**31st July 2022**

**Call to worship**

Let us worship the God of plenty,
who clothes the woods with green leaves,
the fields with crops and the meadows with flowers,
and sends sun to warm and rain to refresh.

**A prayer of approach**

Just as we are, together and apart,
we come to worship you, Lord God,
to hear your word and sing your praise,
to acknowledge our need and share your love.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

God of richness beyond our imagining,
of love beyond our comprehension,
of giving beyond our worth,
of forgiveness beyond our earning,
of generosity beyond anything we need,
we adore you.
**Amen.**

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

**A prayer of confession**

For our lack of generosity and giving, of caring and sharing:
**Lord, forgive us.**
For our neglect of need of body, mind or soul:
**Lord, forgive us.**
For our silence when words would have healed
and for harsh words that needn’t have been spoken:
**Lord, forgive us.**
For our living that fails to put into practice
what we hear of you and from you:
**Lord, forgive us.**
For our ignoring of your truths, your ways, your words:
**Lord, forgive us.**
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

We have confessed our sins, Lord.
Jesus taught us to pray to you,
and Jesus promised that our sins would be forgiven.
We trust in your promises,
and amid the cacophony of noise that life throws at us,
may we hear your word ‘my son, my daughter, my child,
your sins are forgiven.
Go and live well to the glory of my name
and the good of all’.
**Amen.**



**Luke 12.13-21**

As you know our surplus food ministry is growing and most days there is food on the market stall outside for people in our community to help themselves to. People are sharing their food with others too.

We have started to put out material to explain what we are doing and also to point to something more.

Leaflets will be available soon which ends with these words:

*As a church we recognise that people need food. In the Lord’s Prayer we ask, ‘Give us this day our daily bread’. But we also believe that faith, hope, and love bring life in a way that bread alone can’t (Matthew 4.4). We would encourage you to consider what the churches in this town can offer you in the Christian faith to meet wider needs*

We can’t live on bread alone. We need bread. But we also need more than bread.

Someone asked Jesus to intervene in a family row over money. Jesus declined, and instead told a parable about a rich man who constantly sought to build up his wealth and possessions, with the aim of living a good and long retirement; but he didn’t live long enough for this to happen. So, what was the point? Far better, Jesus says, to build up treasure in heaven and to be ‘rich towards God’.

What is the point of accumulating ‘stuff’? Today’s reading suggests that it’s a hiding to nothing; but we still do it. Does it harm us or those around us? Is the damage of greed confined to the spiritual harm it does to those whose life goal is ‘building bigger barns’? Or does the damage spread wider?

We are in a cost of living crisis in case you hadn’t noticed. Not a news report goes by without reference to the issue.

In June this year, the rate of inflation [reached 9.4%](https://www.rateinflation.com/inflation-rate/uk-inflation-rate/), the fastest increase in the cost of living for 40 years. The effect has been a sudden increase in the price of items such as food, clothes, and energy, as well as in the cost of raw materials and transport.

This would not matter so much if incomes were rising at the same rate as, or faster. But since 2010, average prices have risen while average incomes have [remained the same or even fallen](https://fullfact.org/economy/employment-since-2010-wages/). Many people were already effectively poorer, therefore, even before this year’s sudden rise in inflation.

Some can adjust their spending to cope with inflation, by cutting down on luxuries. Some are struggling to maintain a decent standard of living. But those already economising now have to make serious decisions about [eating less or living in colder homes](https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/not-heating-eating-or-meeting-bills-managing-cost-living-crisis-low-income).

There was a report in my paper the other week about foodbanks in Liverpool. It was entitled ‘Desperation in foodbank queues as supplies run out.’ It said that people were not donating to foodbanks as they were feeling the pinch and so supplies were running out.

I’d also add that the churches are running out. As society is looking towards the church to plug the gaps in welfare it may wake up to the fact that people haven’t been going to churches and churches are closing because there is nobody in them to run the place. But a secular newspaper is not going to say that. Indeed it is more likely to include articles and quotes of people knocking faith and the church.

The story did point out that a combination of a long-term squeeze on welfare payments, the two child benefit cap, stagnant public sector pay, the bedroom tax and the removal of the £20 universal credit uplift last October have helped lead vastly more people to food banks. Millions rely on top up payments for their gas and electricity at rates often hundreds of pounds more expensive than monthly tariffs. Most deprived families also live in what is called ‘food deserts’ – areas without easy access to supermarket and so generally pay more for less nutritious food. We all know that school holidays are also tough times when free school meals aren’t available.

There is a brooding summer of discontent with strikes and industrial action promised. Rail Unions claim the rail networks make on average £500 million profit every year, most of which goes to overseas investors, and they are striking to share more of that profit with workers and passengers. The bosses and those in power point the finger at railway strikers for being greedy and wanting more when they have by most standards reasonable salaries. Who is being greedy?

Meanwhile energy bosses are getting a massive payout thanks to the huge rise in energy prices, amidst clamour for a windfall tax.

