

**Sunday 18th September 2022**

**Proper 20 | Ordinary 24**

**The Rev’d Andy Braunston**

# **Call to Worship**

**O come and praise the Eternal One; sing praises to God’s holy name.**

Blessèd be the name of God; from east to west the praise of God each day is to be spread abroad. **O come and praise the Eternal One; sing praises to God’s holy name.**

The Eternal One is high above the earth, with glory far above the sky. Who else is like our God, the one who stoops down low to look on heav’n and earth? **O come and praise the Eternal One; sing praises to God’s holy name.**

God is the one who raises outcasts from the dust and lifts the poor from ash heaps. God rewards the childless with love and legacy. **O come and praise the Eternal One; sing praises to God’s holy name.**

# **Prayers of Approach & Confession**

From west and east, from south and north, we come to worship you O Ancient of Days,

to enjoy Your peace, to rest in your presence, and to praise Your holy Name.

From the ends of the earth, O Christ, Your Church gathers this day:

not only to praise - but to learn; not only to rest - but to change;

not only to enjoy - but to be disturbed.

From the mess of our own lives and loves You call us O Spirit,

in churches and chapels, around screens and speakers, on pew or easy chair,

to rely on you, not mammon.

Yet our world, O God, loves wealth and practices deceit, tramples the poor and needy,

creates unfair systems which value silver and gold over humanity.

Yet you are a God who never forgets these things, a God from whom we cannot hide,

a God who calls us to do better, to create a fairer world.

Give us time, O God, to change,

time to turn away from our greed and selfishness, time to repent. *Silence*

Amen

# **Declaration of Forgiveness**

The Eternal One is faithful and just, showering us with extravagant love and kindness in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit moves amongst us allowing us to know we are forgiven, giving us time to change, and the courage to make a difference; so know this loving kindness and forgive yourselves.

# **All – Age Introduction**

Imagine you win the lottery. I know, it’s a nice thought isn’t it? Say you won a million pounds, or ten million – it’s imagination after all! What might you want to spend the money on? Would you buy a house? A new car? A sports car – a Tesla of course as we’re all very conscious of the environment. Would you go on a holiday? Where?

Imagine your luck and happiness. All that money. All yours…

Except, it isn’t really is it? As Christians we believe not only that all good things come from God but that we have to use what we’re given on trust. We’re stewards of the resources. So what might we use the money for if we were to be good stewards?

Might we support a foodbank?

Might we support a hospital?

Might we support a local or international charity?

Of course we’d remember the Church!

We’re going to think quite a bit about wealth today. Amos condemns the rich in his day and Jesus told a story about a dishonest steward who cheated his master to save his own skin yet was rewarded – such are the strange things that money makes us do. Jesus tells us that we can’t love both God and money – of course we often try to fool ourselves and do both!

# **Prayer of Illumination**

Challenge us by your Word, O God as it is read and proclaimed, pondered and wrestled with, embodied in our lives and enfleshed in the things we love, that we may hear, understand, and respond. Amen.

# **Readings** *Amos 8:4-7* | *St Luke 16:1-13*

For the Psalm set for the day check out this version from the Free Church of Scotland’s Psalter Sing Psalms! It goes well to Sagina – And Can it Be? © The Praise and Psalmody Committee, the Free Church of Scotland.

O praise, you servants of the LORD;

sing praises to his holy name.

O blessèd be the name of God;

His praise for evermore proclaim.

From east to west the praise of God

each day is to be spread abroad.

2: The Lord is high above the earth,

His glory far above the sky.

Who else is like the Lord our God,

the One who sits enthroned on high?

He is the one who stoops down low

to look on heav’n and earth below.

3: He raises outcasts from the dust

and from the ash-heap lifts the poor,

exalting them to dignity, with noblemen to sit secure.

The childless woman he’ll reward

with home and children. Praise the LORD!

