

# 25<sup>th</sup> September 2022 – Morning Service

## A rich man and Lazarus

Margaret Bradley

### Call to Worship

We come to worship God, who is 'just in all his ways and kind in all his doings'. (Psalm 145:17)

### StF 8 – God with us

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|--|--|
| 1) God with us: Creator, Father,<br>Bringing everything to birth;<br>Mother of the whole creation,<br>Fire of stars and life of earth:<br>Down the countless years composing,<br>From the earth's evolving night,<br>Love's response to love, and forming<br>Mind and soul to seek your light.         | 3) God with us: Unwearyed Spirit,<br>From the birth of time and space,<br>Surging through unconscious being,<br>Joyful, Life-Creating Grace:<br>Through the centuries you find us;<br>You, as God, inspire our prayer;<br>Life and Power at work within us,<br>Love for ever, everywhere!        |
| 2) God with us: Redeemer, Brother,<br>Friend for ever at our side,<br>Here, in flesh, you walked among us,<br>Taking up your cross, you died.<br>Crucified, despised, rejected,<br>Perfect Love, who shared our shame,<br>Streaming from the cross, your judgement,<br>Full of mercy, clears our name. | 4) God, Transcendent, far beyond us,<br>Closest Friend, unfailing Guide:<br>Through the ages, wronged, affronted,<br>In your poor, still crucified!<br>God with us: convict, forgive us;<br>By your holy love destroy<br>All that hinders peace and justice:<br>Fill this aching world with joy! |

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### Prayer of Adoration

Eternal God, source of all that exists, all praise and glory belongs to you.

Eternal God, source of all justice, compassion and hope, all praise and glory belongs to you.

Eternal God, revealed to us in Jesus, your Son, all praise and glory belongs to you.

Eternal God, constantly present in our lives by the Spirit, all praise and glory belongs to you.

Eternal God, ceaselessly working in human history, all praise and glory belongs to you.

Lifting our voices before you, we sing your praise.

Lifting our hearts before you, we rejoice that you are God.

Lifting our lives before you, we offer our allegiance.

Accept the worship of your people, to the praise and glory of your name, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

### Introduction to Old Testament reading

Around 750 years before Jesus, God called a shepherd named Amos to preach to the people of Israel.

Things seemed to be going well there. Unusually, the country was secure from foreign invaders and it was

a time of prosperity. But this was limited to the wealthy and it fed upon injustice and oppression of the

poor. People were going to worship, but they didn't seek to reflect God's nature. Amos perceived that God

is just and compassionate and requires us to be likewise. If people failed to reflect this, then the nation's

security would be threatened. Amos' warnings proved to be justified. Within 30 years Israel was destroyed

by Assyrian armies and the people were enslaved. Our peace is founded upon following God's justice.

## Reading: Amos 6:4-7

You lie on beds adorned with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile; your feasting and lounging will end.

## StF 162 – The prophet’s voice

- 1) The prophets' voice comes down the years  
To teach and to inspire,  
To show the nature of our God  
In words and deeds of fire;  
Not to disclose some rigid plan  
That God has set in stone,  
But to renew the promises  
The saints have always known.
- 2) The prophets' voice speaks of the past -  
The actions that reveal  
The way God used the people then  
This broken world to heal;  
And then translates the things gone by  
In ways that we find new  
So we can judge the world we know  
By standards ever true.
- 3) The prophets' voice holds up a glass  
In which to see our day;  
Events which span the globe around  
And things we do and say.  
It calls us to repent and turn  
From things that tear life down,  
To choose the path that Jesus chose  
And share his work and crown.

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## Reading: Luke 16:19-31

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, “Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.”

But Abraham replied, “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.”

