

EPIPHANY 4

31/1/21

CB

CALL TO WORSHIP

Worship, praise, rejoicing. People of faith come and worship!

We rejoice in this opportunity to worship together.

People of faith, come and praise!

We rejoice in this opportunity to sing with heart and voice.

People of faith, come and pray!

We rejoice in this opportunity to open ourselves to God's leading.

People of faith, come and listen!

We rejoice in this opportunity to hear the scriptures and to respond with faithful service.

Opening Prayer saints, prophets, leaders

You give us people for the times, O God.

**In the earliest days, you gave great leaders to Israel:
Abraham, Jacob, and Moses.**

You give us people for the times, O God.

**And when a word of correction or justice was needed, you
sent the prophets: Jeremiah, Amos, and Isaiah.**

You give us people for the times, O God.

**To a world crying out for salvation, your Chosen One,
Jesus, came to teach, to die, and to rise again.**

You give us people for the times, O God.

And still you send your messengers, your challengers, the agents of your love: Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, and unsung saints we know. We thank you, O God. Amen.

HYMN 52 Let us sing to the God of salvation

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8pFxFKuRN3A>

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

God of life's journey,
today we give thanks for our teachers.

We give thanks for teachers who shape young hearts and minds,
listen to stories and tend to scraped knees.

We give thanks for teachers who patiently encourage young people to find
their gifts, who teach kindness and life lessons, alongside mathematics and
history.

We give thanks for teachers who push the boundaries of knowledge, guide
experimentation and inspire new discoveries.

We give thanks for unexpected teachers, those who speak wisdom at
kitchen tables, show paths of right living, or speak truth in moments of
uncertainty.

Jesus Christ, truth-teller and eternal teacher,
for the gifts of teaching and learning, we give thanks.

God who seeks goodness and wholeness,
you have imbued all of creation with love,
and shown us paths of love.

Love builds up, creating communities of wellbeing.

Forgive us when we do not walk the ways of love.

When harsh words are spoken, or patience runs short,
when hurtful paths are followed,
forgive us, and show us a better way.

Turn us to you that we may restore places of brokenness.

Help us to build others up in love, to weave together communities of
wellbeing,

to remove stumbling blocks that all may encounter you.

Come, Jesus Christ, source of truth,
show us the ways of truth.

Where fake news corrupts and trust is eroded, call us to account to
reshape the world around us with honesty and justice.

Plant discerning spirits within us that we may seek your truth and listen for your teaching for us this day. Grant us wisdom.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

God does not abandon us.

Jesus, teacher and guide, offers wisdom and truth.

We are forgiven, built up in love.

The ways of truth and love are open for all to follow.

Thanks be to God.

READING

- **Matthew 25:14-30**

“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵ to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸ But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. ¹⁹ After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ ²¹ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ ²² And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ ²³ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ ²⁴ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ ²⁶ But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹ For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ³⁰ As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

HYMN 161 Tell out my soul

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6ji4y9Q-K0>

SERMON

This is the last in my series of sermons leading up to our Covenant Service next week. We have been concentrating on being a Christian and living as a Christian community. Perhaps the biggest 'elephant in the room' for most churches is stewardship. Over the years this concept has been used and abused by so many different approaches that it is almost a dirty word for some people.

I have chosen to start out our reflection today with the parable of the talents from Matthew's Gospel.

A wealthy person decides that it is time to have a break away. As he leaves he entrusts parts of his fortune to three of his servants. He challenges them to do what they think he would want them to do with the fortune that each of them have received in trust.

The fortune is measured in talents. A talent was worth about 10-15 years income. It was no small amount to be managing. One servant had 5 talents, the next 2 talents the third just one. It simply says that the money was distributed according to their abilities. Trying to read this parable as simply a challenge to the way we exercise our God-given gifts would be a bit of a shame in my opinion. We would be missing some of the depth of the passage.

When the wealthy person returns each of the servants was called to come before the boss to reconcile what they had done with his money in his absence. Two of them had doubled the money trusted to them. The last had had done nothing but keep the money safe. He is condemned and fired.

We normally then start to focus on the fact that the last servant had been given the least and condemn his lack of action. I wonder if this is in fact a mistake. The amount that each received and made is not necessarily the point of the parable, but it is easy to be drawn in by that approach.

The focus of the story naturally falls on the reasons why the third man did nothing with his money. He explains himself saying, "I knew you were only too happy to reap the profits from other people's work without contributing yourself, and I know how harsh you are on those who fail; so I was afraid. I kept your money locked away safely. Here, have it back."

One question here is whether the poor man's assessment of his boss is fair? If he is correct then the penalty might be seen as reasonable. I wonder if in fact he was completely misjudging his boss. Is the boss in this situation reaping where he did not sow and skimming the profits off other people's work without putting anything in himself? Not at all. The boss put all the money in and it was trusted to his servants. He had clearly invested in his servants abilities. The profits he reaped were from his own money. Not only that; but he doesn't even seem to be taking the profits. There is no report of him taking back the money from the other two. When he strips the third man of his one talent, he orders that it be given to the man who *has* the ten.