# **Notes on the Readings**

Both our readings today are challenging lifted only by the words of praise in Psalm 113. Amos rails against the rich who oppress the poor and Jesus seems, at first reading, to suggest that using sharp practice is a good thing! Those who have gone before us have puzzled over this parable and Jesus’ words. Augustine felt Jesus praised the steward for making provision for his future. Other Church Fathers thought that the point was to contrast the worldly - who used wealth to gain friends in the here and now - with the faithful who would use their wealth to serve God in the poor and so gain friends in the hereafter. To refuse to give, for many early Church Fathers was to steal from God. Wesley felt the parable was about good stewardship. Some think the steward was praised as he remitted unfair debt the master had imposed on the poor, others thing he’s praised for his ingenuity. Calvin uses the parable as a way to rely on God’s eternal providence and deal kindly with our neighbours but notes, rather sniffily I think, that “to inquire with great exactness into every minute part of a parable is an absurd mode of philosophizing.” Clearly Calvin struggled with the text too!

Steward were not managers in our contemporary world with job descriptions, person specifications and employment law protections. Instead, stewards were, if not slaves, then not far off them. He'd have relied on his master for his board and lodging, his employment, and the security that came with it for him and maybe for his family. Being sacked would have been devastating. So given that risk he wins friends for his master by remitting some of the debt that was owed. Some commentators think he was remitting the interest on the debt – the Bible condemns the lending of money with interest. The master seems impressed. No doubt the debtors would be back and want more – giving another chance to earn money. The master might have been impressed also that faced with the crisis of destitution the steward acted and, in so doing, saved the day.

Jesus’ words are difficult “ Is Jesus really telling us to make friends with “dishonest wealth”? I hope not. Jesus stood in the tradition of the earlier prophets who, again and again, called on the people to be righteous in following God’s laws – laws which were very clear about supporting the poor, the dispossessed, the stranger. In the passage before today’s reading we meet the prodigal son – a man who squandered his inheritance; an inheritance claimed before his time. In the passage after today’s reading we read of Dives and Lazarus where the one who was rich on earth is punished in hell whilst Lazarus, the poor man, is seated in glory. So it would be odd if in the midst of those two teachings we had Jesus say to use the system to do well. Instead perhaps Jesus was being ironic. There’s lots of places in the Gospel where Jesus uses humour and irony: - called the Pharisees whitewashed tombs, he told people to look to the beam in their own eyes rather than the specks in other people’s, again he told the Pharisees off by saying they strained at gnats whilst trying to drink a camel and he said it was easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God. These are all devastatingly funny and his hearers would have laughed – well the Pharisees wouldn’t have but you get the point.

The prodigal son story shows that dishonest wealth doesn’t win true friends – as the prodigal found when he was left to find food in a pigsty. Jesus says that those he earlier called “sons of darkness” will let you into their eternal homes – if they are, indeed, sons of darkness they won’t have eternal homes. More irony. Later in the passage Jesus says that one cannot serve both God and mammon – something at odds with his ironic comment about being friends with dishonest wealth. So if the context of the passage and what else we know of Jesus means he’s being ironic what might he mean? The ending is the point – we can’t serve both God and mammon. Add to this the sense of crisis that the steward had at the thought of losing everything and we might make some progress…

What are the crises we face? How does our relationship with wealth fit into this? You might want to muse on: the crisis of housing where younger folk find it more and more difficult to rent or buy property at a reasonable cost, or the crisis in our economy of rising prices but not rising wages and pensions and the real poverty and anguish this is causing, or there’s the ecological crisis which looks set to change our world and our lifestyles more profoundly than any of us can imagine. All of these things are related to how our society works, how we value money, wealth and economic growth regardless of the cost. We’re seeing that for all the riches of the world there’s no real security for the poor or even those who aren’t poor but aren’t rich.

