

25th October 2020 – Morning Service

One World Week

Rev Alan Combes

Call to Worship - Proverbs 13: 23

A poor man's field may produce abundant food, but injustice sweeps it away.

StF 706 – Longing for light

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| 1) Longing for light, we wait in darkness.
Longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people,
Light for the world to see. | 3) Longing for food, many are hungry.
Longing for water, many still thirst.
Make us your bread, broken for others,
Shared until all are fed. |
| Ch) <i>Christ, be our light!</i>
<i>Shine in our hearts.</i>
<i>Shine through the darkness.</i>
<i>Christ, be our light!</i>
<i>Shine in your Church gathered today.</i> | 4) Longing for shelter, many are homeless.
Longing for warmth, many are cold.
Make us your building, sheltering others,
Walls made of living stone. |
| 2) Longing for peace, our world is troubled.
Longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has power to save us.
Make us your living voice. | 5) Many the gifts, many the people,
Many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another,
Making your kingdom come. |

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Reading: James 5:4

The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.

As we worship God today, many trade deals negotiated in our name, force developing countries to open their markets to competition from the heavily subsidised agriculture and industries of the developed world. Protests from the governments of those developing countries that their economies will be destroyed have been ignored.

A cry of protest (from Central Africa)

Dear God, you know that we have struggled for many years to be free, to be ourselves, to make our own decisions, to set our own directions, to formulate our own laws and learn from them. Is this not the way of all your children? We do not understand, dear God, why those who say they honour our achievement and want to recruit us to their cause, mix friendship with plunderous gain and tell us we must bend our necks to new yokes of their making. We do not want new masters, God! We want to be free to live, to risk, to fail perhaps, to rise up again, to share. What shall we do, if those who say they are our friends do not lend us their strength? How shall we prosper if they keep us poor, deny us opportunity, rob us of hope? What answer shall we give when our children and widows cry for food? Dear God, we cannot live for ourselves; we are your children, members of your human family. Give us brothers and sisters who will help us to stand up; not lift us, God, not lift us, but give us strength to lift ourselves. Amen.

Prayer of Confession

Forgive, O Lord, our indifference to the needs of others; our thoughtlessness and self-interest. How easy it is to forget, when we are loading our trolleys in the supermarket, that others toil to bring us our daily food. Forgive, O Lord, our voracious appetites for something new, regardless of where it comes from, and who produces it, the unrealistic prices we pay, and the subsidies we expect.

Forgive, O Lord, that we do not equate the results of our own self interest with the plight of so many producers who live in poverty.

Forgive O Lord, when we turn our heads and pretend we do not see.

Lord, forgive us. Amen

*"The way the world is organised is wrong, because there is no place for us. We are equal to you. When a tiny part of humanity lives well, and 90 per cent doesn't live well, something is wrong in God's world."
(Salome Costas, a Brazilian social worker.)*

Reading: 1 John 3: 17 – 18

If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

Do not smile and say you are already with us. Millions do not know you and to us who do, what is the difference? What is the point of your presence if our lives do not alter? Change our lives, shatter our complacency. Make your word flesh of our flesh, blood of our blood and our life's purpose. Take away the quietness of a clear conscience. Press us uncomfortably, for only thus is that other peace is made. Your peace. (Dom Helder Camara, Brazil.)

StF 703 – In an age of twisted values

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| <p>1) In an age of twisted values
We have lost the truth we need;
In sophisticated language
We have justified our greed;
By our struggle for possessions
We have robbed the poor and weak -
Hear our cry and heal our nations:
Your forgiveness, Lord, we seek.</p> <p>2) We have built discrimination
On our prejudice and fear;
Hatred swiftly turns to cruelty
If we hold resentments dear.
For communities divided
By the walls of class and race
Hear our cry and heal our nations:
Show us, Lord, your love and grace.</p> | <p>3) When our families are broken;
When our homes are full of strife;
When our children are bewildered,
When they lose their way in life;
When we fail to give the aged
All the care we know we should -
Hear our cry and heal our nations
With your tender fatherhood.</p> <p>4) We who hear your word so often
Choose so rarely to obey;
Turn us from our wilful blindness,
Give us truth to light our way.
In the power of your Spirit
Come to cleanse us, make us new:
Hear our cry and heal our nations
Till our nations honour you.</p> |
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Reading: Matthew 20: 1 – 15 - The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the market-place doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing.

About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' Because no-one has hired us,' they answered. He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

Address

What child hasn't been heard to say "it's not fair!" when trying to convince mum and dad they should have something which every other member of their class may, or more likely may not, have been given by their families? "It's not fair" is the cry of workers seeking equal pay for equal work. It's the cry of businesses facing subsidised competition or rigged trade barriers.

Such concepts of fairness have much to commend them. It seems right that people should be given the rewards they deserve, and that those who work hard should benefit from their efforts. But, as our gospel reading shows, God's perspective on these matters may be rather different. As so often in his parables, Jesus shocks the listener by showing that our normal human reactions and instincts can be out of kilter with God's views. In human terms, the labourers who have slogged away in the vineyard since the early morning, enduring the heat of the day, are quite within their rights to protest at being given only the same pay as those who only came into the fields at the very end of the day. Any trade union would give full backing to their case. A modern employment tribunal would almost certainly find in their favour!

But God's character is different. In the parable we are challenged to rethink our assumptions about fairness. God shows us his overwhelming concern for the poor and needy. The labourers who are still available for hire in the marketplace as the afternoon wears on are probably the less strong, probably the less able workers – for the fitter and brighter ones will have been snapped up by other employers. But God as the landowner rewards them not just on the same basis as the others, but with huge generosity that responds more to their needs than to their output.

