



KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

10am – Sunday 15 November 2020

Music to prepare us for worship "*Fantasia in re*" Leonhard Kiebe (1490-1556); "*Lobe den Herren*"
Hans Micheelsen (1902-73); "*Prelude*" Harrison Oxley (b. 1933)

Welcome

Music of approach "*Hosanna – Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord*" Luc Jakobs

Plainchant/ Peter Stockwell

Call to worship

Kia tau ki a koutou, te atawhai me te rangimarie o te Atua.

Grace and peace to you from God.

Have hope because a new day is coming

We wait with hope

The night is darkest before the dawn so stay awake

We will stay awake

Rise, children of the day, now is the time for living

We will rise and walk by faith and love.

Hymn

(tune Christ be our light) CH4 543 - Bernadette Farrell

1 Longing for light, we wait in
darkness.

Longing for truth, we turn to you.

Make us your own, your holy people,
light for the world to see.

Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts.

Shine through the darkness.

*Christ, be our light! Shine in your
Church gathered today.*

2 Longing for peace, our world is
troubled.

Longing for hope, many despair.

Your word alone has power to save us.

Make us your living voice. [*Refrain*]

3 Longing for food, many are hungry.

Longing for water, many still thirst.

Make us your bread, broken for others,
shared until all are fed.

[*Refrain*]

4 Longing for shelter, many are
homeless.

Longing for warmth, many are cold.

Make us your building, sheltering
others,

walls made of living stone.

[*Refrain*]

5 Many the gifts, many the people,
many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another,
making your kingdom come.

[Refrain]

Prayer of Approach *Invitation to keep eyes open*

God, we are told you are coming like a thief in the night,
Breaking into our lives and our world in unexpected ways, at unexpected times
Wherever you break in, the light of the new day illuminates our darkness.
And so we are told to stay awake. To be watchful.
To look for the places where you are breaking in.

We notice the light and colour around us.
Reflecting through stained glass.
So too, your glory is reflected in this created world.
A world at every moment ordered by your word and sustained by your Spirit.
A world that, in its frailty, points to the hope of new creation to come.

We notice this building, which witnesses to a long history
Generations who have gone before.
Stones and wood that tell of our desire to glorify you.
And yet stones and wood that have also witnessed to our failures,
To injustices, to our conflicts, to our sin.
These ancient stones remind us of our frailty and mortality
And remind us that we are dependent on you alone, who is the source of life.

We notice the people around us.
People who have been created in your image.
People in whom we see the face of Christ.
People through whom the Spirit is at work.

We notice our own bodies.
Our capacity to sense, to feel, to enjoy life.
And also our weakness and frailty. Our capacity for discomfort and pain.
In your loving and transformative presence,
We confess all we are before you.
Deeply broken people, and yet people who have been destined for life with you
And with one another.

We notice all of these.
These things and these people destined for life with you.
These things and these people being made new,
By your resurrecting Spirit.
In the name of the risen Christ we pray, Amen.

Assurance of forgiveness and passing of the peace

Hear these words from the Apostle Paul:

“For God has destined us not for wrath
but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us,
so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.”

E te whanau, in Christ we are forgiven. **Thanks be to God.**

Kia tau te rangimarie o te Karaiti ki runga i a koutou. May the peace of Christ be with you always. **And also with you.**

Musical interlude *“Turn back O Man”* Gustav Holst (1874-1934), text Clifford Bax (1886-1962)

The Knox Church Junior Choristers with the Knox Church Choir

Preparation to hear God’s Word

Story about my flatmate keeping track of every dollar

Santa Claus: “He’s making a list, he’s checking it twice,
Going to find out who’s naughty and nice.”

Sometimes we have this view of God: a god who is counting up all the good and bad things we’ve done and deciding if we’re naughty or if we’re nice.

But I’m not sure God’s so concerned about that.

I think the main thing that God is concerned about is that we trust God and seek to be faithful to God as God is faithful to us... the rest will kind of take care of itself!

So I have a gift for you. And I want you to invest in someone else.

I want you to do something caring and loving for someone else.

But I’m not going to ask for it back. And I’m not going to ask what you did with it.

That’s your decision.

We listen for God’s Word in scripture

Read by Carolyn Richardson

First reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Both our readings today are shaped by an expectation of the Lord’s coming “like a thief in the night”. Paul employs the powerful image of the coming day. Though we currently endure the night, we are to stay awake and live as “children of the day”.

5 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ² For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ When they say, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! ⁴ But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵ for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. ⁶ So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷ for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹ For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church **Thanks be to God**

Gospel reading: Matthew 25:14-30

Our gospel reading is an example of what are often called “judgment parables”. This parable immediately precedes the well-known vision of the judgment of the nations when the sheep are separated from the goats. These are not easy passages of scripture and initially come across as harsh to our modern ears. However, precisely because they are so jarring, they have a capacity to challenge us and our own assumptions.

¹⁴ 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.”

*This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ **Praise to Christ the Word***

Music “Kyrie Eleison - Lord have mercy”

Gabriel Faure (1854-1924)

Reflection ‘The Tyranny of Merit’

I.

