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Service for the 23rd Sunday after Trinity, 15th November 2020

A warm welcome to all who share in worship with us today.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Lord, you have been our dwelling-place in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

HYMN: Ye servants of God

*If you would like to **sing** this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.*

1 Ye servants of God,
your Master proclaim,
and publish abroad
his wonderful name;
the name all-victorious
of Jesus extol;
his kingdom is glorious
and rules over all.

2 God ruleth on high,
almighty to save;
and still he is nigh,
his presence we have;
the great congregation
his triumph shall sing,
ascribing salvation
to Jesus our King.

3 "Salvation to God,
who sits on the throne!"
let all cry aloud,
and honour the Son;
the praises of Jesus
the angels proclaim,
fall down on their faces
and worship the Lamb.

4 Then let us adore
and give him his right:
all glory and power,
all wisdom and might,
all honour and blessing,
with angels above,
and thanks never ceasing
and infinite love.

Charles Wesley

PRAYERS

Let us pray

A prayer of adoration

Praise to you, Lord our God – King of creation;
maker and minder of all we know, the very heart of all being, we praise you.
Your glory is seen in majestic grandeur, in intricate miniature, in beauty and truth,
in love and laughter, in tears, in joy.

Praise to you, Lord our God – come amongst us;
redeemer of the world, healing brokenness, speaking truth, showing love, giving self on the
Cross in Christ.

Praise to you, Lord our God – coming now,
giving life, breathing hope, lighting minds, lifting hearts, falling fresh on all who call.

Praise to you, Lord our God.

Amen

*A prayer of confession (please join in with the words in **bold type**)*

Sovereign God, we have failed you.

We have become so tired in your service, so small-minded in our caring, so afraid of the
violence and hatred in the world.

You have searched out our wrongdoing and brought our secret sins into the light:

**teach us to use the time you have given us,
so that we can grow in wisdom and holiness.**

Generous God, we have failed you.

We have placed our wealth in material things, giving glory to status and power, and finding
our security in work and achievement.

You have searched out our wrongdoing and brought our secret sins into the light:

**teach us to use the time you have given us,
so that we can grow in wisdom and holiness.**

Merciful God, we have failed you.

We have concealed your promises, resisted your faith in others and ourselves, and refused
your enlarging compassion.

You have searched out our wrongdoing and brought our secret sins into the light:

**teach us to use the time you have given us,
so that we can grow in wisdom and holiness.**

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, who died for us.

Amen.

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 READING: St Matthew 25: 14-30

(Jesus is speaking to his disciples)

¹⁴The kingdom of heaven is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.

¹⁶The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

¹⁹After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰Then 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." ²¹His 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."

²²And 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." ²³His 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."

²⁴Then 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; ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." ²⁶But 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? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest.

²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹For 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. ³⁰As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Thanks be to God.

HYMN: Be Thou my vision

*If you would like to **sing** this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.*

1 Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
naught be all else to me, save that thou art—
thou my best thought in the day and the night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

2 Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word;
thou ever with me and I with thee, Lord;
thou my great Father, thy child let me be;
thou in me dwelling, and I one with thee.

3 Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise,
thou mine inheritance, now and always:
thou and thou only, the first in my heart,
High King of heaven, my treasure thou art.

4 High King of heaven, thou heaven's bright sun,
grant me its joys after vict'ry is won;
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

Ancient Irish, tr Mary Byrne & Eleanor Hull

SERMON: *Mr Keith Walton*

Have you ever thought how often there is a bit of a sting in the tail of the parables that Jesus tells? There is one here! The story is familiar to us all: the man going on a journey, leaving his property with three of his servants. Two of them work hard and double their money. The third panics and hides his share to keep it safe. When their master returns, he is impressed and congratulates the first two but is not happy with the third. Look at the extent of his unhappiness: he takes away what he had received and throws him out! Surely, some people would think, "that is a bit of an over-reaction". I'm sure the people who were listening to Jesus were not expecting that.

Have you ever heard the expression 'use it or lose it'? It is often used to describe the best way to offset the problems that come with ageing. It also refers to something that you must use by a specific date or you lose the opportunity or right to have it. In some fields of work, where there is flexibility about when holidays are taken, an employer might implement a policy that if you do not take your annual leave entitlement by the end of the year, you lose the days you have not taken. One might say that that the parable Jesus told is an early example of the 'use it or lose it' principle.

