**10th October 2021**

Call to worship

Satisfy us with your steadfast love
that we may rejoice and be glad all our days,
and gain a wise heart.
Come and meet the Lord who loves us and is all we need.
Come, rejoice and be glad as we worship together.



**A gathering prayer**

Loving Lord, you know us better than we know ourselves.
As we come together to worship you,
help us to explore our relationship with you.
May your words and challenges strengthen and affirm us.
May your love sustain us and guide us.
May our worship be acceptable to you.
In Jesus’ name. **Amen.**



**A prayer of adoration**

God of all relationships,
God of solved problems,
you care so much for each one of us.
**We praise and worship you, O God.**
Whether our problems feel tiny,
and hardly worth bothering you with,
or huge – just huge –
you are always there for us.
**We praise and worship you, O God.**
All things are possible with you most mighty God,
you are the God of eternal life,
you are always at the heart of all our concerns.
**We praise and worship you, O God. Amen.**



**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

*Invite people to spend some time thinking about things that get in the way of their relationship with God.*

Lord, there are so many things that can get in the way of our relationship with you. We offer them to you now and ask that you will forgive us and show us new ways to always put you first. Whatever that may take. Grant us your wisdom, Lord.**Amen.**

**Mark 10.17-31**

Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first (Mark 10.31).

Most young people probably shouldn’t be watching it, judging by the content description, but they’re definitely talking about it – Squid Game.  The nine-episode Korean thriller has smoothly moved in to the number one slot for Netflix, with the hashtag ‘Squid Game’ on TikTok viewed more than 22.8 billion times and counting.[[1]](#endnote-1) The premise of the show is simple, desperate cash-strapped contestants take part in a competition based around children’s games for enormous prize money. The problem for the losers is that they don’t just get knocked out of the competition, they forfeit their lives. So far, so dystopian, and yet this show has clearly caught the imagination. Maybe it’s a sign of the times, perhaps it’s the drama of survival against the odds or the idea of an enormous prize achieved through seemingly simple tasks; whatever it is, the show resonates with young people.

And yet the story of the rich man in Mark’s gospel tells us that even when riches are possessed, when you’ve made it by all the standards of our world and when you you’ve played the game and won, it’s pretty irrelevant in God’s kingdom. In fact, the very opposite is true – the rich man is told to lose it all, to give everything he has away, in order to gain life in the kingdom. He’s only asked to do one thing: put God first and let go of everything else. The rich man is not faced with a Squid Game death if he doesn’t get rid of his wealth, but he is faced with the darkness of life without God’s light.

This week we launch two things which explore the search for eternal life. The word for eternal life in scripture usually means a quality of life as much as the quantity of life that is never ending. It is the good life. The happy life.

On Wednesday we start the Happiness Lab.[[2]](#endnote-2) The aim of the Happiness Lab is to create space to allow people to explore what psychologists, doctors and faith leaders have to say about happiness. It is not specifically about faith, God hardly gets a mention, but of course it will beg the question about the relationship between the material life and the spiritual life.

Oliver James the British psychologist pointed out that religious people are much less likely to have what he called ‘virus goals or motivations’. He connects the capacity to live without affluenza (the bloated sluggish unfulfilled feeling that pervades 21st century life) and the happiness it brings with deeper spiritual values.

It will look at the disciplines that develop a happier life. Topics explored include Gratitude and Savouring, Acts of Kindness, Learning to Forgive, Investing in Friends and Family, looking after your Body and Soul and Developing Coping Mechanisms. More than anything, after 18 months of isolation, keeping your distance and living a fairly lonely life, it gives the opportunity to meet with people on a similar adventure and learn from each other – to reconnect.

On Thursday I will also start an occasional reading group looking at the book ‘Why Being yourself is a Bad Idea.

Which starts with the statement that as a culture we have become obsessed with the self. Wanting to boost their self esteem we tell our children that they are special, they are amazing, that there is nothing they cannot do if they put their mind to it, that the world is their oyster. Yet with all this focus on the self, it hasn’t seemed to make us happier.

In 2019 Gallup produced its regular ‘Global Emotions Report’ and the headline ran the world is sadder, angrier and more scared than ever before’ - and that was before the pandemic.

You would have thought that Western countries with a strong ethic of personal fulfilment and economic wealth would be the happiest, yet according to the Happy Planet Index[[3]](#endnote-3) - a survey that tells us how well nations are doing at achieving long, happy sustainable lives – the USA is 108th out of 140 countries surveyed. The UK is in 34th place. Still, that’s better than what we managed in the Eurovision Song Contest.

The German sociologist Hartmut Rosa,[[4]](#endnote-4) suggests that there is no agreement in the modern world on what it means to live a good life, so we are left with a kind of ethical pluralism as the norm. Yet he points out that what we do have is almost universal agreement on the preconditions needed to get to our version of the good life. To attain a good and happy life, in whatever shape you want it to be, you need to secure enough money, friends, knowledge, health and rights to achieve it.

