15th November 2026 – Morning Service
An invitation to readiness
Melanie Walters

Call to Worship
Look up… lift your eyes to God:
in the highest heavens, we see your glory, Great Creator.
Reach out… reach out your hands to Jesus:
in Your immense compassion, we know Your love, O Christ.
Place your hands on your hearts… feel around and amongst us the breath of the Spirit:
in our sinews and in our souls, the Spirit whispers hope.
Let us worship the God who reigns, by entering the depths of our humanity
and setting the humble soaring on the wings of the Spirit for the sake of eternity. Amen.

StF 25 – God is here! As we his people
1) God is here! As we his people
meet to offer praise and prayer,
may we find in fuller measure
what it is in Christ we share.
Here, as in the world around us,
all our varied skills and arts
wait the coming of the Spirit
into open minds and hearts.

2) Here are symbols to remind us
of our lifelong need of grace;
here are table, font, and pulpit;
here the cross has central place.
Here in honesty of preaching,
here in silence, as in speech,
here, in newness and renewal,
God the Spirit comes to each.

3) Here our children find a welcome
in the Shepherd's flock and fold,
here as bread and wine are taken,
Christ sustains us, as of old.
Here the servants of the Servant
seek in worship to explore
what it means in daily living
to believe and to adore.

4) Lord of all, of Church and Kingdom,
in an age of change and doubt,
keep us faithful to the gospel,
help us work your purpose out.
Here, in this day's dedication,
all we have to give, receive:
we, who cannot live without you,
we adore you! We believe!

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Opening Prayer
Generous God, who has given us the beauty of this world in which we live, the splendour of life around us, the wonder of friendships with those we hold dear, blessings beyond what we can comprehend. We come to you rejoicing in absolute joy that we find in our faith in You. Faith received by grace, Your gift which cannot be earned, but by which we are saved. The gift offered to all through Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, who lived, died and rose, so that the world might understand the power of faith, which brings the fullness of life and the everlasting joy of life lived with Your Spirit. Our hearts fill with gladness for, with our faith in You, our world will always find its centre, our time on this earth will be full of meaning each day, and Your healing presence will constantly bind up the wounds of our daily life. May our worship this morning reflect back the love which we have received. May our hearts and minds be open to the glory of Your law, the instruction of Your Word and the inspiration of Your Spirit. **Amen.**

StF 183 – Praise to the God who clears the way
1) Praise to the God who clears the way
preparing room and space;
for power and pride will lose their sway
as peace comes in their place.

2) Praise to the God who comes to judge
the truth of word and deed,
who calls our minds and wills to change,
rebuking wealth and greed.

3) Praise to the God who waits with us
for hope and joy to reign,
who shares our suffering and our loss,
embodied in our pain.

4) Praise to the God who comes to bring
comfort to all who mourn.
The whole creation 'Glory' sings
as Christ the light is born.

Jan Berry *© Jan Berry*

Introduction

No one can escape the air of impending judgement, a coming call to account, that surrounds our readings today. That air carries an invitation to be ready when the time comes. The challenge then and now is to accept this invitation that promises future glory. Aptly, our first reading comes from the book which details the history of Israel's Judges. The book describes a dark, violent and disobedient society – a real society, one which represents all who abandon God. It's grim reading, so perhaps not the go-to read it should be, if we are to be ready! As we begin to read, we hear the word "again", a key word that also appears at the start of our Gospel reading. 'Again' suggests a repeating cycle. So, as you listen, what cycle do you think keeps repeating? What does it show us about the readiness of humanity and the readiness of God, the Judge of all?

Reading: Judges 4:1-7 (NIV)

Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, now that Ehud was dead. So the LORD sold them into the hands of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. Sisera, the commander of his army, was based in Harosheth Haggoyim. Because he had nine hundred chariots fitted with iron and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the LORD for help.

Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided. She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, "The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.'"

Barak Monologue

My name is Barak; I had proved myself as an able warrior. I knew Deborah to be a prophetess… God spoke to the people through her, and God chose her as a judge. She often sat under a palm tree, and the people of Israel would come to her for guidance and help from God. When God told Deborah to send for me, calling me to fight our oppressors, Jabin, king of Canaan and Sisera, the commander of his army, I confess I was wary of our chances. Even though women did not normally fight in war, I made it a condition of my acceptance that Deborah must go with us. Deborah agreed without hesitation but declared that because of the condition I had set, the Lord (would) deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman. So together we went into battle, and guess what! God gave us the victory! In all the confusion of war, however, Sisera had escaped from the battle. He hid in the tent of a woman named Jael, whose family had previously been allied to Jabin. Jael, whose name means mountain goat, put a tent peg through Sisera's head while he slept. Now I don't know if you know this, but mountain goats defend themselves by goring predators with their horns! So, the battle was won by a woman, and Jael became the heroine by choosing faith over fear, just as Deborah had said. Deborah knew befriending the evil king was unwise, and that fighting on God's side was right; together with Jael, we worked with God to help God's people defeat evil and know peace once more.

