



Sunday 15th November 2020
[Prayers are © The United Reformed Church from Service of the Word
– Worship: from The United Reformed Church]

Call to Worship

Jesus invites us to a way of celebration,
meeting and feasting with the humble and the poor.

Let us walk his way with joy.

Jesus beckons us to a way of risk,
letting go of our security.

Let us walk his way with joy.

Jesus challenges us to listen
to the voices of those who have nothing to lose.

Let us walk his way with joy.

Jesus call us to follow the way of the cross,
where despair is transformed by the promise of new life.

Let us walk his way with joy.

Hymn StF 103, 36 H&P, 187 MP God is love let heaven adore him

Prayers

All-holy God,
you call us together to be your holy people,
and so we join to give you praise
for the joy of our creation;
for our redemption in Christ;
for the empowerment of your Spirit.

Gracious God, fill our hearts with your love and our lives with your glory
as we come before you in worship and prayer
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

God of love and mercy,
we come before you knowing that we are in need of forgiveness.
We have sinned against you,
in not loving you with our whole heart and soul and strength;
in not loving our sisters and brothers in Christ.
Grant us, O Lord, your forgiveness, restore us in the image of your Son,
and lead us along the way to your kingdom, to the glory of your name. **Amen.**

O God, your heart is full of mercy. May we hear and trust your words to each of us:
'Your sins are forgiven'.
May we forgive each other and forgive ourselves. Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

Scripture Reading

Old Testament Zephaniah 1.7, 12-18

Epistle 1 Thessalonians 5.1-11

Hymn StF 640 We turn to God

- 1 We turn to God when we are sorely pressed ;
we pray for help, and ask for peace and bread ;
we seek release from illness, guilt, and death :
all people do, in faith or unbelief.
- 2 We turn to God when he is sorely pressed,
and find him poor, scorned, without roof and bread,
bowed under weight of weakness, sin, and death :
faith stands by God in his dark hour of grief.
- 3 God turns to us when we are sorely pressed,
and feeds our souls and bodies with his bread ;
for one and all Christ gives himself in death :
through his forgiveness sin will find relief.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945)

Letters and Papers in Prison, 1953, SCM Press

translated Compilers of *Church Hymnary*, 4th edition, 2005

Reproduced from *Singing the Faith* Electronic Words Edition, number 640

Translation: © CH Trust, administered, Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd www.hymnsam.co.uk

CCLI licence 622200

Gospel Matthew 25:14-30

Reflection

It has become a habit of mine when I introduce the Bible readings in a service to use a phrase such as this: “Let us turn to Scripture to listen for God’s word to us there”. Sometimes to do that is easier said than done. There are often other habits or distractions that get in the way of our hearing God’s word to us in Scripture, no matter how hard we strain to listen. One of those barriers to hearing is an assumption that the words we read are primarily addressed to us, today. To make that assumption sets us up to fall; it sets us off on entirely the wrong foot.

Take today’s readings for instance:

Zephaniah did not intend his prophecy for you and me.

Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians was for them, not us.

“Matthew” did not write his gospel to address our situation.

Each of the readings had its own historical context that we do not share. What we do have in common with the people in each of those contexts is the fact that we seek to live in relationship with God and with each other as people of the same God. That fact gives me a clue about how to read Scripture today. With the help of those who have made a lifetime’s work of understanding these different biblical contexts (and with a little help from the Spirit of God at work in me as I read) I can come closer to understanding what the Scriptures meant to the folk to whom they were written. I can begin to see the implications of the Scriptures for those lived relationships with God and other people.

And then I am ready to ask myself a question: If this is what these words meant to the people to whom and for whom they were written, what can they mean for me today as I too seek to live faithfully with and before God?

So, let us turn to the Gospel reading with this question in mind. One of the scholars who has helped me to understand how to read the New Testament is the former

Bishop of Durham, Professor N T (Tom) Wright. He brought home to me powerfully that much of the teaching of Jesus, as we find it in the Gospels, is to be understood 'first and foremost as Jesus' challenge to his own day and the days immediately following'. This passage is part of a longer episode in the Gospel in which Jesus finds himself in conflict with the religious elite of his day, the scribes and the Pharisees. Many of the stories Jesus tells are aimed, 'first and foremost', at them, at the current rulers of the people (both religious and political) and at their historical predecessors. The Gospels all record how Jesus was challenged by and, in turn, himself challenged a religious and political system that had misunderstood God's purposes for the world and had set themselves against the way of God's kingdom

So perhaps the wicked servant in this parable, who simply hid the master's money, is meant to represent this religious elite? A generous master had entrusted them with much, but they have squandered what they have been given, hiding it instead of putting it to good use. What might the talent represent then? Well, Tom Wright suggests that the valuable 'talent' they have been given is the law of Moses and the Temple – both of them meant to be signs of God's blessing to the people of Israel and through them (the light of the world) to the whole of humanity. But what had they done with the precious promises of God? They had effectively hidden them in the ground. But now, in Jesus, God, their master, is returning to his people and the slaves are being called to account. They have proved themselves to be worthless slaves who have wasted their master's generosity.

The other servants, who made wise use of the money that had been left in their charge, are the ones who are responding to the call of Jesus to follow the way of God's kingdom and to make it the reality in the world that God intended.

Which is where we come in. There is a sense in which we can now read the parable in a way that applies to us too. If this is what Jesus' words meant then, what can they mean for us today?

Many have read the parable as looking forward to a time of Christ's Return. But let us not make the mistake of thinking that we do not need to think about being called to account until some unknown date in the future. We are called to account today as we read the Gospel and 'listen for God's word to us there'.

In Christ, God has entrusted with the valuable talent which is the Good News of God's grace and saving love for all people. We have been entrusted with the call to live in the way of the Kingdom and to play our part in making this a reality for the world in all our relationships. What are we doing with our 'talent'? Do we hide it away where only we know it is hidden? Or do we invest this Good News and see it grow and benefit not just us but all the folk we find ourselves in relationship with, everyone whom we might call neighbour? If we do the former and hide it away, then even we will not know its value. If we do the latter and invest it for the sake of others, then we shall find ourselves to be bearers of hope to others and also strangely enriched ourselves in God's upside-down kingdom where Christ is king.

Amen

Prayer of Dedication

Generous God

we bring our gifts to you

with cheerfulness and joyful hearts.

Give us courage that with these gifts

we may also offer our minds, bodies and spirits,

ready and willing to show the truth of the gospel in our lives. **Amen.**

Intercessions

Liberating God,

we bring our prayers for those whose lives are limited,

by their own attitudes or beliefs,

by the pain of their circumstances,

by the actions of others,

seeking for all confidence to journey in freedom.

We pray for those worn down by illness,

or exhausted by caring for others,

longing to feel the freshness and energy

of a bright new day.

We pray for those confined by oppression,

their opportunities limited by prejudice,

longing to experience the possibility

of travelling on an open road.

We pray for those limited by their own lack of self-worth,

held back by doubts and fears, and repeated rejection,

longing to walk with the confidence

of striding freely along their own path.

we pray for those trapped in poverty,

their energies sapped by the struggle against greed and injustice,

longing to know the abundance

of an earth where resources are freely shared. **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer

StF 664 Lord you call us to your service *or a possible alternative for mission praise only 624MP* Take my life and let it be.

Blessing

Let us go into the world

as bringers of love, as makers of peace, as messengers of hope

knowing that the blessing of God, the source of life, of Jesus Christ, the way to life,

and of the Holy Spirit, the sustainer of life, is with us today, tomorrow and forever.

Amen.