

**A Podcast for North Coventry Group – 1 November 2020**  
**Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost**

Hello and welcome to a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This has been prepared for the 1 November, the twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost 2020.

Details of music and sources are in the online transcript, and I would like to thank Bill and Simon for their help in preparing this week's edition.

**Introductory Music<sup>i</sup>** – *Kyrie Eleison, the opening movement of the Petite Messe Solennelle* by Gioacchino Rossini  
Performed by the Netherlands Chamber Choir, directed by Jos van Immerseel

*Kyrie eleison [Lord, have mercy]*

**Call to Worship:** Words from Psalm 43

Vindicate me, my God, and plead my cause against an unfaithful nation.  
Rescue me from those who are deceitful and wicked.

You are God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me?  
Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?

Send me your light and your faithful care, let them lead me;  
let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell.

Then I will go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight.  
I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God.

Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?  
Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.

Some church traditions will mark Sunday 1 November as All Saints Day, so I have chosen a classic hymn as our first one today. *For all the Saints:*

**Hymn:** *For all the saints*  
St Paul's Cathedral Choir with Malcolm Archer  
from the album *22 Great Hymns from St. Paul's*

For all the saints, who from their labours rest,  
who thee by faith before the world confessed,  
thy name, O Jesu, be forever blessed.  
Alleluia, alleluia!

Thou wast their Rock, their fortress and their might;  
thou, Lord, their captain in the well fought fight;  
thou, in the darkness drear, their one true light.  
Alleluia, alleluia!

O may Thy soldiers, faithful, true and bold,  
fight as the saints who nobly fought of old,  
and win with them the victor's crown of gold.  
Alleluia, alleluia!

O blest communion, fellowship divine!  
We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;  
Yet all are one in thee, for all are thine.  
Alleluia, alleluia!

From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,  
through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,  
singing to Father, Son and Holy Ghost:  
Alleluia, alleluia!

Words by William Walsham How (1823-1897)

## **Prayers**

Let us pray

Gracious God,  
as, together, we come to you today,  
we acknowledge our mixed emotions and our differing gifts and needs.  
May a desire to serve unite us.  
May the truth of the gospel encourage us.  
And may the example of your Son inspire us.  
We ask this in Jesus' name.

We thank you, Lord Jesus,  
that you are our teacher and our friend.  
Encourage us when we are low, and challenge us when we are complacent;  
lift us up when we fall, and check our stride when we lack humility;  
that together we might live with honesty, serve humbly, and pray with confidence, in your  
name.

Forgive us, loving God:  
when we trumpet our good deeds, and show off to impress others;  
when we sacrifice integrity for popularity;  
when we seek attention more than we seek you.  
Give us a quiet confidence that has no need to boast, and that puts integrity before success,  
so that we may be people of depth and honesty, to your glory.

And now as Jesus taught us, we say together:

## **The Lord's Prayer**

Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done  
on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as  
we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us  
from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

**Scripture<sup>ii</sup>:                    Matthew 23:1-12**

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: <sup>2</sup>“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. <sup>3</sup> So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practise what they preach. <sup>4</sup> They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

<sup>5</sup>“Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; <sup>6</sup> they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; <sup>7</sup> they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.

<sup>8</sup>“But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. <sup>9</sup> And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. <sup>10</sup> Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. <sup>11</sup> The greatest among you will be your servant. <sup>12</sup> For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

**Reflection (1)**

What is the world coming to? We are living through a year of greater turbulence and uncertainty than I suspect any of us have ever known, affecting individuals, regions and nations the world over. Add to this some pretty terrifying world leaders, doing and saying some appalling things. And don’t get me started on the US political system and the presidential election that seems to have been running for ever but is almost here. It would have been a difficult year for us, even without Covid-19 being added to the mix.

So it seems fitting that our Gospel reading for today comes from a difficult chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, full of grief and anger. Chapter 23 of Matthew can be seen as a bridge between some challenging teaching late in Jesus’ ministry – a time in which he found himself more and more at odds with the Jewish teachers, the Pharisees and the Sadducees - and his foretelling of his own demise and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Although Jesus continues to teach through parables, there are some hard and unpalatable messages. And Jesus makes it very clear that his followers too will have some difficult times ahead. Our passage stopped just before what is referred to as ‘the seven woes’ So definitely not a happy and cheery, sunshine and roses portion of scripture.

The chapter starts with some damning words about the Pharisees, but I should say that we shouldn’t see the Pharisees as all bad, even though Jesus often seems critical of them. Their role in the Jewish structures was to preserve and uphold the whole of the Law, in order to preserve and protect God’s chosen people, the people of Israel. That had been vital through the times of exile and they were an important group, providing stability in difficult times. And even as he criticised their behaviour, Jesus stressed that it was still important for his followers to obey their teaching – he did not deny his or their Jewish heritage. But Jesus also had some harsh words for the Pharisees, words which may well have resonance for us too.

