**19th November 2023**

**Call to worship**

You are all children of light and of the day,

we are not of the night or of darkness!

So then, let us not fall asleep as others do,

but let us keep awake and give our praise.

**A gathering prayer**

Creator God, who has furnished us with all that we have,

we give you praise and thanks.

Remind us of our gifts when we lose sight of them.

Show us where and how to share them.

Give us the courage to offer them freely, as you give to us.

What others may seek to destroy, help us to protect and care,

and give us the conviction to stand fast when we are called to do so.

This we ask of you, in Jesus’ name.

Amen.

**A prayer of approach**

Let us enter into the light of God’s glorious presence,

bringing our all, big and small, in faithful worship.

**A prayer of adoration**

Shout BIG GOD! and spread arms wide

Majestic God,

our dwelling place before the world was formed.

Our God is a BIG GOD!

Creator God,

we look up and marvel at the vast universe.

Our God is a BIG GOD!

Eternal God,

you are beyond time – everlasting to everlasting.

Our God is a BIG GOD!

All-seeing God,

we stand in your light where nothing is hidden.

Our God is a BIG GOD!

Amen.

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

**A prayer of confession**

We come, O God, seeking your forgiveness. You gave us

stewardship of your creation – yet what have we done with it? Our environments are changing; weather patterns swinging between

extremes. Creatures are becoming endangered as their habitats

are altered by climate change, with some at risk as a result of

being hunted to satisfy man’s greed.

Forgive us, O God, for not being good caretakers of your created world; help us to right our wrongs. Forgive us for not always being good caretakers of what you’ve given us personally. You have given each of us talents. Forgive us for not always using them wisely, for hiding away those we think too small to be of consequence. Or for when we brag about what we have and what we’ve achieved.

Forgive our small mindedness, our selfishness,

our greed, our desire for recognition.

Forgive us and help us to grow, and to use well all you give us

to benefit others and further your kingdom.

Amen.

**Assurance of forgiveness**

God’s wrath can be frightening but, because of Jesus, God’s love

and light shine upon us. Because of Jesus, we are children of light.

Because of Jesus, we are loved and forgiven.

Amen.

A prayer of praise and thanksgiving

We praise you, majestic God of light.

We thank you for your light in our lives;

for the love light in your created people,

shining in the faces of those we know and love;

for the light shining in the words and actions of all who know you,

and use their time and talents to serve well;

for the joy that pours in, lights up and empowers us

when we let go and trust you with all we have.

We praise and thank you, loving majestic God of light.

Amen.

**Make like Hild  W**

Using what God gives us to encourage others.

* Abbess Hild of Whitby (sometimes Hilda; lived AD 614-680) is remembered on 17 November. She was a great supporter of people’s gifts – the most well-known person to have benefited from her support was Caedmon. Without Hild, he would not have become England’s first poet.
* Give everyone two ‘Hild cards’ ([template](https://www.rootsontheweb.com/media/25775/make-like-hild-19-nov-2023.pdf)). Invite people to think of something they have been encouraged to develop or have a go at by someone else. How did it make them feel? What did they do as a result of that encouragement? Encourage them to write notes about this on the back of one card – this is for them to keep.
* Next, ask everyone to pair up with someone they know and to think about the gifts of their partner. On the other Hild card, write one or two of that person’s gifts with a couple of words of encouragement; then give the card to them. Everyone should end up with two cards – one they wrote, and one that’s been given to them.

**Matthew 25:14-30 - "The Parable of the Talents"**

This week  [Sir Bobby Charlton’s public commemoration service](https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/67409945) took place and the streets were filled with [the great and the good from the football world](https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/bobby-charlton-funeral-news-pictures-b2446373.html) as well as ordinary people paying their respects.

Sir Bobby Charlton was a *great.* His brother Jack was a *good*footballer. Their relationship became strained, but Jack once said publicly that Bobby was [‘the greatest player I’ve ever seen’](https://www.mirror.co.uk/sport/football/news/bobby-charlton-death-jack-brother-31247437). Jack was aware of his own deficiencies as a player but also of his ‘special skills’: [‘The one thing I couldn’t do is play. But I was very good at stopping other people playing.](https://www.theguardian.com/football/2023/oct/22/bobby-and-jack-charlton-the-brothers-who-won-together-but-lived-apart)’

Outside Old Trafford there is a statue of the ‘United Trinity’ – Best, Law and Charlton – the Irishman, the Scotsman and the Englishman. George Best and Bobby Charlton were very different characters. One famous Best quotation is: [“I spent a lot of money on booze, birds and fast cars - the rest I just squandered.”](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4090840.stm)

Jack Charlton made the most of the talent that he had and, while stopping other people playing may not sound like a particularly positive trait, it stood him in good stead after he finished playing and became a manager. This was one area at which Jack excelled, while his brother did not. George Best finished playing football at a high level when he was 27, alcoholism having restricted his career. However, during his time at Manchester United, Best won two league titles, the European Cup and the Ballon d’Or, awarded to the European Footballer of the Year.

