**12th NOVEMBER 2023**

 **Call to worship**

Eternal God,
We meet this day in solemn remembrance
of those who lived and died in service of their country.
We give thanks for their lives,
and pray that You would enable us to be worthy of the sacrifice made on our behalf.

May they rest in peace, and rise in glory.
May our time of remembrance inspire us to be peacemakers in our own time.
In Jesus name, Amen.

**HYMN: For all the saints**

**Approach to God**

Eternal God
You forget nothing.
All the days and events which have been lived
were done so under Your ever-loving and all-seeing eye.

You have journeyed with us and with our forebears,
and so while we must take the time to consciously remember,
You do so without forgetting a moment that has been.
We give thanks this day for Your faithfulness to Your people in every land and age,
for Your presence with them in the dark days that they have faced,
and we come to praise You that no matter what challenge lies before us,
You have promised to be with us.

We acknowledge now that we have not walked the paths that lead to peace.
We have hated our neighbours;
we have kept hold of the prejudices and assumptions
that belittle others and foment division.

In our thoughts, words and actions,
we have been selfish and unfeeling to the needs of others.
When we have seen injustice in action, we have been silent.
Rather than being peacemakers, we have erred against one another
and against You.

Help us O Lord, to be the people You have called us to be.
Forgive us for our sin which we confess before You,
trusting in Your mercy and compassion.

Eternal God
Your mercy renews and refreshes us.
We give You thanks and praise that we are a new people, entrusted to bring Your peace
– a peace that passes all understanding – to those we encounter.

Bless us as we carry out this holy purpose and task.
Send Your Holy Spirit to be upon us,
as together we pray the prayer Jesus taught us,
saying: **Our Father…**

**Notices:**

**Christian Aid Middle East Crisis Appeal**

**Donations on line or as a retiring collection in the envelopes provided**

Thousands have been killed and many more injured, this is the deadliest attack Israel has seen in decades. Airstrikes have caused widespread destruction of homes, schools, and healthcare facilities.

Hospitals that are already at breaking point are overwhelmed by casualties while hundreds of thousands of people displaced

Christian Aid has been working with the poorest and most vulnerable people in the Middle East since the 1950.

They already have trusted humanitarian partners based in Gaza, ready to respond with medical relief, food, shelter and sanitation, as soon as it’s safe to do so.

They are also actively exploring how they can support Israeli civilians who’ve been directly affected by the violence.

Prayer points:

* For an end to the conflict
* All parties to abide by international law
* That the dignity and value of every life be valued
* For lasting peace and justice

**Puzzling Questions** next meeting on Tuesday – what is God like? Does God exist?

All welcome , even if you didn’t make the first meeting.

**Walk through the Bible – the Old Testament next Saturday, 18th Nov 10am to 4.30pm – need to now numbers today please. Please tell me fi you’d like to come.**

**Open mike time:**

**Chocolates – Birthdays and anniversaries and celebrations?**

**Hymn: Make me a channel of your peace**

***If needing to fill in time until you get to 11am:***

***Either:***

Remind everyone that it is Remembrance Sunday – perhaps you have a special service today. Draw attention to the poppies most will be wearing as a symbol of remembrance. Retell the story of why a poppy is used, if that is appropriate.

Or:

*You might want to have an oil lamp – or a picture of one – to help. If you have an old oil or paraffin lamp you might want to light it, you could make one in a jam jar with some oil,* ***not paraffin****!, in the jar with some material serving as a wick coming up through a hole in the lid and then lit. Have a fairly small wick for a gentle flame. If you have a data projector you could project pictures of them.*

Today’s readings from the Bible encourage us to be wise. We heard of 10 girls who were bridesmaids at a wedding. They waited for the groom at the bride’s house, but he was very late. The wise bridesmaids guessed this might happen and took extra oil for their lamps so they could light up the procession from the groom’s to the bride’s house. The foolish bridesmaids, however, just hoped they’d have enough oil in their lamps. When the groom came the foolish bridesmaids realised they’d run out of oil! They had to find a shop open late at night to buy some more oil and, by the time they’d got back, everyone had gone to the party, and they were left out.

