

Worship for Sunday 16th October 2022

Call to worship

There may be people in the world smarter than us, with stronger faith, kinder, wiser, more zealous for justice, more passionate about fairness, with a longer or more spectacular record of service in the church, who make better leaders or who are even more committed disciples of Jesus...

While all that may be true, this also is true: no-one is more loved than us. God's goodness is not earned, his favour deserved, nor her delight in us dependent on anything about us.

God's love simply is: mighty, eternal, gracious and without end.

And this is the miracle: we, all of us, individually and together, are right in the centre of it. Let us worship God.

Hymn 79: Teach me, O Lord, the perfect way

1 Teach me, O Lord, the perfect way
of thy precepts divine,
and to observe it to the end
I shall my heart incline.

2 Give understanding unto me,
so keep thy law shall I;
yea, even with my whole heart I shall
observe it carefully.

3 In thy law's path make me to go;
for I delight therein.
My heart unto thy gracious word,
and not to greed, incline.

Psalm 119, verses 33-40
The Scottish Psalter, 1929

4 Turn thou away my sight and eyes
from viewing vanity;
and in thy good and holy way
be pleased to quicken me.

5 Confirm to me thy gracious word,
which I did gladly hear,
even to thy servant, Lord, for I
thy holy name revere.

6 Turn thou away my feared reproach;
for good thy judgments be.
Lo, for thy precepts I have longed;
in thy truth quicken me.

Prayer

God who is wise, we who may think we are also wise come to you in worship. Let us, however, be smart enough to know this: that you, you above all others, you only, are worthy of all our praise. If we have been seduced by the attractive people in life, by projects that charm, by those who depend on us or on whom we depend, turn our eyes back to you and tune our ears to your voice, that we, who are easily beguiled, might know that you alone are truth, you alone, love, and you, above all others, gracious.

God who is merciful, we who think we are forgiving, confess: we are not above harbouring grievances, nursing resentments, keeping score of wrongs done to us. Yet

we pray that we might be moved by the word and example of Jesus to set aside all these things and find in our hearts a spirit ready for reconciliation. Likewise, if we suspect our ways and words have not always been helpful, let us reach out, own up, and set matters right. Hear us now as we bring before you wrongs done by us and to us....

God who is above all kind, we who are not all that we might be offer praise and thanksgiving, knowing you accept every good thing we offer, and are ready, through your Spirit's power, to fill us with life anew. As we listen to your word, may we hear the voice of Jesus. As we look at one another, may we see the face of Jesus. And as we go about our business, here and in every place, may we both sense, and be, the presence of Jesus.

Amen.

Reading: Luke 18 verses 1 - 8

Hymn 360: Jesus Christ is waiting

1. Jesus Christ is waiting,
waiting in the streets ;
no one is his neighbour,
all alone he eats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I am lonely too :
make me, friend or stranger,
fit to wait on you.

2 Jesus Christ is raging,
raging in the streets,
where injustice spirals
and real hope retreats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I am angry too :
in the Kingdom's causes
let me rage with you.

3 Jesus Christ is healing,
healing in the streets,
curing those who suffer,
touching those he greets.

Listen, Lord Jesus,
I have pity too :
let my care be active,
healing, just like you.

4 Jesus Christ is dancing,
dancing in the streets,
where each sign of hatred
he, with love, defeats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I should triumph too :
where good conquers evil
let me dance with you.

5. Jesus Christ is calling,
calling in the streets,
'Who will join my journey ?
I will guide their feet.'
Listen, Lord Jesus,
let my fears be few :
walk one step before me,
I will follow you.

John L. Bell (b. 1949) and Graham Maule (1958-2019)

Sermon

Luke 18 verse 8: I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.

However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?

For many years, indeed since they were last seen in 1976, the disappearance and suspected murder of Renee Macrae and her three-year-old son, Andrew, bewildered her family and fascinated the wider Scottish public. And then, a few weeks ago, her lover, William MacDowell, went on trial and was found guilty of these terrible crimes. About ten days ago, news came that he was appealing his conviction. His wife, who is alleged to have given him a false alibi, remains at liberty. There were a couple of brighter spots in the whole ghastly story, however. One was the remarkable perseverance of the police in finding out what had happened and then bringing William McDowell to justice. Another was the touching and heart-warming interview given by Renee Macrae's sister, Morag Govans, who was gracious beyond measure, and wanted only one thing more: that William MacDowell would reveal where Renee and Andrew's bodies had been buried. I fear her wait will outlast her.

