**1st October 2023**

[**Call to worship**](javascript:void(0))

Jesus tells us that the greatest commandment is to love the  
Lord, your God, with all your heart and soul and mind.  
So let us do that.  
Let us bring God our hearts – all our emotional ups and downs.  
Let us invite God into our souls – the very depths of who we are.  
Let us honour God with our minds – in all our thinking and questions.

[**A gathering prayer**](javascript:void(0))

Lord, as we gather in this place,  
may our worship bring joy to your heart,  
may your Spirit breathe into our souls,  
and may your Word reshape our thinking –  
so that we might have the same mindset as Christ.  
**Amen.**

[**A prayer of approach**](javascript:void(0))

Loving God,  
in an ever-changing world, we come to you for stability.  
In a world of so many choices, we come to you for guidance.  
In a world so full of knowledge, we come to you for wisdom.  
In a world awash with rights, we come to you to discern our responsibilities.  
In a world of countless opinions, we come to you to discover  
what you think, that we may be faithful in our promises and  
wholehearted in our service – in Jesus’ name.  
**Amen.**

[**A prayer of adoration**](javascript:void(0))

God of all truth, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
you are the source of all positive change;  
you are the bringer of all lasting healing;  
you are the inspirer of all life-giving choices;  
you are the dismantler of all stubbornness;  
you are the provider of all opportunities.  
So, we worship and adore you  
with our hearts, our minds and our lives.  
**Amen.**

[**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**](javascript:void(0))

**A prayer of confession**

Faithful God, when we are too proud or too stubborn to change  
our minds and our ways: **please forgive us.**  
When we make good choices but then change our minds when  
things get tough: **please forgive us.**  
When we judge others when they change their minds and  
underestimate the courage it takes: **please forgive us.**  
When we believe it is too late to change and miss the  
opportunities we could embrace: **please forgive us.**  
So that we may change for the better and for the right reasons,  
in Jesus’ name.  
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Lord, your forgiveness changes us. It changes our hearts, our  
minds, our lives. It changes our relationships, our judgements.  
Help us to trust that change, whether it happens quickly or slowly  
and surely, day by day; and reassure us of your unchanging love  
for all that you have made, shown to us in the life, death and  
resurrection of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.  
**Amen.**

[**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**](javascript:void(0))

Patient and creative God, you offer us the opportunity to change,  
**and we thank and praise you.**  
You give us eyes to see where change is necessary,  
**and we thank and praise you.**  
You equip us to overcome the temptation not to change,  
**and we thank and praise you.**  
You inspire us with your word to encourage us to change,  
**and we thank and praise you.**  
You bless us with your love that changes everything,  
**and we thank and praise you.**  
In Jesus’ name, we thank and praise you,  
today and every day.  
Amen.

**Matthew 21:23-32**

Jesus tells a parable about a son who doesn’t agree to do what his father asks him but then later does it and a son who agrees to do what his father ask him but then doesn’t.

One son is compliant, the other isn’t.

Having children is a bit of a lottery. You have no guarantees how they will turn out. I was reading Rob Parson’s book the other day ‘Teenagers: what every parent has to know’. He says one of the great mysteries of life, surely one of the greatest must be that if you have at least two children you are going to get widely different personalities. This is the law of nature. It exists, I believe, to humble the parents of well-behaved, compliant children and stop them giving critical advice to every other mother or father in their road.

As with all laws of nature, there is an occasional aberration of this rule, and once in a while a parent is delivered tow complaint children in succession. When this occurs, it creates a parent so terrifying they should be banned from speaking to other adults at parent and toddler groups school gates and sports day. These parents have children who seem truly perfect. When they are babies, they not only sleep all night, but never defecate as soon as you change a nappy. In toddler hood whenever the feel queasy they always rush straight tot eh bathroom and wouldn’t even think of throwing up down the back of the sofa; they are a joy to take to the supermarket squeeze your hand in appreciation as they pass other children having tantrums in the aisles. At school they use toilet rolls to make Blue Peter castles fit for royalty and write essays that have teachers rushing out to buy dictionaries. Such children will later provide literary fodder that will be used by their parents to depress their friends in Christmas letters where they catalogue the most A stars at A level for any child since the education Act of 1944 culminating with the news that they are now the consultant to the King.

Rob parsons’ advice is ‘keep quiet about your achievements and don’t have any more children. ‘

He says it is more probable that you catch yourself tearing out clumps of hair and screaming ‘Where did I go wrong? ‘It seems like your child has a goal in life of testing their parents to distraction. He then goes on to discuss hormones and brain development and how all that can lead to testing behaviour. They are experimenting with life and trying to discover their identity by trying out what does and doesn’t work. The very bad news is that parents are usually on the sharp end of this. But the other thing to remember is that many of these experiences are experiments -not lifestyle choices.