* If you’d been in the story, would you have remembered or forgotten to take extra oil?
* How would you feel if you were late to the party and couldn’t get in because of your own foolishness?

Jesus told the story to remind us to be prepared for a long wait for him to return. We can be prepared by showing love and kindness to people around us. We can share what we have so that no one is left out.

**CALL TO REMEMBRANCE**

**Will the congregation please stand**

God of peace
We come this day in solemn remembrance and prayerful witness
to the courage, self-sacrifice and devotion to duty of those who have given of themselves in service to others.

We remember those who lost their lives and the grieving families and friends they left behind.

We remember also those who came home but who lost something of themselves on fields of battle.
Those who lost limb, or reason, or sense of self.

We pray that Your comfort will be known by all who have seen the realities and dangers of war.

Ease the pain of those who grieve,
being renewal to those whose health in body or mind has been diminished.

We seek Your blessing upon members of our Armed Forces and upon their families.
Grant to them safety in the fulfilment of their duties,
defend them as they face dangers of many kinds,
and grant to them wisdom and courage as they work for peace and justice in our lifetimes.

We remember those who faced and continue to face significant challenge at home.
For families torn apart by war,
for those forced to leave the familiar and seek safety and refuge elsewhere.
For those whose homes have been destroyed,
or who cannot return due to dangers caused by conflict.

We pray for lands where neighbours have become enemies,
where brothers have picked up weapons against one another
and we seek Your reconciliation and peace.
We give thanks for the times and places where we can see seeds of peace growing.

We pray for those who have never known war,
and we plead that this will long continue.
Grant a love of peace to our Young people,
that they will make choices that lead to harmony.

We pray for our King, and our government.
Grant to them wisdom in the fulfilment of their duties,
that they will seek to make our world a place of safety and of prosperity for all.

Grant that Your Church will speak out with passion for the sake of those who are voiceless. Save us from silence or complacency
and inspire us by Your Holy Spirit to prepare the way of the Lord today,
and always.

In this time of silence,
we bring to You those things that weigh heavily upon our hearts,
trusting in the mercy and intercession of Your Holy Spirit.

Let us remember the continuing grace of God,

Whose love holds all souls in life,

And to whom none is dead

But all are alive for ever.

*They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old;
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.
We will remember them.*

*Two minute Silence*

**Commitment to Peace**

We fall silent on this day because we never wish to forget or return to days where every family, every community is touched by the plague of war and death. In remembering the sacrifices made on our behalf, we are asked to be the change which our world so desperately needs.

To that end, silence is not enough, it must be matched by our actions. I therefore ask you the following three questions, trusting that in answering "I will" we might together build a kingdom of peace.

Will you strive for all that makes for peace?
**I will.**

Will you seek to heal the wounds of war?
**I will.**

Will you work for a just future for all humanity?
**I will.**

May God help you to fulfil these promises.

***Hymn whilst the children and young people leave***

**O God our help in ages past**

**Reading:** **Matthew 25: 1-13**

**Sermon**

I’m sorry I can’t be with you in person today. My brother is end of life care and we as a family have gone to be with him in Blackpool.

Last weekend I was there too when the Oncologist said there was nothing they could do for his condition anymore. My brother was incredibly positive and hopeful. He said he had no regrets, and no fear. He has been brought up in a Christian home and was trusting in that. He was even excited at the prosect of discovering the afterlife. Two days later he received communion from the minister of his church.

He is prepared. There is no unfinished business – well apart from the fact he still owes me 10p from when he conned me out of my pocket money to place a bet on Red Rum in the Grand National, when Red Rum wasn’t running.

He says he’s happy to be going knowing that Burnley are in the Premier League. We may be bottom of the Premier League but we are still in the Premier league.

Today’s gospel text tells us in parable form how Jesus wants us to be “prepared,”

Jesus said, "Keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."

On one level this parable is about being ready for God. It is always a question before us. Are we ready to meet our maker?

The late Lewis Grizzard, a humorist and author of many columns and books, was by his minister in the hospital. Grizzard was scheduled to have open-heart surgery the next morning. He confessed to his minister that he had not exactly been a paragon of virtue and asked if there were still time to repent. The minister looked at his watch and replied, "Yes, but I’d hurry if I were you."