Conservative Party members are deciding who to choose as our next Prime Minster. Both candidates are promising tax cuts. None have said how they will make Foodbanks a thing of the past. The Joint Public Issues Team of the URC Baptist and Methodist churches have a issued a report that says tax cuts will most benefit the rich rather than those who need the help most in the cost of living crisis. If your income is less than £20k a year a 1% tax cut will give you tidily squat. If you are earning £100K a 1&% tax cut will buy you a nice foreign holiday thank you very much.[[1]](#endnote-1) The report concludes: *Simply put, the poorest people in communities earn less and spend less– so cutting taxes on earnings or spending helps them less.*

*There are multitude of potential reasons to reduce taxes, each with its pros and cons. However, if your justification for cutting taxes is helping the poorest, you should be honest and mention that a “side” effect of helping the poorest will be to give even more money to the richest.*

*The best way to get money to the poorest families is via the benefit system which is (imperfectly) designed for the job. No contender for the leadership has yet made proposals to do this.*

In the gospel passage the question of greed is upfront and centre. Jesus doesn’t sugar coat it.

There is a brother who refuses to share his inheritance and the other brother comes to Jesus to complain and ask him to arbitrate.

‘Where there’s a will there’s a row,’ so the saying goes. The law of Moses in Deuteronomy 21 verse 7 said that the firstborn son should get double the inheritance of a man’s other children. Bet that was a popular law!

Jesus replies by saying: ‘Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you? Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

It is not clear which brother Jesus is condemning for being greedy. But then he talks about the man in the parable who hoards his grain and goods. They are both driven by greed. The previous parables in this series of readings all include a neighbour, with heroes who are generous and hospitable, at some cost to themselves. But the self-sufficient and self-obsessed rich man is neighbour to no one. His moral values are embedded in his conversations with himself about the material world. He regards the land’s produce as ‘mine’ (vv.17-18).[[2]](#endnote-2)

There is nothing intrinsically wrong in wanting to enjoy the fruits of labour. The rich man’s mistake lies in his myopic vision of abundance.

Has he sown, tended and harvested his land without help? Hardly. So, his workers too should share the benefits of the harvest.

Is grain so plentiful that other farmers have done equally well this year? Not necessarily. Like the time of Joseph, when there was grain in Egypt but not in Canaan (Genesis 41.53ff), he may only be able to relax because others must pay high prices.

Jesus calls him a fool. A fool for trusting in material possessions. It is a strong accusation.

Are you a fool for having amassed savings? Are barns bad – including metaphorical ‘barns,’ such as an individual's rainy-day savings, our pension funds, a church’s assets?

A church decided that the godly/right thing to do, when they didn’t need the house for their minister, was to sell it and devote the proceeds to their mission. Another church found itself struggling to house its minister. It had sold the old house in order to use the funds wisely, only to need another one some years later – by which time house prices had soared.

The Bible encourages us to be wise stewards. To take responsibility for our lives and provide for ourselves (e.g., 1 Thess 3.6-14). But that is balanced by being rich towards God and generous towards others. Does being ‘rich towards God’ always entail the risk of looking foolish in the eyes of the world? How do we get the balance right?

John Wesley famously said ‘Earn all you can. Give all you can. Save all you can.’

This is the only one of Jesus’ parables in which God appears – ominously, for he judges that the rich man is a fool (v.20); not only because others will enjoy the fruits of his labours once he’s dead (as in Ecclesiastes 2.20-23), but because he is essentially soulless. There is no one else in his world. His god inhabits barns full of grain. He is content to live off material capital, with no social or spiritual reserves to draw on when crisis comes.

Presumably the indiscriminate generosity of God means nothing to him (see Luke 6.30-38). He is not fit for God’s kingdom, and can expect to share the fate of another rich and selfish man in a later parable of the rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16.19-31).

‘Be on your guard against all kinds of greed’ (v.15). It’s easy to dismiss the capitalist slogan ‘greed is good’. But could the drive to profit that produced the Covid vaccines have a ‘good’ element? Is all greed bad? Is there any potential for good in the farmer’s hoarding?

The pandemic saw, at first, a most impressive drive to devise, test, evaluate and license a whole range of vaccines against Covid-19. But then hoarding set in. Sometimes, as when the UK secured the promise of enough vaccine to vaccinate its population several times over, it was called prudence. Later it was vaccine nationalism. Some people insisted that the nation devising the vaccine should get first access to it, regardless of need. Others sought to disparage a vaccine they hadn’t produced or procured in sufficient supply, regardless of the consequences of thereby encouraging vaccine hesitancy. What lay behind this rather shocking display of school-playground mentality? ‘It’s my ball and he’s not playing with it!’ ‘It’s a rotten ball and I wouldn’t play with you even if you let me!’

Covid vaccines proved a kind of possession that illustrated all too clearly how our possessions, even good and useful ones, can come to be seen as our only protection against a hostile and dangerous world – or our leverage against opponents. We become possessive and defensive, trusting that what we own will protect us from other people, never mind from impending emergencies or unseen dangers.

So, richness in stuff really does seem to militate strongly against trust in God. Affluence kills faith. One of the reasons our churches are empty is that our society trusts in money not in God. Stuff can mask our real need, and leave no room for faith to squeeze in. Stuff perpetuates and builds fear of loss; and that inhibits hope, as well as love, compassion and generosity. But it’s very hard to shake off our trust in stuff completely. Perhaps we should at the very least wind it down a bit.

