

Winchester, Eastleigh and Romsey Circuit
Worship at home: Sunday 15th November 2020

Preparation

As we continue to worship in our homes, through this service and online, remember that you worship with Christians in your own church, in the wider Circuit and throughout the world.

Call to worship Psalm 123.1-2

Listen, read, pray or sing along

to 'I will lift up my eyes' by Rivers and Robots
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gp54GItT8k>

Waking up to the sunrise
to the golden light and blue skies
I'm in awe of creation
of Your glory and salvation.
All around, it is true, creation's crying out to you
with songs of joy and hymns of praise
to the one who made all things

*So I turn away now from all worthless things
I will lift up (lift up) my eyes (my eyes)
And I choose to look on the beautiful king
I will lift up (lift up) my eyes (my eyes)*

When I'm lost in the darkness
when I feel so weak and helpless
you're my rock, you're my fortress.
You're the peace when I feel restless
when my enemies surround.
You're my firm and solid ground in the flood,
or on the sea, like an ark you carry me.

Oh, with storms all around
My feet upon the solid ground
I will not be shaken 'cause I know that
You, you are, you are all that I needed.
And you, you are, you are all that I wanted
And you, you are, you are
The only one that satisfies me,
that satisfies me, I will lift up my eyes.

Prayer

As our eyes turn to you in this time of uncertainty, Loving God, we wait for you.
Your love is our security,
and your faithfulness our hope.

As our eyes turn to you in this time of anxiety, Merciful God, we wait for you. Your compassion is our assurance and Christ's life our guide.

As our eyes turn to you, in this time of pain and danger, Gracious God, we wait for you. Your grace is our foundation, and your touch our healing.

As our eyes turn to you in our waiting, God of love, mercy and grace, you are present with us.

You invite us to see that your Son Jesus Christ did not take the easy or the safe way, and your Holy Spirit leads us in the path of risky grace: where in sacrifice we are united as your body, in generosity we are offered to your neighbours, and in wisdom and courage we love our enemies, for your sake and for the sake of your kingdom.

As our eyes look to you, loving God, we see ourselves.

We see when we're not prepared to make sacrifices so that your body can be united, that we're not as generous as we might be towards our neighbours, and we struggle to love those we've come to see as enemies.

Turn our eyes towards you, O God, forgive us where we're willing to change and instil in us the mind and heart of Christ.

Loving, merciful, gracious God, free us from all that darkens and ensnares us, and bring us to eternal light and joy, through the power of Jesus Christ who is alive and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Introduction to the Readings

As well as being a time of remembering, and including All Saints and Remembrance Sunday, November is also the time in the Christian year when we reflect on the last things - Christ's return. Each of today's readings picks up that theme ways that reflect their time.

Reading from the Old Testament

Zephaniah 1.7, 12-18

Reading from the Epistles Thessalonians 5.1-11

Reading from the Gospels Matthew 25.14-30

Reflection

One of the striking things about today's parable, is the difference between the servants who *'enter into the joy'* of the master, and the one thrown into *'outer darkness'* where there is *'weeping and gnashing of teeth.'* This is a story – like last week's (Matthew 25.1-13) - which explores the themes of grace and judgment. Because the judgement on the third servant is so harsh, it's easy to dismiss it as not being about the faithful, loving God we know. But it's worth staying with, because it contains an invitation to us all to enter into joy, and joy is something the world needs right now.

Matthew places this parable in a context that presupposes Jesus' departure and his anticipated return. This is also the theme of the readings from the prophet Zephaniah and in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. Following the prophets, Jesus and Paul, Christians confess the hope of Christ's return in the creeds and the Lord's Prayer. Often though, we ask the same question as people did in Jesus', Paul's and Matthew's time. When will these things happen? What will the signs be? What will it be like? None of today's readings answer these questions. They're looking at a different question. How are God's people, Christ's disciples, to live in the meantime? Zephaniah reminds his people that God is a God of justice and abhors complacency. Paul says, *'encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.'* The parables in Matthew 24 and 25 direct us to focus on the issues at hand, to faithfulness, to being prepared, and to risk - to continue to *'look to the Lord our God'* (Psalm 123) rather than being distracted by speculation or complacency.