In secular Britain, we don’t talk about that kind of thing anymore. But folk have always fought shy of making a step of faith and confronting the ultimate questions of life. They can be prepared for any disaster and have taken out all the necessary insurance policies – but have not seriously considered the one thing that will certainly happen one day – that they will die. Are you prepared?

And Jesus says wouldn’t you rather be prepared to go to dinner with a host who might forget to come, than sleep through everything and wake up in the dark, or find yourself hoofing it down to the local garage or supermarket for an oil-flask-refill, trying to hedge your bets, while the host arrived and closed the door without you? Be prepared.

Being prepared is one thing – staying ready and alert and awake is another.

The early reformers of the 16th and 17th century had a great anxiety over what they termed persevering faith. Would someone persevere in their faith unto death so that they died in a state of grace, still in a right relationship with God? In my fellowship group this week we were thinking through this parable and realising that if you are serious about following Christ for the rest of your life how do you keep your faith strong? How do we keep our lamps burning? How do we prevent ourselves from burning out?

I am going to use this parable as an allegory to offer some thoughts in answer to those questions.

**First of all there were** **10 virgins. There were ten. They weren’t in it on their own.** Waiting is always tedious. It is less tedious when you wait with others. People can cheer you up. Encourage you. Give you moral support. They can also annoy you and irritate you and fall out with you – but I’d still rather wait with others than on my own.

People say to me ‘I’m a Christian but I don’t need to be part of a church.’ What a load of tosh! Unless you meet together with other Christians, it is difficult for your faith to stay alive. If you are having problems in your faith or your personal life, then that is not the time to give up on church. That is more than ever the time you need church.

There is a story used on the Alpha Course about a man whose faith was faltering. He visited a wise old Christian. They sat in front of the coal fire in the sitting room. The old man never spoke, but went to the coal fire and picked out a red hot coal with some tongs and put it on the hearth. He still said nothing. In a few minutes the coal had lost its glow. Then he picked it up and put it back in the fire. After a short time it began to glow again. The old man still said nothing at all but, as he got up to leave, the other man knew exactly why he had lost his fervour – a Christian out of fellowship is like coal out of the fire.

If you extend this illustration - the more on the periphery of the fire you are the more luke warm you are – the closer to the centre you are - the warmer and more alight you become.

I get great strength and encouragement from being part of a church community and I am deeply grateful for the fellowship I can receive here. It strengthens me in my walk with God.

The leaders of the church are always trying to help people find a sense of community and belonging. Let us know what you need. Different people need different ways to belong. But it important to belong – it will keep your flame of faith burning.

**Secondly the 10 virgins were split between wise and foolish virgins. Are we sensible or foolish regarding our faith?** This parable of Jesus is rooted in the Jewish tradition of contrasting wisdom and folly – being sensible or silly. The writer of Proverbs treats wisdom and folly as two women and describes them calling out to men going by and offering them their respective lifestyles. This story invites us to decide which we’d rather be.

I have sadly known too many people who have started the life of faith but have given up on their faith because they either got embarrassed about it or felt foolish or they just weren’t grounded, thought out, thought through.

Faith needs to rest not only on the Bible, the word of God, but also on the work of Jesus and the historical evidence of our faith, and also on reason and experience. If your faith rests only on only one of those then it will be shaky.

You can read anything into the Bible – just ask anyone from the old Dutch Reformed Church who used scripture to justify apartheid. The Bible on its own is not enough to sustain faith. You need to apply your reason. You need to be humble to see how others Christians understand scripture, how the church has understood it through the centuries whilst also being open to the guidance of the holy spirit, the lived real experience of faith today.

Oil is often a symbol in the Bible for anointing and indicating the presence of God’s Spirit with a person. Without the Spirit bringing faith, nothing of this makes sense. Being filled with the Spirit, constantly, is a vital aspect of a faith that is aflame.

I try my best to keep these different elements in balance so I hopefully can be a wise follower of Christ. Know the value of them all and the limitations of them all.

Living by faith doesn’t mean we take our God given brains out and risk being gullible We are not called to blind faith. We are called to make a step of faith in the light of what we know and what God has shown us. In all things be wise not foolish.