The idea in the parable is one which many churches have used in fund-raising. You may have done it here in the past. I recall that we have done it, although I can't remember how successful it was. The idea is quite simple. You give those who want to take part an amount of money. My recollection is that it used to be £5, which is in line with the five talents of the parable. Those receiving the money would use it in some way to raise money for the church. I must admit that I never became involved because I never had ideas of what I could do to raise money. Perhaps I am rather like the third servant, although I would not bury the money. Fortunately, so far as I am aware, no church trying this scheme has ever adopted the 'cast into outer darkness' idea if a person did not make money.

Let us return to the parable. The number of servants in today's story isn't important, but the fact that the master entrusts them with his enormous wealth is important. All that the master owns is in their hands, but each in a different amount; and that matches our experience, doesn't it? The good things of this earth – the wealth, the power, the ease and comfort – are distributed widely and unevenly.

But that is not what this parable is about when it speaks of coins or, in the more traditional translations, 'talents'. According to some authorities, a talent was a measure of silver equal to about 15 years of income for a common worker of the land or a carpenter in a workshop. Rather, it is about the unique wealth that God distributes to his chosen people, to his servants – to us. It is the wealth of the Torah as the Jews understood it, the riches of the gospel as we understand it. God has given to each of us a measure of all that he has. Some have more, some less; but each has more than enough – an incredible abundance, in fact.

The first servant receives five talents. In today's terms, that would be 75 years of labour. The third servant, the one-talent person, the person we often think of as having very little – but still having something – had the equivalent of 15 years of work-free living given to him. Each of us has more than enough given to us by God: more than enough faith, more than enough love, and more than enough forgiveness. We have been given everything; we have

been given the gospel of God's grace and mercy, of his healing purpose, of his divine power, each according to what God knows we can do with it. God knows our abilities – just as the parable states that the master knew his servants' abilities – and God knows that even the least well-endowed is endowed with an incredible amount.

And then what happens? As soon as the master was gone, the servants take action. The first two immediately invest the money – they spend it, in other words – in the hope of receiving even more than they first had. They take a chance and engage in some sort of venture, a venture in which – as we all know from the laws of business and high finance – there is always a chance of losing everything.

They don't delay about this, they act immediately; as does the third servant, the one who has been given over 6000 denarii. He takes his precious treasure and does what the rules of the day suggest he should do – that he ought to do. He carefully buries it, keeping it safe until the day of his master's return. He does the equivalent of putting it under the mattress, rather than taking the risk of putting it into some highly speculative stock-market investment.

What's so wrong with being cautious? Discretion and deliberateness are virtues, not vices. I am sure we have all heard the saying 'discretion is the better part of valour', an expression that probably came originally from Shakespeare.

As we find out when the master returns and each servant is asked to give an accounting for what has been entrusted to him, the third servant regards his master as a harsh man – not one who would take kindly to any form of loss – so he deems it better to preserve his own safety and security by keeping the money safe rather than risk everything by risking the loss of the money. It was an accepted financial practice in the day of Jesus to safeguard precious things by burying them – hidden treasure like that of pirates, kept safe until the day it is needed. The one-talent servant does nothing unusual by burying the money. He shows only what can be regarded as a high degree of caution. Indeed, we may think that he is too cautious; but we can't really fault him – or can we?

The twist or surprise, the part of the parable that confounded the original hearers of the tale, is the fault that the master finds with the one-talent person. Read again how the parable ends (verses 24 to 30)....

And this is the problem. Why is God so good to those who double what he has given to them, and so mean to those who simply keep what he has given them safe for his return? What has gone wrong? It begins in the attitude of the third servant. "Sir, I know that you are hard to get along with. You harvest where you do not plant and gather crops where you haven't scattered seed. I was frightened." The servant was afraid and, because of his fear, nothing was produced for the master. The servant was entrusted with substantial – if not astonishing – wealth and did nothing with it. He was afraid.

Nelson Mandela, in his Inaugural Speech in 1994, used the following quote about fear; about the kind of fear that the one-talent servant seemed to have. It is the kind of fear that keeps us from risking the treasure God has given us, from sharing the gospel with deeds of love, of power, and of commitment. He quotes Marianne Williamson, an American spiritual teacher and author.