Did George Best – to use his word – ‘squander’ the talent given to him, or should we instead remember the quotation from Lao Tzu: ‘The flame that burns twice as bright burns half as long.’

In our scripture text today Jesus tells a story about talents. He said there was a wealthy landowner who was preparing for a long journey. He called his three servants and divided his money between them, each according to their ability. When we hear the word, talent, today, we think of a special ability, such as musical talent. That meaning came into the English language through this parable and is derived from it. In Jesus' day, however, a talent was a measure of weight -- and later of money. It may have had nothing to do with abilities To one servant he gave five talents, meaning a sum of money, to a second two, and to a third one.  
  
Why is life like that? I don't know. We are all equal in the eyes of God. In an election our votes are all equal. But when it comes to our abilities, we are as different as different can be. God simply did not make us all the same. There are some people who can handle five talents; there are some who can handle only one. There are some persons who have great intellectual capabilities, and some who do not. There are some who have the ability to project and articulate their thoughts, and there are some who cannot. There are some who have physical prowess and attractive looks, and there are some who do not.

We cannot all be brain surgeons. The Disneyfication of our culture, dream a dream, become whatever you wish for, reach for the stars, tries on one level to encourage people to be the best they can be and aspire for greatness. But on another level it leads to despair and disillusionment. We can’t all be brain surgeons, concert pianists, premier league footballers, X Factor singers or whatever other dreams school children have. Some one has got to go down the mine.

Our teachers need our prayers and support as they try to help our young people come to a realistic assessment of the talents they have and where they can best be used. Inevitably some young people will feel they have little value to society and that their future looks bleak. More than ever, in our bankrupt society, Church of Christ, we need to pray and support young people, teachers, parents, youth workers. More than ever we need to offer our Christian hope. And that is spelt out in this parable of Jesus.

**First of all we all have something to offer**.  
The important thing to remember is that each servant was given something. No one was left idle. You may not be a five-talent person, but you have some talent. We all do. And you know something. I think that there are a whole lot more one and two talent people in this world than there are five talent people. Oh, there are some people who seem to have it all. I won't deny that. But most of us are just one or two talent servants. Maybe those talents are unspectacular talents – humble service. Where would we be without those who did the simple humble things?

We all have something to offer. Even when life takes away our talents we will still have something to offer. I heard about an old lady who lived her life for others. When it became necessary for her, in her nineties, to go into a nursing home, she welcomed the opportunity. She said, 'There might be some people there who don't know the Lord and I can read the Bible to them'."

**Secondly, all that we have is not our own, it belongs to the master.**

Our secular society is still spiritually seeking. The question who am I and what am I here for is still the essential question. I read the other day part of the speech that Richard Dannatt, the former chief of the general staff of the army gave on the need for the spiritual dimension not only for the military but for everyone.

He described the account of a British soldier who had just shot his first enemy fighter in Afghanistan in 2006. He wrote how afterwards he sat down and thought about the incidence and how he had done his job and shot the enemy, the Taliban and felt quite chuffed about it. But then he thought the geezer’s another human being.. but it was either him or me. The he wrote ‘I think people get, like you know, religious then as well. You’re thinking well, in the bigger picture, if there is like a Geezer up there and a Geezer downstairs, what does that mean to me now that I’ve just shot someone? Is that me done for? Am I going to hell or what? And all of that went through me mind that night, for hour after hour after hour.’ Dannatt, who is a committed Christian remarked that these are young people out there asking those spiritual questions.

Some people believe in Christianity as a bit like a heavenly examination. One day God sets the final exam and sees who passes and who fails. At first sight this parable may simply reinforce that impression. But parables don’t tell you the whole picture of God the maker and lover of the world. The whole ministry of Jesus should make us protest against such a view of Christianity. Jesus declared he had come to call, not the righteous but the sinners and to seek and save the lost and warned the religious types against thinking Christianity was about rules to be kept.

