**25th September 2022**

**Call to worship**

Praise the Lord! Come, praise the Lord!
**Everything in heaven and earth, praise God!**
Praise the Lord, all creation – sun, moon and shining stars,
**Everything in heaven and earth, praise God!**
Praise the Lord, sea and land, animals, birds and all nature,
**Everything in heaven and earth, praise God!**
Rulers and nations, young and old together,
**Everything everywhere, praise the Lord!**



**A gathering prayer**

Amazing and loving God,
as we meet together –
inspire us by your word,
renew us with your Spirit
and unite us as we worship you,
creator, redeemer and sustainer.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of approach**

We gather to approach our God.
A God of justice and of love.
A God who hears the cries of those in need,
and who calls us to live in loving ways.
May we draw near to God;
may God draw near to us:
Father, Son, Spirit – the triune One.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of adoration**

God of kindness and compassion,
God of fairness and justice,
God who sees all and hears all,
we worship you.
God of infinite love and boundless hope,
who calls us to life with you,
now and always, we worship and adore.
**Amen.**



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

**A prayer of confession**

O guardian of our hearts,
so often we have focused on the wrong things
and turned away from those who need our help.
Whether through thoughtlessness, presumption or fear,
we have not embodied the abundant life you offer us.
Re-tune our hearts to your Spirit and your perfect love,
motivate us to find ways of helping,
even when we feel limited or without resources.
May we never turn away from doing something
because we cannot do everything.
Help us be light wherever we are,
not keeping it to ourselves
but working together to show your generosity.
Forgive us, restore us, and guide us, we pray.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Loving God,
thank you that it is not too late.
Every day is a new chance to serve you,
to love others and to be the people you made us to be.
Thank you for forgiving us when we get it wrong.
Thank you for being ever willing to begin again.
May we dispense kind words and generous actions.
May we be known for an attitude of love,
that honours you and all you have made.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of thanksgiving**
God, thank you for being a God of restoration.
Thank you for reaching out to us all.
Thank you for caring about how we treat each other,
and for your encouragement as we live our lives.
Help us to share what we have – whatever that may be –
and together make our world a better place.
Thank you for inspiring us to do this!
**Amen.**



**That’s not fair**

* Ask people how much they spend on chocolate in a year – or to guess if they don’t know. How much do they think people in the UK as a whole spend on chocolate? In 2021, the answer was an average of £51 per person – or a total of just under £3.5 billion pounds. And that’s just one country. So why aren’t cocoa farmers rich?
* Ask for three volunteers and share out a bag of chocolate sweets (e.g. M&Ms), but unfairly. That is, give loads to the first person, much less to the second, and hardly any to the third. Ask: Was that fair? Are they all happy with their share? But this is what happens in the chocolate industry: most of the money we pay goes to the shops that sell it and the factories that make it – very little gets through to the cocoa farmer.
* Of course, it’s not just chocolate. This is the sort of thing that happens again and again, and all over the world. This is why organisations such as Fairtrade try to do something about it. What could or should we do differently? Today we are exploring what God wants us to do about injustice or unfairness in life.

Psalm 146

Invite everyone to imagine that they are on a protest march. The words of this week’s psalm are going to be a protest shout for God’s justice in our world. You could display images of people on a march protesting for an issue of justice, interspersed with slides that show the key themes – e.g. ‘Justice for the oppressed’, ‘Food for the hungry’, and so on – and/or make placards for people to hold with the same phrases. Divide everyone into two sections to join in the following words.

Leader: Praise the Lord! Yes, really praise him!

Group 1: We’ll praise him as long as we live!

Group 2: To our last breath we’ll praise the Lord!

Leader: Don’t look to rulers and leaders to help.

1: They can’t help.

2: They all fail.

Leader: Happy are those who have God to help.

1: They hope in the Lord their God.

2: Yes! God who is creator of everything!

Leader: He is the God who keeps his promise.

1: Justice for the oppressed!

2: Food for the hungry!

1: Freedom for the prisoners!

2: Sight for the blind.

Leader: The Lord lifts the burdens away.

1: The Lord loves the righteous and protects foreigners.

2: The Lord looks after the widows and orphans.

Leader: The plans of the wicked he brings to ruin.

1: The Lord will rule for ever!

2: Our God is king for every generation

All: Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!

