

Call to Worship

Lead me by your faithfulness and teach me, for you are God my saviour; in you I put my hope all the day long.

Psalm 25:5

HYMN StF 520 Give to me Lord, a thankful heart

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=klGms74QnTU>

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| 1 Give to me, Lord, a thankful heart
and a discerning mind ;
give, as I play the Christian's part,
the strength to finish what I start
and act on what I find. | 3 By your divine and urgent claim,
and by your human face,
kindle our sinking hearts to flame,
and as you teach the world your name
let it become your place. |
| 2 When, in the rush of days, my will
is habit-bound and slow,
help me to keep in vision still
what love and power and peace can fill
a life that trusts in you. | 4 Jesus, with all your Church I long
to see your kingdom come :
show me your way of righting wrong
and turning sorrow into song
until you bring me home. |

Thomas Caryl Micklem (1925–2003)

Prayers of Approach

God is love and you are his object. You are created to be his love, and he is yours. He is happy in you, when you are happy, as parents are in their children. He is afflicted in all your afflictions, and whoever touches you touches the apple of his eye.

Let us pray

Holy God, we thank you today particularly for the gift of love, and all the love that surrounds us. For the love that has come into our lives and has lit us up, has made us see the world in a new way, and has transformed us. Whoever has the Holy Spirit, must have love; to know love is to walk with you, and to be in your love is to understand something of what it is to be in heaven.

We pray that we may continue in your love; where we lack it may we be guided into it, and should we lose it, may we be restored. Bind us to you in an inseparable bond of love that we may always live unto you and in you.

We pray also for all those who have been deprived of love, who feel unloved, or rejected, or for whom love has brought pain.

We pray for those who find it hard to love
Those whose love has been betrayed
Those who are scarred by bitter and painful experience
Those who have been subjected to abuse
Those afraid of showing their true feelings
Those who are tortured by mental illness
And those who cannot conceive that they are lovable.

In this complex world of human relationships,
Where there are such possibilities for joy and for sorrow,
We bring before you all who are vulnerable, and who suffer, the lonely, and the isolated; those whose loved ones have gone away, or have died, those for whom the great love of their life is a

thing of the past, kept alive and sanctified in memory, and in your company. We pray for them, and for the souls of those who have died.

Lord, you have made us your servants as sociable creatures, lovers of company, taking delight in our friends; replenish this capacity which you have given us; lead us out to bring light into the lives of others, and teach us to walk with you in all your ways.

Through Jesus Christ Our Lord,
Amen

Junior Church

Video: The Garden Gate <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itn6eZQnUwE>

Introduction by James Allen

HYMN Baa Baa He's the Good Shepherd

REFRAIN

Baa Baa He's the Good Shepherd

Everywhere I go He knows.

Baa Baa He is my Saviour.

I will follow where He goes.

Jesus loves me; finds me; cares for me.

Watches; saves me; Leads back home.

REFRAIN

I was so lost; where do I begin

He paid the cost for my sin.

REFRAIN

I was so scared; Storms would frighten me.

I will not fear; He's with me!

REFRAIN

I will follow where He goes.

I will follow where He goes.

Readings

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 Be ready for the Lord's coming

¹ Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ² for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ 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.

⁴ But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief.

⁵ You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. ⁶ So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. ⁹ For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁰ He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.

¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Matthew 25:14-30 Parable of the Talents

¹⁴ "Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. ¹⁷ So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. ¹⁸ But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

¹⁹ "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.'

²¹ “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!’

²² “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.’

²³ “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!’

²⁴ “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.

²⁵ So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’

²⁶ “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?’ ²⁷ 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.