He answered, “Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.” Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.” “No, father Abraham,” he said, “but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.” He said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

## Reflection

### ***'At the rich man's gate lay a poor man': past and present social inequality.***

Many people will be familiar with the song 'All things bright and beautiful'. It was written for children in 1848 by a wealthy Irish Anglican woman by the name of Mrs Alexander. One of the original verses is omitted today. It went 'The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, God made them high and lowly and ordered their estate.' Mrs Alexander wanted to perpetuate the class system. She believed that the poor should be kept in their place. She didn't want to encourage children to have ideas of improving their lot and getting above their station and she claimed that this was in line with God's will. She wasn't the only one who thought this way. There were many in the established church in Victorian England who were unsympathetic to establishing a more just, equal and fair society.

Three years before the song was written, Benjamin Disraeli, who was later to become Prime Minister, wrote of the UK being 'Two nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts and feelings as if they were dwellers in different zones or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by different breeding, are fed by different food, are ordered by different manners and are not governed by the same laws – The Rich and the Poor.'

Similarly, in first-century Palestine there were those possessing extreme wealth and those in abject poverty, living in close conjunction with one another, but with an immense gulf between them. At the bottom of the pile were those who had little to live on and often went hungry. The richest people at the top were the aristocratic families and merchants, who received bonuses for collaborating with the Romans occupying their land. Modern archaeologists have discovered remains of their opulent homes. They had responsibility for maintaining the Temple and performing sacrifices and were known as Sadducees. As religious 'conservatives' and defenders of the status quo they viewed the ministry of Jesus with considerable alarm and played a role in his trial and death.

Jesus told a parable about a rich man and a poor beggar, which was based on a popular folk tale about the reversal of fortunes, but he made it a satire against the Sadducees. He describes the huge chasm between two people at opposite ends of the socio-economic ladder. The rich man is expensively clothed. The poor man is dressed in dirty rags, with dogs licking his sores, making him unclean and consequently unable to attend worship. The rich man feasted sumptuously every day. The poor man was hungry, weak, and envious. The rich man had five brothers. The beggar had no family. The rich man isn't given a name. Sometimes he is called Dives, which is the word in the Latin Vulgate version of the Gospels for a rich man. The poor man is the only character in any of Jesus' parables to be given a name. It's Lazarus, which means 'God will help'.

Disraeli's description of two nations living within our country 180 years ago has not improved significantly. Whilst the current Sunday Times Rich List shows a record number of 180 are now billionaires - the richest man is worth over 28 billion pounds - thousands are struggling to cope with rising prices and higher bills this year. Whilst boardroom members and shareholders are receiving large bonuses, employees are being forced to take action to improve their pay. Nevertheless, we live in one of the world's largest economies and on a global scale there is huge inequality between the richest and poorest nations. Our refusal to respond to the climate crisis is making people poorer and widening the gap.

Although the rich man saw poor, sick Lazarus lying at his gate, he closed his ears to the cries. Giving 'handouts' was not in his nature. He hardened his heart rather than offering aid to the beggar on his doorstep, who was tantalised by the sight of guests at the banquet table throwing to the ground good bread on which they had wiped their hands. The nearest that I have come to appreciating what this might feel like was seven years ago, when my family took part in a sponsored fundraising project for the Methodist charity All We Can, when we were challenged to live on a pound a day for a week. We did successfully complete it and raised £700 to fund projects that would improve the quality of life for those living in some of the world's poorest countries.

But the hardest part for me was when Keith and myself used our free bus passes to go into Birmingham for a free early-evening folk concert in the bar of Symphony Hall. We took bottles of tap-water with us to drink, and we had to sit watching others eating and drinking things that we couldn't afford. That cut deep! And we knew that it was only a short time before we would be back to our normal life-style. We could see an end to our poverty. For others there is no prospect of an end to their discomfort.