**Luke 16.19-31**

With a parable about what happens after death there is nowhere to start this week other than the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II last Monday[[1]](#endnote-1). [28 million people](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-62966616) watched the funeral on television on Monday, with schools and business closed for the day. For many young people, this will have been the first funeral they have witnessed, with parents having protected them from attending family funerals when they were younger. For others, watching the Queen’s children and grandchildren walking behind the royal coffin will have brought back memories of someone that they have lost and made that grief fresh again.

Researchers gathering stories from people in ‘[The Queue](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-62940182)’ found many reasons, not just shared grief but also individual losses, a sense of national identity, and just wanting to be part of an historic moment. Others raised concerns about the silencing of those who wanted to protest against the institution of the monarchy; of those who mourn the harmful and oppressive role Britain has had as a colonial power; of those who call us to recognise the injustice experienced by the black community, after the death of Chris Kaba. How do we live with these different perspectives and challenges, seemingly in tension with each other?

This week a [petition has been drawn up](https://metro.co.uk/2022/09/20/holly-willoughby-and-phillip-schofield-petition-reaches-25000-signatures-17420027/) to get Phillip Schofield and Holly Willoughby sacked from their jobs on daytime television programme, ‘This Morning’ for jumping the queue to see the Queen as she was lying in state. At the time of writing, 25,000 people have signed it so far which makes me wonder at the way in which people want to see bad behaviour punished (it looks like the pair were there as broadcasters and not in the queue at all) and see offences on a sliding scale from minor to awful. It feels very British to be this exercised about whether people have queued properly. Have those executives for the water industry who have authorized the dumping of sewage into our rivers received a similar level of anger? What about bankers who will soon be able to receive huge bonuses once the government lifts regulations on them. Regulations that were imposed so that the financial crash of 2008 wouldn’t happen again. Are 25,000 people going to get up a petition about that? Do we have different expectations of celebrities to ‘normal’ people?

The Pharisees laugh at what Jesus has been saying because they were lovers of money (16.14). Jesus scolds them with a searing condemnation of their hypocrisy that pays huge attention to what people think of them but scant regard to how God sees their hearts (16.15). Then in a reversal of the norm, he accuses them of breaking the Law – usually it’s the other way around, they accuse Jesus! – by not welcoming and helping the poor. And this has consequences, which Jesus demonstrates in this parable.

It is a graphic commentary on Jesus’ teaching in the beatitudes (Luke 6) i.e. blessed are the poor. The rich man is fabulously wealthy; the poor man is totally destitute – but notice he’s the only one with a name (Church tradition has named the rich man Dives, the Latin word for rich).

Both die and their fortunes are reversed. Lazarus is comforted in the bosom of Abraham – an image of the great banquet (cf 13.28-30) – while the rich man is tormented in the flames. Having not lifted a finger to help Lazarus, the rich man now expects Lazarus to help him, but Abraham says this is not possible. So, the rich man asks that Lazarus be sent to warn his brothers, but Abraham says they already have all the warning they need – even someone rising from the dead won’t persuade them. Perhaps verse 31 is a wistful prediction that the Pharisees will never change, even after Jesus has been raised.

But eschatological though the parable certainly is, the point of it is what is happening in this life. Lazarus would not have been destitute if the rich man had lived according to the Law. Lazarus would not have lost his land – no doubt swallowed up into the rich man’s estate because of debt (the parable inhabits the same world as the earlier story about an unjust manager that we looked at last week).

The point is that the Law and prophets clearly spell out what God expects of his people concerning the poor. The hypocrisy of the Pharisees is that while heeding some of the Law, they ignore important parts of it – including this key area. The disciples, however, should live by the values of the kingdom that uphold the Law’s emphasis on helping the poor, on sharing our possessions with those in need, on graciously welcoming all, as God welcomes us.

Let me pick up on a few pertinent issues.

My sermon preparation notes said, it is important to tread lightly around the topic of hell and eternal torment. Instead, there is a conversation to be had about choices made in life. MMMMM!

I did a funeral on Tuesday in which I reflected on the long queues of hundreds of thousands of people lined up to see the Queen’s coffin. I said we are all in a queue to see a coffin. Our own. We will all die and the wise comes to terms with that sooner rather than later.

There is a sentimental folk belief that we will all meet again. That we have a right to immortality. We are entitled to our place in heaven. The words of the Queen have been used in that vein.

We have no right to immortality. We are not entitled to a place in heaven. It is God’s choice, God’s mercy to grant resurrection life. We are not God. We are not God.

We do not hold the keys of life and death. We are not the beginning and end of life, the alpha and the Omega.

Eugene Peterson said ‘Life’s basic decision is rarely, if ever, whether to believe in God or not, but whether to worship or compete with Him’.