We have been doing the 9 Beats course on Wednesday nights looking at the beatitudes. The first beat, the first beatitude was ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit for they shall see god’ We looked at anxiety and scarcity – all connected with the issue of poverty – the feeling that you lack something. And the need to trust and be generous and be open to God’s provision and care for you. Instead of closed hands, gripping on to what you have. To live with open hands, ready to give and to receive, to others and to God.

‘The world has enough for everyone's needs, but not everyone's greed’ – Mahatma Gandhi (cf. Luke 12.15).

We follow Jesus Christ, who accepted crucifixion rather than use his power for his own benefit. If willingness to suffer for the sake of others is the way to store up treasure in heaven, as Jesus taught, then rather than obsess about accumulating wealth, we should continually make sacrifices to improve others’ lives.

[David Trimble](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-25825573) died on Monday. He was a Northern Irish politician who was key to the Good Friday Agreement being signed in 1998 – a key moment in peace coming to Northern Ireland.[[3]](#endnote-3)

David Trimble worked hard to get the Unionist community in Northern Ireland to give the Good Friday Agreement a chance. It wasn't easy; it involved tough compromises and difficult decisions and plenty of people weren't happy. He received death threats and lost votes (the Ulster unionists were destroyed at the 2005 election by Ian paisley’s Democratic Unionist Party) and he lost friends, but David Trimble didn't give up because he knew that these hard decisions could bring peace.

Former Prime Minister Tony Blair - who headed the British side at the time of the 1998 peace talks - said Lord Trimble, "in his support of the peace process, showed politics at its very best".

"When some within his own ranks were opposed to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, he supported it," he said.

"When we needed his willingness to go the extra mile for peace, he travelled that mile. When there was the prospect of collapse of the process without strong leadership, he provided that leadership.

"His contribution to Northern Ireland and to the United Kingdom was immense, unforgettable and frankly irreplaceable."

There is now a generation of people in Northern Ireland who don't remember the violence that used to be a constant part of life there. This peace is David Trimble's legacy (and others like him). The difficult moments were worth it in the end.

Jesus tells a story about a man who focuses on the wrong things. He spends his life getting rich rather than making his life rich with God. He misses out on the chance to have a lasting heavenly legacy.

Both the story of David Trimble and the parable of the rich man remind us that our decisions and actions have long-lasting consequences. The challenge is: will we make the right decisions even when it is difficult?

Will we be rich towards God? You can’t serve two masters said Jesus.

To live sacrificially, in a society that seems to have made money a god, is a huge ask. But it’s Jesus’ ask.

**Prayers of intercession**

Lord our God, your abundance, your love, your provision, your blessing amazes us day by day. With such knowledge we bring our prayers for others in need this day.

We pray for those in need of food on the table when the cupboard is bare or when the crops have failed. No one should need overseas aid and yet they do. No one should need to use Foodbanks and yet they do. No one should go hungry and yet they do. Help us to do all we can to help feed the hungry.

God of abundance:
**hear our prayer.**

For those who are hungry for love, hungry for care, hungry for compassion, hungry for purpose, may they find what they need and what they seek from the abundance of your richness to the world.

God of abundance:
**hear our prayer.**

For those who don’t seek abundance, but simply seek for a shelter to surround them, a roof to protect them, a place to call home, a place to belong, a place to be the best they can be.

God of abundance:
**hear our prayer.**

For the fearful and the frightened, the bewildered and bemused as the pace of life overtakes them, for those who feel they no belong where they used to, they no longer understand what they used to.

God of abundance:
**hear our prayer.**

For the NHS and Social Care and Social Workers who strive to see people as a whole and to meet their needs when all around them there are pressures and cutbacks and shortages and complaints.

God of abundance:
**hear our prayer.**

For governments across the world as they readjust to life’s changing needs and demands, may they have open eyes to see the real needs, open ears to hear the cries of the needy, open hands to reach out in compassion and are and open minds to change their ways when needed.

God of abundance:
**hear our prayer.**

For those participating and organising the Commonwealth games, that they may be a games of friendship, hospitality and fairness. That all who share may feel respected and appreciated, safe and secure.

God of abundance:
**hear our prayer.**

For those known to us who need our prayers today…in the silence of this moment we bring their names and offer them to God.

God of abundance:
**hear our prayer.**

For ourselves that we may live fruitful, helpful lives, treating others with respect, dignity, fairness and worth. That we loved as we are loved and as Jesus commanded.

God of abundance:
**hear our prayer. Amen.**

**A sending out prayer**

Loving God, you have given us eyes to see
the beauty and bounty of the earth,
and minds to understand the importance of sharing.
As we go from this place, make us quick to see
where there is injustice or suffering,
and generous to do what we can to alleviate either.
**Amen.**

1. <https://jpit.uk/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2022/120-july-august-2022-c/proper-13/bible-notes> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2022/120-july-august-2022-c/proper-13/the-week-in-focus> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)