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us, it's in everyone. And as we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

The fear that Mandella – or Williamson, if you will – is talking about may help us understand the slave who hid the talent in the ground. Psychologists understand the dynamics of fear, fear of failure and fear of success. The third servant's fear and Mandella's intuition of fear are, however, deeper than those psychological dynamics. It is profoundly spiritual in character. His fear is rooted in the cosmic conflict of good and evil. It is the human propensity for sin in action. It is a refusal to act, to share ourselves and our lives (*ie* all our energy, stamina, health, strength, emotional well-being, creativity, knowledge, wisdom, ability, gifts, graces, and even all our material possessions) in response to, and in accordance with, God's gracious kingdom-creating, community-building presence.

This refusal to act is the spiritual decision to NOT let that mind be in us that is in Christ Jesus. It is the decision to NOT have our lives disrupted by discipleship, by obedience; by becoming like Francis and Theresa, like Schweitzer and Ghandai, like Bonhoeffer and King.

What frightens us is the thought of all that will be required of us if we dare to be faithful. You know how it works, the "I won't go to the meeting so they can't ask me to do anything" mentality. We have been given so much. God has given each of us riches beyond measure. Even to the least of us, he has given more than enough.

We are beautiful, we are gifted, we are in communion with the power that made the universe. We have the message and we have the ability that we need to do all that is asked of us. What goes wrong is attitude – fear – and it leads to evil. Because we believe in a God of justice, a God who judges rightly, it leads to a bad end for the cautious, the fearful servant, the servant who did not dare to act.

You might ask, what would have happened if there had been a fourth servant in this parable, one who had received one, or five, or ten talents and gone out and invested it – and lost it? What would the master have said then? What judgement would he make upon his careless servant? I suggest the answer is that the master would have commended him for trying, that he would have forgiven him for making a mistake, that he would have smiled upon him for his sincere attempt to do what was right & good with what he had been entrusted.

But there is no need for a fourth servant in this parable for us to understand it; because if we use what God has given us, it can do nothing else but multiply. It is only when we do not use what God has given us, but keep it hidden away inside our hearts where no-one can see it – where no-one can benefit from it – that there is a problem.

I would like to conclude with another scripture reading – also from Matthew’s gospel – in the 28th chapter, verses 18 to 20: the last words that Jesus spoke to his disciples before ascending into heaven or, in the words of today's parable of the three servants, before going away on a long journey. Jesus came to his disciples and said:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go to the people of every nation and make them my disciples. Baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to do everything I have commanded you. And lo, I will be with you always, even until the end of the world."

We have been entrusted with all that we need to accomplish God's will. We have been given great riches – resources greater than we can possibly need – so that we can produce fruit pleasing to God. God will not judge us for trying and failing to produce that fruit, he will only judge us if we do not try.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

At the words “This is our prayer”, please respond with “**help us to know and do your will**”.

Let us pray

Creator God, you have entrusted us with this world. Help us to prove worthy of your trust, and to remember that we are accountable to you for what we do.

We think of the things that spoil your world: the pollution of air and water and land; waste, warfare, cruelty to animal and humankind.

May we work to put things right.

This is our prayer: **help us to know and do your will**.

Saviour God, you have entrusted us with one another. Help us to prove worthy of your trust, and to remember that we are accountable to you for what we do.

We think of the things that cause suffering: selfishness, injustice & hatred, illness, hunger and bereavement.

May we show love to others.

This is our prayer: **help us to know and do your will**.

Life-giving God, you have entrusted us with yourself. Help us to prove worthy of your trust, and to remember that we are accountable to you for what we do.

We think of the ways in which we have betrayed you: keeping you out of some parts of our lives, failing to live together in peace and unity.

May we give ourselves to you.

This is our prayer: **help us to know and do your will**.

In the name of him who remained trustworthy to the end, that your trustworthiness might be revealed, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

Amen.

HYMN: Take my life

*If you would like to **sing** this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.*

1 Take my life and let it be
consecrated, Lord, to thee.
Take my moments and my days;
let them flow in endless praise.

2 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.

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

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

5 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.

6 Take my love; my Lord, I pour
at thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself, and I will be
ever, only, all for thee.

Frances Havergal

BLESSING

Live with us day by day, God of compassion; that we may be generous to receive, generous to give, and that we may be worthy channels of your grace.

Amen.