Reflection

I began my working life as a teacher; now I work as an exam invigilator. The question I am asked most is why students have so many mock exams. Look beyond the obvious, and the answer is less about 'test' and more about an opportunity to make ready. A lack of understanding of what is

needed, an unwillingness to obey, and paralysing fear of failure are all barriers to future glory. Again and again, students receive righteous, just and sometimes uncomfortable assessments of their efforts so far. There can be weeping and tantrums along the way. Again and again, they are shown compassion and mercy as their teachers bring people and circumstances together to repeat the invitation, giving students every chance to hear, accept, overcome, and so ready themselves for a glory-filled future.

Since God led the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and into the promised land of Canaan, they have faced what is often described as an extended period of repeated testing; there is only one question: Are they ready for the promised glory God offers?

Again (and again), the Israelites "did evil in the sight of the Lord"; again (and again) the Old Testament testifies that all God's *ways are justice… just and upright is he… he will not always accuse… he does not treat… as… sins deserve or repay… according to… inequities… he is slow to anger abounding in love… the Lord is compassionate and gracious… the Lord longs to be gracious… he will rise up to show… compassion* (Deut 32:4, Ps 103: 8-10, Is 30:18).

Although we may struggle with the graphic, violent imagery in the Old Testament, looking beyond the gore reveals flawed humans faced with a choice between right and wrong, good and evil, obedience and disobedience, faith and fear. Consistently, too many of these humans choose wrong, with dire consequences.

We also see God.

Like the very best teacher, God repeatedly steers people in the right way. God keeps inviting the Israelites to readiness, providing everything needed to prepare for glory. In the story of Deborah, Barak and Jael, we are told that, again, the people have gone the wrong way. We mustn't be misled when we hear the consequence: *the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin, king of Canaan*; this is 'bible speak' for a divine judicial transfer of power intended as a wake-up call. In other words, God first acts justly and righteously in line with the people's choice; then, when they realise what they have done and *cry to the Lord for help*, God acts with compassion and mercy by bringing together the right people – in this case Deborah, Barak and Jael – each with their own unique abilities to again enable a fresh start and peace for the people.

In doing so, this story readies us for the future God can already see and leads us neatly to our second reading found near the end of Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew's account has a single aim: to prove to those who first heard or read it and to those who hear or read it still, that Jesus is the Messiah. The promised Saviour, who brought a once-and-for-all invitation to readiness for God's new Kingdom. A Kingdom which will burst into life as it is carried everywhere in the heart of believers.

You may want to consider:

Where are you in the scene? Are you a disciple… which one? Perhaps one of the characters in the story? Or someone who is not mentioned in the passage?

Look around the scene. What are the other people doing? Look at the expressions on their faces. What about the expression on Jesus' face as he begins his parable?

Reading: Matthew 25:14-30 (NIV)

"Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

“After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.’

“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

“The man with two bags of gold also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.’

“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

“Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’

“His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

“‘So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Reflection

Can you see Jesus? He’s sat on the Mount of Olives; the disciples are gathered around him, and they have been listening for some time. Tensions have risen since his spectacular arrival in Jerusalem as the Passover began, not least because he flipped the tables in the temple, so there is likely urgency in his voice. Jesus knows, but the disciples don’t yet really understand, that time is short. Maybe Jesus’ face is a little weary but still full of love as he runs through parable after parable. Seven familiar stories are retold across this and the preceding chapter to teach the disciples (and us) the need to show ourselves ready for God’s return and eternal glory. Maybe the disciples’ faces show the strain of concentration, the consternation of confusion or even the joy of enlightenment.

The story we have just heard is the middle of three about the need to account; it follows the story of contrasting consequences for the virgins who readied themselves with oil for their lamps and those who failed to prepare for the bridegroom’s return. It precedes the foretaste of the day of glory when the Son of Man returns, and the people are separated as sheep are from goats. On that day the blessed will take the inheritance promised for all who accept God’s invitation. It refers to talents, once a measure of weight, now more closely associated with a natural ability or spiritual gift. Talents were most commonly silver, with each worth roughly what a labourer could earn in 15 years.

