18th September 2022

Why have we come together?
**We’ve come to worship God.**
What can we give to God?
**All that we say and do; all that we are.**
What does God want from us?
**To love as God loves us.**
How can we show that love?
**By seeking justice and peace.**



**A gathering prayer**

Holy God, as we meet together,
help us to be aware of your presence.
Create in us a desire to build your kingdom,
so that, as we listen to your word and sing your praises,
we will understand how to be your people
wherever you have placed us.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of approach**

Generous God, maker, saviour, counsellor,
we come to you with all that we have,
a community gathered in your name.
May we hear what you have to say to us today,
and live our lives as an act of praise.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of adoration**

From sunrise to sunset,
from East to West,
from earth to heaven,
your name is worthy to be praised,
your glory shines above all things.
We worship and adore you, our wonderful God.
**Amen.**



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

**A prayer of confession**

Lord, we regret the times we have been unwise or short-sighted,
when we have not thought through the impact of our actions.
Give us the ability to make adjustments to our lives,
to build each other up,
and to invest ourselves in ways that are beneficial to all.
Help us when we get confused,
when things aren’t black and white,
when we injure others and ourselves –
whether deliberately or accidentally;
forgive us, restore us and help us
to repair what has been broken.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

God, you turn your face from our wrongdoing,
but you do not turn away from us.
Every time we come to you,
acknowledging our woundedness and folly,
you bring us back;
you see the person you made us to be
and wipe the slate clean again.
There is no residue left behind,
no mark on our record that you cannot erase.
You embrace us unconditionally,
and turn our brokenness to beauty.
Thank you, all-forgiving God.
Restore us to you and to your community.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Wise and wonderful maker,
thank you for all that you provide.
Thank you for the blessings you bring us – big and small.
Open our eyes to see all your acts of goodness
and to recognise what resources we have.
Thank you that, with your help,
great things can be achieved
and that we can be part of bringing beauty
to the world around us.
**Amen.**



**Community networks**

**You will need:**a large ball of string.

* Stand somewhere centrally and ask everyone to stand up. Ask them to think of all the communities or networks they are part of – apart from Church. Invite one person to tell you just one group/network. Then, keeping hold of the end of the string, throw the ball to that person. Invite another person to name a group/network; the first person, keeping hold of the string, throws the ball to the second person.
* Keep this going until everyone is holding the string – or you run out of ideas, or string, or you collapse in giggles! How many different places, groups, networks, etc., are connected by your gathering together as Church?
* Today we are going to wonder about the difference we can make in these places. Could God be calling us to bring transformation in our community

**Luke 16.1-13**

This narrative, interspersed throughout the reading, provides a commentary to a difficult and challenging passage. You need two voices: one to read this, and one to read the Bible verses.

*Before the reading*: Jesus wanted people to know that the way that we use the things we have is really important. He tells a story that can seem strange to us. He shows that a clever manager who plays the system not only helps himself but pleases everyone else. *Read Luke 16.1-4.*

So, what does he do? The way that the system worked is that if his master expected 50 jugs of oil, the manager charged the customer extra so that he himself would get paid. He has previously told the client that he owes 100 jugs of oil. But now he says: ‘Forget my commission, just pay the 50 to the master.’ He does the same with another customer: ‘You owe 100 bags of wheat; forget my fee, just pay 80 for the master.’ *Read verses 5-8a.*

So, who loses out here? Who gains? The master gets what he wants and is pleased. The customers are delighted, they paid less than they were expecting; they think the manager is great. The manager may not have been paid this month, but he may not have lost his job, he has created good will in the community, and he’ll probably make up the money in time. Jesus then challenges those listening to him about how they use their worldly possessions. If they don’t use them well, how will they ever be trusted with Godly gifts? *Read verses 8b-13.*

The parable of the dishonest manager raises disturbing questions (Luke 16.1-8).

**Reflection**

*Spend a few moments thinking about what stands out for you from the Bible reading. This idea may help.*

How often do we talk about wealth or money? This parable invites us to explore the real world of money. So many of our hearers are people trying to make the best of a system they did not create but are called to make work. Like the steward of Jesus’ story, they/we are caught between profit-maximising bosses and customers keen to pay as little as possible for products. Who, we wonder, is exploited along the way? Does Jesus’ sly tale of seeking to operate by kingdom values in the grubby world of commerce help us navigate our nine-to-five?

