

Call to worship (from Church Action on Poverty)

Holy Trinity, you give dignity to all

Remind us that we all are treasured by you

Loving God, you lift up the lowly

Remind us of those whose value is not seen

Jesus Christ, you bring good news to the poor

Remind us to reach out for justice for all

Holy Spirit, you free the captives, you challenge and inspire us

Empower us to build a society where everyone belongs

Hymn Great God, your love has called us here, R&S 339

Great God, your love has called us here

as we, by love, for love were made.

Your living likeness still we bear,

though marred, dishonoured, disobeyed.

We come, with all our heart and mind

your call to hear, your love to find.

We come with self-inflicted pains

of broken trust and chosen wrong,

half-free, half-bound by inner chains,

by social forces swept along,

by powers and systems close confined,

yet seeking hope for humankind.

Great God, in Christ you call our name

and then receive us as your own,

not through some merit, right or claim,

but by your gracious love alone.

We strain to glimpse your mercy seat

and find you kneeling at our feet.

Then take the towel, and break the bread,

and humble us, and call us friends.

Suffer and serve till all are fed,

and show how grandly love intends

to work till all creation sings,

to fill all worlds, to crown all things.

Great God, in Christ you set us free

your life to live, your joy to share.

Give us your Spirit's liberty

to turn from guilt and dull despair

and offer all that faith can do

while love is making all things new.

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Children's Time – Parable of the Talents

Gifts

God, 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.**

Now let's sing; Go tell it on the mountain

*Chorus: Go tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere;
Go tell it on the mountain
That Jesus is his name.*

He possessed no riches,
no home to lay his head;
He saw the needs of others
And cared for them instead.

Chorus

He reached out and touched them,
The blind, the deaf, the lame;
He spoke and listened gladly
To anyone who came.

Chorus

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Let's talk to God now before our Sunday Club goes out:

Dear generous God, Help us to be more like you,

To see people as you see people,

To care for them as you do

And to share what we can with others.

Be with our young people as they go into Sunday Club to learn more about you. Amen.

Opening Prayer (from Church Action on Poverty)

I thought I knew. I had read magazine and newspaper articles,
charity appeals, seen photos, watched TV documentaries.

I thought I knew about poverty.

But the hardship, the deprivation, the lack of hope, were kept safely behind the screen,
or tied down in dead words on paper.

I thought I knew, but I did not know.

Then I listened to the stories of food bank clients, came face to face
with illness, misfortune, bureaucratic incompetence and intolerance,
benefit delay, inadequate pay, ill informed choices, domestic violence, homelessness,
no barriers protecting me from the pain and despair.

I thought I knew, but I did not know.

For I returned to my warm, comfortable home, My adequate income and savings,

My healthy, debt-free life. I thought I knew

But I did not actually know.

Dear God, please give me –

the grace to admit that I do not know what it is to be in poverty,

the courage to make my voice heard on behalf of the poor,

the will to do whatever is in my power to help, Amen

(Brian Ford)

Bible reading: Matthew 25:14-30

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, or, in the version in Luke's gospel, heading off in an attempt to gain more power by being made king. For the sake of clarity, we will perhaps give this character a name, let's say, Michael, as in Michael Platt the UK's wealthiest person. 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 or slaves would be held accountable for the land and money upon their master's return. Matthew's version shows how the indentured slave with the most power is quickly able to make money

with the money he has, five talents making five talents more. The second slave also gains more money for his initial two-talent investment. With a capitalist worldview, this seems like the right thing to do. Michael 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 was 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. So, the slave 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, saying: "I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed." The slave bravely points out the exploitation of the elite land-owner, and whilst being frightened of the repercussions, is prepared to confront him. Michael then lays into him, demonising him with some devastating tweets sent off in the heat of the moment. Opponents of the wealthy are 'lazy' and 'wicked', he says. "You should have at least put the money in the bank then I would have at least gained some interest," says the rich land-owner. This would have been a clear sign to the listeners that Jesus did not intend Michael to be mistaken for God, as charging or paying interest was highly sinful to the Jewish community. Michael then displays that he is in fact a cruel tyrant who will bully and destroy his opponents. He does what those with power have always 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 the land-owner, but the one who refuses to take part in the system, who 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, as we know Jesus did.

