

Winchester, Eastleigh and Romsey Circuit

Worship at Home: Sunday 5th November

Prepared by Ken Richardson

Preparation

Spend a moment or two in silence in order to collect your thoughts and prepare yourself for worship, reflecting that you come to do so as part of a worldwide community of Christians.

Call to Worship

We come to worship God,
His love for all of creation is never-ending,
He knows us better than ourselves,
He calls us to respond to his love for us in humble obedience, service and praise. Amen.

Listen, read or sing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7w-tDjIpgk>

(omitting verse 4 if you're using Singing the Faith)

At the name of Jesus
every knee shall bow,
every tongue confess him
King of glory now.
'Tis the Father's pleasure
we should call him Lord,
who from the beginning
was the mighty Word.

Humbled for a season,
to receive a name
from the lips of sinners
unto whom he came,
faithfully he bore it
spotless to the last,
brought it back victorious
when from death he passed:

Bore it up triumphant
with its human light,
through all ranks of creatures
to the central height,
to the throne of Godhead,
to the Father's breast;
filled it with the glory
of that perfect rest.

For this same Lord Jesus
shall return again,
with his Father's glory,
with his angel train;

all the wreaths of empire
meet upon his brow,
and our hearts confess him
King of Glory now.

Caroline Maria Noel (1817-1877), Reproduced from Singing the Faith Electronic Words Edition, number 317

Opening Prayers

Eternal God, creator and sustainer of all that is, we offer you our praise and worship. You reign supreme, your greatness and majesty far exceed our imagining, but are reflected in the splendour of the mighty hills, rolling countryside and surging seas that surround us, and in the wonder of the diversity of living creatures and plants that share our planet with us.

Loving God, you sent your Son Jesus Christ to live amongst us, to die on the cross for us, and to rise again on the third day so that we might inherit eternal life. We thank you for his life and teaching, his words of wisdom and truth that remain as relevant today as when they were first spoken. We thank you for friends and family who do so much to support us in our everyday lives, and we thank you for our fellow Christians who encourage us on our journey of faith.

Empowering God, your Holy Spirit helps us to understand your Word today and discern your will for us, and guides and empowers us in our response to your call to serve you.

Forgiving God, despite everything that we have to be thankful for, and despite our best intentions, we always fall short in our efforts to follow the example of Jesus:

- for the times when we have failed to live as you have wanted us to, forgive us;
- for the times when we have been full of our own importance, forgive us;
- for the times when we have not allowed others to simply be themselves, forgive us;
- for the times when we have not listened to, or valued, what they have to say, forgive us.

Pause

Hear God's words of grace:
'Your sins are forgiven'.

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Read: Matthew 23 v1-12

Reflection

I have just watched an interview with Paul and Sarah on Breakfast Television. They are the pastors of Lifehouse Church in Chesterfield and, ever since the flash floods that devastated the centre of the town on October 20th, they have been working tirelessly to help their neighbours cope with the aftermath. They spoke about the appeal fund they've launched to raise money for those affected, many of whom couldn't afford to pay for contents insurance. And this is after their own church was one of the buildings flooded. When asked about the clean-up operation there, Paul's reply was *'That's for another day.'* I tell you this because it's a perfect illustration of serving others and putting others before ourselves, the key message of today's bible reading.

The first word of today's reading is *'Then'*, and it's an important *'Then'* because it tells us that what has happened previously provides the context for what comes next, in this case what Jesus is about to say to the crowds and his disciples. The passage follows hot on the heels of a series of clashes between Jesus and the Religious Authorities (recorded in Matthew 21v3 – 22v46) that have been the subject of the lectionary gospel readings in recent weeks. However, according to the timeline in my bible, these clashes all occurred on the same day – the Tuesday of Holy Week, two days after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the day after he has cleared the temple of the corrupt merchants and money changers. Each of the main religious groups - the Pharisees, the Chief Priests, the Elders, the Sadducees and a group known as the Herodians – have taken their turn in challenging Jesus on a variety of subjects ranging from religious authority to paying taxes to Caesar, from the resurrection of the dead to the Greatest Commandment, and on each and every occasion Jesus has responded with words of truth, integrity and wisdom, and each group has been silenced. Jesus has then asked the Pharisees a question of his own, *'Whose son is the Messiah?'* (22v42a) and their reply that *'He is the son of David'* (22v42b) betrays their failure to recognise and accept that Jesus is the Messiah and the son of God the Father. I think this is as pivotal a moment in the gospel

