

19th November 2023 – Morning Service

A story about three stewards

Margaret Bradley

Call to Worship

Welcome to this act of worship, when we will be focusing upon a story that Jesus told, about a master who entrusted his servants to carry on his business in his absence.

Come, as 'good stewards of the manifold grace of God,

to serve one another with whatever gift each has received,

so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ,

to whom be glory and praise for ever and ever. Amen.' (1 Peter 4: 10-11)

StF 340 – Ye servants of God

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| 1) Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim,
And publish abroad his wonderful name;
The name all-victorious of Jesus extol;
His kingdom is glorious, and rules over all. | 3) 'Salvation to God who sits on the throne!
Let all cry aloud, and honour the Son;
The praises of Jesus the angels proclaim,
Fall down on their faces, and worship the Lamb. |
| 2) God ruleth on high, almighty to save;
And still he is nigh, his presence we have;
The great congregation his triumph shall sing,
Ascribing salvation to Jesus our King. | 4) Then let us adore, and give him his right:
All glory and power, all wisdom and might,
All honour and blessing, with angels above,
And thanks never-ceasing, and infinite love. |

Charles Wesley

Prayer of Praise

Awesome God, the world is filled with your glory, and all around us we can see signs of your immense creative power, in the vastness of the universe, in the wonders of nature and in the huge variety of life-forms. In Jesus we see something of your amazing love, a love which you are always offering to each of us, because every person is valued and cherished by you. In Jesus, you show us that you take the risk of sharing with us the responsibility of using wisely all that you have entrusted to us. Your Spirit is with us now, inviting us to share in the adventure of discovering the joy and blessings that you are so eager to bestow upon us. So, we come this morning to say, 'Yes' God. Yes, you are. Yes, you are great. Yes, you show us the way to authentic life. Yes, you are among us. And we offer you our praise and worship.

To you we lift our eyes, **O you who are enthroned in the heavens!**

As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, **so our eyes look to the Lord our God, until he has mercy on us.** (Psalm 123:1-2)

Prayer of Confession

Merciful God, you know what is within us as we come to worship. You know our joys and excitement. You know our fears and anxieties. You know our feelings of inadequacy and doubt, our remorse for things we wish that we'd not done and our regrets over things that we wish we had done. We own that our lives have not always given you top priority and that we have wasted opportunities to reach out to others.

But you have made available to us all the resources of your grace. We pray that our failures may not become our burden. Grant us your forgiveness to set us free, and a fresh vision of our calling to follow Jesus, in whose name we pray. **Amen.**

StF 727 – God in his love for us

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| 1) 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. | 3) 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. |
| 2) 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. | 4) Earth is the Lord's: it is ours to enjoy it,
Ours, as his stewards, to farm and defend.
From its pollution, misuse, and destruction,
Good Lord, deliver us, world without end! |

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Reading: Matthew 25: 14 - 18

‘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.’

Reflection – God trusts us to be responsible stewards

A scheme that has been used by churches trying to raise funds for a project is the ‘Talents Challenge’, where members are given a sum of money which they are invited to increase and bring back to a special service. The money might be used to buy ingredients for cakes, jams, pickles, which are made and sold on to make a profit; to paint pictures; to hold a barbecue, organise a car-wash, or whatever. People are challenged to use their imagination and creativity to multiply what’s been invested in them. The idea is based upon a story that Jesus told, about three servants/stewards whose master entrusted them with a sum of money, with which they were to engage in trade on his behalf. Versions of it appears in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and also in the non-canonical Gospel of the Hebrews. In Galilee there were many absentee landlords, who left stewards in charge of the household while they were away. Jesus knew of such a man, who distributed his huge wealth to his servants so that they could carry on his business in his absence. And Jesus said, ‘That’s what God is like.’

How is God like this? First of all, it reminds us that we are not owners of the world. God owns all. ‘The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.’ (Psalm 24:1). God created the universe and everything in it, and God is generous in bestowing life, gifts and treasures upon us. It also reminds us that God has invested an enormous amount in us. The landowner in the story gave his stewards a sum of money that represented the equivalent of around 150 years of a labourer’s wages. The Greek word ‘talanton’ was a very high value unit of coinage, which is translated in more modern versions of the Gospel as ‘bags of gold’ or ‘gold bars.’ This was an enormous risk. But God takes risks, and calls upon us to take risks too.

It was a huge risk for God to create us with freedom of choice as to how we act. But God trusts us. Human beings have been given the responsibility for looking after God’s dominion - the world, humanity, and all the gifts and resources that have been entrusted to us. God has made us custodians of the earth and God gives us tasks to do, together with the means to do them. There’s a modern story about a man who was working in his allotment when a woman came by. She said to him, ‘Well, you and the Lord have certainly done a good job there.’ The gardener replied, ‘Yes, and I’m grateful, but you should have seen this patch when the Lord had it all to himself!’ God desires to work in collaboration with us.