The trouble seems to me to be that the third servant doesn't seem to recognise when he has something handed to him on a plate. He can't accept the wonderful generosity of the gift giver. He seems to be living his life as if it is some sort of horribly difficult test, rather than a gift of love. It is like God is the horrible thing in the sky looking to judge everything he does harshly, looking only for mistakes and reasons to punish.

When a person is so fearful of making an innocent mistake they are unable to enjoy the full beauty of life in the wonderful world that God has given us. There is always the concern that if they allow themselves to be open to love and laugh and openly share with others that they might make a mistake, so they don't take any risks at all.

This sort of life would be so blinded by fear of a black mark that they would never be able to receive any sort of blessing from God either. Theirs is a life 'unlived.' This is in itself a denial of the love and the grace of God. They treat those gifts from God as some sort of poisoned chalice and refuse to have any part of enjoying the wonderful gifts of God.

Given that we are all made in God's image I have no doubt that God recognises that we are all different. Some of us have an easy life, others have had to endure very difficult times. Some people have experienced nothing but love in their lives while other feel that they have been ripped off and squashed at every turn. God does know and understand our lives and the effect that this has on how we interact with others.

The master in the parable does not in any way condemn the second servant for only generating a profit of two talents while his compatriot produced five talents. They were both generously rewarded for making their best efforts. The only person condemned was the servant who refused to make any effort to produce something with the money entrusted to him. In not making any efforts to produce any returns on the money entrusted to him the servant also seems to be inferring that God is playing a deceitful game.

Here we are gathering as a community sharing together in the wonderful bounty that God has granted to us. We have come through the heat and the fires of last January.

We have been able to survive the ongoing drought of the last few years.

We have managed to have our wonderful building not only strengthen but also significantly upgraded.

We have brought our technology into the current era.

We have been gifted so much not just from our resources but from the efforts of people in the past.

This congregation and the bountiful experiences of worship and prayer and Bible Studies, etc., are able to benefit from the profound gifts which have been multiplied and grown through the efforts of the people who call this home. It is something that many people would look at with admiration.

The question that sits before us now is what are we going to do with it?

Are we only going to look to preserve what we have for as long as possible?

Or, are we going to live openly and generously to share without fear in an attitude of love and mercy? Are we going to do something with the gifts that God has given us?

Are you going to turn your prayers in here into a shared life of reckless acceptance, radical hospitality, and extravagant generosity outside these doors?

Our challenge is to commit weekly to living with a joyous and generous spirit and celebrate what God has gifted to us not just here in this building but outside in our everyday lives. Matthew is challenging us to make sure it is not just words. We've got to walk the walk, not just talk the talk.

There are real risks involved in taking that challenge. If we accept it we will make some mistakes, we might lose some treasured ideas along the way, we will get hurt from time to time, and perhaps even crucified. But as the first two employees discovered and proved, if we shake off the shackles of timidity and invest all we have fully in life, we will not only be commended as good and faithful servants, but we will find our life multiplying over and over, and ourselves welcomed warmly into the joyous celebratory life of our extravagantly generous God.

HYMN 599 Take my life

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gf11rReeWIs>

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

Generous God,
you have given to us love, wisdom, understanding – intangible gifts of life.
We open our hands to you that we may offer such gifts to others and to the world.

You have given us tangible and concrete gifts – money, resources, time and skills.

We open our hands to you that we may offer such gifts to others and to the world.

Bless our lives and our offerings this day, we pray. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

God of all time and space,
as we pray this day we centre ourselves in your love. May our prayers and our living build others up in love. (*pause*)

We pray for places of learning. May these be places of kindness, truth, beauty, knowledge and understanding. May breakthroughs progress society to be a place of wellbeing for all; may discoveries of your creation reveal the deep wisdom of nature; and may invention lead to paths of peace and healing for all people and the planet.

We pray for places of healing. Loving God, hear the cries of people, communities and families, where division, pain or suffering, dominates each day. May love be made known here.

We pray for places of leadership. God of light and life, where leaders are given authority and responsibility, may they act with justice. Reveal wisdom and speak truth into places of authority. Guide leaders to see the needs of the oppressed that they may act with empathy and understanding.

Holy God, gather our prayers this day, spoken and unspoken. Hold them in tenderness and guide our living, that our paths may be shaped in love. Amen.

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.

HYMN 618 What does the Lord require

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1T-zLUn-kxs>

BENEDICTION

Seek truth, search for wisdom,
desire understanding, and walk in ways of love.

May the love of God enfold you,
the presence of Christ uphold you,
and the wisdom of the Spirit be your guide. Amen.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liH_HdkWs74