Other families wait for justice of all kinds. Relatives of those shot dead by soldiers serving in the British Army on Bloody Sunday in Londonderry in 1972 have endured an interminable wait as political expediency and justice have fought a long-drawn-out battle, bereaved family members, as so often, caught in the crossfire. But one high profile injustice that makes me really mad is that suffered by so many perfectly ordinary, perfectly hardworking and perfectly honest men and women who ran sub post offices, only to have their lives torn apart by a computer programme supplied by Horizon and designed by Fujitsu, a programme with built in flaws that saw them apparently run up thousands of pounds in "debt" when they'd done nothing of the kind. Why oh why did it take the UK government so very, very long to act on that scandal?

You'll have your own "favourite" examples of miscarriages of justice, I guess; or rather, your own passions. The guilty allowed off the hook, left to go free and enjoy the rest of their lives (though what kind of a conscience allows that to happen, you do wonder)... The innocent convicted, sentenced, punished, their only hope of liberty being to confess to a crime they did not commit.... But when we think of "justice" in only this somewhat narrow way, we edit out all the other injustices that impinge upon us, niggle at us, and should really keep us wide awake at night (unless, of course, we're actually doing something about it): the very existence of foodbanks in a country that keeps telling anyone who will listen how great it is (and sadly that's not just the UK)... the fact that children born in Drumchapel, a mile down the road, might have much less in the way

of opportunity than a child born here in Westerton.... and the shame of some of our older folk living out their last years alone, fearful, forgotten. Start to speak about injustices and you'll just never stop.

The widow in Jesus's story – she's described in the heading as "persistent" – had no intention of stopping, either. Luke says she relentlessly went up against a judge with the plea: **Grant me justice against my adversary.** We're not told what her plea is. She hasn't announced it on Twitter or Facebook or set up a Just Giving page to fund her legal expenses. What we are told, however, is that the judge was highly suspect. He **neither feared God nor cared what people thought.** Makes you wonder, maybe, how he got into that position. But then, don't we spend a lot of our time wondering how people got to where they are? And it makes you wonder why the widow kept on bothering, kept on at him, kept on, without ceasing, pestering him. But she did. And finally, finally, he relented. He saw the writing on the wall and rolled over. **Because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me.** Her refusal to give up had eventually worn him down and frightened him.

Jesus finishes his short story and then tells his disciples: **Listen to what the unjust judge says.** Then he asks this rhetorical question: **And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones.** (I don't think we need to be side-tracked by this reference to "chosen ones" and start to worry that God's justice is only partial, or biased, or shows favouritism. I think it's just Jesus' manner of speaking to his disciples).

But God's justice is problematic. This is pretty plain from some of the stories Jesus told. Remember the one about the workers in the vineyard? You'll need to look in Matthew's gospel for this one. A landowner goes out in the morning looking for workers for his grape harvest. His agreement with them is simple, straightforward, just: a day's work in return for a day's wages. Even the most strident trade unionist would be hard put to argue. But after his breakfast the owner goes out again and finds some others standing around. He hires them too and agrees to pay them **whatever is right.** And so on. He goes out again just before lunch, and then mid-afternoon, and then one last time, at teatime. And in the evening, he is as good as his word and calls them all together and pays their wages.... Except that they all receive the same, and the ones who've toiled all day in the heat are outraged. But that's Jesus for you: for every one he makes happy,

it seems, another one is outraged. If we think we know what justice is: right and wrong, black and white, innocent and guilty, God has news for us.

But Jesus insists that God is a far better judge than the dodgy one in his parable. **Will not God bring about justice** he asks, rhetorically, adding another question of the same kind: **Will he keep putting them** (those who cry for justice) **off?** We're supposed to mouth a silent "no". But just as the word is forming on our lips, Jesus tells us something else about God: **he will see that they get justice, and quickly.** Which is fine, you'll agree. But then another question, and the sting in the tail: **However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?**

If only he hadn't asked.... If only he hadn't asked, because this one leaves me scratching my head. Does Jesus mean that we are to go on, relentlessly seeking from God what we need, or think we need, hoping, expecting, knowing God will cave in or roll over in the end? Experience tells us we don't always get what we think we need. Or could Jesus mean, perhaps, that "faith" and "justice" belong together, indeed are inseparable? If so, perhaps Jesus is asking: when the Son of Man comes, will his people still be engaging in the fight for justice, or will they, unlike the persistent widow, have thrown in the towel and left the fight to someone else.

Fighting for justice: how does that sound? It might sound pretty overwhelming. It might even sound pretty hypocritical. Think, if you can bear to, of our sister churches' inability to acknowledge, far less confront or even deal with, scandal after scandal of catalogues of sexual abuse by the clergy. Then stop there. Stop there and consider how well our church has done in recognising and dealing with other forms of injustice. I happened to tune into Radio Four one day recently, to find the speaker saying that, thirty years ago, she thought misogyny would fade away, only to discover that, thirty years on, it's as alive and as well as ever. She wasn't speaking about the church, but she might have been. The church remains a deeply misogynistic place, and if you think I'm talking about some other part of the church, think again.