### 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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### Reflection

#### ***'Have mercy on me': a future vision.***

Having described the different circumstances of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus' story then goes on to tell of how, in the after-life, their positions were reversed. When the rich man died, he was the one outside, in anguish and torment. He recognised Lazarus, who was now at the banqueting table, seated comfortably in a position of honour and intimacy, beside Abraham, founder of the Jewish race. There's nothing to indicate that Lazarus received his blessing because he was particularly pious. It is only because he was poor. The rich man cried for help and pleaded for mercy, even though he had no mercy for Lazarus in his need. Abraham tells him that he is now facing the consequences of refusing to help when he had the opportunity. At best he was just apathetic and couldn't be bothered. He was unable to sympathise and failed to be moved. At worst he was hard-heartedly callous to those living in poverty and with a less-privileged life-style to his own. He accepted inequalities of circumstance as being the proper conditions of life and refused to bridge the gap between them. Such attitudes have no place in God's Kingdom. In the past and present reality of inequality, Jesus had a vision of the future where community is not ordered in this way, but where the poor would be raised and inequalities would be levelled out. He said that he had come to bring good news to the poor.

The original folk story, of the reversal of fortunes of the wealthy man and impoverished beggar, was extended in the parable told in Luke's Gospel. The rich man makes excuses for his lack of concern. If only someone had told him, had warned him in advance. But Moses and the prophets HAD given warnings about the consequences of serving your own self-interest and neglecting the poor, as we saw in the reading from the Old Testament book of Amos. But this rich man's mind was closed to the revelation of God in the prophets and Scriptures and his heart was shut to feelings of compassion. Those who ignore the Scriptures, and aren't persuaded by a sense of morality, aren't likely to be convinced even by apparitions from the dead. Witnesses of Jesus' resurrection later understood that even the raising of Jesus from the dead could not be guaranteed to convince people of how God intends us to use wealth.

The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, wrote: 'One reason why the rich, in general, have so little sympathy for the poor, is because they so seldom visit them. Hence it is that one part of the world does not know what the other suffers. Many of them do not know because they do not care to know; they keep out of the way of knowing it; and they plead their voluntary ignorance as excuses for their hardness of heart.'

But modern technology means that we do know. One way of showing our love for our neighbour is by paying a just tax, because it means that we can maintain systems and support which keep many people in our communities from sinking. Tax isn't an evil. It's a blessing, which enables those who are better-off to play our part in a generous society that cares for all. It's easy at the moment for wealthy individuals, and corporations making huge profits, to avoid paying their fair share of tax. This means that the rest of society loses out. This is unjust and the group Church Action for Tax Justice exists to challenge government inactivity on this issue.

Jesus taught that God desires greater equality. He taught that God expects people who have prospered to demonstrate compassion towards those who have not done so well. Generous giving and sharing should be normal for those who would follow Jesus. We may not be millionaires, but most people in our churches are closer to the rich man than we are to Lazarus. Because of this, some might find Jesus' words uncomfortable. But the demand is to do what we can well afford. Agencies like Christian Aid and All We Can bring those not so near closer to us. We do have opportunities to show concern for poor, at home and abroad. To ignore them is to put our own life in peril.

## **Meditation**

Am I really a Christian at all?

When I show favouritism to those who have money, when I try to impress those with status, and ignore or humiliate those with neither. Am I really a Christian at all?

When I eat lavishly with guests at my table, when I spend freely and dress splendidly, and ignore or humiliate people on my doorstep. Am I really a Christian at all?

Lord, if I had really known who you were! If I had recognised that those without money can be rich in faith and will possess your promised kingdom. Although you have risen from the dead, if I failed to take heed, failed to be warned, I wonder, sometimes, am I really a Christian at all?

## **StF 713 – Show me how to stand for justice**

- 1) Show me how to stand for justice:  
How to work for what is right,  
How to challenge false assumptions,  
How to walk within the light.  
May I learn to share more freely  
In a world so full of greed,  
Showing your immense compassion  
By the life I choose to lead.
- 2) Teach my heart to treasure mercy,  
Whether given or received -  
For my need has not diminished  
Since the day I first believed:  
Let me seek no satisfaction  
Boasting of what I have done,  
But rejoice that I am pardoned  
And accepted in your Son.
- 3) Gladly I embrace a lifestyle  
Modelled on your living word,  
In humility submitting  
To the truth which I have heard.  
Make me conscious of your presence  
Every day in all I do:  
By your Spirit's gracious prompting  
May I learn to walk with you.