As part of being wise, the parable of the bridesmaids urges watchfulness and self-awareness. [Humanitarian horrors in Gaza](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/06/israel-hamas-war-blinken-turkey-gaza-us-submarine-ankara-talks-hakan-fidan)  and [heartfelt demonstrations in Israel](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/07/we-cannot-forget-families-hold-vigils-for-israeli-hostages-held-in-gaza) batter our emotions as they point us first to one set of innocent, civilian victims, and then another. We may seem neutrals, neither Muslims nor religious Jews. But this is [our Holy Land too](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-67331176). With the raw pain in Israel and Gaza continuing to dominate the thoughts of many and [surging emotions among the closely concerned](https://www.rte.ie/news/middle-east/2023/1105/1414793-hand-israel/) inevitable, [measured accounts from one side](https://www.thejc.com/lets-talk/all/starmer%27s-no-ceasefire-position-makes-moral-and-strategic-sense-7fMC9ZZFwfoTsw6tCZobSc) or[the other](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/glasgow-alison-thewliss-gaza-palestine-humza-yousaf-b2437727.html) are helpful.[[1]](#endnote-1)

But, on this Remembrance Day, there has been a disturbing shift in Britain around what is deemed urgent. Domestic political considerations seem to have shifted attention to [government voices opposing a pro-Palestinian march](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12722681/Pray-dont-end-riot-Cenotaph-Met-warned-threat-violent-clashes-Remembrance-Day-force-says-pro-Palestine-rally-ahead.html)  as hateful, un-British, and unpatriotic, and on the opposition side to resignations, actual or threatened, trying to [push their leader](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-67354632) further left and fully behind the call for a ceasefire.

Has the Holy Land’s pain been hi-jacked in the cause of a contested, to some merely nostalgic, view of Remembrance Day? Should this day perhaps be particularly appropriate for contemplating the raw horror of war and the painful dilemmas it poses?

Can a Christian response to all this remain one distinguished by emotion used sparingly, and as carefully in the cause of justice as the wise virgins used their oil?

Can we avoid herd-instinct and, like the wise virgins, remain free agents with our own resources of moral ‘oil’?

Can we set aside a previous preference for the incompatible aspirations of either Zionists or Palestinian Arabs to do thoughtful justice to what appears to be an existential crisis for both?

Can we keep on the alert, constantly monitoring our sense of what is proportionate, necessary, and ultimately likely to be effective in bringing peace to Jews, Muslims and Christians alike in the Holy Land?

**Thirdly, those who are wise will know their limits**. The wise virgins knew they would not have enough oil if they shared with the foolish ones. So they refused their request and told them to go and get their own oil. Know your limits and be realistic about life.

Be realistic about church. We are saints, called by God, loved by God. But we are still on a journey of sanctification – being made perfect. We are not perfect. People will let you down *as much as you let other people down*. Give and take. We all have our limits. Forgive and you will be forgiven.

Know your own limits. I have to keep reminding myself that I am not God, nor the Messiah. It stops me from burning out trying to save the world in my own self righteous way.

Know your limits or else you will burn out.

**Fourthly - Be taken up in purposeful service.** These girls were doing a lovely thing serving the bride and groom by waiting in this way. It was a responsible job. It cost them. They missed out on some of the fun. But they were part of something bigger that make their lives meaningful. Their light shone for a reason.

Josh McDowell tells about an executive "headhunter" who recruits corporate executives for large firms. This headhunter once told McDowell that when he interviews an executive, he likes to disarm them. "I offer them a drink," said the headhunter, "take off my coat, undo my tie, throw up my feet and talk about TV, football, family, whatever, until they are all relaxed. Then, when I think I’ve got them relaxed, I lean over, look them square in the eye and say, ‘What’s your purpose in life?’ It’s amazing how top executives fall apart at that question."

Then he told about interviewing one fellow recently. He had him all disarmed, had his feet up on his desk, talking about football. Then the headhunter leaned over and said, "What’s your purpose in life, Bob?" And the executive said, without blinking an eye, "To love God and be with him for ever and take as many people with me as I can."