accounts as Peter's declaration, on behalf of all the disciples, that Jesus is the Messiah at Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16v13-16). The disciples acknowledge Jesus to be the Messiah, whereas the religious authorities reject Jesus and plot to have him arrested and killed (Matthew 26v1-5) thus setting in train the course of events that will play out during the rest of Holy Week culminating in Jesus' crucifixion on Good Friday and resurrection three days later on Easter Day.

In the middle of these challenges to his authority, are a series of Jesus' parables; The Parable of the Two Sons (21v28-32), The Parable of the Tenants (21v33-46), and The Parable of the Wedding Banquet (which also includes the Parable of the Wedding Garment) (22v1-14). All of these parables are allegories of God's dealings with his world, and in all of them the Religious Authorities are the target of Jesus' criticism (something which they realise only too well!):

- one son does as his father wishes, the other (who represents the religious authorities) does not;
- the tenants (again the religious authorities) reject the owner's servants (the Old Testament prophets), and then reject the owner's son (Jesus himself);
- those who are initially invited to the Wedding Banquet (that is invited into God's Kingdom) refuse to accept the invitation, and so others are invited instead;
- those who turn up the Wedding Banquet wearing the right clothes demonstrate that they are properly prepared and ready (to enter God's Kingdom) whilst those wearing the wrong clothes show themselves to be ill-prepared and get thrown out!

It is these clashes and parables that provide the context for what Jesus has to say in today's passage ...

We are told that he is speaking to both the crowd and the disciples (v1) but actually only verses 1-7 are addressed to the crowd, whilst verses 8-10 are addressed exclusively to the disciples. This is not unusual, for Jesus often follows a public incident or discussion by expanding on its meaning for the benefit of the disciples. Verses 1 to 7 are a summary of Jesus' criticism of the religious authorities in general, and the scribes (or Teachers

of the Law) and Pharisees in particular, who *'sit in Moses' seat'* (v2). This is both a physical seat, the place in the synagogue from where a teacher would deliver the sermon, and a metaphorical seat in that they are the successors to Moses who received the law from God on Mount Sinai and passed it on to Joshua from whom it passed to the Elders, the Prophets and so on down to themselves, the scribes and the Pharisees in Jesus' time. The charges against them are two-fold, and particularly damning ...

- they fail to *'practice what they preach'* (v3), one of the sayings from the bible that remains part of our everyday speech today; and
- they make great show of everything they do (v5a).

In respect of their failure to practice what they preach, the point here is that the underlying principles of the law, reverence for God and respect for other people, summed up by Jesus in the previous chapter as *'Lov[ing] the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind'* (22v37) and *'Lov[ing] your neighbour as yourself'* (22v39) have, along the way, been lost and buried under an intolerable burden of rules. Jesus' verdict that *'All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments'* (22v40) has been undermined by the Pharisees desire to build a great edifice of regulations to cover every conceivable eventuality in the life of a religious Jew.

Furthermore, the Pharisees are guilty of an ostentatious display of false piety, exemplified by their oversized phylacteries (leather boxes worn on the arm or forehead containing scriptural passages written on parchment) and tassels (fringes on clothes intended to be a reminder of the commandments). The Pharisees use both to draw attention to themselves and their own importance. They also endeavour to sit in the place of honour at banquets (contrast this with Jesus' teaching in Luke 14v1,7-24) and in the synagogue, and love being addressed as 'Rabbi' in acknowledgement of their superior knowledge and piety. But it's all for show, and demonstrates their lack of sincerity in religious practice.