## **A time of quiet**

A time of quiet for personal reflection on how we can each increase our awareness of, and contact with, those in this country, and abroad, who are living in poverty and distress. What new action will we commit to in response to what we have learned today? It may be to give to the Food Bank, to make a donation to All We Can or Christian Aid, to have a conversation with the person selling The Big Issue, to help out at a soup kitchen for the homeless, to pay our taxes, to write to your MP, or to join a group which campaigns for social justice.

## **Confession**

God of mercy and new beginnings, we confess that our discipleship has been lazy and we have missed opportunities for bearing witness to you in our words and by our actions. We have been envious of those who have more than we have, we have looked down on those who have less than us, we have been angry with those that disagree with us, we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves and we have allowed the divisions in our society to widen. Although you condemn social injustice, we persist in making excuses for not sharing our resources. Melt our hearts and keep pricking our consciences, so that we may respond to your moral compulsion to put justice and compassion to effect in our nation and in the world. Amen.

## **Prayers of thanks and concern**

Generous God, we bring our thanks for all the richness of creation. We live in a green and fertile land, surrounded by trees, crops and water. We pray for those who know only dry, parched rock and sand and see no running water. And for those in Pakistan who are caught up in devastating floods where millions have lost their homes and crops have been washed away.

Generous God, we give thanks for our spiritual riches. We have books, music, art, religious teaching to stimulate our minds and help us in our search for you. We pray for those whose lives are spent just surviving another day. For those who are suffering and afraid in Ukraine. For those overseas who are prepared to risk the high seas in order to reach security and freedom in another land.

Generous God, we bring our thanks for our material riches. We enjoy nourishing and varied food, comfortable homes and many possessions. We pray for those who are unable to afford a home because of astronomical house prices and a shortage of affordable housing to rent. We pray for local housing departments and all who work in them. For voluntary projects which serve the homeless and poorly-housed - Shelter, Crisis, Church Action on Poverty.

Generous God, we bring our thanks for our health and social care services. And we pray for those we know who are receiving treatment. Strengthen and uphold them in their weakness and restore them to wholeness.

Generous God, we thank you for all that we have. Open our eyes and ears to the needs and cries of others. Enable us to see that in caring for those in need we are caring for you, made known to us in Jesus. May your church be a place of generosity, where people give freely in order to meet the needs of those in this country and throughout the world who are homeless, hungry, poor and ill. God our Maker, this is our prayer. Help us to know and to do your will.

## **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 462 – Come with me, come wander

- 1) Come with me, come wander,  
come welcome the world  
Where strangers might smile or  
where stones may be hurled;  
Come leave what you cling to,  
lay down what you clutch  
And find, with hands empty,  
that hearts can hold much.
  - 2) Come walk in my company,  
come sleep by my side,  
Come savour a lifestyle with nothing to hide;  
Come sit at my table and eat with my friends,  
Discovering that love  
which the world never ends.
  - 3) Come share in my laughter,  
come close to my fears,  
Come find yourself washed  
with the kiss of my tears;  
Come stand close at hand while I suffer and die  
And find in three days how I never will lie.
  - 4) Come leave your possessions,  
come share out your treasure,  
Come give and receive  
without method or measure;  
Come loose every bond  
that's resisting the Spirit,  
Enabling the earth to be yours to inherit.
- Ch) Sing hey for the carpenter leaving his tools!  
Sing hey for the pharisees leaving their rules!  
Sing hey for the fishermen leaving their nets!  
Sing hey for the people who leave their regrets!*

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## Blessing

Go to love your neighbour, to give to the poor from the riches given to you, so that you serve God faithfully. And the blessing of God, Creator, Son and Holy Spirit, be with us all. Amen.