This is a message for our time too. This week we heard the good news that a vaccine for Covid-19 has been found. But it isn't ready yet and we don't know how long-lasting it will be. So, even though it's a joyful moment, it's a cautious joy that does not promise us a return to what was

'normal.' We will need to factor living with the virus into what it means for us to live as God's faithful people. The servants in the parable offer us different ways of doing this. Which we will choose hinges on how we understand the one who gives the talents in the first place.

We usually assume that the main character in Jesus' parables – the master here - is God. It is how Matthew interprets many of his parables. But this parable is different because Matthew equates the master with Jesus. We know that Jesus was loving, gracious, and hospitable, but we also know that some people found him too challenging. This should inform the way we read this story. The master is with the servants at the beginning. So, when he departs and asks them to steward his gifts, it's hardly surprising that he judges them on how they've done that when he returns. A talent is a huge amount of money and he's generously entrusted them with it for a long period of time, not just to invest, but to enjoy. While he's away, they can share - albeit incompletely - in his life, which is what the kingdom of heaven on earth is like. When the first two servants are finally invited to *'enter the joy'* of the master, it's not yet the greatest fullness, but we understand that their joy echoes the joy of the master. The joy that emerges out of his *'self-giving, sharing, being distributed into the world.'*⁽¹⁾ It's the joy Jesus promised earlier on in Matthew's Gospel. *'...everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.'* (19:29). Everyone is invited to follow and to trust. Everything, including joy, is given as a gift.

So, what was it about the third servant that prevented him from embracing the gift? He isn't a thief or dishonest. He doesn't attempt to fraud or swindle his master. In another version of this parable, he's a wild rebel who spends the money on women and drink but there's no hint of that here. All he does is hide the money in the ground, and we wonder, what's wrong with caution? Is it enough to justify his fate? Isn't caution a virtue? Charles Cousar writes, *'with the third servant*

virtues become vices. Prudence and wariness easily become self-protectiveness and restraint. Inhibition turns to fear.⁽²⁾ He thinks it's enough to preserve the talents he'd been given to invest, but rather than doing the work his master entrusted to him, he's protecting himself. The third servant represents the community Matthew was writing for. They were frightened of sharing the Gospel publicly, in case their safety and security was threatened, so they kept it to themselves and did nothing. For generations, the threats made in these parables have been used in churches throughout the world, making many people's lives miserable. I doubt that Jesus would have condoned the actions of those who excluded so-called 'wrong-doers' from church communities. I believe he'd have said, *'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone,'* (John 8.7) and looked at them as sadly as he looked at the rich young ruler.

This doesn't mean, though, that we should ignore the invitation they offer us in the light of our current situation. I want to offer you three things to ponder. Let me say at the outset that I am not equating their situation with ours, or suggesting we risk each other's lives. Covid-19 kills and we all have a responsibility to do everything we can to prevent it being spread. I'm challenging you to think about how we live, as individuals, and as churches. It's an invitation to look at your life, and our life together, and to notice how or where we're like the third servant or the others.

The first is a question: Are you holding out, just surviving lock-down, waiting until everything goes back to 'normal' and you can live and worship as before? Time doesn't stop. Change continues, and some of the changes we've experienced in the last nine months, have been positive.

The second is an invitation: to ponder where you're meeting God now as you experience the good news of the Gospel, in joyful moments, and in times of sadness and challenge.

This leads me onto my third point, which is a reminder that the gifts you've received, are not just for you. They're for all God's people and

world. So, how are you living and how are you sharing your gifts - including those you've received in the last months - as we wait for the time when our lives are less constrained by Covid-19?

These aren't easy questions. The third servant reminds us how easy it is to succumb to speculation, complacency or fear. But the other two remind us that when we take we appropriate risks we will receive the abundant grace of God's love - that as we live graciously and love flows from us into all the communities of which we are a part, more people will experience the fullness of the joy that we receive, as God's kingdom comes on earth in heaven.