Why are we so hesitant to talk about money in the church?

I suspect the answer is that we don’t want to offend people. But I think it should offend us more that there are entire elements of our life that we feel Scripture does not speak to. I think most of us genuinely struggle to make sense of our economic lives and would welcome some counsel. And I think that’s part of what this text indeed speaks to, the struggle to make good use of our resources.

So maybe this is the week to at least bring up the question of money and faith. If you do, you’ll quickly realize there is no simple “biblical” view about economics. Why? Probably because our relationship to our wealth is pretty complex, and “sound bite” theology or biblical maxims don’t work. At the same time, there are a few themes that seems to run across the Gospels and make an appearance here.

1) Wealth is both a blessing and a responsibility.[[1]](#endnote-1) As throughout Scripture, we are blessed to be a blessing, and we are held accountable less for what resources we have accumulated than how we use them. From this point of view, perhaps the shrewdness or prudence of the manager comes through his recognition that he has privileged amassing wealth to developing relationships. It may be that he earned his money by charging interest on the amounts his lord loaned out to others. Finding himself between a rock and a hard place, he cuts the amount others owe by his surcharge, avoiding further accusation that he is defrauding his master but strengthening, perhaps even establishing, relationships that will sustain him in a time of need.

2) Wealth – along with status, power, and privilege – is fleeting. One day this manager is on top of the world; the next he is faced with disaster. We are not so far removed, I think, from the financial meltdown of 2008 that we cannot remember how many people lost much of what they’d amassed in such a short time. When faced with the pronouncement that we cannot serve God and Mammon we might remember that whereas the Lord’s attention, care, and providence are constant, Mammon proves to be a pretty fickle, and ultimately untrustworthy, master.

3) In times of crisis, God often appears where we least expect God to be, coming us to “from below” to render help and aid. There are lots of “crises” in Luke that turn on receiving help from unexpected places – the Jewish traveler left for dead along the road who is saved by a Samaritan; the rich man (in next week’s text) who begs for help from Lazarus, the slave he ignored; this manager now suddenly dependent on those who used to look to him for loans. From Mary’s *Magnificat* through the beatitudes to Jesus’ death on the cross, God regularly shows up in those places where we least expect God to be so that we are not tempted to place our faith in the wrong place.

And perhaps this is the key – or at least one of the keys! – to this passage: we are placed on this earth to love and care for each other, not to separate ourselves from each other with wealth, status, or privilege. **I’ve heard it said that St. Augustine asserted that God gave us people to love and things to use, and original sin manifests itself in our penchant to confuse those two, loving things and using people.**

Perhaps one way to get at this would be the following: after raising some of your questions and offering your suggestions, provide folks with a 3×5 card and an envelope dated October 18, 2016 (a month from Sunday), and ask them to write on the card the name of one person, one relationship, that they want to improve or deepen and so deserves their investment of time, energy, and money. That is, let’s take seriously that God gives us people to love, that we are given all of our resources to care for others, and that none of us know how much time we may have to do that. So ask people to write the name of one person with whom they would like to improve or deepen a relationship and then put that card in the envelope, take it home, put it somewhere safe, and open it again in a month to see how they’ve done.

This is not a challenge, and no one will judge the outcome. It is simply an invitation to see those around us as God’s true gifts to us, the “honest wealth” and true riches of life in community.

**Context**

We are facing a cost-of-living crisis. The combination of [Covid, Russia’s war on Ukraine, and extreme weather events](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-62752450) has led to escalating prices. One of Liz Truss’ first actions as Prime Minister was to announce a far-reaching [energy plan](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-58090533). But there is [scepticism over whether it will help those most in need](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/sep/09/a-broken-system-campaigners-urge-liz-truss-to-rethink-energy-plan%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank). Many will still face agonising decisions this winter over whether to eat or keep warm. Not enough will be coming in to pay the bills, and most people are ‘ashamed to beg’ (Luke 16:3), or resort to foodbanks. [Three short videos](https://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/not-even-wee-bit-security) from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation illustrate the dilemmas faced by parents trying to get by on low incomes. And Church Action of Poverty has filmed young people talking about their experience of [food poverty](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/stories/hangry/), including their embarrassment over receiving free school meals.

