

A service for 15th November, 2020 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 25 verses 4 to 7

Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long. Remember, O LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O LORD. Amen.

The author of our first hymn, David J. Evans, was involved in the beginning of the house church movements, which resulted in many 'new hymns and choruses'.

However, he grew ever more concerned that many worship songs became over-familiar towards God, ignoring his holiness, power and glory. So, in 1985 he wrote both words and music for hymn number 20, 'Be still, for the presence of the Lord'

1. Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One is here;

Come bow before Him now with reverence and fear.

In Him no sin is found, we stand on holy ground;

Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One is here.

2. Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around;

He burns with holy fire, with splendour He is crowned.

How awesome is the sight, our radiant King of light;

Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around.

3. Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place;

He comes to cleanse and heal, to minister His grace.

No work too hard for Him, in faith receive from Him;

Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place. © David J. Evans

Let us turn to the Lord in Prayer.

Almighty God, whose might is matched only by your boundless love, you are the Living Word who spoke the Universe into existence, who created the earth and all that lives on it. It is you who created mankind and entrusted the stewardship of this world into our care. You have granted us wisdom to make use of the resources this world offers and a conscience to discern between right and wrong. We thank you for the honour bestowed on us.

Heavenly Father, in your compassion you seek to sustain all life and you provide our daily needs. Although you know all our failings and flaws, you call us to be your earthly sons and daughters, a holy priesthood in an everlasting covenant of love. You understand us intimately, for you lived among us as Christ Jesus, who shared our very nature: our joys and woes, hopes and fears, our trials and temptations and who came to show us in words and deeds how you want us to live. Through his crucifixion and resurrection, our Saviour broke the power of sin and death and offers us everlasting life through faith in him.

Spirit of truth and love, it is good to be here to worship you. Take away all anxieties and distractions, so we may offer our praise and adoration with open hearts and minds and receive your blessing through Christ our Lord. Amen.

In our prayer of confession, when I say 'Gracious God', please respond with, 'have mercy on us'.

Heavenly Father, we offer heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we have received from you: our lives; homes, friends and family, things that we enjoy and experiences which bring us fulfilment. Most of all, thank you for loving us even when we are faithless, loveless and unlovable.

Gracious God, **have mercy on us.**

Lord, pardon us when we don't love our neighbours as we love ourselves and fail to love and serve you wholeheartedly. In Jesus' precious name, help us to change our ways, O Lord, so we lead Christ-centred lives. Forgive us for sins we have committed and for the good we have neglected to do.

Gracious God, **have mercy on us.**

Merciful Lord, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only forgiven us but call us to follow you once again unburdened by guilt. From now onward, may we serve you in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that, by caring for our neighbours joyfully and faithfully, we may honour you in Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.

Let us say the prayer our Lord taught us:

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.

The author of our next hymn, Allan Dickinson, was an IT consultant for the Health Service in Cardiff, where he lived for thirty years. Although raised as a Methodist, Allan became a Baptist lay preacher and had a deep concern for the poor and marginalised – as the hymn will show. Hymn number 672, 'Where can we find you, Lord Jesus, our Master?'

1. Where can we find you, Lord Jesus our Master?

We want to serve you, to answer your call.

Where do you lead us and ask us to follow?

What should we do in our service to all?

2. 'Go to the hungry, to those who have nothing;

Go where the farmlands are empty and bare.

I broke the bread for the people around me;

Out of my plenty, think what you can share.

3. 'Go to the homeless, to those who have nowhere;

Go where my people sleep out in the rain.

I had no comforts but what others gave me;

Offer them shelter, give ease to their pain.

4. 'Go to the outcast, to those who have no-one;

Go where my sheep are rejected and lost.

I dined with sinners and reached out to lepers;

Go and do likewise, and don't count the cost.'

5. Where will we find you, Lord Jesus our Master?

We are your servants who answer your call.

You go before us, and there we will follow,

Taking our cross in the service of all.

© Allan Charles Dickinson (b. 1954)

We come to our prayers of intercession. Let us pray.

God most gracious and holy, we thank you for your boundless, undying love that has sustained us throughout lockdown and which we are confident will bring us through this time of trial. Help us to reveal the light of your love in our daily lives, so we can drive

away some of the darkness that has enveloped the world, as we care for neighbours both nearby and far away. Grant us courage, steadfastness, wisdom and compassion so we may answer your call, but there are many circumstances where we know we are powerless, so we turn to you, for to you all things are possible.

Lord of all, remember in your goodness, this church, the other churches in our Circuit and, indeed, the World Church. Help us as we begin to reopen our buildings when the current lockdown ends. Help us to manage any problems that have arisen during the past eight months, so we may share Christ's Good News, united in words and deeds with our neighbours.

God of reconciliation and forgiveness, we pray for peace around the world where acts of war, terrorism and persecution cause so many deaths, so much destruction and such profound despair. Inspire the leaders of the nations of the world to seek justice and peace, rather than resorting to violence when they cannot have their way. Faithful God, help leaders resolve situations that seem hopeless, so your love will overcome the hatred in human hearts.

