

**Sheffield United Reformed Churches
Team Ministry worship for individuals or families**

Sunday 15th November at 10:30 am

Call to Worship (from Psalm 123)

As the eyes of a servant looks to the hand of their master - so we look to You, our Lord
As the eyes of a servant looks to the hand of their mistress - so we look to You, our Friend

Hymn of thanks and worship - R&S 66

My God, we thank thee, who hast made the earth so bright;
So full of splendor and of joy, beauty and light;
So many glorious things are here, noble and right.

We thank thee, Lord, that thou hast made joy to abound;
So many gentle thoughts and deeds circling us round,
That in the darkest spot of earth some love is found.

We thank thee, too, that all our joy is touched with pain,
That shadows fall on brightest hours, that thorns remain;
So that earth's bliss may be our guide, and not our chain.

Prayer of Worship

Lord God, our heavenly Father, we worship You.

We worship You as the creator and giver of every good gift.

In the goodness of your generosity, we glimpse and welcome Your loving care and purpose for our lives.

We have an abundant capacity of talent, understanding and resource to live lives that reflect Your kindness and compassion and to make this world a place of joy and wonder for all.

Our daily needs are met in countless ways and You give more - gifts that deepen our love for You, Your creation and the people You have sent into our lives.

We thank You for the gift of creation that is the arena of all our endeavours, the inspiration for our worship and the source of Your provision for all our needs.

We thank You for the gifts of talent, ability, learning and skill, that enable us to serve You and the needs of others.

We thank You for the gift of one another, the people from whom we learn about Your world, and with whom and for whom, we travel on the greatest adventure, the journey to deeper love.

We praise You for the gift and gifts of the Holy Spirit through whom all that we offer to You grows and multiplies to strengthen Your people up together in ever-increasing trust and love.

We thank You for the greatest gift of all, the one You gave to share our lives in both sorrow and perplexity but in belonging and hope.

So we praise You for Jesus, through whose love in both cross and resurrection, we are all brought into friendship with You, together with everything You have given.



Readings

Judges 4: 1-7 - the Lord inspires Deborah to lead Israel.

Psalm 123 - We can look to the Lord for mercy and help...

Matthew 25: 14-30 - The King has entrusted His servants with precious riches...

1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11 - ...so let us serve one another in anticipation of His return.

Reflection - by our Synod Moderator, Reverend Jamie Kissack

The Virtuous Circle of Love

You will know all about vicious circles because our world is full of them.

- Someone hurts you. You seek revenge. They get their own back. Relationships break down and hatred sets in. More and more damage is done as time goes by.
- Someone loses their job. They struggle to make ends meet. They get into debt, which adds to their woes. The deeper into debt they get, the fewer options are open to them, and the harder it becomes to seek help and find solutions.
- We become a bit lonely. We turn in ourselves and become a bit reclusive. The friendships we have start to suffer. We slip out of the supportive networks we once had. We become more and more isolated.

Fortunately, our world is also full of virtuous circles.

- In a broken relationship, someone finds it in their heart to reach out to the other person. Forgiveness is expressed. The 'other' is encouraged also to review the broken relationship and finds it in their heart to forgive. Step by step, the relationship is restored, and may even end up stronger than it was.
- Someone on the edge of society is given support to take control of their lives. They start to stand on their own feet. Their story inspires others, and a more hopeful story starts to take shape.

'Love', of course, is the ultimate virtuous circle. Because I am loved by others I find it easier to love. In fact, I would say that the whole creation of which we are a part is built on the foundation of Love's virtuous circle.

Our parable of the talents contains both a virtuous, and a vicious circle. The third slave receives his talent (a phenomenally large weight of silver or gold – about 6,000 times the daily wage) with bad grace. He lacks the motivation to do anything more with it than bury it in the ground. For his inaction, he receives further punishment from his master, and the little he has is taken from him. A classic vicious circle.

Meanwhile, the first and second slaves receive their talent with good grace. They are motivated to invest it, and having doubled their master's money they are further rewarded with the ultimate prize of entering into the joy of the master's presence. Here is a virtuous circle in full swing.

So what does the parable of the talent mean to us? I hope it is reasonably obvious that Jesus is not advocating a financial model for us to employ in our world whereby we take from the poor even what they have, and reward the rich with ever greater financial rewards! (Though sadly and scandalously it is often the way of the world, and this is exactly what happens in practice.)

We would more usually use the word 'talent' to mean not a weight of gold, but a natural ability – like musicality, an artistic eye or athletic prowess. Whilst the message to use our God-given talents to their utmost is not a bad message, I think this is not the most helpful way to interpret Jesus' parable.