Jesus turns to the disciples and, in contrast, instructs them (and by extension all of his followers down the ages) to speak and act with humility, to avoid deliberately drawing attention to themselves, and to maintain a focus on Jesus as

the one Teacher, and God as the one Father. The key verses in the passage are the last two, *'The greatest among you will be your servant. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted ... [in the Kingdom of God]'* (v11-12).

Returning to Paul and Sarah, after seeing them on TV, I googled 'Lifehouse Church Chesterfield' and watched their Appeal Video on *youtube*. They are standing in what looks like someone's front room, possibly ankle deep in water, and speak, off the cuff it seems, directly to camera. I was struck by some of the phrases they use; *'[we want to] do as much as we practically can to make a difference to the people of Chesterfield', '[lets] see what we can do together as a community ...[and] ... be the community we dream of'* and, at the end, *'people matter'*. Out of adversity comes community and the hope of a better future. It's an illustration of faith in action, and a sign of God's Kingdom.

The scribes and the Pharisees seek honour and reward from others in the present. But Jesus' followers are called to be humble and to serve others in the present, and be exalted by God in the future. The way of humility and service leads to greatness in the Kingdom of God. Amen.

Listen, read, pray or sing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Of4I5bTdZ8M>

Take my life, and let it be
consecrated, Lord, to thee;
take my moments and my days,
let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands, and let them move
at the impulse of thy love;
take my feet, and let them be
swift and beautiful for thee.

Take my voice, and let me sing
always, only, for my King;
take my lips, and let them be
filled with messages from thee.

Take my silver and my gold,
not a mite would I withhold;
take my intellect, and use
every power as thou shalt choose.

Take my will, and make it thine;
it shall be no longer mine;
take my heart - it is thine own;
it shall be thy royal throne.

Take my love; my Lord, I pour
at thy feet its treasure-store;
take myself, and I will be
ever, only, all for thee.

Frances Ridley Havergal (1836-1879) Reproduced from Singing the Faith Electronic Words Edition, number 566

Prayers of Intercession

A prayer from the President and Vice-President of the Methodist Conference for Israel-Palestine ...

God of peace and compassion, we pray for all impacted by the escalation in conflict in Israel-Palestine, for all who are mourning, for all who are fearful, today, and for what may lie ahead, for all traumatised and re-traumatised by what they have experienced. Enable us to stand in solidarity with people of peace.

May your Spirit bring peace and healing to your troubled world

and we continue ...

We pray for those in other areas of the world who continue to suffer from the impact of natural disasters, or the consequences of human action or inaction, the victims of the earthquakes in Afghanistan, and the ongoing wars in Ukraine and Yemen, those whose lives or livelihoods have been devastated by floods, droughts, wildfires or unseasonal temperatures as a result of climate change. We pray for aid agencies working on the ground, and individuals and organisations who campaign for a fairer and greener world.

May your Spirit bring peace and healing to your troubled world

We pray for our own country and all the people who reside here, all who are reeling from the impact of the 'cost of living' crisis, those struggling to make sense of a system they find overwhelming. Grant politicians of all parties and at all levels of government the wisdom to serve all those they represent with integrity and compassion.

May your Spirit bring peace and healing to your troubled world

We pray for those individuals known personally to us who are need of our prayers at this time, those who are sick, those whose earthly life is drawing to an end, those who mourn the passing of a loved one. We bring them to mind now ...

Grant them your comfort and the assurance of your presence with them at all times.

May your Spirit bring peace and healing to your troubled world, Amen.

Listen, read, pray or sing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqHlAxjrpw8>

Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heaven to earth come down,
fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesu, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation,
enter every trembling heart.

Come, almighty to deliver,
let us all thy life receive;
suddenly return, and never,
never more thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray, and praise thee, without ceasing,
glory in thy perfect love.

Finish then thy new creation;
pure and spotless let us be;
let us see thy great salvation,
perfectly restored in thee:
changed from glory into glory,
till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love, and praise!

Charles Wesley (1707-1788), Reproduced from Singing the Faith Electronic Words Edition, number 503

Blessing

Father God, may your love enfold us, the teaching and example of your Son Jesus Christ inspire us, and the power of the Holy Spirit equip us to faithfully and humbly serve you all of our days. Amen.

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