When I repeat the words of Jesus at the start of a funeral :

I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; **26**and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.

I pose a conditional question: The one who believes in me?

What about those who don’t believe? What about those who said nawww I’ve got more important things to do than hang around churches and learn how to pray and follow Jesus. Not cool. Too busy. Got a partner to find, or a family to raise, or money to make or sport to play. Not got time for God.

Will God have time for you when you come knocking on heaven’s door?

I believe in a merciful God who gives us what we don’t deserve. I have encountered the grace and mercy of the Lord – I see it in Jesus. But there are enough scriptures and parables and sayings of Jesus to challenge anyone: don’t mock God. I cannot with all confidence say ‘we will all meet again’. That is not for me to say. God is the judge and the giver of life.

What I can say is seek the Lord while He can be found. Discover eternal life now through a relationship with Christ.

It is an evangelistic opportunity to prompt the question with our family with our friends: what happens after death: will we meet again? Where is your hope and confidence in that?

Of course there are intellectual reasons why people don’t believe in God and life after death. But there are also personal reasons why people don’t want to believe in God and life after death. They don’t want to be held account for the decisions they make in this life. It is not for nothing that British people live atheistic lives because they have heaven now. We are in the top 5% of the most affluent people on God’s earth. This parable should scare the living daylights out of us.

At the time of Jesus some of his audience would have taken the judgement of the resurrection very seriously, expecting judgement on the basis of their behaviour in this world. Jesus’ parable challenges us to think hard about how we live here and now.

In Jesus’ time, community would have been central. To deny alms, monetary help, to someone one was in relationship with was a denial of that community.

Perhaps that is the rich man’s greatest sin. He is self-indulgent and ignores his relationship with Lazarus. Lazarus is at the rich man’s gate every day; they would know each other and yet the wealthy man denies their community. We who have been blessed with abundance, act as if we are disconnected. We may not be so absurd as the rich man, but we are blessed, and are separated from the world. Who is at our gate that we ignore? What are the big divides in our society which are harming our neighbourliness?

Many churches around this time will be having harvest services, (ours is next week). One favourite hymn is ‘All things bright and beautiful’. The original hymn has this verse:

The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them high and lowly,
And ordered their estate.

Modern people are a bit uncomfortable singing those words and they have been omitted from most hymn books. Are they appropriate? Are they true? How should we respond when we see people living in poverty around us? Has that been ordained by God? Do you just have to accept your estate – how God put you on this planet.

As the rich man of the parable spent his life wearing fine clothes and feasting, what was different about Queen Elizabeth’s life? She wore expensive clothes and ate at banquets with world leaders so what gave people such confidence at her funeral in speaking about her life being ‘well-lived’?

Part of that was her stated intention to serve others - even while she had servants herself - to give her time and energy to doing what would help relations with other countries or one of the many charities of which she was patron. The Queen spoke often of service: Both in terms of her faith in Jesus and her desire to serve him as well as the calling she felt God had given her to use her position and power for the good of others.

A question often asked is: What would you do if you were ‘king for a day'? - what would you do with the resources and power that you imagine comes with that position? Is it easier or harder to work for the good of others when you personally have everything you need?

From the parable, is there a different judgement being applied to the rich man than to Lazarus? Lazarus doesn’t appear to have worked to benefit anybody else but is instead blessed for enduring so much suffering. Does this change how we judge those who are struggling and how much we expect from them? Who do you know who is in a similar position to Lazarus where their suffering stops them from being able to join in with society?

The parable speaks of a ‘great chasm’ fixed between Lazarus and the rich man in the afterlife, but there are those who suggest that there is an increasingly great chasm fixed between rich and poor in this life, both globally and locally.

Proverbs 30.8 says

‘Two things I ask of you, Lord;
    do not refuse me before I die:
**8**keep falsehood and lies far from me;
    give me neither poverty nor riches,
    but give me only my daily bread.
**9**Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you
    and say, “Who is the Lord?”
Or I may become poor and steal,
    and so dishonour the name of my God.

One of the great challenges for discipleship is honouring God with your wealth in a relatively affluent country. Taking just reward for your labour but counting your blessings because you were born in a country with a stable prosperous economy. Taking responsibility for yourself and your family, making provisions for the future, but also playing your part in your community and your church.

It is in this light, a biblical light, not a political one that I found the so called mini budget on Friday deeply disturbing.

You will all have your own opinions on what has been described as a budget for the rich, because the richest members of our society are the ones who will benefit the greatest from it.