Just to put this in a UK context - The UK has a very high level of income inequality compared to other developed countries. The majority of households in the UK have disposable incomes below the mean income, which was £32,300 in 2022. In 2022, incomes for the poorest 14 million people fell by 7.5%, whilst incomes for the richest fifth saw a 7.8% increase. This does not show the full extent of the difference between the richest and the rest of society as the top 1% have incomes substantially higher than the rest of those in the top 10%. Wealth in Great Britain is even more unequally divided than income. In 2020, the

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ONS calculated that the richest 10% of households hold 43% of all wealth. The poorest 50%, by contrast, own just 9%.

Hymn Christian Love, written for the 2020 Racial Justice Sunday © John Campbell
Tune 'Ode to Joy'

Christian love is not romantic,
not soft-focussed, twee or sweet,
Christian love's not 'likes', nor dating,
far more real than text or tweet.
Christian love means life-long struggle;
lived-out kindness ev'rywhere.
Christian love must echo Jesus:
selfless, soulful, steeped in prayer.

Christian love cries out for justice
wheresoever it's denied;
joins the struggle, makes the protest,
stays the course, eyes open wide.
Christian love rejects what's racist,
sexist, ageist, prejudiced,
turns against each nurtured bias,
learning daily to resist.

Christian love respects the other,
seeks to understand, not judge;
takes delight in mutual learning
doesn't force and doesn't fudge.
Christian love's an arduous journey,
finding self by giving all;
serving, sharing, helping, caring;
full response to Jesus' call.

Christian love is learned from Jesus,
walks his way and bears his cross;
self-surrenders, like our Saviour;
gains much more than what is lost.
Christian love is so persistent,
it outlasts all other things;
by its hope, its faith, its struggle,
it's the song all heaven sings!

Bible reading: Acts 4:1-20

The setting of most of this story is the Temple in Jerusalem, which was also the setting for much of Jesus' teaching and other actions. His teaching drew crowds, challenged many people and led to changed hearts. It was often controversial. So were the healings he enabled. Peter and John are following closely in Jesus' footsteps. A man is healed; the crowds are amazed; Peter speaks about the healing power of God, embodied in Jesus; many people believe his words – and all this is controversial for the authorities. But there is an extra challenge: Jesus in the temple spoke with the authority of a rabbinical training gained in the Nazareth synagogue. But these two disciples were not only from the provinces, strangers to the city, but were uneducated laymen. So, the first question was, "By what power, by what name – by what authority – do you dare to do this?" Those asking the question are men of unquestioned authority. First on the scene are priests, law-enforcement officers, and Sadducees whose creed denied the possibility of resurrection, which was central to Peter's message. After a night in prison the disciples are confronted by a whole hierarchy: rulers, elders and scribes (teachers of the law), assembled in Council. They have law and cultural tradition on their side. They are confronted by two 'outsiders' who have neither. And, another – a man who for years had to sit begging at the Temple gate because his disability made him unclean, so he could never go through the gate.

Finding himself healed, he had gone leaping and singing into the Temple. He didn't wait to show himself to a priest to be certified 'whole'. What for us seems a natural and joyful human reaction must have seemed one more transgressive action. But the Council members saw that this man was living proof that something life-changing had happened – something that had power to move and convert the crowd. The power was greater because of the way that Peter and John insisted on telling the story. The disciples respond very simply and directly. Verse 20 sums up the commitment underlying much of the New Testament – “we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.” We have seen and heard a lot in the news recently about the cost-of-living crisis, and particularly the cost of energy. In particular, there are two recent stories, that it seems to me, as Christians we shouldn't be keeping quiet about. Indeed, we should be like Peter and John – speaking out.

One is the selection of the new deputy chairman of the Conservative Party. Not only was the Chairman sacked for dubious tax dealings, but the new deputy is on record as saying that food bank users didn't know how to budget or cook and that a nutritious meal could be cooked for only 30p! Other views include bringing back the death penalty and saying council tenants should be made to live “in a tent in the middle of a field” and pick vegetables for 12 hours a day before a cold shower.

The other awful situation, is people who have British Gas forcing their way into their homes to install pre-paid meters. These meters usually mean that people end up not putting the heat on or cooking because they don't have the money to put in. What are the churches saying and doing about this? What are we as Christians saying?

Since the start of the year, more than 30,000 warrants have been issued by magistrates for these meters to be installed, despite concerns raised before Christmas that the courts were approving warrant requests en masse without scrutiny over whether energy customers were vulnerable. Although now Magistrates have been ordered to stop issuing warrants allowing energy firms to force fit prepayment meters in England and Wales. Sadly, the use of pre-paid meters and their impact on the poor and most vulnerable is nothing new. In 2015, Christians Against Poverty urged the Government to speed up its overhaul of pre-payment energy meters, which, the charity believes, are giving the poorest and most vulnerable people in the UK the worst deals. That is over 7 years ago. In that time, things have only got worse. What are the churches saying and doing about this? What are we as Christians saying?