Rather than asking what the talents in the story might represent, I think it is most helpful to see this as an invitation from Jesus to us to leave behind the vicious circle that starts, as for the third slave, with a relationship of fear; and to enter instead into the virtuous circle that begins from the foundation of a loving, obedient response to God.

Caught up in the virtuous circle of God's love, we will be well-equipped to foster and enter into the virtuous circles of our world where forgiveness leads to forgiveness, mercy leads to mercy, generosity leads to generosity, and love leads to ever greater love.

Song of praise - MP 619

Such love, pure as the whitest snow
Such love, weeps for the shame I know
Such love, paying the debt I owe
O Jesus, such love!

Such love, stilling my restlessness
Such love, filling my emptiness
Such love, showing me holiness
O Jesus, such love!

Such love, springs from eternity
Such love, streaming through history
Such love, fountain of life to me
O Jesus, such love!

Prayers of Intercession

So, generous Father, in praying for our world, we are conscious of the awesome responsibility You give to each of us to make it a place of compassion, love and mercy - a place where we empower people to grow and love and give in their turn...

First of all, we confess that we have not received nor used all Your gifts with grace or openness. Like the servant in the parable, we have looked at Your gifts through jaundiced eyes of self-denigration; we have projected our low self-expectations onto You, seeing You as a hard and demanding task-master. We have served grudgingly and with a lack of generosity; we have buried Your gifts in the cold ground of our greed. Lord, forgive us.

But now, from this moment, help us turn joyfully to You by Your grace. Sensing Your welcome and knowing Your generous love, may we receive Your gifts with good grace and use them unstintingly for the sake of Your Kingdom.

Pour out Your gifts on Your people by Your Spirit, helping us to perceive, understand and offer our talents that we may build one another up in faith and grow in the likeness of Christ. Strengthen the ministry of all in Your Church who seek to help Your children discover and develop their gifts. Help their ministry be one of empowerment, that the gifts of Your people may multiply in their effect.

Help and support all those in our society who are denied the opportunity to use their talents, those who are unemployed, denied training, those discouraged by the criticism of others and those obstructed in their education. We pray especially today for teachers and pupils who are suffering illness or who lack resources.

Guide our leaders in politics, industry and commerce, that we might become a generous society in which those with very little are strengthened to use what they have to find dignity in providing for themselves and their loved ones and fulfilment in serving others. May those who have been granted much realise that everything they have is a gift from You, so may they be motivated to share.

Help us use the gifts we have been given wisely, not squandering them but sharing and storing them for tomorrow, not just the gifts of the earth and all its food and resource, but gifts of learning, medicine, technology, justice and peace. Above all, we pray that we may protect the gift of the earth itself, its seas, rivers, fields and forests - that all Your children may live together in abundance in Your world.

Finally, we pray that we may be careful and generous stewards of the greatest gift of all, Your love; that all may know the care and compassion that You long to lavish on them. Help us tend and nurture the message of the Gospel as we share Your love with friends, family and neighbours. May we nurture, also, the gifts that come from Your love: service and truth in politics, advancement in medicine and science, enterprise and prosperity in commerce and politics, co-operation and peace among the nations, care and concern for those in need.

So we bring those who are on our hearts at this time (*name anyone you are concerned about here*) and we pray that in using all our gifts, we may speed the advancement of Your Kingdom in word, deed and prayer...so we pray as Christ taught us...

Father of us all, may Your name be honoured in Your world
May we perceive and build Your Kingdom
as Your purposes are accomplished in our daily living.

Please give us everything we need each day.
Cover our failings with Your grace so that grace may overflow to those who hurt us.
Strengthen us when we are challenged and lead us through difficult days.

And, as we learn to trust:
That You order all things
And can accomplish all things,
So may we praise You in all things
As You deserve - Amen

Hymn of Dedication - R&S 371

Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
Take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise,

Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of Thy love.
Take my feet and let them be swift and beautiful for Thee,

Take my voice, and let me sing always, only, for my King.
Take my lips, and let them be filled with messages from Thee,

Take my silver and my gold; not a mite would I withhold.
Take my intellect, and use every power as Thou shalt choose,

Take my will, and make it Thine; it shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart; it is Thine own; it shall be Thy royal throne,

Take my love; my Lord, I pour at Thy feet its treasure-store.
Take myself, and I will be ever, only, all for Thee,

Blessing

All God's gifts, in the hands of His Son, by the power of His Spirit
Will change our world
Lord bless the gifts you have given, the gifts we use and those who receive them
For the sake of God's Kingdom;
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.