 25:14-30, the Parable of the Talents

Sermon – first part by Revd Chris Howson, who works closely with sanctuary-seekers and those pushed to the edge by austerity politics - **writing for Church Action Against Poverty**

This is possibly one of the most misunderstood stories in the Gospels and leads to a lot of confusion as to the nature of God, sometimes mistaken for the absentee landlord in the story. In school assemblies and during sermons, preachers often explain the term 'Talents' (a unit of money) as actual talents or gifts, with the implication that they are given by God, and your discipleship journey is to make the most of them. The 'bad' person is the one who has buried or squandered their 'gift'. Some readings see the story as an endorsement of capitalism. Margaret Thatcher used the parable as a justification that God loves the money-makers and will reward entrepreneurialism. These misguided interpretations ignore vital elements in the story that would have been more evident to Jesus' audience in a pre-capitalist, Roman occupied agrarian society. The story begins with a member of the wealthy elite leaving his property. Let's give this character a non-political name, let's call him Mr Smith. Absentee landlordism was a regular experience for people in Palestine at the time, and they would have been used to the expectation that the indentured servants would be held accountable for the land and money upon their master's return. Matthew's version shows how the indentured servant with the most power is quickly able to make money with the money he has, five

talents making five talents more. The second servant also gains more money for his initial two-talent investment. With a capitalist worldview, this seems like the right thing to do. Mr Smith has given money to those he trusted to make him more money, and they have done so. They are faithful minions who know where the power and wealth lie. However, in Jesus' time, capital is extremely limited. To gain more, i.e. an 'extra piece of the pie', would mean that someone else had their piece of the pie taken away from them. This was seen as a bad thing. The servant then who morally refuses to take part in this exploitative exchange, but prudently buries the money, would have been seen as the hero of this story. His deed is more obviously heroic when the slave stands up to the wealthy absentee landowner: "Mr Smith, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed." The servant bravely points out the exploitation of the elite land-owner, and whilst being frightened of the repercussions, is prepared to stand up to him. Mr Smith then lays into him, demonising him with some devastating criticism given in the heat of the moment. Opponents of the wealthy are 'lazy' and 'wicked'. "You should have at least put the money in the bank and then I would have gained interest," says the rich land-owner. This would have been a clear sign to the listeners that Jesus did not intend Mr Smith to be mistaken for God, as interest (usury) was highly sinful to the Jewish community. Mr Smith then displays that he is in fact a cruel tyrant who will bully and destroy his opponents. He does what those with power always have done: he takes everything from the poor and gives it to the already wealthy, declaring the doctrine of the greedy elites: "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." From a peasant perspective, the hero in this scenario is not Mr Smith, but the one who refuses to take a part in the system and speaks truth to power, even if it means that the powerful elite may destroy him. What is most important is speaking out and exposing the truth, whatever the cost. Even if it means ending up on the cross.

I want to add just a little bit to Chris's reflection on this passage - Those with the least will have even that taken away, and to those who have, more will be given. During the pandemic the owners of online companies like Amazon have increased their already obscene wealth while children on free school meals have gone hungry, while those in poor paying jobs have lost that work, while many of the self-employed were not eligible for any financial help during the lockdown, and asylum seekers who have already fled danger and violence are locked in detention centres or deported. In our world, over 2000 years after Jesus told this parable, nothing has changed, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. I don't know if any of you saw Simon Reeve in Cornwall last Sunday night, showing the seasonal workers who cannot make enough to survive, and showing a man who having lost his job had set up a foodbank. When he started, 12 years ago they were serving 70 meals a month, now it is 14,000. It is the biggest, independent foodbank in the UK. As Simon Reeves pointed out, the UK has one of the widest gaps between rich and poor and that gap is only getting wider.

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So what can we do? We can educate ourselves. We can speak out about wealth inequality. We can try to avoid buying from the likes of Amazon and look for more ethical and local shops. We can support local charities like Hopeworx, Home-Start and HARP as we are through our Christmas Appeal, who provide food year-round and especially food and gifts for Christmas and of course we can pray for a fairer world, and the people to bring it about.