"For the first time in my career," said the headhunter, "I was speechless." No wonder. He had encountered someone who was prepared. He was ready. His purpose, "To love God and be with him for ever and take as many people with me as I can." You and I might not express it that way, but do you doubt that this is one man who has extra oil for his lamp?

What keeps me going is having a sense of purpose. Nothing we do for the Lord is in vain. It may cost : but anything worthwhile and precious is costly.

**Fifthly, these ten girls were virgins!** There that has woken you up.

These were the days when you were expected to be a virgin before you got married. Not like today, when sadly you are supposed to be sexually experienced before you enter into a committed relationship. In those days of course, girls would be married from the age of 13. But they would usually be dead by the age of 40. So they got on with it.

Elsewhere in scripture the symbolism of being a virgin is about remaining pure, dedicated, consecrated to your loved one, awaiting the consummation of your passion. The great consummation is a racy phrase that has been used by the church down the ages to talk about the end of time when Christ the bridegroom will come for his bride the church and a new heaven and a new earth will begin, and there will be no more pain or sorrow, sin or death. We await the great consummation. In God’s grace we try and keep faithful – but know that there is more to come. It is not down to us to give the final word. It doesn’t all depend on us. We have not got there yet. Live with a sense of anticipation and not disappointment. Even with all the knockbacks and hardships know that there is more to come. Anticipate it like a virgin waiting for her wedding night!

**Finally - this more to come is a party!** It’s the devil’s trick to make God out to be a miserable pedantic judgemental joyless soul who is out to get us. The God we believe in, the God we see in Jesus, is someone who loves a party. The end of time will be one big party.

Preparing for disaster is something. The traditional Boy Scout motto of “Be prepared” taught generations of kids lots of useful skills. But those “skills” were put into practice by going fishing, rock climbing, toasting marshmallows over a campfire . . fun stuff! They were preparing for good times, not just bad.

As Christians we are called to “be prepared”—-but not just for all those “trials and tribulations” that grab the headlines.

 Are you prepared to party?

 Are you planning for gloomy-doomy scenarios? Or are you full of great expectations?

Loosen up. Enjoy yourself. What keeps me going is that the God who loves me is a party going God. That sounds fun and gives me licence to have fun now in anticipation of even more fun later.

May God help us to be prepared, to keep awake and be ready for the party.

**Hymn: Abide with me**

**Thanksgiving and intercession**

Lord of life, we live in turbulent times as we await your return. The lives of your people are in turmoil.

Lord, this country has survived two world wars. Today we remember all who have served, and still serve, in our armed forces. We pray for the families of those who lost their lives serving their country, and all who have found their lives altered by physical or mental injuries. We pray for all still serving, for all veterans and all who will benefit from this year’s Poppy Appeal.

We pray for all around the world caught up in conflict today; for the continuing war in the Ukraine and that in the Middle East. We pray for those urgently in need of medical supplies and food to survive. We pray that more aid lorries will be allowed to cross the border and reach their destination.

Lord, we bring before you all caught up in atrocities, particularly the traumatised young children in need of tender care amid the brutality that surrounds them.

We pray also for those who have suffered in the recent earthquake in Nepal.

Lord of life, bring peace to this darkly chaotic, turbulent world. May the light of hope shine amid the darkness in these difficult times.

Lord, we pray for the unrest in this country. We pray that there will be no interference with Remembrance services or parades. Give wisdom to the police as they work to maintain order and safety on our streets.

Lord, leading nations have signed an agreement vowing to protect the world against the potential of Artificial Intelligence to cause catastrophic harm. We pray promises will be kept, and that technology giants will act responsibly.

AI aids and abets scammers and fraudsters. We pray for all people who have suffered emotionally and financially at the hands of such people.

We pray for all who fear losing their jobs due to the increasing use of technology.

Lord of life, bring justice and integrity to this turbulent world. May the light of hope shine amid the darkness in these difficult times.

Lord, we pray for your Church in today’s world. May it be a beacon, a lighthouse where people can find refuge and safety in times of need and reassurance amid difficult, confusing times.