We speak about us putting our trust in God to act on our behalf. The official motto of the United States is ‘In God we trust’ and these words appear on stamps, currency and license plates. We sing with gusto, ‘And I will trust in you alone’ and ‘We’ll praise God for all that is past and trust him for all that’s to come.’

But it's significant that God also trusts us. We often forget that we are in a Covenant relationship with God, and any such relationship is built upon trust on both sides. It's not very satisfactory if one partner has absolute and utter faith in the other if they themselves can't be trusted to be committed, faithful and loving. That's why John Wesley introduced a Covenant service for Methodist people to renew their vows to God at the start of a new year.

God had entered into a Covenant relationship with the people of Israel, with the intention that they should be 'a light to the world.' But they had not kept their side. Jewish leaders had withheld from others a share in God's gifts. And so, Jesus told this story against the religious authorities of his day, who had 'buried' God's gifts under their traditions, regulations and rules, making idols of law, race and customs. They believed that it was their duty to preserve what God had given them. They just didn't get that God's capital was expected to be invested in mission to foreigners, sinners, outcasts and all those whom they were excluding. This story was Jesus' way of answering those who were questioning his ministry, his authority, his breaking of the rules, and to remind them that they had been entrusted with the task of bringing in God's rule on earth.

StF 658 – A charge to keep I have

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| 1) A charge to keep I have:
A God to glorify;
A never-dying soul to save,
And fit it for the sky; | 3) Arm me with jealous care,
As in your sight to live;
And O your servant, Lord, prepare
A strict account to give! |
| 2) To serve the present age,
My calling to fulfil; -
O may it all my powers engage
To do my Master's will! | 4) Help me to watch and pray,
And on yourself rely,
So shall I not my trust betray,
Nor love within me die |

Charles Wesley

Reading: Matthew 25: 19 - 30

'After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. 20 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 – We are accountable

In Matthew's Gospel this story is set within the context of being ready for Christ's coming in judgement. The master returned and called his servants to account for what has been entrusted to them. Two had been good and faithful and shown a good return on the investment. They were rewarded. The third expected to be praised, but, because he was fearful of taking risks, he timidly hid his share for safe-keeping. He was charged with a breach of trust, because he had defrauded his master of his legitimate gain. Matthew's Gospel was written for Jewish Christians rather than for a Gentile audience. It came into being over 40 years after Jesus' death. In the evangelist's eyes, the Fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in AD 70 was God's judgment upon the Jewish nationalistic party for failing to respond to Jesus and rejecting him. The task with which they had been entrusted was taken from them and given to others. It was imperative now for the early Christian communities to carry on the work of Jesus, in his absence, and grow the rule of God on earth.

Throughout the centuries the parable has been interpreted in the context of different social, cultural and religious situations. The 17th century Authorised Version of the Bible translated the Greek word 'talanton', meaning a value of money, with the English word 'talent'. The parable then came to be used as an encouragement to us all to use our talents, in the sense of the TV programme 'Britain's Got Talent', that is, our abilities, skills and gifts, in the service of God.

The growth of the idea of financial stewardship in the church extended this to include not just our natural endowments and aptitudes, but also by the way we commit our wealth and material possessions, and our time, to God and in serving others. The name of the 19th century ironmaster Noah Hingley is known to many local people because of his foundation of the Netherton ironworks, which made part of the anchor for the supposedly unsinkable SS 'Titanic'. Not so widely known is how Noah used his wealth to further the Christian cause and to benefit those who were not as well-blessed as himself. Noah lived in Cradley and he donated large sums to the three Methodist congregations there, as well as to the Anglicans. He was a member of their Missions Committees. He believed that the best way to help raise people out of poverty was by education, so he contributed to the cost of the Church Schools, whose Trust Deed states were intended 'for the education of the labouring classes.' And he funded the building of High Town Ragged School, with its worshipping congregation for those who felt uncomfortable in a traditional church. He was a regular visitor to Two Gates Ragged School and was also responsible for organising relief, such as giving out clothing and blankets to over 200 people in the cold winter of January 1861. He provided Christmas dinners and the gift of 1 shilling to those in need and arranged outings for them in the summer. His strong religious faith was inherited from his mother, and his whole life demonstrated how he was indeed a faithful steward of his Master.

This consideration of how we use our money is not just an individual one, but also a question for the church to ask itself, of how we handle the finances and property entrusted to us. How might things be different if our gifts, time and possessions were put to bring glory to God in the church and in the world? If only it was not all stored away, what might be done? We appoint people to the office of stewards in the church, to look after it, but we ALL carry the responsibility of being good stewards. God trusts us to be faithful and to be active in growing kingdom values, not sitting back behind closed doors, like the man who buried money in the ground. This story is an exhortation to all followers of Jesus to use all our God-given gifts and resources in the service of God and to take risks.

Stewardship is an ethical value that embodies the responsible management of our God-given resources. A contemporary understanding of this will include our care for the earth, how we treat the environment and planet – water, air, animals, soil, land, scientific data etc. Whether or not we are religious, this is a vitally important issue for all of us. Young people are showing us the way.