Where was your attention drawn as you listened? It’s hard not to focus on the final servant, called ‘wicked’, ‘lazy’, ‘worthless’. Theologians say he can only represent the Scribes and Pharisees, whose whole aim *was to keep the law exactly as it was* (Barclay, 1953), who had *turned the command to be the light of the world into an encouragement to keep the light for themselves* (Wright, 2004). In other words, these flawed humans hid the light they were given under a bushel and failed to let all God had given shine out from their hearts so the Kingdom could burst into life.

In the story, the third servant is rightly condemned for his failure to respond to the opportunity he has been given. Even in giving just one talent, the master in the story believes the servant is capable of a huge responsibility, so he is perhaps not entirely useless. Yet the servant seems unable to see that and suggests, instead, that he is frozen by fear because he is so afraid of failing to live up to what he thinks is expected. If I think of the servant as the Pharisees and Scribes, I

think about how desperate they are to get it right for God, counting out even a tenth of their herbs and spices as sacrifices. Yet despite every second chance God has offered across the generations, they maintain a misguided view of our just and merciful God as vengeful or wrathful. Like the servant in the story, they reject the invitation to join in with what God is doing because they are fuelled by fear, not faith, and so dig an ever-deeper hole for themselves along with the treasure they have been given, just like the servant does; maybe like we all do sometimes. This **is** a necessary wake-up call, but it is not the whole story. Maybe we leave them in the hole a while to reassess whilst we turn our attention to the successful servants.

What do you believe belongs to God? Psalm 24:1 reminds us that t*he earth is the Lord's and everything in it*. St Paul later expands this understanding in his letter to the church in Rome, explaining that *from him, and through him and for him are all things* (11:36).

This belief allows the two servants to succeed. What they have been given is abundant. It is full of promise, but it is not theirs. They recognise through the master's action that they have been given a purpose, a task to fulfil. Crucially, the story says *to each according to their abilities*. In their stories, fear is displaced as they respond to the trust placed in them. In doing what they can with what they have, they see what they have been given burst into life.

As a teenage soldier on a battlefield, Nicolas Herman received God's assurance that his barren, unpromising life would, in time, burst into fruitfulness. Later, injury took him from soldiering to life as a footman who broke everything. Drawn into service in a Priory, Nicolas worked first in the kitchen before moving to the workshop to make and repair sandals. For more than fifty years, Nicolas humbly and diligently used the abilities he had been given in God's service. In doing so, Nicolas, now Brother Lawrence, became fruitful beyond anything he could ever imagine, as visitors daily bypassed the chapel to seek the wisdom and counsel of a man who did what he could with the ordinariness of his days and found a life sweeter and more delightful.

Like the two successful servants in Jesus' story, Nicolas shared in the master's happiness, receiving affirmation and celebration for what he had done and a greater role in the master's work. Like the successful servants, Nicolas teaches us to humbly and diligently use every part of all that God has given us in his service so that we too fulfil our purpose and can hear the rejoicing in our Master's voice on the glorious day of his return.

We can't, though, leave things there… theologian Tom Wright reminds us not to forget where Jesus is headed next…

Where is Jesus going? Back to the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. To the holes we dig ourselves. To the cross, with loving compassion and mercy to ensure, once and for all, an eternal fresh start for those he came to save. Good news indeed for the third servant, those Pharisees and Scribes, you, me and anyone now ready to accept his invitation.

Prayer of Confession and Thanksgiving

Loving and forgiving Father, whose merciful compassion is endless, whose just understanding of us began even before we came to be, whose willingness to allow us to start over never ends, whose desire to work with us to achieve your will on earth as it is in heaven knows no bounds, we recognise this moment as an opportunity to confess our need of you. We are frail humans, and we know that all too often, we dig the most enormous holes for ourselves. In our weakness, we easily get so wrapped up in ourselves and our limited vision of what is possible that we get drawn into worldly troubles and miss the opportunities You offer us to be a part of Your eternal life-giving plans. So, in the silence, we offer our confession.

Pause

It is with heartfelt thanks that we rest now in the glorious truth: Jesus came, lived, died and returned to life so that we might know that our sins, our mistakes and wilful wrongdoings are remembered no more.

