

18th September 2022 – Morning Service
The wisdom of serpents and innocence of doves
Colin Russ

Opening words - Matt 10:16, 19 & 20

I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Do not worry how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you at the time. It is not you who speak, but the spirit of your Father speaking through you.

StF 88 – Praise to the Lord

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| 1) Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the
King of creation!
O my soul, praise him, for he is thy health
and salvation!
All ye who hear,
Brothers and sisters, draw near,
Praise him in glad adoration. | 4) Praise to the Lord, who, when darkness of
sin is abounding,
Who, when the godless do triumph,
all virtue confounding,
Sheddeth his light,
Chaseth the horrors of night,
Saints with his mercy surrounding. |
| 2) Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper thy work
and defend thee;
Surely his goodness and mercy here daily
attend thee:
Ponder anew
What the Almighty can do,
Who with his love doth befriend thee. | 5) 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. |
| 3) Praise to the Lord, who doth nourish thy life
and restore thee,
Fitting thee well for the tasks that are
ever before thee,
Then to thy need
He like a mother doth speed,
Spreading the wings of grace o'er thee. | |

Joachim Neander translated by Catherine Winkworth & Rupert E Davies

Opening Prayer

Almighty God, majestic creator of this amazing universe, who has made us in your own image and refreshes us each day with the breath of life, we want to worship you and praise your holy name together. We thank you for the ability to appreciate the wonder and glory of your creation and for the privilege of sharing in its life each day. We thank you for the way in which you have revealed yourself to us through the gift of Jesus Christ and for the measure of faith through which we have put our trust in Him whom you gave for our redemption from sin. We see your love and care at work in the world in so many ways and through so many people living faithfully in the power of your Spirit.

We are conscious of our weaknesses and sorry for the many times we fail to act as your sons and daughters. Forgive our sins and our oft time reluctance to trust as we should. Forgive our failure to grasp opportunities to make a difference by sharing the grace and mercy we have received. By the power of your Holy Spirit renew our commitment, strengthen our faith and enable us to proclaim the good news of your love for all people revealed in Jesus Christ your Son, our risen Lord and Saviour. **Amen**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

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.**

Reading: Luke 16:1 – 13

Then Jesus said to the disciples, 'There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, "What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer." Then the manager said to himself, "What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes." So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?" He answered, "A hundred jugs of olive oil." He said to him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty." Then he asked another, "And how much do you owe?" He replied, "A hundred containers of wheat." He said to him, "Take your bill and make it eighty." And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.'

'Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.'

StF 251 – Jesus Christ is waiting

- 1) Jesus Christ is waiting, waiting in the streets;
No one is his neighbour, all alone he eats.
Listen, Lord Jesus, I am lonely too:
Make me, friend or stranger, fit to wait on you.
- 2) Jesus Christ is raging, raging in the streets,
Where injustice spirals and real hope retreats.
Listen, Lord Jesus, I am angry too:
In the Kingdom's causes let me rage with you.
- 3) Jesus Christ is healing, healing in the streets,
Curing those who suffer, touching
those he greets.
Listen, Lord Jesus, I have pity too:
Let my care be active, healing, just like you
- 4) Jesus Christ is dancing, dancing in the streets,
Where each sign of hatred He, with love,
defeats.
Listen, Lord Jesus, I should triumph too:
Where good conquers evil let me dance with you
- 5) Jesus Christ is calling, calling in the streets,
'Who will join my journey? I will guide
their feet.'
Listen, Lord Jesus, let my fears be few:
Walk one step before me; I will follow you.

Reading: 1 Timothy 2:1 – 7

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all —this was attested at the right time. For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

Reflection

I find this parable very difficult to understand and interpret. It is so different to other stories which Jesus told in His ministry. In this story a corrupt, rogue manager appears to be applauded for his dishonesty and the way in which he tried to feather his own nest and to protect himself at his masters expense.

The crooked manager had been caught in the act of fiddling his masters business for his own gain. The master called him in to account for what he had done and told him to get the books in order and that he would then be sacked. He then comes up with a plan to protect his future. He knows he isn't strong enough for physical work and can't expose himself to having to beg on the street and so decides to gain favour with some of the master's debtors in the belief that they would then help him when he is out of the job. He sets about reducing the amount that debtors owe the master, a plan which will further damage the master's business, but will hopefully enable the rogue manager to more easily balance the books, and gain him credit with the customers who have benefitted from his dishonesty.