²⁸ ““So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

HYMN StF 404 God’s spirit is in my heart <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtKJBX7oHIY>

1 God's spirit is in my heart ;
he has called me and set me apart.
This is what I have to do,
what I have to do :

*He sent me to give the good news to the poor,
tell prisoners that they are prisoners no more,
tell blind people that they can see,
and set the down-trodden free,
and go tell everyone
the news that the kingdom of God has come ;
and go tell everyone
the news that God's kingdom has come.*

2 Just as the Father sent me,
so I'm sending you out to be
my witness throughout the world —
the whole of the world :

3 Don't carry a load in your pack ;
you don't need two shirts on your back ;
God's workers can earn their own keep —
can earn their own keep :

4 Don't worry what you have to say ;
don't worry, because on that day
God's spirit will speak in your heart —
will speak in your heart :

v. 1 and refrain Alan T. Dale (1902–1979)

vv. 2-4 Hubert Richards (b. 1921)

Church Anniversary

Three members, Robert Curnow, Beryl Wootton & Richard Norris, give some memories of our church in the early days.

Sermon

I wonder what you were thinking as we listened to the reading from Matthew. It may have been, “there goes an old truth about the world: the rich get richer and the poor get poorer”. Or, you may have taken from it that God wants us to be inventive and energetic in the way we use the resources he has given us, and multiply his capital. To us, the two servants who invest profitably are the heroes. That is certainly a possible view, and is one widely held, particularly in America, where it fits very nicely with the idea of prosperity theology – God favours those he has chosen, and rewards them. “Hallelujah! My shares have just gone up by half a million!”

Well, let us park those two interpretations, and spend a moment looking at how this parable fits in to the gospel. We are not talking just about Matthew's gospel here, because there is a similar episode at Luke 19.

Matthew 25 falls into three parts. First, there is a the parable of the bridesmaids and the lamps, then the parable of the talents (which we just heard), then the story of the coming of the Son of Man in his glory, in which people are separated into two groups like sheep and goats, who will be led away in one case to eternal life, and in the other, to eternal punishment. It is not immediately obvious how the two earlier parts feed into the third part.

In the first part, the first words are "then the kingdom of heaven will be like this." The scenario is a wedding. The guests or 'bridesmaids' – five wise, five foolish – are waiting for the bridegroom and bride to arrive. The time of their arrival is not known, and time goes on, and they drop off to sleep. The wise ones are prepared with spare oil for their lamps but the foolish ones are not, so the wise ones can go in to the wedding feast but the foolish ones miss the opportunity because they are rushing round trying to find more oil. Then, when they finally arrive, the door is locked and they never do get in.

The point of the story is that you can miss the coming of the Kingdom because you have not made the right preparations. The final words are, "keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." The reading we have just heard from 1 Thessalonians also makes this point.

Then we come to the parable of the Talents, and it is important to know what attitudes to money-making were in ancient Israel. The view was then that the amount of wealth in the world was finite and (excluding disasters) remained constant. Everything existed in finite, limited supply and was already distributed. Therefore, if I increase my wealth, I am making others poorer. This is always wrong under this world-view. What I should do instead is to maintain my wealth at its current level, becoming neither richer nor poorer. Do you remember in the hymn '*All Things Bright and Beautiful*', there used to be a verse which went

The rich man in his castle
The poor man at his gate;
God made them high or lowly
And ordered their estate.

This verse is nearly always omitted these days, as being socially unacceptable – many would say, outrageously so - but it is Biblically correct, if you accept this reading of the parable of the Talents.

The status quo represents the way things should be, though I have to say, what is happening if for instance I plant a vineyard, or cultivate previously waste land? The theory does not seem to allow for that, except perhaps by saying that the potential was always there.

However, the idea of the constant level of wealth in the world in turn leads to the idea of Jubilee, in which every fifty years (the year after seven cycles of seven years or 'Sabbath years') all debts were forgiven, and all land sold is returned to its original owner or their descendants. This is the 'year of freedom', which acknowledges that everything belongs to God; it is the year of the Lord's favour which we find in Isaiah 61:

¹ The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour

and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
³ and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.

We need to understand the parable of the Talents in this setting. The landlord and two of his servants are rapacious, and are bad characters. The only one who is good and correct in his behaviour is the third servant, who safeguards what has been entrusted to him, and restores it to its rightful owner.

The message is one from another age, another economic system and a different set of values. It is a stretch for us to engage with it.

That brings us to the third part of Matthew 25, in which we have the judgement scene, with people separated into two groups, like sheep and goats. This is the denouement. Those who are unprepared for the kingdom, like the foolish wedding guests, or villainous, like the exploitative investors of their master's Talents, go with the goats. Those who are dutiful, modest and content with what God has allotted them, go with the sheep.