He suggests always having a second look at your children – you may see the stuff you are not happy about – and miss and overlook the stuff they are doing that which is good and praiseworthy.

Try and keep them busy learning skills and being exposed to good influences. And finally choose your battles. But ultimately children make their own choices and sometimes they are bad ones and if our worst fears are realized then perhaps the first thing to do is to lay aside false guilt. It tends to paralyze us, and you don’t think clearly about the right parental response, in other words what to actually do about the situation.

Jesus challenges the authority of the religious leaders of his day. He used a parable about two sons. One of whom says he isn’t going to do what his father asks him, but who then does what his father asked. And another son who says he will do what his father asked him but then doesn’t. Which of the two did what his father wanted?

How compliant are we? What do we inherit and what do we do for ourselves?

Where/when do we find ourselves becoming more like our parents? Where/when have we deliberately done things differently from our parents or siblings – and why? Have we done something different, but later realised we were wrong?

As I get older, I realise I am becoming more like my father in some ways and not in other ways.

And apply that similar thinking and questions to the life of faith and the church family. How much do or should we think for ourselves in matters of faith?

It is a constant dilemma for many of us that our children don’t’ seem to accept our faith or our commitment to the church. What have we done wrong? We may shrug our shoulders in parental guilt. Is it rebellion, or just finding their own separate identity from us? Will they return later in life when things change for them, when they become parents themselves perhaps or face a life issue that draws them back to the resource of faith?

The issue of ‘nature or nurture’ is a constant debate when it comes to behaviour, with many, scientists and theologians included, divided on which might be more dominant. But both can be used to deflect from personal responsibility. Whether we have inherited predispositions from our parents in our genes, have learned attitudes and behaviours from them and others, or been conditioned by our environments that were shaped by previous generations, each of us has a choice regarding our behaviours to a greater or lesser degree. Two brothers I know, one a heavy smoker, the other a militant anti-smoking activist, both point to their mother, who died relatively young from smoking-related emphysema, for their life choices.

The context of this parable and this passage is that Jesus has ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey and been hailed by the crowd as their new king, sent by God. It is made clear, though, that he has come in peace, not as a military leader (21:1-11). He has challenged the Temple operations that helped to support the work of the Temple and to facilitate those bringing sacrifices as the law demanded, but that also got in the way of the Temple’s true purpose as God’s dwelling place, the place of prayer (21:12-13). He has healed and prophesied (21:14-22).

Now Jesus is questioned by the religious leaders about his right to behave in such a way. They have authority in this place, and Jesus’ behaviour is challenging that authority by calling into question the status quo they are maintaining.

The parable of the two sons highlights the problem: people can rethink, weigh up their options, change their minds – and yet no matter what evidence is presented to them, the religious leaders are immoveable.

In their defence, their role is to safeguard the faith. Time after time throughout their history the people of God have turned away from God, whether deliberately or by drifting. Time after time they have suffered the consequences of this. From being a sizeable nation, the people of God have diminished to a relatively small group living partly in the occupied territory that is all that remains of their Promised Land, and partly dispersed across the surrounding countries. The religious leaders are working hard to reshape and renew the faith, and to protect it.

Jesus’ presentation of the kingdom of God as open to all presents a challenge in a context where ethnicity and religious affiliation have come to mean more than faith or obedience. What would it take to change their minds?

What would it take to change your minds on issue of belief or practice?

When Jesus entered the Temple, he was challenged about his authority by those who relied on their positions in the priestly hierarchy for their own authority. Jesus wouldn’t answer their question directly. Rather, he posed questions to them, asking them to think about the story he told.

Whoever we look to for leadership, we often want them to have clear answers in what is an increasingly complex world. And some would-be leaders will try to supply such answers, although they often come in the form of simplistic slogans rather than real solutions. Those who recognise the complexities and are frustrated by simplistic answers, might be tempted to get T-shirts or baseball caps printed with the phrase ‘It’s complicated…’. But perhaps that is falling into the same trap of turning things into slogans.

What Jesus encourages his listeners to do with his parables is to think – to use the brain cells in our heads as more than packing material. Last two weeks we have been pondering on the parable of the unforgiving servant and what it says to us about forgiveness and I’m grateful for those who have had conversations with me about that topic. In her book *The Vigil: Keeping Watch in the Season of Christ’s Coming*, Wendy M Wright shares advice given to her by a Trappist novice master of a monastery, who said, ‘To be a Christian does not mean knowing all the answers; to be a Christian means being willing to live in the part of the self where the question is born.’