But something else troubles me deeply, and less personally, about the church's - our church's, - denial of justice. It's our lack of engagement in the political arena where the deepest injustices might be confronted. You'd think, for example, that in a just country, there would be no doubt whatsoever that social security benefits should be raised in line with inflation. But where is our church's voice? Even more pressingly: if you believe

that too, where is your voice? Did Jesus not repeatedly say: the last will be first? Perhaps the deafening silence of the church is helping to ensure that the last will, indeed, be last, after all.

I think Jesus is hoping for something more, something better, which is a pretty safe thing to say. A less safe thing to say is: I think he may be looking for something more, something better, from us. It could be that he is looking for that very thing we all find so hard at times: a commitment, springing from our faith, to justice. Perhaps, though, we might take heart from these things: the substantial offering the Guild made a couple of weeks ago when our speakers came from the St Rollox Community Outreach Project... the continued support, by some here, of the Drumchapel Food Bank... the work done, via Rotary, for example, to support a host of important causes... and our giving, never enough but always before us, to Christian Aid, under Alan Stevens' leadership. As we know, the things asked of us by God are often costly – Christianity is certainly not for wimps – sometimes literally in terms of our money, and sometimes in terms of our sheer dogged persistence in pursuing what we believe to be right. A day will arrive when there will be a reckoning. That's what Jesus means when he talks, as he often does, about the Son of Man coming. **Will he find faith on the earth?** Even if we cannot answer that in the way we would like for our flawed church, we can indeed answer for our flawed selves. Only you and I will know what our answers will be....

Hymn 263: God of freedom, God of justice

1 God of freedom, God of justice,
God whose love is strong as death,
Christ who saw the dark of prison,
Christ who knew the price of faith:
touch our world of sad oppression
with your Spirit's healing breath.

2 Rid the earth of torture's terror,
you whose hands were nailed to wood;
hear the cries of pain and protest,
you who shed both tears and blood;
move in us the power of pity
to pursue the common good.

3 Make in us a captive conscience
quick to hear, to act, to plead;
make us truly sisters, brothers
of whatever race or creed —
teach us to be fully human,
open to each other's need.

Shirley Erena Murray (b. 1931) (*alt.*)

Offering

Prayer

God who is just, we hear that word and sometimes also hear the word "judge" and we think we are in for it. But you seek not to judge but to usher in fairness and righteousness, and to encourage us not to favour the rich, the "haves", those who are more articulate or have louder voices. And so, when we pray for justice, we do so with relief and enthusiasm.

We remember first of all the law makers, and ask wisdom for them, and a lack of prejudice, and breadth of vision. May they have mercy in mind in all they do, for the good of all of society. Especially we pray for those who uphold the law: judges and sheriffs and justices of the peace, and those who tackle law breakers: the police and the procurator fiscal's service. With special compassion we pray for those waiting for the law to run its course, those who serve in our prisons, and those who serve on the front line, and behind the scenes, in the police service.

We remember, too, those denied economic justice, praying especially for those deciding how to spend very limited resources, those needing to visit foodbanks, those unable to offer their children those things that the rest of us take for granted. May we all take responsibility for a fairer world, here in our community and in every place where we have influence.

And we do not fail to remember in our prayers those with needs of a different kind: the ill and the frail, the frightened and the dying, the lonely and the bereaved. Bring comfort, bring reassurance, bring peace, bring hope; and through us bring compassion.

Amen.

Hymn 622: We sing a love that sets all people free

1 We sing a love that sets all people free,
that blows like wind, that burns like
scorching flame,
enfolds like earth, springs up like water
clear:
come, living love, live in our hearts today.

2 We sing a love that seeks another's good,
that longs to serve and not to count the
cost,
a love that, yielding, finds itself made new:
come, caring love, live in our hearts today.

3 We sing a love, unflinching, unafraid
to be itself, despite another's wrath,
a love that stands alone and undismayed:
come, strengthening love, live in our hearts
today.

4 We sing a love, that, wandering, will not
rest
until it finds its way, its home, its source,
through joy and sadness pressing on
refreshed:

come, pilgrim love, live in our hearts today.

5 We sing a burning, fiery, Holy Ghost
that seeks out shades of ancient bitterness,
transfiguring these, as Christ in every
heart:

come joyful love, live in our hearts today.

June Boyce-Tillman (b. 1943)

Benediction

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you and all those whom you love. Now and always.

Amen.

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