The secret to a successful life is to get better skills and knowledge to land the dream job that will enable you to make a difference in the world, while at the same time giving you enough money to buy what you need to live that life. It requires being healthy enough to enjoy sport or just be pain free and attractive enough to draw admiring looks wherever you go and find your ideal partner. You need influential friends who can advance your cause and help you to bend the world in the direction you want it to go. You need the confidence to stand up for your rights – what you deserve. We are all in a race to acquire those keys to a happy and good life, even if that life looks like it is entirely self-determined.

But does this work? If you don’t get all this is life worth living? It is deeply alarming that the most common cause of death in under 30-year-olds is suicide. If they aren’t going to succeed in life, why bother? We are back to the Squid Game again. Better to die than not win the enormous prize.

The £20 per week supplement to universal credit ended in the past week, a decision [opposed by many people](https://www.trusselltrust.org/2021/09/08/the-public-wants-us-to-keep-the-universal-credit-lifeline-the-prime-minister-and-the-chancellor-should-listen/) and [criticised by many church leaders](https://ctbi.org.uk/church-leaders-oppose-universal-credit-cut/) as unwise. Our society often values skill above wisdom. The way that celebrities and sportspeople are paid is hardly reward for wisdom. [Marcus Rashford has taken a stand](https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m000qq41/marcus-rashford-feeding-britains-children) on behalf of the dispossessed in our society but not many other celebrities seem to have joined him.

Thinking only of yourself makes you turn all your attention on yourself, which is the last thing you should be thinking of is you really want to be of use to, or even attract, other people. When you think of people who are good to be with, who make you feel alive, who help you to be a better person, they are usually those who aren’t thinking about themselves at all – they are far more interested in you.

What if the secret of eternal life is not about turning inwards and thinking just about yourself but turning outwards, thinking about others and turning to God – someone transcendent, or as the philosopher Charles Taylor says- *The horizon of significance* – someone who adjudicates between what really maters and what doesn’t and our own subjective ideas of how we live our lives.

Are we challenged by this week’s Gospel passage as were the man who went away grieving, and the disciples who found Jesus’ sayings hard? What do you think Jesus intended when he spoke of the first being last and the last first? And what is the significance of that powerful saying for Christians today?

What are you willing to let go of in order to put God first? And how does it feel knowing that you don’t have to play the game, because your prize is freely given?

**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Thank you, God, that all things are possible with you.
If we truly do something in your name,
however hard it has been, you will bless us.
You are always there to guide us,
to keep us on the right track.
Thank you that when we don’t understand something –
such as a camel going through the eye of the needle –
you are there to give us understanding.
You keep us on the straight and narrow way
when we need it most.
Thank you, God, that with you everything is new.
Through you we know we have the way to eternal life.
Thank you, Lord. Just, thank you. **Amen.**

**Prayers of intercession**We bring to you: the fuel crisis, the disruption of supplies and services, the fears of empty shelves in shops; and we pray for the government and all decision makers.

Loving God,
**may your wisdom shape their choices.**

We bring to you the police and criminal justice system, and those whose confidence in the police has been shaken. We pray for those who seek to restore faith in an organisation and its people who are supposed to offer security and protection.

Loving God,
**may your wisdom shape their choices.**

We bring you the NHS and all who work for it. We pray especially for those facing difficult decisions concerning appropriate treatments, safety of staff and matters concerning Covid-19.

Loving God,
**may your wisdom shape their choices.**

We bring to you the church throughout the world, different traditions, different denominations. We pray for those who seek to guide the mission of the Church that your Word may be spread and your work done in all places. We bring to you those who are challenged by lack of resources to achieve their vision of your kingdom.

Loving God,
**may your wisdom shape their choices.**

We bring to you all those who face difficult choices, those without enough money for the essentials of life, those facing decisions about medical treatment or concerns about housing. We pray that they may find help and support in their communities.

Loving God,
**may your wisdom shape their choices.**

As we bring all these things – indeed, the whole world –  to you, knowing that there is much that needs doing, we are reminded today that first of all things is our relationship with you. Wisdom comes from you. By your Spirit, you guide and strengthen us. You show us the path, and help us to make our decisions. All things are possible with you, and without you we can achieve so little.

Loving God.
**May your wisdom shape our choices.**

To the sick bring healing.
To the sorrowful bring comfort.
To the despairing bring hope.
And to us bring vision, wisdom and a knowledge of your purposes.
In the name of Jesus.
**Amen.**

**A sending out prayer**

Loving God, who sees us and loves us just as we are,
be with us and go with us,
guide us and challenge us
to draw closer to you,
and to be and live more like Christ.
**Amen.**

1. *Fiona Dorman taught English in secondary school for 20 years and is currently working as Bristol Cathedral education officer and as an educational consultant.*

<https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/115-september-october-2021-b/proper-23/the-week-in-focus> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <http://thehappinesslab.org/> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <http://happyplanetindex.org/> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Hartmut Rosa, Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity, New York Columbia University Press, 2013 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)