Lord of shalom, or wellbeing, may the light of your love shine upon people in our community who are sick in body, mind or spirit. May they feel your presence in their need and find healing, renewed strength, comfort and hope, throughout the treatment they receive. Gracious God, reach out to people who are living with a dementia, their families and carers, especially in these difficult times. Comfort them, reassure them and let them feel loved and valued for who they are, despite their brokenness.

Loving God, hear our prayer for neighbours whom coronavirus has caused to be lonely, afraid, depressed and anxious, for whom lockdown has strained their relationships to breaking point, besides people who are facing the loss of their jobs when furlough ends. We pray for everybody who mourns the loss of a loved one at a time when funerals are so constrained. In a time of silence, we offer names of people for whom we are particularly concerned, confident that you will reach out to them. Lord, we ask you help us to offer them practical support and friendship, despite the social restrictions that are in force. We pray that you will hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love, in which they may find healing, courage, strength and enduring peace.

Heavenly Father, grant national leaders wisdom to adopt policies that protect their peoples until COVID19 can be brought under control. Help us to remember that this crisis has no parallel in living memory, so we may be patient when honest mistakes occur, as they have done and will continue to do so. May we patiently observe guidelines for the second lockdown, as laid down by the Government, even though we may find them difficult and unwelcome. Dispel scepticism and reckless behaviour in parts of the country where people have rebelled against the restrictions, so that, by obeying the rules, the rate of infection can be controlled. We pray for the NHS, scientists and keyworkers as they continue their struggle to bring an end to this threat to humankind. Bless them and keep them safe in their duties until researchers successfully produce a vaccine, or vaccines that work. Lord, reassure us that you are with us throughout this time of trial, so we can find comfort in your saving grace.

Abba, Father God, we ask you to bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe from harm and help us not only to lead Christ-centred lives but to boldly take the light of the gospel to a broken and needy world. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

We continue with a hymn written by Colin Ferguson, a Scot who worked as a probation officer, then for family courts, contributing much to the establishment of mediation services and training for work as well as bereavement care.

He is an elder and licensed preacher in the United Reformed Church. We shall sing hymn number 629, 'God of my faith, I offer you my doubt'.

**1. God of my faith, I offer you my doubt,
For life at times seems far too dark for me,
And my belief becomes more insecure,
When worldly cares produce uncertainty.**

**2. God of my hope, I offer you my fear,
When I am scared by my anxiety,
When all I hear is suffering and woe,
In all my shadows you will walk with me.**

**3. God of my joy, I offer you my grief,
When I sink down in sadness or despair,
When in depression I cannot be touched,
I pray in all my depths to find you there.**

**4. God of my love, I offer you my pain,
When I'm alone and feel nobody cares,
In aching age or in rejected youth,
You bear my cross and dry my human tears.**

**5. God of my life, I offer you my dreams,
Light in the darkness where I hide from view,
Light in my faith, my hope, my joy and love,
Light in my life and all my life in you.**

© Colin Ferguson (born 1937)

Our Epistle is 1Thessalonians chapter 5 verses 1 to 11

Now, friends, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

But you, friends, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. Amen.

The Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 25 verses 14 to 30

"Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more.

But the man who had received the one talent 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 the five talents brought the other five.

‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five talents. 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 the two talents also came.

‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two talents; 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 the one talent 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 talent 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. Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’” Amen.

We are going to sing a hymn that I began during a service at Amblecote Wordsley Methodist Church, three years ago. It was a brilliant service and I paid attention to it, as well as writing the opening verses! ‘The Lord invites us, “Come and see,”

1. The Lord invites us, ‘Come and see,

Leave all your work and follow me:

Spend time with me and I shall show

The Father’s grace to all below.’

Christ Jesus calls us; let us go

And talk with him, our hearts aglow.

2. The Lord invites us, ‘Eat with me;

The Bread we share will set you free.

I bring good news for one and all

If only they will hear my call.’

Christ Jesus calls us; ‘Let us eat,

And I shall make your faith complete’.

3. The Lord invites us, ‘Share my grief:

Let faith o’ercome your unbelief.

Pray for this world of greed and pain,

And strive to make it whole again.’

Christ Jesus calls us; let us pray

That love and justice win the day.

4. The Lord invites us, ‘Walk with me:

Where’er you serve, there shall I be.

Friends, be my hands, my eyes, my voice

Share all your talents and rejoice.’

Christ Jesus calls us; ‘Follow, friends;

With me is life that never ends’.

Martin Rider – 1st January, 2017 (to ‘Mozart’ StF 546)

Sermon: “*The Parable of the Talents.*” Matthew 25:14 – 30

At a time when we are in the midst of a pandemic, slipping into a recession and creating national debt that will take decades to repay – depending on our political outlook – Jesus’ teaching about the talents might seem out of place if was simply advocating that we invest wisely. Indeed, many people would sympathise with the steward who buried the talent, rather than risking it in the marketplace, particularly as the only people who seem to profit are the fat-cats who speculate on others’ misfortune. However, the parable deals more with God’s judgment on our roles as kingdom-workers rather than making use of our skills in a general sense.