Before today’s parable he explicitly asks those challenging his authority ‘What do you think?’

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is a tool used to help people with a range of psychological problems. Instead of delving into either a person’s history of their relationships (as with Freudian and other psychotherapies), or addressing biochemical imbalances in their brain (as with psychiatry), CBT attempts to change a person’s thought patterns in response to certain situations, encouraging them even to change the language that they use to describe their circumstances, with the understanding that a change in thinking patterns can lead to a change in response. It isn’t the solution to every psychological condition (again, the human mind and the world in which we operate are too complicated for a single simple solution), but it has made a massive difference to many people’s lives.

The Greek word for repentance, metanoia, literally means ‘change of heart’, but what is implied is an entire change of attitude and direction – a change in behaviour that begins when we change our minds. Perhaps we need a form of spiritual cognitive behavioural therapy.

Many will be familiar with the word ‘orthodoxy’, which literally means ‘right opinion’ or ‘belief’. It is much less common to hear talk of ‘orthopraxis’, which means ‘right action’. Jesus refers to John the Baptist who came calling people to ‘repent’ or ‘turn away from’, implying that they should change their minds and actions. In the story, Jesus told both sons to ‘change their minds’ and subsequently do the opposite of what they had previously said they would. The important thing is not which one said the right thing in the first place, but which one ultimately did the right thing.

When Jesus mentions tax collectors and prostitutes, he mentions them in the context of those who have repented or changed their lifestyles – tax collectors from exploiting people of money and prostitutes from disrespecting sex and monetising it.

Last week there was a major turnaround in government policy on the country becoming ‘carbon net-zero’. The ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars was put back five years until 2035. And now there is talk about the superfast rail link HS2 from Birmingham to Manchester being cancelled because, it is said, costs are spiralling out of control.

In the media and in face-to-face conversations debate will rage as to whether these are the right actions. Some will see them as carefully considered policies for the benefit of the country, and others may see them as political attempts to gain popularity.

These are serious issues concerning our stewardship of the planet and the use of resources which are available for public expenditure. It is right for Christians to give these matters prayerful consideration and reach their own conclusions on them.

The parable of the Two Sons in Matthew 21 comes in response to an attempt by the chief priests and leaders to catch Jesus out. They have found themselves facing a question they can’t, or don’t want to answer.

This week there have been those who have condemned the government for policy changes. Perhaps they are right in relation to the specific issues. However it is wrong to condemn a change of mind as weakness. The parable shows us that we should be willing to allow others to reconsider their decisions. Perhaps we should take it further and allow, even encourage ourselves, regularly to review the standpoints we have taken.

Neither compliance, nor testing rebellion for the sake of rebellion. But thoughtful, prayerful decisions. What do you think?

I end with the story fo someone who did change and who did find God

Michael Corcoran was drinking himself to death, but an encounter with a Christian changed the trajectory of his life[[1]](#endnote-1)

Wobbly Bob. That’s what people used to call me. I would drink so much that I would sway from side to side as I walked down the street.

But it wasn’t always like this. I grew up in a large Catholic family in Liverpool and had a happy childhood, but when I discovered alcohol in my teens, I started going off the rails. Whenever I had money in my pocket, I spent it drinking with friends. At first it wasn’t a problem, but soon I found I couldn’t do anything without a drink.

After I split up with my first wife, I had a nervous breakdown and lost my job. My two sons went to live with their grandparents. For a few years I was sober, but then I remarried and returned to alcohol. I had lost hope and was drinking all the time. Eventually I lost my ten-year civil service job and my house as well. I had well and truly hit rock bottom.

**A KNOCK AT THE DOOR**

I found a flat share, but my drinking had led to severe social anxiety and I could barely leave the house. I struggled to get out of bed without a drink. Then the couple I was living with were kicked out of their flat. I became homeless overnight. That’s when someone suggested speaking to Green Pastures, which is a social enterprise that helps homeless people. Green Pastures organised a flat straight away in Southport and did absolutely everything for me.

One afternoon I heard a knock at the door. I was still in bed – as was quite usual for me back then. A man called Mike introduced himself. He thought my name was Bob – Wobbly Bob – but I explained that it was actually Michael.

Mike had just started at Green Pastures and had come to check on me. We clicked straight away and it was the start of a lifelong friendship. There was just a goodness about him. After he left, I felt a sense of hope that I had not felt in a very long time. I had begun to believe that I was useless and worth nothing, but Mike told me that God was always there for me and that with help from him and “the big fella upstairs”, I’d get through this.