Of course, from a human perspective this doesn't make sense, it feels unjust. From a Darwinian or economic perspective, it feels inefficient, a distortion of the market pricing mechanism for labour which should be weeding out the weak in favour of the strong. But Jesus is telling us that God values every person equally and for whom they are, not for what they can do. It is a message of unconditional love, of grace, and it should bring joy and relief to all of us, or at least for those of us who are conscious of our own weaknesses. It is a message that underlines once more God's special and constant love and compassion for the poor, the needy, the outcast and the oppressed.

We want to read this parable as one about fairness, but is that what we want or need?

An old proverb says:

When we get what we deserve, that is justice.

When we don't get what we deserve, that is mercy.

When we get what we don't deserve, that is grace.

Clinging to our sense of fairness reveals how we misunderstand God's ways. God's kingdom is not based on what is fair but on what we need. We don't need justice, we need grace. Grace that overlooks all we are and all we have done and said; grace that allows us to stand in line knowing that God will smile upon us.

The great secret of fair trade is that, in human terms, it actually isn't fair at all! Fair trade is really about biased trade – trade that is biased to the poor, as God's heart is biased to the poor. That is why fair trade is such a profoundly Christian response to world poverty. That is why fair trade shows God's profound graciousness.

By making it possible for the poor and disadvantaged to compete in a world where otherwise they would fall by the wayside, fair trade is reflecting the nature of God. By taking account of people's needs as well as their productivity in determining the price we pay for their goods, fair trade is putting into practice a Christian perspective of fairness that stands out against the harshness of human standards of fairness.

Through all of this our core message shines out strongly: that the world should not operate purely on the basis of economic efficiency; that the laws of the free market should not be seen as paramount. May we continue to proclaim instead a message that places love, dignity, respect and relationships at the heart of trade and society; a message that proclaims that society's goals should not be measured purely in terms of money, but should be concerned with human values, quality of life and the impact of policies on people; a message that proclaims God's sense of fairness and his bias to the poor and calls each of us to work towards a vision of a world where all people are able to prosper and grow into the people God wants them to be.

Whenever you go shopping, just remind yourself that here is another opportunity to answer God's call to justice, righteousness and love. It may take a touch of mental gymnastics to see the door of your local supermarket as an entry into God's kingdom, but in its own way that's exactly what it is.

[From a sermon by Reg Bailey, Chair, Traidcraft Foundation.]

Reflections on a knife, fork and spoon (from Traidcraft at Iona)

Knife: Lord, with this knife you have given me the power to hurt or be useful. Please help me to use this and all that you give me to help and not to harm. Lord, this knife is useless without its cutting edge. Help me to be sharp and keen to work for you.

Fork: Lord, thank you for food and the farmers who sow and reap; for the suppliers who buy and transport; for the retailers who sell, and for the means to prepare, cook and enjoy my meal. Help me not to be greedy and to eat only what is sufficient for my needs and not for my appetite. Help me to remember that I should live simply so that others may simply live.

Spoon: Lord, stir me today. Mix in my fear with my confidence, my doubt with my faith, my strength with my weakness, and make me whole, like this cup of (fairly traded) tea!

Prayers of Intercession

We pray for the peoples of the world in all their richness and diversity, and for all those who have influence and authority. As we grow together, may we all, in ways great and small, seek justice, freedom and peace for all and serve each other with wisdom, honesty and love.

We pray that as your followers we may use your gifts to us to set others free from drudgery and want; to redress the imbalances in world trade that keep millions trapped in poverty, to give dignity and respect to those who grow and make the things we buy and use.

We pray for those working for justice in trade: the campaigning organisations, those in the church and those in the commercial world who hear your call to seek justice for the poor. Strengthen and inspire them, and bless them with success.

We pray for ourselves as consumers. The choices we make in our shops and stores and supermarkets will affect the lives of people in other parts of the world for good or for ill. Help us to choose wisely and with care so that exploitation may be overcome and deprivation may be ended.

In you, Father, we grow as one family in earth and in heaven. Save us from false piety and empty prayers. Move us and stir us to make our faith real and active. Help us to share the joy of those who are united in your service. 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 693 – Beauty for brokenness

- 1) Beauty for brokenness, hope for despair,
Lord, in Your suffering world, this is our
prayer.
Bread for the children, justice, joy, peace,
Sunrise to sunset Your kingdom increase.
- 2) Shelter for fragile lives, cures for their ills,
Work for all people, trade for their skills.
Land for the dispossessed, rights for the weak,
Voices to plead the cause of those who can't
speak
- Ch) God of the poor, friend of the weak,
Give us compassion we pray,
Melt our cold hearts, let tears fall like rain,
Come change our love from a spark
To a flame.
- 3) Refuge from cruel wars, havens from fear,
Cities for sanctuary freedoms to share.
Peace to the killing fields, scorched earth to
green,
Christ for the bitterness, His cross for the
pain.
- 4) Rest for the ravaged earth, oceans and
streams,
Plundered and poisoned, our future, our
dreams.
Lord, end our madness, carelessness, greed,
Make us content with the things that we
need.
- 5) Lighten our darkness, breathe on this flame
Until Your justice burns brightly again;
Until the nations learn of Your ways,
Seek Your salvation and bring You their
praise.

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A prayer of dismissal (The Northumbria Community)

Almighty God, Creator of all things, Maker of all people, grant that we may find a unity in you; that we may grow together in a bond of peace; that we may share with justice, the rich resources of the world; that no one may be in hunger, or oppressed, that none of your creation may be spoiled or abused. We ask this in the name of him who gave himself for the world, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.