Dialogue & prayer from Life-Changing Stories.

Hymn The feast was spread for all to see (tune: On Christmas night all Christians sing)

The feast was spread for all to see,
the host then summoned company;
successful, rich and satisfied,
they made excuses – even lied.
Lives filled with self, lives packed with pride –
lives too full to let God inside!

The host then sent to scour each street
for those whom ‘nice’ folk never meet.
He welcomed poor and blind and lame;
those crushed, forgotten, trapped by shame.
Lives filled with hurt, lives raw and sore,
lives our God could make whole once more!

The summons spread across the land,
’til all the hungry were at hand;
the door then closed to leave outside

those rich, complacent, satisfied.
Feast for the crushed, feast righting wrong,
feast that shouts God’s great justice song!

This feast’s now spread for you and me,
if we’ll accept God’s company.
Christ summons us from near and far,
no matter who or where we are;
laid down his life, paid ev’ry cost,
wine and bread to revive the lost!

So let us come and share what’s giv’n,
this foretaste of the feast of heav’n;
respond, receive, and be made new
for all the things we’re called to do.
Receive God’s gift, that we may all
live our lives to announce God’s call!

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Lord’s Supper

The peace of Christ be always with you

And also with you

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.

God is here.

Her Spirit is with us.

Blessed be the names of Love.

They touch our hearts with grace.

We open our hands in thanks.

Our song is one of welcome.

We thank you, Holy God,

For being a fool in the eyes of the world.

We thank you for abandoning control,
for creating a universe, new and strange.

We thank you for nurturing life, diverse, evolving, surprising and strange.

We thank you for calling a people who did not walk straight or know their limits.

We thank you for different bodies and desires

for different ways of thinking and speaking

for different ways of belonging and believing.

May our thanks cut a path through dividing walls to free the Spirit’s song:

Holy, holy, holy One

God of life and love.

The world overflows with your glory.

One came who upset the rules:

who accepted the grace of the outsider,

who looked for wisdom in those who did not count,

who took his food in the company of the rejected.

One came who walked a strange path:

who did not think anyone was unclean,

who did not look for scapegoats
who refused to put a price on anyone's head.
The tables of the moneychangers he threw over.
The tables of liberation he threw open.
On the night before he gave himself up,
He ate and drank to the end of slavery.
He took the bread and broke it, and said:
'This is my body. Do this to remember me'.
He took the wine and poured it, and said:
'This is my blood. Do this to remember me.'
May the Spirit of creation take these earthly things and show us in their brokenness,
the life-giving plenty, the end of all poverty, the body and blood of Christ.

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.

Into our hands he delivers himself, Jesus, the Victim, the Excluded One,
who is now a sign of hope for all.
So we celebrate this event of love; this rising from death,
unpredictable and full of wonder.
We pray that we will be a community defined by what it is open to
not by what it fears; by the excess of its love not the walls along its borders.
May our prayer be welcome to you, the God who is in all, and with all and for all. **Amen**

(Inclusive Church liturgy)

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 is 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 with all those living in poverty. We pray especially for those in our own
country who are suffering greatly due to the cost-of-living crisis, inflation and fuel costs.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer

We pray for unity and equality and an end to discrimination and prejudice
of all kind. Help us to truly remember that in Christ we are all one.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray 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.

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We pray for scientists, for doctors, nurses, porters and cleaners, carers and their families, as they continue to care for our health and wellbeing and we pray for the NHS.

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. We pray for journalists who risk their lives to bring us the truth and for aid workers in challenging conditions.

We pray for the all the people affected by the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria.

And for peace in Ukraine.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for and with all who feel lonely and sad. For the homeless, those with mental health conditions and the those who are neurodivergent.

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, and we think particularly this week of the family and friends of Irene Church. May your infinite love and grace surround them and bring them peace, in Jesus' name. **Amen**

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn Now let us from this table rise - R&S 463

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.

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Blessing

May God bless us with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people,
so that we will work for justice, equity and peace.

May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war,
so that we will reach out to comfort them and change their pain to joy.

And may God bless us with the foolishness to think that we can make a difference in the world,
so that we will do the things which others tell you cannot be done.

And the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all now and ever more. Amen

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