

## Worship for Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2022

### Call to worship

*On an October day, even the vibrant multi colours of the leaves have to compete for our attention, as we huddle under our umbrellas, and watch our feet, lest we tumble on slippery pavements.*

*Then, suddenly, the sky lifts, and so do our eyes, and there, before us, even if fleetingly, is all the beauty of creation.*

*And, if we have time to pause,*

*creation may point beyond herself to God,*

*whom we believe to be the instigator of all things lovely.*

*There is joy in our hearts at the wonder of it all.*

*And there is joy here, too,*

*for God meets us in this moment, if our eyes and ears and hearts are open.*

*So, for this hour, in conversation and in silence,*

*let us open ourselves up to every possibility...*

*and to this cast iron certainty: we belong to God, on this autumn day and forever, and are loved by God with a mighty and gentle love.*

Hymn 44: Praise waits for thee in Zion, Lord

Prayer

*To you, God who is mighty yet near, eternal yet ever present, the source of both truth and love, we who are your people come in worship. We have left our homes and arrived in search of one another, fellow believers, travellers on the way, sisters and brothers in Christ Jesus. Together we walk, faltering and with pauses and backward steps, in his footsteps, but we have company and are sustained and encouraged by each other, and by the memory of those who have gone this way before us. In our worship, we continue our walk, seeking strength, giving and receiving love, knowing that, one day, we will meet you in all your glory.*

*To you, God who is both demanding and forgiving, we come in humility, seeking forgiveness. Despite our best efforts, our knowing, and the enlivening power of your holy spirit, we have strayed from your way. Self concern may have overwhelmed us, our horizons narrowed, our dreaming and imagination been replaced by cynicism and even despair, and we have given up and given in. But now, in the worship place, reality has crept in with the stillness, and we realise: you are waiting, not for us to become perfect, but to come and throw ourselves on your mercy. Taking a quiet moment, we reflect on our words and actions, and own up to any that let you and ourselves down, and complicated the lives of others...*

*To you, God whose forgiveness brings freedom and deeper faith, we offer praise. Your love alone can win us, making us the people we long to be. Your compassion alone can move us, until our hearts overflow without ceasing with kindness. And your grace, seen abundantly and always in Christ Jesus, whose life and dying and rising again redeem us, your grace alone makes us whole and secure and full of peace and hope. Amen.*

Reading: Luke 18 verses 9 – 14

Hymn 187: There's a wideness in God's mercy

## Sermon

Luke 18 verse 13: But the tax collector stood at a distance. He could not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Even as I sat down at my desk and laptop to engage in the necessary and sometimes joyful task of sermon writing, the whole country was, apparently, holding its breath – yet again – for the latest incarnation of the "mini-budget" (only it wasn't to be called a "budget", and it turned out to be anything but "mini", more of a gigantic, wholesale disaster). Absolutely amazingly, Kwasi Kwarteng, the man with the unique distinction of holding the office of Chancellor of the Exchequer for the very shortest time, apart from Ian Barbour, who died after xx days in office, thought abolishing the forty five per cent tax rate for highest earners would fly with a population facing desperate financial problems – or had agreed to be Liz Truss's mouthpiece. Within three weeks, the man had been called back from Washington to be sacked. If you have a shred of human kindness in your heart, you'll feel sorry for him. But enough! We all know how it played out.

Also in my mind – though not so much! - as I sat down to write was the fact that we were in the second half of October and my tax return had to be completed and sent to HMRC by the end of the month. We tend to think very little about tax collectors these days, imagining them as faceless bureaucrats, hunched over computers, then writing to tell us we've paid too much, in which case we await a rebate, or too little, in which case what we owe will be clawed back. We all know, though, that it was a different matter in first century Palestine. Two things are especially important about them: who they were, and the relationship Jesus had with them, individually or together.

First, a reminder of who they were. Prof Elizabeth Johnson describes them thus: *They are franchisees of a corrupt and byzantine system that gouges the poor and enriches the wealthy. The tax collector, by definition a wealthy man, pays the [Roman] empire a set amount for the privilege of gathering whatever he can squeeze from his neighbours. Although he is personally responsible for the money owed by his district, he is free to collect that money any way he wants, and anything he collects above what he owes is his profit.... Tax collectors are frequently foreigners, and they often farm out their own responsibilities to others, creating a perfect pyramid scheme of graft....* Nice people, then.

But somehow that fact didn't seem to bother Jesus. The first three gospels are littered with stories of Jesus' encounters with them. It didn't win him many friends. In an engagement with a crowd after John the Baptist had been put in prison, Jesus challenged them when, speaking of himself, he said: When the Son of Man came, everyone said, "Look at this man! He is a glutton and a drinker, a friend of tax collectors and other outcasts". Near the end of the same gospel, in an account of a robust exchange between Jesus and some chief priests and elders, Jesus uttered this unspeakable sentence in their hearing: I tell you: the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you. And, famously, Matthew's gospel tells us about the calling of one such individual, Matthew, into discipleship. Jesus was having

a meal in his home, and we're told: many tax collectors and other outcasts came and joined Jesus and his disciples at the table. It says that Matthew simply got up and followed. I need not go on. Except to remind you of perhaps the most famous tax collector of them all: Zaccheus. We'll come back to him at the end.

It's one of that much and apparently justifiably maligned class who found his way into the temple one day, at least according to the parable that Jesus told to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else. I don't know about you, but that initial description doesn't make me warm to them one little bit. No-one likes anyone who's self-righteous. Here's how the scenario of the parable plays out....