Much harm has been done over the years with the belief that God is coming again to judge us based on how much good or bad we have done in our lifetimes, or even by how faithful or unfaithful we’ve been. It can lead to paralyzing fear or crippling guilt on the one hand, and to resentment against and rejection of this God on the other.

I would like to borrow a phrase from Michael Sandel, a professor at Harvard University. The phrase is the title of his new book, *The Tyranny of Merit*. He writes from the American context to challenge the idea of the American dream: the belief that one can succeed in life if one works hard enough (with the help of god-given talent); the belief that America is a meritocracy, a society ruled by the brightest and best who, through sheer hard work and ingenuity, have climbed to the top. But this is simply not true, he argues. While there may be some for whom this is the case, these are the exception rather than the rule. And, in fact, while there may technically be a ladder to climb, in recent years the rungs of the ladder have grown farther apart. It is harder and harder to climb the ladder of success as the gap between rich and poor widens. And yet the common narrative of the American Dream feeds the lie that those who are at the top

deserve to be there, while those who are at the bottom deserve to be there. It breeds a hubris built on a lie. A hubris that is problematic at best and downright dangerous to our sense of social responsibility and collective pursuit of the common good at worst.

While the elements Sandel talks about aren't quite as pronounced in New Zealand as they are in the U.S., we nonetheless hear similar narratives. That those on the bottom are lazy. And that those on the top have deserved their wealth and influence. This is the tyranny of merit, as Sandel terms it.

We could apply the same to faith and build a picture of God based on a meritocracy: a God who ascribes us worth (or lack of worth) based on our merit (or lack of it). When we hear parables like this one from Matthew 25, we can see why people might develop such a view of God. The master, we might reasonably assume, is an allegory for Jesus. And the master's coming-again is a story about Jesus' coming again. The only thing is that the master doesn't appear in a particularly favourable light. The parable at first sight seems to provide theological justification for a kind of meritocracy: that God judges us according to our *merit* (or lack of it!). Those who receive the favour of God are those who are the best, who have the most ability.

Each of the slaves, we're told, is given wealth "according to their ability". The slave with the greatest ability is given the greatest amount of responsibility and ends up making the largest gain. He is welcomed with open arms "into the joy of the master". Likewise with the second slave, but to a lesser degree. The third slave, who has the least ability, is given the least and, because he does not invest his master's wealth, is judged harshly and is condemned to "the outer darkness". And so we have the apparent point of the parable: that, to those who have, *more* will be given, and, to those who do not have, even what they have will be taken away."

There is not much room here for grace! And we might reasonably have a knee jerk reaction to such an image of God.

Not only is it a difficult image, but it actually seems to go against other indications of God's character in Matthew's Gospel (and, indeed, in the New Testament generally). Other parables in Matthew tell stories that suggest God is full of grace, quick to forgive, abounding in love. A God who favours and actively searches out those whom the world judges as unworthy. Nowhere is this more explicit than at the beginning of Jesus' famous "Sermon on the Mount"... blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, etc.

II.

But like so many of Jesus' parables, they are more complex than they first appear. Jesus was a master storyteller, using common metaphors of his day to subvert our understanding of God. We may not sit easily with the parable -- I still don't -- but it at least deserves a fair hearing. Jesus sets up a scene that would have been common in his day. A wealthy free lord, a *pater familias*, would have had plenty of slaves. And while slaves were slaves, many of them, if they proved trustworthy and able, were given large responsibility, acting on behalf of the master. This is what happens in our story today. The master gives each of the slaves a huge sum. Even the least slave gets one talent, the equivalent of *twenty years wages*.

It becomes apparent, the closer we look, that the ability level of each slave makes little material difference to how much wealth each makes. The one with the greatest ability is given the greatest capital to invest and does so. He manages to double what he has been given. The slave with the second greatest ability returns less -- but he is also given less capital to invest in the first place. Like the first slave he doubles his income. So both the first and second slave *double* what has been given to them by grace. Their ability makes little difference to the final outcome. The wealth of the master does its own work as it were. The thing that separates the first two slaves from the third is not their ability or their merit. We might reasonably assume that, if the third slave had invested his one talent, he too might have doubled what had been given to him.

Here, I think, the parable subtly undermines a meritocratic understanding of the kingdom of God: that those whom God favours are the best among us.

To return to Sandel again, a similar point is made. While some who have the most power and wealth in our society may be hardworking, creative, kind, generous, etc., it is simply not true that they are *more* hardworking than people on the bottom. There is, contends Sandel, a large degree of luck as to who succeeds in this life and who doesn't. Those on top would be wise to remember that and live with a degree of humility, which is the base for our commitment to the common good ...but for the grace of God...

It is notable that all *three* slaves begin in the trust of the master and are given a huge amount of wealth and responsibility. All *three* slaves already *belong* in the masters household!

III.

So what goes wrong for the third slave then? As I've just argued, it's not the slave's lack of ability. It is his fear that the master is a harsh man who will count up every dollar and punish every dollar lost. He creates an image of the master built on his understanding of the dog-eat-dog world we live in, a meritocratic world that says *you are only worth what you produce*. In the master's absence, it affects how he relates to the master, how he deals with what the master has given to him. He does not accept the trust and responsibility of the master but instead is paralysed by fear, sticking his head in the sand.