All of these things show that, like ancient Israel, we’ve forgotten God’s command to care for and nurture the poor. Our response must always be to turn back to Jesus for: Jesus tells us not to look for security in worldly mammon; Jesus tells us to use our wealth to serve God and the poor – the prodigal who squandered his inheritance gained nothing. Dives who had all the comforts on earth but oppressed the poor man Lazarus ended up in hell and Jesus echoes Amos’ words cry down through history challenging us not to oppress the poor.

You might want to think about things your congregation could do: support credit unions so the poor can get access to loans they can afford, give provisions to food banks which will be needed more and more in the months ahead, put pressure on our elected officials to reverse the decline in social housing and to look at new models of housing so that there is a plentiful supply of good, warm, and cheap housing. This coming winter might your church open up, with other local churches maybe, to offer warm places for food and socialising? We can show we love God more than we love mammon in a myriad number of small ways in how we use our money.

# **Affirmation of Faith**

Today, we affirm our faith that **we cannot serve both God and wealth**.

Yet we recognise that’s hard. Prices are rising faster than wages and pensions; we worry about the power, fuel, and food bills and, despite fine words about trusting in God, we are worried. We struggle to remember that, even in these times, **we cannot serve both God and wealth**.

The One we follow, left the richness of heaven for the poverty of earth. Living a simple life, owning very little, he challenged the rich and powerful reminding them that, **we cannot serve both God and wealth.**

The Spirit who formed the earliest Church, and called them to live in community sharing their wealth, calls us to use our resources to relieve poverty, challenge the comfortable, and change our economic systems because **we cannot serve both God and wealth**.

From before the ages the Eternal One calls us to live justly, to love righteousness, to lift up the poor and broken, and work for the coming of the Kingdom where we will no longer try **to serve both God and wealth**.

Until then we work and pray for change, so that the pain and oppression of our world will be transformed into justice and joy and we will forget that we ever attempted **to serve both God and wealth.**

# **Offertory**

Our economic system is based on growth at any cost, profit or surplus without regard to the consequences, the acquisition of consumer goods that wear out or fail all too soon so we are forced to buy more. We know this needs to change but have no idea how; in the meantime we can show a different way of using money. Instead the desire to gain more, get richer, have more in the bank we can change the story and give.

Giving frees us from our addiction to always wanting more. Giving frees us from the fear that we don’t have enough. Giving frees us from the poison of capitalism. Giving reflects the divine nature in that God loved us so much that He gave without regard to the cost.

We give in many ways, through the collection, straight to the bank, through our time and talents, through our gentle presence with others in need. But now, at this point, we give thanks for the financial gifts which are used to show a different economic theory, a different way of working, a different kingdom. Will you pray with me?

O God of the ages, we give because you first gave;

help us to use our resources to bring about change

that the poor will be lifted up, the broken healed,

and the despised included,

let our love for you increase and our love of mammon fade away. Amen.

# **Intercessions**

God of the ages, we bring our world to You, thanking You for its beauty,

yet remembering places of pain and persecution.

Bless with Your love the poor and dispossessed this day,

those who have fled home for fear of war, violence, and persecution.

Lead, with Your grace, those who struggle in desperate situations,

strengthen those who work for peace and justice,

and make us ever open to our world, its glory and it’s pain. (pause)

God, in your mercy…**hear our prayer.**

God of the poor, we bring You the leaders of our world,

those elected, appointed, or who have seized power,

that they may always remember where true power comes from,

and You, to whom they will, one day give account.

We pray for the leaders of our own nations,

that truth, legality, justice, and compassion may again become

the hallmarks of our state. (pause)

God, in your mercy…**hear our prayer.**

God of the outsider, we pray for the Church throughout the world.

We remember those, this day, who meet in secret for fear of the authorities,

those preparing for baptism – especially for those who will be baptised in secret -

that their faith and commitment will help renew us.