He challenges the false living of some of the scribes and Pharisees and especially their love of status, position and privilege. Bill and I had a taste of these things when we went on a safari holiday with Bill’s brother John three years ago. We should just be back from a similar trip, but that has had to be put back. John is a generous man, and he treated us to business

class travel on our trip. I have never experienced this before, but I have to say that checking in at airports without having to queue; boarding first; lots of legroom (more of a benefit to Bill); a glass of fizz before take-off and a choice of pretty good food. All of this was very pleasant and very seductive, though for us it was not the real world. When it's just the two of us it's back to economy class! But we thoroughly enjoyed our special treatment and we could see how very quickly you could get used to that kind of way of life, to start to take it for granted, and to see it as your right. You might even start to believe that you are superior to the tourist masses!

Jesus says that the Pharisees like to be ostentatious in the way they dress and present themselves, so that nobody is in any doubt as to their status and importance. They do this by wearing their phylacteries wide – these are the little leather boxes containing portions of scripture that are strapped to the forehead or arm – and they wear the tassels of their robes long. Maybe I'm showing my own feelings and prejudices here, but I think the equivalent in our contemporary Christian society might be the ministers who insist on wearing a clerical shirt and collar whatever the occasion, to make it clear that they are ordained, or the people who wear an enormous cross round their neck. Tell me later if you think I'm being unfair here! But going beyond these outward trappings, what are the faults and failings identified as being typical of religious people? Jesus says:

They don't practise what they preach  
They are unwilling to do themselves, the things that they demand of others  
They love to show off  
They revel in titles and in recognition by others  
They misunderstand what they are called to be and so get their priorities wrong.

Jesus criticises leaders who set themselves apart from their people and are unrealistic in the demands they place on people. He suggests that sometimes the practical effects of putting their teaching into practice aren't appreciated or recognised by those making the demands. There was real damage done to barely viable Scottish island communities, where the demands of the incoming Presbyterian ministers, for strict Sabbath observance and long hours spent in bible reading and prayer, were incompatible with the labour required of subsistence farmers.

Jesus is preaching that Christians should adopt a servant lifestyle and not set themselves apart.

We pause for thought and some music, before we think about that some more.

**Music:** *Rain in Venice* (extract) by Geoffrey Burgon  
from the original soundtrack album of the TV serial  
*Brideshead Revisited*

## **Reflection (2)**

There have been times when the church has been led by great orators, people of vision, strong leaders. Some who have not really been of the people but have had the charisma to lead the people. I'm reminded of George McLeod, Founder of the Iona Community, who achieved great things and made a massive impact that has continued beyond his death. But the more I have learned about him, the less I think I would actually have liked him as a person. He was autocratic and sexist, for a start! A man of his time and upbringing. These days I think we are mostly more comfortable with church leaders who are not perfect, who don't set themselves apart but share the same trials and tribulations as the rest of us. People who give of themselves to serve others and don't expect to be put on a pedestal.

Jesus also talks about the perils of having too much of love of titles. When we fill in forms with our title and names, and pick the title from a list, I think I am much more inclined to put Bill down as Reverend than he is. Unless there's a particular reason and relevance in the title for the purpose the information is needed for, he is fine with being a regular Mister. I guess it's me that's guilty of pride in his title. In the same way I always put Dr on things addressed to my sister, rather than Mrs, because I'm proud of her having gained a doctorate.

Again, Jesus says of the Pharisees: *They love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called 'Rabbi' by others.*

*"But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*

So don't set yourself up in a high place, and don't set other people up on a pedestal either, because pride comes before a fall. There's the same warning about those who exalt themselves being humbled and *vice versa* in Luke chapter 14, where we are told that Jesus observed people invited to dine at a Pharisee's house picking the places of honour at the table. He told them that they shouldn't sit down in the highest seat, because someone more important than them might arrive, and then they would be asked to move to take a lower place, with all the humiliation that that entailed. Rather they should take a low seat, and then their host might urge them to move up. I bet you are all like me, and when you go to a wedding service or a funeral, you carefully sit well towards the back, so that you don't find yourself further forward than someone who comes in later but has a greater claim of connection.

It is important that we remember that in the Christian community, nobody is any greater than the rest. We are all brothers and sisters under the protection and love of our father God. We are all learners, following our one teacher, Jesus Christ, and we none of us ever reach a point where there is nothing left for us to learn. And we can all learn from one another. Every one of us has something that can be an example to others of how the Christian life should be led.