How often can we slip into the same error? Creating an image of God built on the ruthless economic and political systems of our world. Believing that God does not really have our back as we thought. Fearing for the future when all might be taken from us. Fearing that God will not ultimately provide. And so we live in the present out of a paralysing anxiety and a deep seated fear that what we have now will not be enough. We seek to secure our future by simply hiding what we have in the ground. Holding on selfishly to what we have rather than investing in others with love and generosity.

In a way the third slave's belief in who the master was was a self-fulfilling prophecy. At least that's how I read it. He believed the master was a harsh task-master, who would judge him based on the bottom line, and he lived like that. In the end, his belief came true. He created his own hell, living out of fear rather than out of trust in the master.

While we are children of the light, called to live in the joy of the master, with God and with one another, the third slave stuck his head in the ground, shutting out the light. The ominous outer darkness that Matthew talks about, this *hellish* place, is perhaps Matthew's way of warning us what it's like to live in paralysing fear. We push ourselves to the edge until that becomes our own reality.

We have seen anxiety and fear bubble to surface this year in all the uncertainty. Nowhere more clearly than the fact that, despite repeated assurances that there would be enough food at supermarkets, we still went panic-buying. Toilet paper no less. We turned in ourselves. Giving into fear. Playing it safe. Seeking to hoard up for ourselves what we could. Secure our present. Such actions arise out of a deep seated fear that what we have won't be enough, that we live in a dog-eat-dog world, that we do not already belong in the household of the master, protected, that the master is not coming back calling us into a party where there is enough for all.

What better picture of hell, than the image of sitting on the toilet, pants around our ankles, surrounded by countless toilet rolls, and yet with an unavoidable feeling of being bereft, exposed, vulnerable and utterly alone. In that place, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth! Let all with ears to hear, hear! We pray...

Dedication of offering – *Please place your offerings in the offering bags held out for you at the door as you leave. Please do this as soon as you are able.*

Hymn

(tune: Neander) CH4 475 - John Ross Macduff

1 Christ is coming! let creation
from her groans and travail cease;
let the glorious proclamation
hope restore and faith increase:
Christ is coming! Christ is coming!
Come now, blessed Prince of Peace.

2 Earth can now but tell the story
of your bitter cross and pain;
she shall yet behold your glory,
Lord, when you return to reign:
Christ is coming! Christ is coming!
'Come, Lord Jesus, come again!'

3 Long your exiles have been pining,
far from you, and rest, and home:
but, in heavenly glory shining,
soon their loving Lord shall come:
Christ is coming! Christ is coming!
Haste the joyous jubilee.

4 With that blessed hope before us,
harps be played and songs be sung;
let the mighty advent chorus
onward roll from tongue to tongue:
'Christ is coming! Christ is coming!
Come, Lord Jesus, quickly come!'

Preparation for Advent: an invitation to remember

Rachel Tombs

Prayer for others and the Lord's Prayer

Written by Warren Jowett

Anglican prayer book

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 forever. Amen.

E tō mātou Matua i te rangi
Kia tapu tōu Ingoa.
Kia tae mai tōu rangatiratanga.
Kia meatia tāu e pai ai
ki runga ki te whenua,
kia rite anō ki tō te rangi.
Hōmai ki a mātou āiane
he taro mā mātou mō tēnei rā.
Murua ō mātou hara,
Me mātou hoki e muru nei
i ō te hunga e hara ana ki a mātou.
Āua hoki mātou e kawea kia
whakawaia;
Engari whakaorangia mātou i te kino:
Nōu hoki te rangatiratanga, te kaha,
me te korōria, Āke āke āke. Āmine.

Hymn

(tune: How Great Thou Art - CH4 154)

1 Whakaaria mai
Tōu rīpeka ki au
Tiaho mai
Ra roto i te pō
Hei kona au
Titiro atu ai
Ora, mate
Hei au koe noho ai. (x2)

*Show
Your cross to me
Let it shine
There in the darkness
To there I
Will be looking
In life, in death
Let me rest in thee.*

2 When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation
and take me home - what joy shall fill my heart!
Than shall I bow in humble adoration
and there proclaim, my God, how great thou art!
*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee,
how great thou art, how great thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee,
how great thou art, how great thou art!*

Blessing *"God's own for the world"*

text - The Iona Community, music Sara Brown

Music for our leaving *"Fugue in G major BWV 577"* J S Bach (1685-1750)

played by Carolyn Schmid

Serving

Associate Minister - Jordan Redding
Organist and Choir Director – Karen Knudson
Reader – Carolyn Richardson
Prayer for others – Warren Jowett
Welcoming team – David Mann's team
Counting team – Chris Bloore's team

In relation to your monetary offering, you may:

- *Make regular automatic payments (which are tax deductible) - contact Helen Thew at plannedgiving@knoxchurch.net*
- *Give online to the Church's bank account at 03 0903 0016425 00 - our charity number for tax rebate purposes is #CC52318*
- *Give at the conclusion of the service.*