Listen, read, pray or sing along

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

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,
be all else but naught to me, save that thou art;
be thou my best thought in the day and the night,
both waking and sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word,
be thou ever with me, and I with thee, Lord;
be thou my great Father, thy child let me be;
be thou in me dwelling, and I one with thee.

Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;
be thou my whole armour,
be thou my true might;
be thou my soul's shelter,
be thou my strong tower:

O raise thou me heavenward,
great Power of my power.

Riches I heed not, nor earth's empty praise:
be thou mine inheritance now and always;
be thou and thou only the first in my heart:
O Sovereign of heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, thou heaven's bright Sun,
O grant me its joys after victory is won;
Great Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
still be thou my vision, O Ruler of all.

Prayers for God's people and God's world

If you use these prayers, use them as a framework for your own, more focused prayers.

Loving God,

you have entrusted us with your creation.

Remind us that we are accountable to you and to each other for how we live.

We pray all who suffer from climate change, from pollution, waste, warfare and cruelty, and from the impact of natural disasters...

Merciful God,

you have entrusted us with one another.

Remind us that we are accountable to you and to each other for how we live.

We pray for the leaders and people of divided nations and communities.

For those unable to live full lives because of poverty, hunger or persecution.

And people without friends or community to support them through illness, bereavement or abuse...

Gracious God,

you have entrusted us with yourself.

Remind us that we are accountable to you and to each other for how we live.

We pray that as we turn our eyes to you, you will enable us to see where you are calling us, so that our lives will lead others to you...

In the name of him who lived to reveal your love, mercy and grace, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Prayer of Dedication

If you give your weekly offering through an envelope scheme or in cash, please set it aside, and pray with those who give by Standing Order.

It is easy to wait expectantly on God and forget that God waits expectantly on us too. Reflect on what you have been entrusted with this week.

Then pray: 'To you, Lord of love, I offer my gifts, invest my time and entrust my life. Amen.'

Listen, read, pray or sing along

<https://youtu.be/oKJfs8C14yc>

In Christ alone my hope is found,
he is my light, my strength, my song;
this Cornerstone, this solid Ground,

firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
What heights of love, what depths of peace,
when fears are stilled, when strivings cease!
My Comforter, my All in All,
here in the love of Christ I stand.

In Christ alone! -- who took on flesh,
fullness of God in helpless babe!
This gift of love and righteousness,
scorned by the ones he came to save:
till on that cross as Jesus died,
the wrath of God was satisfied
for every sin on him was laid;
here in the death of Christ I live.

There in the ground his body lay,
light of the world by darkness slain:
then bursting forth in glorious Day
up from the grave he rose again!
And as he stands in victory,
sin's curse has lost its grip on me,
for I am his and he is mine -
bought with the precious blood of Christ.

No guilt in life, no fear in death,
this is the power of Christ in me;
from life's first cry to final breath,
Jesus commands my destiny.
No power of hell, no scheme of man,
can ever pluck me from his hand;
till he returns or calls me home,
here in the power of Christ I'll stand!

Keith Getty (b. 1974) and Stuart Townend (b. 1963) Reproduced from Singing the Faith Electronic Words Edition, number 351 Words and Music: (c) 2001, Thankyou Music. Administered by worshiptogether.com Songs, excluding UK & Europe, administered by Kingswaysongs, a division of David C Cook <tym@kingsway.co.uk> Used by permission.

Blessing

May the blessing of God, the Father,
Son and Spirit, be with you and all God's creation,
today and as you continue to wait. Amen.

Prepared by Rev Sue Keegan von Allmen.

Prayers adapted from *Companion to the Revised Common Lectionary Year A* by Julie Hulme (Epworth Press 1999) p196-7, the Collect from the MWB (TMCP 1999) p560, and *Companion to the Revised Common Lectionary Vol 1: Intercessions* by Christine Odell (Epworth Press 1998) p57.

1. Dirk Lange

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4621

2. Charles Cousar from *Texts for Preaching A Lectionary Commentary based on the NRSV Year A* (John Knox Press 1995) p569-70.