The biblical material suggests that those with the broadest shoulders should carry the biggest burden for ensuring the welfare of the community and looking after your neighbour. This budget seems to be in stark contradiction to that, incentivizing self-interest and aggrandizement at the expense of the community.

I have lived through the advocating of trickle-down economics before. I was unemployed for a few months during that era. The assumption is that cutting taxes for the wealthiest fuels growth to such as extent that tax cuts pay for themselves. There is scant historical evidence that this happens. More often the wealth doesn’t trickle down it just stays with the wealthiest.

In America low taxes give people more money in their pockets to do what they like with it. Americans per head of population give about three times as much money away to good causes charities, churches, than British people do. They have a more philanthropic culture. But because taxes ae low public services are lacking. Health care is not a right but down to whether you have the right insurance policy for example. So structural justice the redistribution of wealth through the tax system to pay for the well being of society isn’t as effective as in the UK.

Time will tell and you get to vote in two years whether this strategy of low taxes will help our economy.

But remember the pandemic. Not so long ago we realized who were the most valuable members of our community in a crisis. Those working in the food industry, keep us fed. Those delivery drivers. Those working in health care keeping us alive. Those working in care homes, keeping our elderly relatives protected. Whilst poor bankers need extra incentives to work all the others can go whistle.

Remember too how during the pandemic it took Big State intervention to prevent us all from going bankrupt, losing jobs and homes with a generous furlough scheme and a vaccine roll out. Big state was important then.

Remember a decade ago and austerity economics justified balancing the books on public spending. There was no magic money tree we were told.

Now there is a whole forest of them. Huge reckless borrowing that could put the country into massive debt for generations to come. I remember Jeremy Corbyn being ridiculed for suggesting massive borrowing to renationalize the energy companies so that they would be accountable to us and not to their shareholders. Where would he get the money from – how reckless! At least we would have had something to show for it. Now the country is borrowing huge amounts of money to pay those energy companies and give tax handouts to the rich and we the taxpayer will be picking up the bill for generations to come.

Poor Lazarus – you had a rough deal on earth.

*But remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.*

Stopping preaching politics Simon. Preach the bible! Well let me give you chapter and verse:

Jesus requires the rich to be attentive to their responsibilities within the community and concern at divisions within society. May God help us to heed that advice, take care of our own souls and be good neighbours in our care for one another: locally, nationally and globally.

**Prayers of intercession**

Loving God,
**we pray for those who wait at the gate.**

For those who wait at the gate in poverty, seeking essentials from foodbanks, unable to afford to turn their heating on, walking the streets to save using fuel at home. We pray for all in poverty and need that those who have will see and respond to the needs of those who have not. We especially ask that you will bless those who are planning winter warmth projects to provide support for those struggling as a result of spiralling fuel costs.

Loving God,
**we pray for those who wait at the gate.**

For those who wait at the gate because they have nowhere else to wait for those whose homes have been destroyed by flood; for those whose home has been bombed; for those who cannot afford a home. We pray for all who are homeless or whose homes are insanitary or unsatisfactory. We commend to you those charities that seek to provide aid to those in Pakistan, for those who welcome refugees, for those who provide emergency shelter.

Loving God,
**we pray for those who wait at the gate.**

For those who wait at the gate in sadness and grief, for those whose lives have been torn apart by the death of a loved one, for those who struggle to cope, for those who can't find a way to fit in. We pray for all those for whom the recent period of national mourning has brought to the surface grief they were seeking to ignore that they may find the comfort and strength that your presence offers.

Loving God,
**we pray for those who wait at the gate.**

For those who wait at the gate of the church, for those who have been rejected, for those who fear they will be turned away, for those who don’t know how to access your strength and love. We pray that our churches may be inviting places of welcome where no-one is turned away and all are helped to experience the grace and peace that you offer.

As we enter the gate of our homes, our churches, our lives, give us eyes to see those in need and hearts to respond in the name of our Saviour Jesus. **Amen.**



**A prayer for all ages together**

Holy God,
as we try to live our lives as Jesus did,
fill us with a longing for justice,
and give us generous hearts.
Help our actions to show that we really do
want your kingdom to come,
here and now, and not just in heaven.
**Amen.**



**A sending out prayer**

Lord, we know that your kingdom exists
wherever injustice is challenged,
wherever the oppressed are set free,
wherever the hungry are fed,
wherever the helpless helped
and foreigners welcomed.
Help us to work for this,
wherever we are this week.
**Amen.**

1. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2022/121-september-october-2022-c/proper-21/the-week-in-focus> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)