**Ideas for sermons or interactive talks**

This week’s Gospel reading ends with the seemingly straightforward statement ‘You cannot serve God and wealth’ (Luke 16.13). The preceding parable and sayings, however, are anything but straightforward. We start with an outrageous, puzzling story, which Christians (starting with Luke?) have long struggled to make sense of. It comes as a shock that the master, and by implication Jesus, commends his sacked manager for falsifying bills to rescue himself from poverty. The master recognises the manager’s shrewdness and ingenuity, even though they are used dishonestly. Luke follows the parable with sayings on the theme of wealth. The first suggestion is that the ‘children of light’ need to learn shrewdness from the ‘children of this age’. It is no good being naive. Disciples need to be streetwise. This is reminiscent of the saying in Matthew 10.16: ‘be wise as serpents and innocent as doves’. The second suggestion is that wealth should be used to make friends with those who will carry weight in eternity. Does this perhaps mean giving alms to the needy? Ingratiate yourself with the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God (Luke 6.20). The third suggestion is that faithfulness in money matters is a preparation for greater things. Life in this world is training for life in the next.

A statement about the incompatibility between God and wealth does little to help those struggling with the cost of living. The parable seems more realistic about the difficult dilemmas involved in trying to survive. What is the shrewd thing to do in the current crisis? – as individuals, as churches, as a nation? Some have concluded that drastic action is needed, hence the strikes by railway workers, postal workers, refuse workers, barristers … And the call for [mass non-payment of energy bills](https://dontpay.uk/). One theme in the reading is that of making friends. We need each other, we need community, we need common action, more than ever. In a message to churches, [Trussell Trust](https://www.trusselltrust.org/get-involved/church-support/) points out that it is those who have the least in our communities who are most affected by the decisions we make as a society, over benefits, housing, employment. They call on Christians not only to have compassion for those who are struggling, but to seek justice and advocate for change.

**Questions for discussion**

* How might your church create community, in support of those struggling with the cost of living?
* How far should protest go? What do you think of the recent strikes? And of the refusal to pay energy bills?

*Ann Conway-Jones teaches biblical studies and early Jewish-Christian relations, including for*[*Sarum College*](https://www.sarum.ac.uk/short-courses/biblical-temple-theologies/)*and the*[*Oxford University Department for Continuing Education*](https://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/courses/the-parting-of-the-ways-between-judaism-and-christianity?code=O22P745THW)*.*

* How often do we preach about wealth or money? This parable invites us to explore the real world of money. So many of our hearers are people trying to make the best of a system they did not create but are called to make work. Like the steward of Jesus’ story, they/we are caught between profit-maximising bosses and customers keen to pay as little as possible for products. Who, we wonder, is exploited along the way? Does Jesus’ sly tale of seeking to operate by kingdom values in the grubby world of commerce help us navigate our nine-to-five?
* Jesus is in good company. Following a long line of prophets, he denounces money as ‘unrighteous’ and sharply warns that we cannot serve both it and God. And yet, almost in the same breath, he tells us to learn lessons from the apparent sharp practice of the steward and make friends using the very cash he has denounced. The clue to how this is done is found in Jesus’ clear-eyed reading of the world and the situation the steward finds himself in: how can we help our hearers to be similarly clear-eyed?
* Throughout this section of Luke’s Gospel, Jesus has been teaching the disciples what it means to follow him. The religious people tried to keep themselves holy by staying away from anything that might be considered ‘dirty’. Jesus didn’t separate himself from anyone; instead, he chose to transform the places he was in. Have you ever wished that you could be more holy, more like Jesus? Perhaps you’ve thought it would be good to work full time for the church or a mission? In this story, Jesus challenges us to stay where we are and to bring kingdom values of justice and community building to every situation. This links closely to Amos 8 – what difference could we make in a situation such as that?
* How does what we do – as individuals and as a group – build community? If our church was shut down tomorrow, would it make any difference to the local community? The manager in this story uses his position to please everyone. The result is that he is the only one to lose out. He creates good will. Jesus challenges the disciples to be faithful with everything they have. He implies that being faithful is about building community, and that we should use all that we have to build the kingdom of God. So, as a Church, can we use our resources better to build good relationships in the wider community?