StF 428 – I'm accepted, I'm forgiven

I'm accepted, I'm forgiven,
I am fathered by the true and living God.
I'm accepted, no condemnation,
I am loved by the true and living God.

There's no guilt or fear as I draw near
to the Saviour and Creator of the world.
There is joy and peace
as I release my worship to you, O Lord.

Rob Haywood *© 1985, Thankyou Music Ltd.*

Response

All we are, all we can do – our talents, our gifts of love, joy, gentleness, kindness, peace, forbearance, faithfulness, self-control come by the Spirit from God. We are to be used through God, for God… in response to Jesus, who gave his all, once and for all for us, so that the Kingdom might burst into life as we carry it everywhere.

Do you feel in your heart that you use your talents to the best of your ability?

In what ways are you using them for the service of God's kingdom here on earth?

If you feel you do not use your gifts to their full potential, why? Is it because you fear taking risks and instead build holes?

Take a moment to hear words from the Apostle Peter, one of those who sat at his feet that day on the Mount of Olives and heard Jesus say God gives *each according to his ability*; he dug a fair few holes of his own before he was ready to be the rock on which Jesus built his church. In a letter to that church, Peter said: *serve with whatever gift you have received… with the strength God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ*.

Rest in this understanding: God gives according to our ability and gives all the strength we need through the Holy Spirit to do what we are called to and glorify God through Jesus.

Now take a moment to consider again your potential to glorify God through active service with all you have and are.

StF 513 – Take this moment, sign, and space

1) Take this moment, sign, and space;
take my friends around;
here among us make the place
where your love is found.

2) Take the time to call my name,
take the time to mend
who I am and what I've been,
all I've failed to tend.

3) Take the tiredness of my days,
take my past regret,
letting your forgiveness touch
all I can't forget.

4) Take the little child in me,
scared of growing old;
help me here to find my worth
made in Christ's own mould.

5) Take my talents, take my skills,
take what's yet to be;
let my life be yours, and yet,
let it still be me.

John L. Bell & Graham Maule *© 1989, WGRG, Iona Community*

Prayers of Intercession

O Lord, in turning to you in this time of prayer, we see that we live in an imperfect world, full of the problems of humankind. We hear the cries of children who go to bed hungry as their family income falls short of what they need for food and shelter. We know of the challenges faced by those serving time and working in overcrowded prisons, including the innocent. We struggle with the violence in our society, and the challenges facing those who care for those with mental illness or addiction, who are limited in the ways that they can respond to an unfriendly world. All these and

many more carry burdens that at times seem to crush them and hold them down. We think of the burdens faced by those we know and ourselves. We ask that Your Holy Spirit be present with these Your children and help lift that burden. With the power of Your love, and the love that is expressed through our actions, we ask that You give a hand of strength to them and lighten their load.

May we be your agents of love, O Lord. As we have talents to share, each of us called to witness to your love for us, grant that we might hear your Word, and allow faith to overtake fear. Give us the strength to listen to the cries of distress, whatever their source, and to respond in love with all you have given to their needs. You have called us each with our own strengths and weaknesses to minister to one another, to live out our lives according to the teachings and ministry of your Son Jesus. He alone is the One who showed us the way to sacrifice, to ready ourselves in faith, giving his Life that we might ourselves have life in You. May we see with fresh eyes the needs of the world around us, be with us as we adjust our priorities and turn our hearts, our minds and our souls over to your will. With joyful hearts we welcome your love and inspiration back into our lives.

For we ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus, who has called us to above all love one another. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your Name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and for ever. **Amen.**

StF 504 – May the mind of Christ my Saviour

1) May the mind of Christ my Saviour
live in me from day to day,
by his love and power controlling
all I do and say.

2) May the word of God dwell richly
in my heart from hour to hour,
so that all may see I triumph
only through his power.

3) May the peace of God my Father
rule my life in everything,
that I may be calm to comfort
sick and sorrowing.

4) May the love of Jesus fill me,
as the waters fill the sea;
him exalting, self forgetting –
this is victory.

5) May I run the race before me,
strong and brave to face the foe,
looking only unto Jesus,
as I onward go.

Katie Barclay Wilkinson

The Grace

As we go from this time of connection, may we remember that we are called to carry the Kingdom within our hearts. As we go from this time of reflection, may we be ready to replace fear with faith as we hear and respond to God. As we go from this time of worship, may we hold onto the truth that everything we have and all we are come from God, through God and for God's glory. May we go in peace and love to bring glory to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and always. **Amen.**