It's hard for us to take this passage literally, because our church has become big since Christ's day. It can't be managed without structures and titles and defined roles. Many of us carry one role, one title, or another. So what are we to do?

Even if there are others who may look up to us and call us 'father' – or 'mother' in my case, we still need to be childlike in spirit, and I suppose we might feel more like big brothers or sisters in our care for others.

If we are seen as 'teachers', we must carry on learning about Christ ourselves, growing and maturing in our faith, and learning in our turn from the Christian experience of the people we teach.

And any among us who are seen to be great, and I can think of some in our local area who I would say are great, they must work hard to ensure they hold on to humility.

And above all, we can all try always to practise what we preach. Even if we don't literally preach, if we are known by others to be Christian then we should try always to act as

Christians should. There's that slogan beloved of fervent young Christians 'what would Jesus do'? that they ask themselves and apply to situations in life. But I'd suggest that we also ask the question 'what would Jesus think?' and use that to guide our thoughts, words and deeds. And if we do that, if we measure what we do against what Jesus would want us to do, maybe we won't go far wrong.

Amen.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Let us pray.

Lord, fill us with your Holy Spirit, so that all we say or think or do may be motivated by you.

We pray for those with power and influence in our land and in our world. We ask that the words that they speak and the measures that they initiate should not spring from a wish to hold on to power but from the wish to serve their fellow human beings with justice, wisdom and compassion. If they should follow the lead of other countries and decide that more restrictions are needed to control the coronavirus, help us to bear what comes with fortitude.

In a week when a family has drowned trying to seek a better future among us, may those seeking solutions to the problems of refugees be moved by generosity and humanity above party dogma.

We pray for those holding positions of responsibility within the church. We ask that in the exercise of their duties and in meeting the demands of busy lives they should not lose sight of the vision of your saving love that first inspired them. We know that the events of 2020 will have changed us all, and the ways that we are the church, for ever. Help us not to hanker after what is gone but to embrace the future and be ready for further change.

We pray for ourselves as followers of Christ. We ask that our beliefs might find expression not only in words but in loving actions. And we ask that in our relationships with others we may learn to love for love's sake and not for any ulterior motives of our own. Help us to act as your hands and feet, your heart and your voice, in our engagement with all whom we meet.

We ask all this in the name of Him who personified humility, integrity and above all, love.

Amen

**Hymn:** *Lord for the years* by Timothy Dudley-Smith  
Huddersfield Choral Society and Joseph Cullen  
from their album *The Hymns Album*

[Unfortunately our licensing arrangements don't permit the reproduction of the words of this hymn in this transcript, although they can be found online if you are so equipped.]

### **Blessing**

Father God, be with us as we strive to live lives of integrity and humility.

And may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with us all today and for ever. Amen

It is always good when our worship and our worship music is joyous – here, as we finish, is another movement from Rossini's *Petite Messe Solennelle*, which he wrote in retirement for a 12-strong choir of friends, two pianos and a harmonium, and which he clearly intended to be both joyous and fun.

He wrote this on the last page of his manuscript:

*Dear Lord, here it is finished, this poor little mass. Have I just written sacred music, or rather sacrilegious music? I was born for opera buffa, as you well know. Not much technique, a little bit of heart, that's all. Blessings to you and grant me Paradise.*

**Music:** *Gloria, cum sanctu spiritu, from the Petite Messe Solennelle* by Gioacchino Rossini  
Performed by the Netherlands Chamber Choir, directed by Jos van Immerseel

*Cum Sanctu Spiritu, in gloria Dei Patris. Amen.*  
*[with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father. Amen.]*

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#### **Credits**

*Kyrie Eleison, the opening movement of the Petite Messe Solennelle* by Gioacchino Rossini was performed by the Netherlands Chamber Choir, directed by Jos van Immerseel

*For all the saints* was sung by St Paul's Cathedral Choir, with Malcolm Archer, and taken from the album *22 Great Hymns from St. Paul's*

An extract from the piece *Rain in Venice* by Geoffrey Burgon was taken from the original soundtrack album of the TV serial *Brideshead Revisited*

*Lord for the years* was sung by the Huddersfield Choral Society and Joseph Cullen, from their album *The Hymns Album*

and *Gloria, cum sanctu spiritu*, from Rossini's *Petite Messe Solennelle* was again performed by the Netherlands Chamber Choir, directed by Jos van Immerseel

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<sup>i</sup> All music included in this podcast is made available for download under the terms of the PRS for Music Limited Online Music Licence number LE-0019067

<sup>ii</sup> Bible quotations are all taken from the New International Version, Anglicised Edition