Hymn Inspired by love and anger

© WGRG, The Iona Community (recorded by Thora in July)

Inspired by love and anger,
Disturbed by need and pain,
Informed of God's own bias,
we ponder once again:
'How long must some folk suffer?
How long can few folk mind?
How long dare vain self interest
turn prayer and pity blind?'

From those for ever shackled
to what their wealth can buy,
the fear of lost advantage
provoked the bitter cry,
'Don't' query your position!
Don't criticise your wealth!
Don't mention those exploited
by politics and stealth!

From those for ever victims
of heartless human greed,
their cruel plight composes
a litany of need:
'Where are the fruits of justice?
Where are the signs of peace?
When is the day when prisoners
and dreams find their release?'

God asks, 'who will go for me?
Who will extend my reach?
And who, when few will listen,
will prophesy and preach?
And who, when few bid welcome,
will offer all they know?
And who, when few dare follow,
will walk the road I show?'

Lord's Supper as you follow at home, please say the words in bold

Let us celebrate this joyful feast.

People will come from east and west and north and south,
and sit at table in the kingdom of God.

Loving God, the world you made is beautiful and full of wonder.

You made us, with all your creatures, and you love all that you have made.

You gave us the words of your prophets, the stories of your people throughout the generations,
and the gathered wisdom of many years.

You gave us Jesus, your Son, to be born and to grow up
in difficult times where there was little peace.

He embraced people with your love and told stories to change us all.

He healed those in pain and brought to life those who had lost hope.

He made friends with anyone who would listen and loved even his enemies.

For these things, he suffered.

For these things, he died.

And he was raised from death and lives with you forever.

You give us your Holy Spirit, to teach and to strengthen us,
to remind us of Jesus Christ and to make us one in him.

For all these gifts we thank you, and join with all your people
on earth and in heaven, in joyful praise, saying:

Holy, holy, holy Lord

God of power and might,

heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

This is the mystery of faith:

Christ took the form of a slave

Christ took the cross of shame

Christ gives the free gift of life.

Send your Holy Spirit upon this bread and wine,
and upon your people, that Christ may be with us,
and we may be ready to live for you
and do what you ask of us, today and every day to come. **Amen**

On the night when he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way he took the cup after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood, Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Sharing of bread and wine

Prayer after communion

Most gracious God, we thank you for what you have given us. You have fed us with the bread of life, and renewed us for your service.

Now we give ourselves to you, and ask that our daily living
may be part of the life of your kingdom,
and that our love may be your love
reaching out into the life of the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Prayers of intercession

Gracious God, we pray today, for all those who go hungry and for the people who help them, through volunteering at foodbanks, by donating food and money, or by speaking out and raising awareness of issues.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for scientists working hard to develop vaccines, for doctors, nurses, porters and cleaners, carers and their families, as they battle tiredness and depression to keep going.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for world leaders and democratic systems. Let them not be abused, and help us not to be overtaken by apathy and despair when it seems that democracy is flawed.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for those who feel lonely and sad, locked in their homes again, not able to see family or friends.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for all those who are ill and those who care for them; for those awaiting test results or treatment, for the dying and those who mourn. May your infinite love and grace surround them and bring them peace, in Jesus' name. **Amen**

The Lord's Prayer

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Hymn Now let us from this table rise, (recorded by Thora in August)

Now let us from this table rise
renewed in body, mind, and soul;
with Christ we die and rise again,
his selfless love has made us whole.

To fill each human house with love,
it is sacrament of care;
the work that Christ began to do
we humbly pledge ourselves to share.

With minds alert, upheld by grace,
to spread the Word in speech and deed
we follow in the steps of Christ,
at one with all in hope and need.

Then grant us grace, Companion-God,
to choose again the pilgrim way,
and help us to accept with joy
the challenge of tomorrow's day.

Blessing

As we will soon be in Advent, I share with you an Advent Blessing:

Follow, where the Spirit of Hope leads you
Listen, as the child of Peace cries for you
Rejoice, as the Love of God embraces you
and go now, with Hope, Peace and Love in your hearts
and the blessing of Creator, Child and Spirit for ever with you. Amen

(A World of Blessing, ed. Geoff Duncan)