Here is where it is difficult to understand the meaning of the story. Jesus says the master admired this smart Alec, who knew how to look after himself, albeit dishonestly. The text says that streetwise, cunning people are better at looking after themselves than law abiding folk. They are alert to devious opportunities, always looking for crafty angles and are able to survive by living on their wits. The point of the story is that Jesus wants His followers to be equally alert in spotting opportunities to take positive action in order to protect and promote what is good, proclaiming the good news of God's love for all people and so build His kingdom on earth. In other words the call is to use our creative and persuasive talents positively at every opportunity to show and share the love of God in Christ with those among whom we live. Our effort, be it large or small will make a difference. When our grandson was at university in Huddersfield he spotted a fellow sleeping rough on the street. His response was to befriend him and take him a sandwich when he went to lectures each day. It was just a small gesture of care and love, but important for the man who only had a doorway in which to sleep.

In Luke 10 and Matthew 10 we have the account of Jesus sending His disciples to share the good news with the people, but He does so with a strong and sober warning. In Matt 10 v 16 Jesus said, 'I am sending you out like sheep among wolves, so be wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove.' In Matt 28 v 19-20 we have the account of Jesus commissioning His followers to go and make disciples in all nations baptising in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit with the assurance of His enabling presence to the end of the age. The commission represents an amazing and daunting responsibility. However, it is made all the more challenging by what Christ's followers are to proclaim and testify to. The good news is that of God's unconditional love and extravagant generosity for everyone as revealed in the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We remember the things He said such as 'doing to others as we would have them do to us' and the instruction to 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'. He said 'if someone sues you for your coat, give them your cloak as well, and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go the second mile also'. This is the dilemma we have to deal with; that of witnessing to unconditional and generous love without being seen as a soft touch and too easily taken advantage of.

It is also against the backdrop of sin at work through people using dishonest means to gain advantage and power, people who are crafty and not averse to using evil means to gain easy wealth, cause hurt to innocent folk or snatch unjust power at the expense of others.

For me it puts into focus Jesus' instruction to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves simultaneously. I have heard a number of ministers say that when people come to the Manse door begging for money, they never give in to that request but always help by chatting and giving them food. They always try to meet need in a useful and practical way rather than give money which may well be squandered very quickly with nothing to show for it.

Maybe the point of the story is less about the actions of the crooked manager and more about his attitude and ability to look after himself in a difficult situation by being alert and smart in exploiting the options open to him. In Ephesians 6 v 12 Paul says 'our struggle isn't against enemies of flesh and blood but against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places'. The important thing is to recognise the way in which the evil forces work to try and control human hearts and minds, and to be spiritually sharp in seeing opportunities to promote the Kingdom values of Jesus with creative energy, conviction and loving generosity.

If we are willing to place ourselves under the control of the Holy Spirit, God will use us to discredit and undermine the evil in the world around us and to create situations in which love prevails. In today's language, we might speak of being humbly smart and thinking outside the box to create situations through which we can share the good news of God's love with those among whom we live. We may feel nervous in the face of so great a challenge, and so do well to remember the promise of Jesus to His followers in Luke 21 v 15, 'don't be over anxious, for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand'.

The work of Street Pastors in towns and cities is a good example reaching out in places of need to show the love of God at work in everyday life. On Monday morning, a man who was a Chaplain in hi-vis vest, was interviewed on BBC among the crowds gathered in Edinburgh to honour Her Majesty, The Queen as she was taken from Holyrood to St. Giles Cathedral for the service of thanksgiving. He said, 'I am just here in case anyone in the crowd needs support, help or just wishes to talk'. Another simple but profound example of taking an opportunity to show God's love at work in the community.

Paul says in 2 Timothy 4 v 2 'proclaim the message and be persistent whether the time is favourable (convenient) or not, and whether the message is welcome or not, and do so with the utmost patience in teaching'. Furthermore in our reading from 1 Timothy 2, Paul puts great emphasis on the importance of prayer and thanksgiving for all people, mentioning especially 'kings and all who live in high positions of leadership' so that a society in which all live in peace, with dignity and godliness is created. How appropriate is that prayer strategy for the present time in our country and the world?