First to arrive was a Pharisee. A reminder about him, though, before we proceed: a Pharisee (according to Elizabeth Johnson again) would be a paragon, someone noted for extraordinary piety. According to Luke, in Jesus' story, he stood by himself and prayed. Well, at least he prayed.... Sometimes going to a solitary place to pray is the right and necessary thing to do. The gospels tell us that, on occasions, this was the very thing that Jesus did. Perhaps you do it, too. I don't imagine for a minute that your praying is confined to what you do here in church, either listening to me doing it, or joining in the Lord's Prayer, or bowing your head for a few quiet moments at the beginning or end of worship. Maybe, if you are troubled, you find a quiet space at home, or out of doors, for your contemplations and conversations with God. Maybe you find praying with others stimulating, encouraging, uplifting – or you never do it, through embarrassment, lack of confidence, or maybe just not believing it will make a blind bit of difference. I used to go out occasionally to Schonstadt at Milton of Campsie, which has a lovely little chapel that lends itself to prayer, even when, as happened the last time I was there, folk were coming and going. Maybe on holiday you find a church with a quiet corner and pray there. Each of us finds his or her own way, I guess. But I'm willing to bet that you've never prayed like this: God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like him or her, over there. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.

Let's drill down a little, though, shall we, before we write this man off altogether. Even if we don't like – and I'm very sure we don't – his "big tip for himself" as my late dad would describe it, I guess we might not be absolute strangers to the tenor of the second sentence of his short prayer. (Always remember: short prayers can be good!). We might not, admittedly, get the bit about twice weekly fasting – unless, coincidentally, we're on a diet – but perhaps we have felt a bit of conceit about our offerings. Now, for those of you who feel squeamish at the very thought of this, the minister is about to mention MONEY, but only because Jesus does.... But what *about* our offerings? Maybe you have sat back and thought, whenever the subject came up, "I'm doing all right. I'm giving x or y or z pounds a week, month or quarter". I'm in the very fortunate position of not knowing what any of you gives in your offering, unless you actually tell me, or send me a cheque, and that happens very rarely indeed. And if you give a tenth, and maybe some of you do, that is terrific and welcome, thank you. But this has to be borne in mind: giving a tenth is not the best way of determining your offering, because, if you have a big income, giving a tenth will still leave you much more than a person who tithes on a smaller income. At least our man gave it. He gets credit for that. But I'm

getting sidetracked... The point is not the religious observance or offerings, but the Pharisee's smugness. He's about to get a lesson...

Meanwhile, a little distance away, a tax collector was making a scene. Fists clenched, he was beating his chest and calling out to God to look on him with mercy. That's it, really. Just asking for mercy. Then Jesus cut to the chase and announced the conclusion of his story: I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. Which is, in common parlance, a way of saying that God was pretty happy with the tax man, after all.

I think this is a story of the very greatest hope. What matters to God is not really anything I can do to prove myself in God's eyes. And it goes to the heart of the reformation theology of justification by grace – everything depends on God's goodness, rather than justification by works or deeds. The wonderful thing about this is that it means we are all in there on an equal footing, standing on a level playing field, if you like, in this regard: we are all absolutely dependent on God. It's what the tax collector got and the Pharisees absolutely failed to grasp.

Mercy... it's a wonderful gift. Sometimes we give it to one another, when you or I get things wrong, fail to measure up, disappoint, let ourselves, each other, the congregation, down. We all do. But sometimes we are just a little bit smug because, somewhere at our core, there is the feeling that we are, well, just a wee bit better than others. After all, don't we come to church, turn up on the right day at the right time to do our duty, offer service on the Kirk Session, Guild, at the care home, wherever? Yes, we do! And it's all good and fine until that disastrous moment when we think it makes us better than our neighbour, who doesn't do something, anything, quite as well as we do. The moment that happens, we are in danger. We have exalted ourselves in our own eyes, only to find ourselves humbled, while our neighbour, not just quite as good as us, will be exalted in the sight of God, after all.

It's difficult stuff, this. It holds a mirror up in front of us and asks us to regard ourselves with the eyes of truth, and then with the eyes of God. But here's the thing: God always, always, always looks on us with mercy; and then asks us to do the same as we regard others.

We're all got time to make that prayer, that one-liner, before we leave: God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Go on... you know you want to. And we'll all feel so much better when we know that it's not down to us, because God is always merciful. But just before you make the prayer, remember the most famous tax collector of them all: Zaccheaus. When he threw himself on the mercy of Jesus, it moved him to spontaneous and costly generosity. Maybe, finding God to be very merciful indeed, it will do the very same for us.....

Hymn 493: *It's me, it's me, O Lord*

Offering

Prayer

To you, living and giving God, we dedicate these offerings, along with the gifts you have given us to use in your service. Especially we thank you for our skills in listening, encouraging, and caring. Help us to do what we can, to accept the help we need, and to trust you always.

God who insists we face the truth, especially the truth about ourselves, we come to you knowing all is not right with us. Knowing that, may we be gentle in our estimation of others. Particularly we pray for those whom we so hastily judge: those who look different, sound different, believe different things, don't do the things we expect and do things we find it hard to reckon with. Here in church, first and foremost, may we look with kindness and generosity of spirit upon one another, not counting anyone better or worse than us. Instead, may we build each other up so that, together, we who are your church further the work of Christ in bringing in your kingdom.

God who loves all, we pray for those who have been judged harshly by others, those who have become despondent through rejection, or hopeless in the face of prejudice. Help us, truly help us, to extend grace and mercy to others in the very same measure that you extend them to us.

God who is with us always, we pray for those for whom life is challenging: those who are ill and face rigorous treatment regimes.... those who are frail and face the surrender of their independence, at least in part... and those who, not being as fit as others, feel excluded, or a burden...

And now, in humble trust, we pray for ourselves and those we love most.....

Hymn 490: Jesus, lover of my soul

### **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*