

**A Podcast for North Coventry Group – 15 November 2020
- Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, 2020'**

Hello and welcome to a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This has been prepared for the 15 November, the twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, 2020.

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

Music: *Andante*, by Vivaldi, arranged by John Williams
played by John Williams and Kevin Peek
from the album, *Sky 2*

Call to Worship: Psalm 130 1-6a [said responsively]

Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord;
Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.

If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, who could stand?
But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you.

I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope.

I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning.

Hymn: Immortal, invisible, words by Walter Chalmers Smith (1824-1908)
The Choir of Winchester Cathedral, David Hill & David Dunnett
From the album *Hymns and Psalms from Winchester*

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious, thy great Name we praise.

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might;
thy justice like mountains high soaring above
thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all life thou givest—to both great and small;
in all life thou livest, the true life of all;
we blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
and wither and perish—but nought changeth thee.

Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,
thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight;
all laud we would render: O help us to see
'tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.

Prayers

Let us pray

Lord God, our Victorian hymn uses old images to explore and describe the nature of your being and your love. Just as we cannot stare into the light and describe anything that lies beyond it, so we are unable to capture and convey just who you are and what you do. Your greatness we compare to mountains; your love we compare to clouds, spreading out over the land, over your world.

We compare ourselves to the transitory foliage that comes and goes in our parks and gardens, impermanent in the face of your infinity and eternity.

While we worship you in all your glory, may we not be daunted by you but once again approach you with our praise and our thanks, with our prayers and our concerns.

We thank you for the creation of our world, for our human family and for all the resources we ought to share. We thank you for the gift of your Son, for his teaching and example that we ought to follow.

And where we do not share, and where we fail to follow, we ask that once again you will give us both your forgiveness and the grace to try again and to try harder. You created humankind in your own image, but we are so often poor imitations.

In a time when so many in our nation and in our world are unwell, are anxious, are unsure of what the future holds, help us to learn from a fresh look at the words of Jesus just what we should be hoping for and striving to do.

We offer these prayers in the name of your Son, who came to be one of us and himself knew anxiety and suffering. Jesus, our Lord.

In his words we gather all our prayers 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.

The Psalms of the Old Testament are sometimes referred to as the hymnbook of the ancient Jewish people. And like our hymnbooks they contain words for a variety of moods and circumstances. Here is Psalm 6, a prayer for deliverance from difficult times, and appropriate for **our** time.

Psalm: *Hear me, Lord, and draw near* (setting of Psalm 6 by John L Bell)
Sung by the Wild Goose Worship Group of Iona Community
From their album *Psalms of Patience, Praise and Protest*

[Unfortunately our licensing arrangements don't permit the reproduction of the words of this song in this transcript.]

Scriptureⁱⁱ: Matthew 25.14-30

A reading from Matthew's Gospel, in chapter 25, verses 14 to 30

¹⁴ 'Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. ¹⁵ To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, ¹⁶ each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey.

¹⁶ The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. ¹⁷ So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. ¹⁸ But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

¹⁹ 'After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. "Master," he said, "you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more." ²¹ 'His master replied, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"

²² 'The man with two bags of gold also came. "Master," he said, "you entrusted me with two bags of gold: see, I have gained two more." ²³ 'His master replied, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"

²⁴ 'Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. "Master," he said, "I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. ²⁵ So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you."

²⁶ 'His master replied, "You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? ²⁷ Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

²⁸ "'So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. ²⁹ For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. ³⁰ And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Reflection (1)

"The Kingdom of God is like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them.

15 To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey.

We have probably all been through, whether at school or in a study group, an exercise to re-write part of our scripture for the modern world. I remember at the age of 12 or so in RE, which my school was posh enough to call "Divinity" we had to re-write the 23rd Psalm. Various ideas emerged: The Lord is my football team manager. (This was Manchester in the Matt Busby days); the Lord is my bus conductor. And from the class swot – not me - the Lord is my school teacher.

The parable of the talents could have been treated in the same way, not so much in the bones of the story, but in the outcome reported by the three servants.

The man who had received the five talents brought [another] five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.'

How would he do that, today? How long a time would he have to be away for the value of something to double? If you got an interest rate as high as 5% and put your money in a bank, how long would it take to double?

The answer - 14 years – and 75 days.

If you give the money to someone to get some raw materials to make further goods to sell, of course you might manage the job of doubling your money quicker, though you would need to get lucky and be organised.

'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

"The man with the two talents also came.

Same outcome, though financial gut feel and perhaps a sense of fairness suggests it would be a better story if the second guy had managed just a 50% growth.

"Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said,

You have to bear in mind that past performance is not necessarily a guide to future market conditions, and the value of investments can go down as well as up. Here's your talent back – in the current stockmarket situation and the way the FTSE 100 index is going, you've not done too badly.

I looked up the word talent. I won't bore you with the etymology, but it's pretty clear to me that this story is what is principally responsible for turning a word that the Greeks used two thousand years ago for a unit of currency into the word we use now to express an opinion about the quality of someone's gift for... something or other.

He's a very talented child. She has a talent for music, for French, for baking, for Maths, for organising people, for whatever.

So this parable is not about money – but we knew that; we're used to hearing it, because we've taken up the word "talent" we are used to telling our children not to waste their talents, to seize the opportunities they are given.

But the parable is not just about other sorts of gifts and our obligation to use them, either.