This story then carries a warning about fulfilling our responsibilities faithfully, whether it was to the religious leaders of Jesus' day, the later disciples of the early church, or us in the present age. It's an encouragement to get active, and a warning of what will happen if we don't.

Our positive response to divinely-given opportunities will make God happy and bring its own reward of joy in sharing in the Master's work, whereas lack of action will lead to negative judgement and destruction. We are accountable. Does our future hold commendation or condemnation?

Albert Schweitzer, the 20th century theologian and medical missionary to Africa, said, 'The purpose of human life is to serve and to show compassion and the will to help others. Therefore, search, and see if there is any place where you can invest your humanity.' What changes might you make to your life-style after hearing Jesus' story this morning? Maybe to be more committed to bringing in God's rule on earth, by offering more of your time, talents and money to God to enable new expressions of mission and ministry to spring up, by helping others and giving to good causes, by campaigning on behalf of the environment, perhaps by voting in a different way. We all have something to offer. May we each come to hear God's voice saying to us, 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant.'

StF 491 – As servants working an estate

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| 1) As servants working an estate
Whose owner is away,
And whose return they all await
Though no one knows the day,
So none of us can name the hour,
The season or the year
When Christ with all of heaven's power
Will suddenly appear. | 3) For Christ the Lord will surely come,
The King whom kings will fear,
And with God's perfect justice plumb
The justice we do here,
Revealing that the present age
And every age that's past
Are not the final moral gauge
That judges us at last. |
| 2) Our task is not to calculate
What angels do not know,
But faithfully to watch and wait
And Christ's compassion show.
Not loading fragile human schemes
With hopes they cannot bear,
We trust the promise that redeems
The present from despair. | 4) So guide, Lord Christ, our every choice
That when our hearts shall hear
Your step, your knock, your calling voice
We will not hide in fear,
But welcome you from realms above
To your estate below,
Where justice, mercy, peace and love
Abundantly will grow. |

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Giving Thanks

We give thanks to God, the giver of all good things. For the life that we have been given and for all the blessings we have received. For the gift of Jesus, who lived and worked amongst us. For his teaching, his suffering and death on the cross, for his resurrection to new life and for the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit. We give thanks for the opportunities that we have been given to use all that God has entrusted into our care and for all those throughout the ages who have been prepared to take risks in the cause of good. May we be more appreciative of God's gifts to us and help us to see that no work truly prospers unless it brings blessings to others. **Amen**

Prayers of Concern

Trusting God, we bring to you our concerns about the world: for the future of the planet earth and all who inhabit it. We bring our tears, as we see the appalling scenes of suffering caused by wars and conflicts and the infringement of human rights; our distress at the lack of compassion of people in power for those who are powerless and vulnerable; our dismay at extreme inequalities of wealth and poverty.

And we offer you our campaigning and our votes; our talents and our money; and our prayers for your creation, that peace and justice, love and mercy might prevail.

May your kingdom come: **may your will be done.**

We bring to you our concerns about the church: for those who are persecuted in any way for the faith they hold or the life-styles they adopt; about the trend to growing secularism and declining spirituality; for the difficulties faced by the institutions of the church and its leadership. And we offer you our commitment, our loyalty, our hope and our prayers that one day your will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

May your kingdom come: **may your will be done.**

We bring you our concerns about our society: for the young and for the elderly; for those who are disadvantaged and discriminated against; our unease about the growing pre-occupation with 'self'.

And we offer you our friendship and help; our listening and our doing; and our prayers for our community.

May your kingdom come: **may your will be done.**

We bring you our concerns about people that we know and love: those whose bodies and minds are not as they once were; those who are anxious about the future and live with stress or depression; those who are bereaved and sorrowful. And we offer you our words and our touch; our time and our listening; our care and our prayers for their strengthening, healing and renewal.

May your kingdom come: **may your will be done.**

In Jesus we see your concern for the world and for each one of us. And we offer you our thanks, our obedience and service, and our prayers that you will use us and perfect us. **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.**

StF 483 – We are marching in the light of God

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|---|---|
| 1) We are marching in the light of God,
We are marching in the light of God,
We are marching in the light of God.
We are marching in the light of God.
We are marching, Oh
We are marching in the Light of God
We are marching, Oh
We are marching in the Light of God | 3) We are moving in the power of God,
We are moving in the power of God,
We are moving in the power of God,
We are moving in the power of God.
We are moving, Oh
We are moving in the power of God.
We are moving, Oh
We are moving in the power of God. |
| 2) We are living in the love of God,
We are living in the love of God,
We are living in the love of God,
We are living in the love of God.
We are living, Oh, we are living in the love of God.
We are living, Oh, we are living in the love of God. | |

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Blessing

Go now, throwing off everything that holds you back from living your life in praise and service to God. And may the blessing of God, Creator, Son and Spirit be with each one of us, today and always. **Amen.**