This parable comes near the end of the story of the gospel when the Son of man came to give his life as a ransom for many. When Jesus speaks about being thrown into the darkness outside where there is weeping and the gnashing of teeth, we must never forget that he himself was on the way into the darkness, where even he would sense himself abandoned by God and worthless. We are not our own we are bought with a price – thank God we are His, valued and precious in His sight – greater love hath no ne than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

You may have been given five talents. Don’t be arrogant and think you are better than the rest. Live in humble gratefulness to God – he has entrusted you with these talents for his service and the good of his world. God is taking a risk – but values you so much he’ll take it with you. You serve a purpose bigger than the enlargement of your own kingdom. The more our political leaders appeal to people’s self interest, the more we are destined for the breakdown of our society. We are not our own. We depend on each other and ultimately we depend on God, to whom we belong.

**Thirdly, we always have an opportunity to serve the master so long as we can overcome our fear or lethargy.**

Unemployment may be on the rise – this is tragic and deeply concerning. We are making good progress to establish a Food bank which will be a practical response from the local churches to people experiencing financial hardship. It will need further volunteers to help – and if you feel you can help see me. Sadly we can’t pay you – it will be voluntary work. There is always work to be done for the Lord – there is always employment in the church – sadly it is not always paid. But gifts can be used and a difference can be made.

The landowner in this parable, went on his journey. When he returned he called together his three servants and asked them to give an account. It seems that the five talent man had invested his talent and was able to return an additional five talents, a 100% return. So, too the two talent man doubles his money. Well done good and faithful servant.”  
  
An anonymous writer has said, "My small son and I were taking a walk. In the far corner of the field we found a small patch of beautiful and fragrant flowers. They were in the middle of weeds, almost completely hidden and unnoticed, yet these flowers were blooming in full beauty and we sensed their fresh fragrance. All of us have met persons unnoticed by many, but who in the middle of struggle and unlikely surroundings far from the centre of attention live lives of beauty and fragrance. And living lives which seemed obscure they faithfully fulfilled God's calling for them. God's question on the last day will not be, 'How much were you noticed?' or even 'How much did you do?' Rather, his question will be, 'Were you faithful in fulfilling your calling where I placed you?' God gives us the seeds, we produce the fruit.

Mother Teresa was once asked by a journalist how she kept going, knowing that she could never meet the needs of all the dying in the streets of Calcutta. She replied’ I am not called to be successful; I’m called to be faithful’.

We read this parable through Western eyes, in our capitalist culture.

We think the important thing in the parable is profit! How much did you make? In Jesus time many rulers in Palestine were called back to Rome to give an account. Some would return some wouldn’t’. Whilst they were away they would expect their servants to remain loyal and go about their business in their name. Some wouldn’t want to be associated with them and thought they would be losers so the best option was basically hide the cash under the mattress until a new ruler comes back. But in that sense you betray the one who gave you the gifts in the first place. So this parable could be seen as a test of faithfulness?

Those of you old enough to remember the Shah of Iran could imagine him telling his followers look after my businesses whilst I go into exile. Until I return after the Islamic revolution. But of course he never did return. Did those followers stay faithful to the Shah when there was so much hostility around them?

So it is for those who follow Jesus – in an atmosphere of hostility will you remain faithful?

But what about the one talent man? He stepped forward and said: Sir, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow. So he returned that which he had originally been given him. The landowner, incensed, uses words such as “slothful” and “wicked.” Angrily he took the talent back and gave it to the servant who now had ten.  
  
Well, it is obvious that the star, or we might say the villain, of the story is the one talent man. The salient question is: why did he choose to do nothing with the one talent that had been given to him? We are not really given the answer. We are left to speculate. Is his inaction due to the fear of failure? Is his inaction because of the ‘What if” game? Is he thinking ‘Will one little talent make a difference – so why bother?’ or like the scenario of the absent ruler -the safest option is to stick the money under the mattress until things are resolved politically?

One of the messages of this parable is that being taken up in Christ’s service involves more than playing it safe and doing little or nothing. It demands the kind of devoted and risky service to Christ’s kingdom that produces results.

Fred Craddock has said:

“The major themes of the Christian faith - caring, giving, witnessing, trusting, loving, hoping - cannot be understood or lived without risk."

A captain of a ship called the crew together. Some of the old crew members who had jumped ship had returned because they heard and saw what was happening. And other members were new, bringing with them great excitement and love for the sea. “It is time that we made plans to leave this harbor." The crew looked around at each other. The captain, knowing that some of them were fearful, said, "This ship was not made for the safety of the harbor but for the horizon," and he pointed to it. "But you are the crew. You must decide. Will it be the harbor or the horizon?"

"A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are for."

The third servant was afraid of his master. The parable means to transform our imagination about who God is. If we remain trapped in imagining God as a fearsome God of vengeance, then we end up judged according to our own imaginations. But if we can imagine a gracious God, as the first two servants do, then both our actions and the consequences of our actions yield gracious results.

