

Sunday 15th November 2020

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us,
though separate let us worship together in God.

Suggested hymn In heavenly love abiding

Watch [hymn](#)

Prayer

Loving God, we come to worship you and give you thanks for the beauty of creation and the graciousness of your love. As we pause in our daily life to reflect on your love which surrounds us, and the inspiration of the Spirit which fills us, we wonder afresh at our place in your creation. Everyday we are surrounded by messages of love within our lives, letters and phone calls from friends and family, the food we eat, the gardens we care for, and the opportunities to serve others. Your love encourages us to live our lives more fully, being more aware of the needs of others, and using the gifts we have to make a difference in your world. We thank you that we have found our place within your church and for the encouragement we have received in our journey to know you better, we thank you for the life and ministry of Jesus which is the model for your church and which we seek to emulate in our lives. As we worship together in heart, we say the words that Jesus taught the disciples.

Our Father....

Readings 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Reflection

In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul is trying to describe something so unknown that he has to draw on metaphors to try and give people an idea. Tom Wright in his commentary on this passage suggests it is akin to trying to describe colours to someone born blind. A few years ago, I came across a fascinating children's book that told how Thomas, who is blind, 'sees' colours. He uses all his other senses and, in the book, shares his experience of colours in a world without vision. The book is called 'The Black Book of Colours' by Menena Cottin and every page is black. On the left-hand pages are the words, at the top of the page they are in Braille and at the bottom of the page they appear in white print. On the right-hand pages is lightly embossed an illustration of something mentioned by Thomas, so 'Yellow tastes of mustard but is as soft as baby chick's feathers' has a pattern of feathers embossed on the right. It explores Thomas's understanding of red, brown, blue, green, white and black which he says is the best of all as it is soft as silk when his mother hugs him and her hair falls across his face. It is a beautiful and thought-provoking book. You can hear and see the whole book [here](#). You might like to think about how you sense different colours and what would be your description of purple.

The book illustrates Tom Wright's question, we have to use different criteria when describing something people cannot see. Paul draws on familiar ideas and assumptions to get across to people the notion of the life in the next world. Even now, we have to use our imagination about what comes after this life and our experience of this life will frame our assumptions, our hopes and dreams for what comes next, assuming we believe there is something after this life, which is not always the case.

Paul's argument focuses on the need to be ready for the momentous coming of the kingdom, for at this point in time the belief is still very much that Jesus will return and usher in the day of judgement. Over the centuries Christians have had to rethink and rework this belief as time has passed and we have studied the way and words of Jesus and come to understand things differently. However, as our reading from Matthew last week reminded us Jesus urged his listeners to be ready,

others knitted or sewed etc. We did something similar in one of the churches I served in Gloucestershire and again raised a good sum of money. The story reminds us that we all have gifts we can use for the benefit of others which is at the heart of service.

However, familiar though it is, this parable is also one of the most difficult as soon as you delve below that familiar surface and as we read it many questions surface that can be difficult to answer. Different theologians have different ideas about how this parable should be understood. I invite you to read the passage again and list some of the questions that come into your mind.

The master treats his servants differently and judges them in their ability. He then gives the least money to the one with least ability and at first we think this is logical but was it fair? We are told that the servant was afraid of the master because of how he dealt with other matters and I can imagine him like a rabbit caught in the headlights looking at the money in his hand and thinking help what do I do with this? Given that the master had already judged him to have less ability what did the master expect him to do with the money? We are told what he expected later in the story but would he have been less angry if the servant had not been so honest, what angered him more the lack of return on his money or the honesty of the servant?

As a child I was encouraged to see the master as God who gives us our 'talents', but I am not comfortable now with this portrayal of God. Tom Wright in his commentary suggests the placement of the parable in Matthew is intended to help us see the third servant as the Scribes and Pharisees who oversee the practices of Israel, a people who have received so much from God but whose leaders have created so many laws and loopholes that make it difficult for ordinary people to have a relationship with God. The picture being that they have buried all they have received and kept it for themselves rather than using it for the benefit of others.

Susan Durber on the other hand suggests an altogether different approach, acknowledging the growing difficulties with the familiar interpretations. Apparently when this story is read in the Middle East people cheer the third slave when he makes his speech. Far from seeing him as weak and pathetic they see his courage in standing against the bad practice of the master and in burying the money he is distancing himself from the practices that he sees as corrupt. The suggestion from the master that he could at least have put the money in the bank for interest is greatly at odds with the biblical imperative about receiving interest on loans (usury). This way of reading the parable gives us a story of good triumphing against the odds and the actions of the third servant, suggests Susan Durber, actually point us towards the way of God. This parable is a parody of the world whilst the third servant shows us an alternative path to accepting the ways of the world. He speaks out against corruption, fear and oppression, just as Jesus himself did.

