

19th November, 2023

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.

Our opening hymn was written by Carl Boberg, in Sweden during 1885 after a tremendous thunderstorm, followed by a rainbow and the peal of church bells. It was adopted by churches in Germany, was taken to Russia and was discovered by a Salvation Army missionary serving in Ukraine. Stuart Keene Hine adapted and translated Revd. Boberg's hymn, but at the end of the Second World War, he was forced to return to the UK where he worked amongst refugees. He sent copies of his hymn to refugees in New Zealand and they like it so much they sent it to Billy Graham in the USA. The rest is history! Hymn number 82, 'How great thou art!'

1. O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder

Consider all the works Thy hand hath made,

I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,

Thy power throughout the universe displayed: Chorus

Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,

How great Thou art, how great Thou art!

Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,

How great Thou art, how great Thou art!

2. When through the woods and forest glades I wander

And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;

When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur

And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze: Chorus

3. And when I think that God His Son not sparing,

Sent Him to die – I scarce can take it in.

That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,

He bled and died to take away my sin. Chorus

4. When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation

And take me home – what joy shall fill my heart!

Then I shall bow in humble adoration

And there proclaim, my God, how great Thou art! Chorus

© K. Boberg & Stuart K. Hine

Let us turn to the Lord in Prayer.

Creator God, who spoke the Universe into existence, who created the earth and all that lives on it, you not only made us, but 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, for you seek a relationship with us where we can call you Abba, or Daddy. You call us to be your earthly sons and daughters, a holy priesthood in an everlasting covenant of love.

Heavenly Father, in your compassion you provide our daily needs and you understand us intimately, for you lived among us as Christ Jesus, who not only shared our very nature, our joys and woes, hopes and fears, our trials and temptations, but

came to show us in words and deeds of love how you want us to live. Through his crucifixion and resurrection, our Lord broke the power of sin and death and offers us everlasting life through faith in him.

Loving Lord, it is good to come here to worship you today. 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: things that we enjoy, experiences which bring us fulfilment, besides people who have guided, loved and inspired us. 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 when we 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. As we do so, 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.

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. 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)

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

God of all nations, you sent Jesus to address the world's brokenness and so we turn to you in prayer, asking you to bring healing and wholeness to our suffering world, for there are so many situations beyond our power, but which to you are possible. Help us to change our ways, so that we always seek the well-being of people whose lives touch ours and act as your earthly hands, by reaching out and offering practical support to neighbours who are in need or trouble. Lord, grant us steadfast faith and compassion so we serve you well.

Today as we pray for peace, we remember people killed in wars; those whose bodies, minds and spirits have been crippled by war, persecution, or terrorism and for the huge numbers of people displaced because of conflicts. Currently, Lord, we pray for a satisfactory end to the war in Ukraine and for an end to the conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. Heavenly Father, hear our cry of grief for the many lives lost as a result of the attack by Hamas in southern Israel and in subsequent fighting in Gaza, most of who are non-combatants, the elderly, women and children with nowhere to flee. In your mercy remember people who have been bereaved, or injured, for those taken as hostages and ordinary civilians, deprived of food, water and fuel. We pray that the Knesset will not allow its desire for revenge to overcome its observance of international law.

Heavenly King, lead and inspire leaders of the nations of the world so they lead their people with mercy and justice and do not resort to violence in order to have their own way. May they learn to negotiate and compromise when disputes arise, so their words offer grace and reconciliation rather than contempt, or threats.

Lord of creation, we confess that we have failed our collective responsibility to be stewards of our planet and the evidence is before our eyes: melting glaciers; wildfires; floods and droughts, increasingly strong storms and depletion of resources. Help us do what we can to rebuild the environment by changing our lifestyles and by supporting people whose lives are affected by extreme weather. Merciful God, we pray for victims of disasters and famines. Bless the work done by relief workers and charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee. Grant them the resources they need for their work.

Lord of shalom, of healing and well-being, let the light of your love shine upon people who suffer from sickness, grief or trouble, as well as everyone who mourns the loss of a loved one. In a time of silence, we pray for people for whom we are particularly concerned, trusting that you will know their need and will reach out in compassion to them.....

Lord, help us to offer them practical support and friendship and may you embrace them in your love, which offers healing, courage, hope, strength and transcending peace.

Gracious God, hear our prayer for our church, the churches in our Circuit and, indeed, the World Church. Lord, give us all the spiritual strength, energy, compassion, courage and vision to follow where you want the Church to go. May we proclaim good news boldly and find new ways of engaging our community.

Abba, Father God, we ask you to bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe from harm and help us to lead Christ-centred lives by sharing the abundance of your love with all-comers. In Jesus' holy name. 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.

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)

Sermon: "The Parable of the Talents." Matthew 25:14 – 30

At a time when we are in the midst of a struggling economy and a 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 who had to stand down owing to his both 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 extemporary 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 share the love he gives us in abundance with this sin-darkened world. If we want build up our church, don't just rely on the Billy Grahams, or our ministers, or local preachers to succeed by preaching: each of us has the responsibility and honour 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 evermore. Amen.