**FREEDOM IN CHRIST**

Mike was true to his word and pretty soon, he connected me with Mandy, who worked at a local recovery centre. She was a Christian as well, and helped me get back on my feet. Between God, Mandy and Mike, I began to get better.

Mike took me to a church service and the people there were really welcoming. I started thinking that maybe there was something I could do about my problems. Every day, Mike would come to my flat, explain more about God’s love and pray for my healing. I could feel something changing inside me. I was becoming more positive and outgoing. I had given up on God completely and then, all of a sudden, this belief arrived and I started to praise him.

After a week in rehab I felt as if I had been born again. Everything changed. I haven’t touched alcohol since. I have been sober now for four years and, in that time, the amazing people at Green Pastures have helped me find my sons, whom I had not been in touch with for 17 years. I also rekindled my relationship with my mum. Before she died, one of the last things she said to me was: “I’ve got my Michael back at last.”

I was a dead man walking when I first met Mike, but now I am fit. The doctor tells me that, miraculously, my liver is all clear! And I am back in touch with my family. I’ve just returned from a holiday to Budapest – something that I would not have been able to do before.

I put it all down to God and Green Pastures. I now know that I have people who believe in me. I am not worried about relapsing. Wobbly Bob is well and truly gone.

[**Prayers of intercession**](javascript:void(0))

We look upon our world with sadness. As the climate gets warmer harvests fail and the poor grow poorer. Many are comfortable and are reluctant to adapt their lifestyles. The climate is changing and we seem to do nothing about it. Yet you have given us stewardship of the planet. We pray that the governments of the world may retain policies and practices that support the transition to renewable energy and phase out the use of harmful fossil fuels. May we all reflect on how we live and find ways to reduce our energy consumption and promote sustainability.

Loving God,  
**turn hearts and minds towards your kingdom.**

More and more people suffer as a result of mental health issues. Stress causes illness, relationship breakdown and even crime. Yet the world seems apathetic about them. Yet you tell us to love all your children. We pray for those on the brink of despair that they may find the support and guidance they need. We commend to your care the work of Samaritans and all helplines as they offer care and compassion.

Loving God,  
**turn hearts and minds towards your kingdom.**

Churches struggle. There are not enough people to do the essential jobs. we worry about keeping the show on the road. We focus on maintenance and have no enthusiasm for mission. Yet you command us to make disciples of all nations. Give us the courage to lay down what is past and to look for relevant and innovative ways of being your church in the twenty first century.

Loving God,  
**turn hearts and minds towards your kingdom.**

Foodbanks report shortages. More and more people turn to them out of necessity. People fear the winter because of the cost of heating our homes. Nothing changes. Yet you call us to feed the hungry and shelter the needy. May those who have plenty realise how blessed they are and be willing to share generously with those in need. May nations follow policies that discourage greed and which seek to offer help and support to those in greatest need.

Loving God,  
**turn hearts and minds towards your kingdom.**

Many are suffering in our world. We remember those in hospitals, care homes and hospices especially…We pray for those on waiting lists hoping for treatment and care soon. We commend to you all who work in health and social care at the front line or in policy making. May the care of individuals be a priority. May all health and social care establishments be places of love and peace.

Loving God,  
**turn hearts and minds towards your kingdom.**

We try to be caring and loving; we try to see your face in those in need; we try to be faithful disciples but sometimes prejudice, self interest and ignorance get in the way. Help us to look at ourselves; at what we believe; at how we live. May we be transformed into compassionate, faithful, Christ-focussed disciples.

Loving God,  
**turn hearts and minds towards your kingdom.**

In a time of quiet we bring to God our own special concerns and reflections

**Silence**

Loving God,  
**turn hearts and minds towards your kingdom.**

In the name of our Lord and Saviour we pray.  
**Amen.**

[**A prayer for all ages together**](javascript:void(0))

O Lord, teach us how to think:  
**may we love you with all our minds.***(point to head)*  
O Lord, may we not be afraid of questions:  
**may we love you with all our minds.** *(point to head)*  
O Lord, show us when we should change our minds:  
**may we love you with all our minds.** *(point to head)*  
O Lord, may our actions match our words:  
**may we love you with all that we are.** *(hand over heart)*

[**A sending out prayer**](javascript:void(0))

Be encouraged.  
Go from this place united in Christ,comforted by his love,  
sharing his Spirit, shaped by his mindset. As humble, servant learners, bring glory to God the Father, in Jesus’ .  
**Amen.**

1. https://www.premierchristianity.com/testimonies/from-dead-man-walking-to-alive-in-christ/16354.article [↑](#endnote-ref-1)