The world today is a strange place, not just because of Covid. We see countless expressions of human rights, Black lives Matter, disability rights to name two recently, and we can see a parallel with the third servant, together people are raising awareness on injustice and inequality. We have also seen people railing against Lockdown because it impinges on their right to do what they want. However, with rights come responsibilities. We should all have equal opportunity and everyone matters in the kingdom but we are all in this together and if for a while I have to curb my activities to protect others then I should accept this as part of my responsibility to my brothers and sisters. We are called to be loving in our words and actions, and as church to encourage one another in this. When we read parables we must remember that Jesus used these stories to challenge people. He used familiar attitudes and encouraged listeners to question them. He held up a picture of the world as it was and then threw in an alternative view. This parable does not start 'the kingdom of heaven is like', I believe this parable is a mirror of the world and the third servant is the way to challenge and bring closer the kingdom. That is something to cheer.

In 1963 Peter, Paul and Mary performed their version of the song 'If I had a hammer' at the March on Washington and they later said that performance had changed their understanding of the song. You can listen to the song [here](#)

Prayers

Loving God we lift to you the world as it is and pray for the world as it will be when we have learnt to be one in your love. We remember all who have been brave enough to challenge the inequalities of this world and speak out against injustice without fear of what others think. We pray that your church will be a voice for freedom and a catalyst of change within the world, lifting the poor and oppressed and offering them your love.

Challenging God may we have the courage to be like Jesus and speak out against injustice.

We pray for philosophers and dreamers with the imagination to see an alternative way and the passion to share their dream. We remember all who have campaigned against slavery and prejudice, those who had the vision to challenge what was with a picture of what could be and inspire others to work with them in building a new world.

Challenging God may we have the courage to be like Jesus and speak out against injustice.

We pray for politicians and leaders who through justice and love seek to shape a new society where all are valued and all belong, where all have access to enough and no one is hungry or homeless. In the world too many disregard the responsibilities their office brings to care for all and take decisions that will benefit the majority rather than a small minority.

Challenging God may we have the courage to be like Jesus and speak out against injustice.

We pray for church leaders and theologians who encourage us to study the scriptures with questioning hearts of love, who offer us new insight into familiar stories and sow the seeds of the kingdom through shared conversation and exploration. May we be open to new ideas and always seek to be a church that welcomes the stranger and the insights they bring.

Challenging God may we have the courage to be like Jesus and speak out against injustice.

God of creation you continually surprise us with new discoveries with a playful foolishness that highlights the paucity of our wisdom and encourages us to enjoy the journey with all its ups and downs, its twists and turns in the knowledge that you travel with us and we are never alone. In the power of your presence you invite us to be courageous in our travelling and to challenge the things that are less than the kingdom.

Challenging God may we have the courage to be like Jesus and speak out against injustice.

In love we offer these prayers and our prayers for friends and family as they travel their journey, may you love uphold them in their challenges and inspire them in their seeking and may we be there for them in the oneness of your love. In Jesus name Amen.

Our offering to God.

As we continue to worship apart but together, we pledge our commitment to sharing in the work of our church through our continued offering and by exploring new ways of living generously, and may we know your blessing on all we do. Amen

Suggested hymn

Suggested tune Regent's Square Listen to tune [here](#)

We are pilgrims on a journey,
following the path Christ shows;
one with God and with all people,
changing as the Spirit blows.
We are called to share our story,
Sowing seeds of love in lives.

When we gather here to worship,
voices praising, hearts made whole,
we encounter fresh ideas,
new expressions light our soul.
We are called to share our story,
Sowing seeds of love in lives.

Life is like a mighty puzzle,
piece by piece God is revealed;
when we share our story gently
other people can be healed.
We are called to share our story,
Sowing seeds of love in lives.

We are witness to God's wonder,
seeing daily love divine,
living, loving, being Jesus
building kindom as a sign.
We are called to share our story,
Sowing seeds of love in lives.

Held in love and bathed in mercy,
God within us we are one;
ever open to the Spirit,
as we grow and journey on.
We are called to share our story,
Sowing seeds of love in lives.

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Blessing

May the blessing that is the knowledge of God, source of all being, the love of God discovered through Jesus and the inspiration of the Spirit which binds us together be with us on our journey this day and every day. Amen.