At the time of Jesus, a master who was about to travel would often entrust some of his wealth to his most reliable servants, so they could employ it to make as great a profit as possible. In the parable, the master handed five talents, two talents and one talent respectively to his servants. A talent was originally a unit of weight, rather than a coin – representing seventy pounds of silver, the equivalent of 6000 denarii. When you think that one denarius was the wage for a day’s work, and, if we take the average daily pay nowadays as £40, then each talent was the equivalent of £200000! This means that the first servant received a million pounds, the second £400000 and the third £200000, so the master would be perfectly justified to expect a good return on his outlay.

The first two servants actively set out to use what their lord had given them and through sheer hard work, so that, by the time the master returned, each had made one hundred percent profit on the capital they had received. Both servants were commended and rewarded in the same terms by the master, not so much because of the wealth they had accrued, but because of the way they had worked for him. I say this because the servant who had received two talents gained the same reward as the one with five. By contrast, the servant who had received the single talent sought to justify his idleness by saying that he was too afraid to do his master’s will because his lord was too demanding for him to please, especially if he failed to make any kind of profit. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the master was furious not only with the man’s fruitlessness, but at being blamed for the man’s idleness, too!

In the parable, talents don’t just refer to God-given gifts, but to individual opportunities and responsibilities we have as Christians. Jesus acknowledges that people with leadership roles have greater chances to work for the kingdom than those who have to juggle their service with work and familial demands. Nevertheless, we are expected to take and use opportunities to honour our responsibilities as fully as we can, to take risks for the kingdom, rather than allowing fear of failure to hold us back.

God the Father invested all he held most precious for our sake: his Son, Jesus. He gave him to this sinful world, knowing from the start that Jesus would be rejected, abused, tortured and put to death as the lowest of criminals, but he did so because only by becoming the one perfect sacrifice could Christ break us free from the power of sin and restore us to a right relationship with Almighty God. Moreover, by being raised from death, Jesus offers us the gift of everlasting life that sin would have denied us. How can we – how dare we – claim to be so afraid of such a loving God that we won’t be active in his service!

In case any of you think that active service is beyond your powers, let me tell you of a local preacher friend of mine. Al was in his eighties when he had to stand down owing to his own ill-health and his wife’s, too. Shortly afterwards, I preached at his church where I found him very despondent. He told me that he thought his usefulness to the Lord was at an end, yet as he spoke, he was collecting the hymn books and enquiring about the well-being of his fellow-worshippers. I had admired his extemporaneous

prayers for several years, so I pointed out that he was already serving Christ as a Barnabas – an encourager – but suggested he might consider forming a house-prayer group, using the time he would have spent preparing services to pray for the needs of the community, if not the world. He took me at my word and used those gifts joyfully for the remaining eighteen months of his life. The Lord doesn't just discard us when one form of service ends: he will offer us another, if we're sufficiently spiritually aware to recognize the opportunity.

Jesus calls us to use not only our gifts, graces and talents for the good of his Father's kingdom, but to take advantage of the opportunities we have to reflect the love he shines into our lives onto a sin-darkened world. If we want build up our church, don't rely on the Billy Grahams, or our ministers, or local preachers to succeed by preaching: each of us has the responsibility to take the gospel to a sceptical world and the best way is by living out the Good News in the way that we treat other people, for if they can see the love of Jesus in our words and actions, if they regard us as welcoming, rather than exclusive, they will want to find out what it is that makes us different – and that is when they are likely to hear and answer Jesus' call. Amen.

“My talents, gifts and graces, Lord, / Into thy blessed hands receive”. Our closing hymn was written by Charles Wesley in 1749, one of a number hymns headed “Hymns for a Preacher of the Gospel”. I hope I fit into that category. Hymn number 661, ‘Give me the faith which can remove’.

**1. Give me the faith which can remove
And sink the mountain to a plain;
Give me the child-like praying love,
Which longs to build thy house again;
Thy love, let it my heart o'erpower,
And all my simple soul devour.**

**2. I would the precious time redeem,
And longer live for this alone;
To spend, and to be spent, for them
Who have not yet my Saviour known;
Fully on these my mission prove,
And only breathe, to breathe thy love.**

**3. My talents, gifts, and graces, Lord,
Into thy blessed hands receive;
And let me live to preach thy word,
And let me to thy glory live;
My every sacred moment spend
In publishing the sinners' friend.**

**4. Enlarge, inflame, and fill my heart
With boundless charity divine;
So shall I all my strength exert,
And love them with a zeal like thine;
And lead them to thy open side,
The sheep for whom their Shepherd died.**

© Charles Wesley {1707 – 1788}

Benediction

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and for evermore. Amen.