**Thought for the week**

**Read out in place of a sermon if you wish**

Let me tell you about Bella, someone who changed her mind about Church. She had loved everything about her church. She couldn’t wait for work to end so that she could join her Christian friends – in the choir, home group, anything. Church was everything and work was just a way of funding it. Then one day Bella realised that God had placed her in her job to bring God’s transformational love there too. This surprised her. Bella worked in Human Resources in a large company. But she decided to look for opportunities to show God’s love through her work.

One day she realised that she didn’t know any of the night workers. She asked her boss if she could spend a night working with them, and then did so. When midnight came and they stopped for their ‘lunchbreak’, Bella joined them in the basement. It was a shambles. There was nowhere for them to sit and eat – just a couple of old broken chairs and a kettle. In her mind, Bella contrasted this with the day workers’ rather plush cafeteria. In the basement, there wasn’t even a noticeboard to share news and create a sense of belonging to the company. She knew how God’s love could transform this place and her boss agreed: the night workers were given nice chairs, tables, a fridge and a noticeboard. Bella didn’t stop loving her church, but she discovered that going to church didn’t make any sense if she wasn’t looking to see how to show God’s love in the rest of her life.

Jesus told the story of a manager whose boss had been told that he wasn’t up to scratch. We don’t know whether he was guilty or not. What we hear is how he chose to act when the boss came to check. In those days, the owner told his manager how much he wanted from each tenant. The manager’s cut was the commission he charged on top. Realising his job was on the line, he decided to forgo his commission – the tenants would pay less but the owner still got everything he was expecting. Everyone was happy and no one could criticise the manager – they were all pleased with him. He was the only one to lose out.

In Jesus’ day the religious people thought that only some things were holy. Everything else made you ‘unclean’. Jesus taught his disciples that it doesn’t have to be like that. He demonstrated it by not being discriminatory about who he ate with. But he taught it too – in the ‘lost’ parables and in this story. Jesus challenges them to consider not what something is but how we use it. If we’re not faithful, using the ordinary and everyday things of life in a way that show’s God’s love, then how can we be trusted with the heavenly things? Jesus shows that being holy is about transforming the communities where we live and work into places where people can experience God’s love – not as something separate from ordinary life but as part of it. Bella discovered a whole new way of building community and showing God’s love – can we?

**Ask people, as they look at the images, to consider what are the good things in your community where Christians might join in? And, how might you bring transformative love to the more difficult/challenging areas**?

* Jesus appears to praise a dishonest man. Why did he do this?
* How can we be faithful with what God has given us?
* How can you use one of your resources (the things you have) to help someone this week?

 Are we challenged in how we spend our money/use our resources? What opportunities do we have to  build our community with the resources we have?

**Prayers of intercession**

As our nation remembers Queen Elizabeth II, we call to mind her role in the services and we pray for all those in our own country and overseas who serve in the military and all those whose lives are shattered by the war which is going on around them. We hold before you the leaders and people of Ukraine and pray for peace in that troubled land.

As the nation recalls the faithful service of Queen Elizabeth II, we call to mind her compassion and we give thanks for the hundreds of charities to which she was connected. We pray for them and those whom they seek to serve. We commend to you the people of Pakistan as they seek to rebuild their lives after the devastating flood and all the various aid agencies working there.

As the nation grieves the passing of Queen Elizabeth II, we pray for her family who mourn a mother and grandmother and we remember all those who at this time are saddened as a result of the passing of a loved one those who have suffered a recent bereavement, those for who it is a time of anniversary and those for whom the pain is constant. May they know your comfort and  peace.

As we prepare to celebrate the life of Queen Elizabeth II and commend her to your eternal care, we pray for our nation that as we have been united by grief, we may be united by commitment to serve one another. Bless King Charles III and the Queen Consort, give them strength and wisdom that above all things they may serve you in the roles to which you have called them.

Loving God as we remember your faithful servant, Queen Elizabeth II, we thank you for her faith and for the wisdom and strength with which you blessed her. Bless us and all your children that we may follow her example, live in peace and unity and serve each other’s needs.

In the name of Jesus.
**Amen.**

**A sending out prayer**

We want to be the body of Christ,
longing to bless the world with love,
and transforming society, here and now.
Holy Spirit, we offer you
all that we are, all that we do.
Take us, and our gifts and talents,
and help us be signs of your kingdom today.
**Amen.**

1. <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/09/pentecost-18-c-wealth-and-relationships/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)