AMEN

There are so many issues in this, that I would like to offer you an opportunity to discuss them further. If you would like to join me for that on Zoom in the coming week, please let me know.

HYMN StF 565 Only by grace <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4WbOUsp-0U>

Only by grace can we enter,
only by grace can we stand ;
not by our human endeavour,
but by the blood of the Lamb.
Into your presence you call us,
you call us to come.
Into your presence you draw us,
and now by your grace we come,
now by your grace we come.

Lord, if you mark our transgressions,
who would stand ?
Thanks to your grace we are cleansed
by the blood of the Lamb.
Lord, if you mark our transgressions,
who would stand ?
Thanks to your grace we are cleansed
by the blood of the Lamb.

Only by grace can we enter ...

Gerrit Gustafson

Prayers for Others

Lord God, We bring to you this morning all who need your help and guidance. We pray for those who are oppressed by suffering, and for all who are ill, in body or in mind; particularly those who have been ill for a long time, and lose hope of recovery. Also for all those who care for them and treat their illness. Give them the strength and the tenderness to bring good out of unhappy conditions. Lord, bring them healing; be with them and help them.

We pray for poor, here and abroad; for everyone who has too little for a healthy or decent life; we think of the ache of poverty, and all the problems that come with it; under-nourishment, vulnerability to disease and to crime, premature old age, depression and alcoholism. Lord, support the poor; be with them, feed them and shelter them; give them the strength and good cheer to rise above their conditions, and help us all to assist them, and find ways out of poverty.

We think of those who suffer addiction to drugs or alcohol; of the loss of control which affects any addict; of the terrible decline in capability to lead a normal life and to work, of loss of health and independence, of the risk of being sucked into crime, of young lives blighted, even ruined.

We think of everyone affected by war and civil strife, in danger and in fear. For all who are hurt, or homeless, or bereaved, who lose all that they have; also for those who are brutalised by war, who begin to treat others as objects, or mere animals, who abuse their position of power, and make themselves vicious.

Lord, bring them healing; be with them and help them.

And we think of everyone in government; those who make decisions which affect peoples' lives, their jobs, their health and education, and may make the difference between peace and war. Guide them; let them see truth, not manufacture it. Let them understand what is good for their own people and by others, and not be blinded by political motives. Help those in journalism and the media too, who have so much power to influence public opinion. Let them use that wisely, not just to score points with cheap sensation. And, thinking of these things, we pray particularly for a just peace in Iraq and also in Palestine.

And we pray for all those known to us who are in need and for those no longer with us.

We pray also for those who believe they do not need help, who are determined to go it alone, who see life's struggles as something for them to take on and conquer, and who have no idea of your grace, and the help and support to be found in your company. Let them see that they need not be alone, that there is more strength to be found in relationship with you than there can be in oneself alone, however well fortified. Show them the open door, and the route to your peace.

Finally, we pray for ourselves; for this holy house, and for all who come into it; Lord, be with us and help us, for without you we are nothing. On you we are anchored. Guide us, help us, keep us, and maintain your Holy Spirit among us, so that we may do your work well. *Amen.*

HYMN StF 556 Just as I am <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Ka6143Nt4M>

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| 1 Just as I am, without one plea
but that you died to set me free,
and at your bidding, 'Come to me !'
O Lamb of God, I come ! | 4 Just as I am — your love unknown
has broken every barrier down —
now to be yours, yes, yours alone,
O Lamb of God, I come ! |
| 2 Just as I am, though tossed about
with many a conflict, many a doubt,
fightings within and fears without,
O Lamb of God, I come ! | 5 Just as I am, of that free love
the breadth, length, depth and height to prove,
here for a time and then above,
O Lamb of God, I come ! |
| 3 Just as I am, you will receive,
will welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve :
because your promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come ! | Charlotte Elliott (1789–1871)
<i>adapted by Jubilate Hymns (alt.)</i> |

Blessing

May you meet God in every place, in every person, and in the depths of your own heart.
Amen.