Actually, the third slave acted as he was probably taught. In first century AD/ Jewish culture taught that if one was entrusted with something of great value, one should bury it in the ground for safekeeping.

Some scholars, notably William Herzog, suggest that the third servant is a hero. This servant stood up to a demanding boss who encouraged his employees to increase his wealth and their own bank accounts by making loans or investments that charged exorbitant interest rates. Burying the funds kept them from being used for such corrupt purposes. By refusing to take action that would have oppressed others and shaming the business practices of the owner, the third servant embraces God’s reign of justice and equity.

Is the behaviour of the master in the parable something that God would commend, let alone imitate? Is this kind of behaviour what Jesus expects of God's people? I hope not!

Parables are deliberately open to many interpretations – that is how the Spirit works – those who have ears to hear listen for what the spirit is saying. If we don't read Christ or God as the master anywhere in this parable then we could see this simply as Jesus making a comment on standard human economics for which, "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer" (a defensible interpretation of the master's comment in verse 29). Then kingdom of heaven will be found with those who suffer from such economics. If we "follow Jesus," that's where we will find him, namely, with those left out when the rich get richer. Jesus' life began in a barn, grew up in the poverty of Nazareth, spent a ministry among the poor and outcast, and finally let himself be handed over into the hands of the richest and most powerful of his nation to be judged as one completely on the outside, a godforsaken, blaspheming criminal.

**Final point of hope is that God looks at the big picture.**

It is interesting to note that in the 25th chapter of Matthew’s Gospel there are three parables told in a row: The Parable of the Bridesmaid, The Parable of the Sheep and Goats, and the Parable of the Talents. Essentially the same phrase is used in each: after a long time. The bridegroom comes after a long time. The landowner returns after a long time. The judgment comes after a long time. Perhaps this is Matthews’s way of saying to us: Our master may be delayed in his return, but, in the meanwhile, what are you doing with the talent that has been entrusted to you. If things aren’t working out for you now – don’t fret –it’s a long haul. You shouldn’t judge a football team after only a few games. It’s the table at the end of the season that counts.

So many people I have come across who didn’t do well at school but found themselves later in life. So many people look back on their lives and remember how they coped with hardship, suffering depression, breakups of relationship, but they came through. These things will pass.. It’s a long journey – keep going, keep going in faith and hope – God is with you.

We all have something to offer.

We are not our own

Overcome your fear and serve the master

Look to the long term.

**Prayers of intercession**

Creator God, we pray for your world. Have mercy upon it.

We pray for the countries being torn apart by war: for the fighting in Ukraine. And that there will be no escalation in the war between Israel and Gaza by other factions getting involved. Be with those working to seek the release of hostages.

Creator God, have mercy. Blanket your world with peace.

We bring before you your Church. Many countries victimise your followers. They face great dangers; imprisonment or death.

Creator God, have mercy. We pray your strength and safety upon believers in danger.

We pray your hand on the COP28 conference, beginning at the end of this month. Help all in the fight to combat climate change. Help us to maintain your creation for future generations.

We pray for the Icelandic people experiencing earthquakes and those evacuated due to the threat of volcanic activity.

Creator God, have mercy. Sustain your world.

We pray for all young people in education. Help those children skipping school due to bullying and violence. We pray for teachers nurturing young talents. Open doors of opportunity.

Creator God, have mercy. Help all to grow in wisdom and knowledge.

We pray for the exploited. For all lured into modern slavery by false promises made by unscrupulous people. We pray against those using social media for their own ends, for those stirring up dissent.

Creator God, have mercy. Open the eyes of the vulnerable and bring awareness.

We pray good health on our King as he enters his 76th year. May he grow in wisdom.

We pray for our government, at odds with itself over the dramatic reshuffling. Bring cohesion to the corridors of power.

Creator God, have mercy. May those in power serve humbly.

We pray for our communities; for all those working towards making them safer places to live and work. We pray for the lost, the lonely and the hungry.

Creator God, in this winter season help us to use well all that you give us. Help us, your children, to bring light and warmth into the lives of those around us.

Amen

**A prayer for all ages together**

Holy one, (reach out and up)

may your peace (hands over heart)

surround me; (hug self)

may your peace (hands over heart)

work through me; (push away, with palms facing out,

pointing up)

may your peace (hands over heart)

reach all the world. (spread arms wide)

Amen. (hands together, bow head)

**A sending out prayer**

This earth, this good earth,

The sunlight, the moonlight,

The sky that reaches over us,

The soil beneath our feet.

We will hold all this in our hands with gentleness and love.

Amen.