Our Father God's plan that all His children should live in peace with Him and each other was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, himself human, who gave His life that all may gain new and eternal life through trusting His sacrifice. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5 v 21 'For our sake God made Him (Jesus) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God'. What an act of generous love. This is the great news we are called to share creatively and with enthusiasm so that all people, discovering the reality of God's love in Christ for themselves, will also discover life filled with purpose, opportunity, peace, joy and boundless love.

StF 637 – Soldiers of Christ, arise

- 1) Soldiers of Christ, arise,
And put your armour on,
Strong in the strength which God supplies
Through his eternal Son;
Strong in the Lord of hosts,
And in his mighty power,
Who in the strength of Jesus trusts
Is more than conqueror.
- 2) Stand then in his great might,
With all his strength endued;
But take, to arm you for the fight,
The panoply of God;
That, having all things done,
And all your conflicts passed,
You may o'ercome through Christ alone.
And stand complete at last.
- 3) Leave no unguarded place,
No weakness of the soul;
Take every virtue, every grace,
And fortify the whole:
Indissolubly joined.
To battle all proceed;
But arm yourselves with all the mind
That was in Christ, your Head.
- 4) From strength to strength go on,
Wrestle. and fight, and pray,
Tread all the powers of darkness down,
And win the well-fought day;
Still let the Spirit cry
In all his soldiers: come!
Till Christ the Lord descend from high,
And take the conquerors home.

Charles Wesley

Prayers of Intercession

Almighty and loving God, we pray for the witness of the church, the body of Christ, in our country and across the world, that it will be Spirit led and empowered by your love in sharing the good news of Jesus effectively to build your Kingdom on earth. We pray for the inspiration and guidance of your Holy Spirit, to see opportunities to share the gospel and the courage to respond enthusiastically in the knowledge that your love and power will equip us for each task.

At this moment in history, we give thanks and praise for the long and faithful life of Queen Elizabeth II. We thank you for her life of witness and testimony to your great love for all people and for the wisdom bestowed on her in the face of so many and varied situations throughout her reign.

We pray for the royal family as they grieve, that you will comfort and encourage them. We pray that you will comfort our nation and people around the world as we say farewell to a much loved and respected woman and entrust her to your care and safekeeping.

Father God, we pray your special blessing upon King Charles III that you would anoint him with the wisdom to reign faithfully, sound judgement and the strength to set an example of godly service in the life of our country. Help him to be sure of your support and guidance through all his duties and responsibilities and to put his trust in you and your love revealed in Jesus Christ your Son.

We continue Father God to pray for peace in the world. Lord bless and protect the people of Ukraine. Guide the Russian leadership in ways of compassion so that this evil war will end and harmony between brothers and sisters in the two nations can be restored.

We pray for lasting peace in Israel and Palestine and for an end to violence and oppression. We pray for help and support for all people suffering due to climate change, especially those living in Pakistan at this time, that they will receive the help they need from a compassionate world community. Lord bless and guide world leaders and scientists to good judgement and decisions which lead to the slowing down of climate change.

Loving Father God, we pray people who are sick, bereaved, lonely and those worried for the future and how they will cope. We long for them to know the comfort of your love and care in their time of need and distress as we think particularly of those known to us. Lord in your mercy hear our prayers as we come before you in the name of your Son and our Saviour, Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

StF 167 – Colours of day

- 1) Colours of day dawn into the mind,
The sun has come up, the night is behind.
Go down in the city, into the street,
And let's give the message to the
people we meet.
- 2) Go through the park, on into the town;
The sun still shines on, it never goes down.
The light of the world is risen again;
The people of darkness are needing a friend.
- Ch) *So light up the fire and let the flame burn,
Open the door, let Jesus return.
Take seeds of His Spirit, let the fruit grow,
Tell the people of Jesus, let His love show.*
- 3) Open your eyes, look into the sky,
The darkness has come, the sun came to die.
The evening drawn on, the sun disappears,
But Jesus is living, His Spirit is near.

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Blessing

Lord God, grant us your blessing in the coming days, as we seek to live with courage, trusting faith in the power of your love and under the guidance of your enabling Holy Spirit. Help us to play our part in the work of building your Kingdom of love on earth through the grace and mercy of your Son and our Saviour Jesus Christ. **Amen**