We pray for your hand, Lord, on all within our communities. There are many without homes; many without permanent accommodation, constantly moving children from one temporary room to another. We pray for more affordable housing. We bring before you all living hand-to-mouth. Lord, give wisdom to those in authority allocating funds and resources.

Lord of life, bring sustenance to this turbulent, needy world. May the light of hope shine amid the darkness in these difficult times. Lord of life, we await your return with an urgent desire to see your light shine and dispel the darkness. Fill all hearts with the oil of gladness. In your name we pray. Amen.

**Hymn: when we are living we are in the Lord**

**Communion**

The Lord be with you! And also with you!

Lift up your hearts! We lift them up to the Lord!

Let us give God our thanks and praise! It is always right to do so!

Longing for your light, O God, we wait in darkness.

Before the ages Your Spirit breathed on the waters and brought forth life,

She danced at Creation’s start and sanctified the earth, our mother.

Long ago you called a people to be Your own,

You gave them freedom and law, land and responsibility,

waiting always for them to care for the poor and the stranger.

Time and again You sustained Your prophets

who taught Your people to wait for salvation.

In due course Your Spirit overshadowed Mary,

and, obedient to Your will, she became the God Bearer.

Through nine long months of waiting,

You grew within Her and, in the fullness of time

she was delivered of a vulnerable, fragile, baby,

wrapped in her blood, born poor and exiled.

Jesus grew, gathered friends around Him

and told us to work and wait for the Kingdom to come.

Proclaiming good news to the poor, liberation to the oppressed,

sight for the blind, and healing for the sick,

Jesus showed through word and deed how to live.

Yet those opposed to him waited in the dark,

had him betrayed, handed over, and tried at night,

then tortured and crucified by day.

For three long days He waited in the tomb,

until You raised Him up revealing Your costly love,

Your extravagant yet expensive grace.

Jesus promised he would return at the end of the age,

to separate the sheep from the goats, to put all things right, and make all things new,

and so, with the wise of every age we sing of Your praise and glory:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,

heaven and earth are full of Your glory, Hosanna in the Highest!

Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord,

Hosanna in the Highest.

On the night he was betrayed

Jesus shared in the simplicity of a meal with his friends.

There, with Judas who had betrayed him,

with Peter who would deny him,

with the young man who would run off naked in fear from him

and with all the disciples who’d melt into the night,

Jesus shared his very self with them.

Using the ancient prayers of blessing,

Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke the bread

and gave it to his friends saying:

*“Take this all of you and eat it,*

*this is my body which is broken for you.”*

In the same way, after Supper,

again using the ancient Jewish prayers of blessing,

Jesus took the cup of wine, gave it to his friends and said:

*“Take this all of you and drink from it,*

*this is the cup of my blood,*

*the blood of the new and everlasting promise of God*

*for you and for many that sins may be forgiven.*

*Do this in memory of me.”*

Let us remember Jesus as we wait for him to return:

Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

 Come now Spirit of our God,

 as You danced at creation’s start, dance with us now,

 overcoming us with Your gentle power,

 transforming these simple things of bread and wine,

 into the body and blood of Christ.

 Lift us to dance with You in the heavenly places,

 that we may be given strength as we wait,

 passion as we proclaim the coming kingdom,

 and patience to see You at work in our world,

 until that day comes when we will share in the great wedding feast of the Lamb.

 All praise is Yours O Most High,

 through Jesus Your Word made flesh,

 in the power and love of the Abiding Spirit,

 until the end of the age, Amen.

***Distribution of bread and wine***

***Remember Gluten Free Option!***

**Post Communion Prayer**

Eternal God, for whom we wait,

You have fed us with the bread of eternal life:

keep us ever watchful, that we may be ready to stand before the bridge groom,

Jesus Christ, our Lord, when he returns. Amen.

**Hymn Lord for the years**

**Blessing**

May the God of love fill your heart with peace
and send you into the world to live it.
And the blessing of God Almighty,
our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,
be with you and those you love,
this day and always.
**Amen**

1. *Brenda Vance is a URC Elder and retired university teacher living in Lewes.* [*https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2023/128-november-december-2023-ab/proper-27/the-week-in-focus*](https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2023/128-november-december-2023-ab/proper-27/the-week-in-focus) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)