It comes in the midst of a section of Matthew's Gospel where Jesus is teaching about the future. In this section, which stretches through all of chapters 24 and 25, what do we have? What's the **context** of this parable?

We'll pause a moment before thinking some more about this part of Matthew's Gospel.

Music: *Hymn by Karl Jenkins (extract)*
From the album *The Journey: the Best of Adiemus*

Reflection (2)

This story has arisen when we have had the disciples asking Jesus for some hints as to when they can expect his second coming.

We have Jesus apparently giving pointers to his disciples about the coming destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, which came to pass in 70AD.

We have Jesus predicting oppression and persecution for his followers, also division within their ranks, betrayal and dispersal.

We have Jesus predicting that false prophets would come, some claiming to be his own reincarnation.

[Matthew 24,24]

“False Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive...”

“So if anyone tells you, there he is, out in the desert, do not go out, or here he is, in the inner rooms, do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.”

Don't get taken in by the false prophets, says Jesus – when I come again, you'll know about it.

Those of you who have enjoyed climbing hills like I did when I was younger and fitter will know the dangers of the false summit. You think you are about to reach the top because the ground ahead changes in slope and you can't see anything higher. Then you come over the brow and there is another climb ahead.

One of the more glorious examples of this is a hill called Catstycam, in the English Lake District. You know for sure you have finally reached the top because when you do, the only way is down. The view suddenly opens up to this fantastic scene of Helvellyn, Red Tarn beneath and Striding Edge off to the side. But you still fool yourself along the way, that you are there, when you are not.

What else do we have in this part of the Gospel?

Jesus tells his disciples to look for the **right** signs, not just for signs. And most of all to keep watch. Just like the flood in the Old Testament story overtook people who were otherwise getting on with their daily lives, that's how it's going to be.

The Gospel continues with a series of parables that exemplify this readiness. The servant who keeps looking out for his master coming, and makes sure there's always food in the cupboard. The five wise virgins who kept the lights ready for the homecoming of the master. The parable of the talents, as we've heard. And after that we have the summary of the whole section in the form of the story of the sheep and the goats. Those who showed during the time of waiting for the coming of Christ that they were **living for Christ** would be among the ranks of the saved. Which is next week's Gospel reading, so I had better keep my powder dry.

The interpretation of this extended passage in Matthew doesn't just cover a series of admonitions to live right, so that we'll all be among the sheep when the time comes to judge the flock.

It also seems intended to prevent premature excitement about the second coming of Jesus. And although we don't have time to go into the detail of the passage word by word,

we seem to have here a warning to the original readers of the Gospel, which would most probably be some time **after** Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans, not to get too excited about this being a sign that Jesus was about to return. The Temple would be razed to the ground within the same generation as saw Jesus crucified and risen again. but that generation would not be the one to see Jesus return.

So what is the parable of the talents about? It's not about money. It's not, in the wider scheme of things, **just** about talents and the apprehensive servant who so lacked initiative. It's not about the servants at all - it's about the master. Like so much of our scripture, it helps us learn about God.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a man gone on a journey and come back. We don't know when he will return. When he does, we need to be ready to greet him and to account for everything in the world that falls under our control.

Like the man with one talent of gold who should have made the effort, we need to be able to show that we have tried our best.

For Christ has died; Christ has risen – Christ will come again. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Lord God, you put your trust in us, your servants. You equip and resource us, not with money but with the example of Christ and the inspiration and power of the Holy Spirit. Help us to be ready for when you call us to account for our use of your gifts.

Help us to be ready when you ask whether we have cared for your world. In our use of the world's raw materials, in our stewardship of its treasures and in our oversight of all that is living, may we be even-handed and conscientious, aspiring always to keep your creation from harm.

Help us to be ready when you look to your Church to be a beacon in your world. In our invention of its organisation and deployment of its resources show us how to be effective and true to its mission. Help us always to remember that it is the body of Christ with responsibilities to do as well as to be, and that it exists for the good of those outside its membership.

Help us to be ready when you challenge us to care for those we don't know, to respond to situations we feel untrained to deal with. Give us confidence in you and in ourselves, and courage to say 'yes'.

Be with those in our world who are suffering in this problem-filled time. Those affected by the pandemic who are ill, those who worry, those who care for them and those who grieve after the loss of a loved one. May we be brought closer together by the suffering we see and experience, and given a fresh resolution to be ready for you.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen

Hymn: *In Christ alone*, written and performed by Stuart Townend
from the album *Stuart Townend, the Ultimate Collection*

After that modern classic worship song, and as an added blessing, here is a rather older song, the words dating from 1514, and taken from the Old Sarum *Book of Hours*:

Music: *God be in my head*
sung by the choir of Keble College,
taken from the album, *Complete New English Hymnal Volume 8*.

God be in my head and in my understanding;
God be in my eyes and in my looking;
God be in my mouth and in my speaking;
God be in my heart and in my thinking;
God be at my end and at my departing.

Blessing

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

Music: *Capriol Suite: Fifth movement, Pied-en- L'air* by Peter Warlock
performed by the Academy of St Martin in the Fields,
conducted by Sir Neville Mariner
from the album *Warlock: Capriol Suite and Songs*.

Thank you for listening to our podcast.

We always welcome feedback, suggestions, and volunteers to read, including anyone who would like to take part in an online festival of carols and readings at Christmas-time. A full archive of all of our podcasts since March is on our website [<https://revdbill.uk>].

Credits

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ⁱⁱ Bible quotations are all taken from the New International Version, Anglicised Edition