We pray for those who dare to lead the Church,

those in places of persecution and those in places of indifference,

that, through creativity, an ability to read the signs of the times,

and faithfulness to You, we may through evangelism, witness, loving service

and worship, honour You, our rock and redeemer. (pause)

God, in your mercy…**hear our prayer.**

We pray for our own congregation, that in these times of challenge and opportunity,

we may serve, witness and, through loving kindness,

show of Your grace to those in need.

Help us to not only welcome those You send,

but enable us to invite our friends and family,

to feast with You in this place, that Your people may know You,

be enriched, and enabled to change our world, into Your coming Kingdom. (pause)

God, in your mercy…**hear our prayer.**

In a moment’s silence, we bring to You, O God, those we love and worry about,

and all in any kind of need….(longer pause)

God, in your mercy…**hear our prayer.**

We join all our prayers together as, with Jesus, we pray…Our Father

# **Holy Communion** *adapted by Andy Braunston from a prayer from the Iona Community*

We gather around the Lord’s table, in person, around a screen or speaker, and welcome the Lord into our hearts as He welcomes us into the heavenly places where all are called to make a home.

Gratitude, praise, hearts lifted high, voices full and joyful;

these You deserve, Eternal One,

for when we were nothing, you made us something;

when we had no name and no faith and no future, You called us to be Your children;

when we lost our way or turned away, You did not abandon us;

when we came back to You, Your arms opened wide in welcome.

And look, You prepare a table for us,

offering not just bread, not just wine, but Your very self

so that we might be filled, forgiven, healed, blessed, & made new again.

You are worth all our pain and all our praise

and so with angels and archangels we praise your name singing…

O holy, most holy, the God of creation,

for ever exalted in power and great might.

The earth and the heavens are full of your glory.

Hosanna, hosanna and praise in the height!

How blessed is He who is sent to redeem us,

who puts ev’ry fear and injustice to flight;

Who comes in the name of the Lord as our Saviour.

Hosana, hosanna and praise in the height!

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Eternal One, as we come to share the richness of Your table,

we cannot forget the rawness of the Earth.

We cannot take bread and forget those who are hungry.

Your world is one world and we are stewards of its nourishment.

God, put our prosperity as the service of the poor.

We cannot take wine, and forget those who are thirsty.

The ground and the rootless, the earth and her weary people cry out for justice.

God, put our prosperity at the service of the poor.

We cannot hear Your words of peace and forget the world at war

or, if not at war then preparing for it.

Show us quickly, O God, how to turn our weapons into welcoming signs

and the lust for power into a desire for peace.

And now, O God, send down Your Spirit on us and on these gifts of bread and wine,

that they may become for us Your body, healing, forgiving and making us whole;

and that we may become for You, Your body,

loving and caring in the world until Your Kingdom comes.

And we remember Jesus who among friends

on the night that he was betrayed, took bread, broke it, blessed it

and gave it to his friends saying;

“Take this all of you and eat it, this is my body which is given for you,

do this and make me real in your lives.”

In the same way, after the meal, he took the cup filled with wine,

blessed it and gave it to his friends saying:

“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 all people. Do this and remember me.”

As we share in this meal we ask you, Loving God,

to watch over and guard your Church throughout the world.

Grant it peace and unity and bless those who are persecuted

for believing in you; bring relief to all who are oppressed.

Remind us that we are to proclaim your death and new life until you come again bringing in the Kingdom where there will be no more pain, no more persecution, no more injustice, no more tears.

Until then we serve and praise You,

Father of All who with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit,

reigns forever, one God world without end. Amen.

This is the table, not of the Church, but of God,

it has been made ready for those who love God,

and those of us who want to love God more.

So come, those who have much faith, and those of us who would like to have more;

those who have been here often, and those of us who have not been for a long time,

those who have tried to follow, and those of us who have failed.

Come, not because I invite you, for it God who invites us here,

and it is God's will that all who want it should find life and beauty and happiness here.

Come and share this meal.

To prepare ourselves to meet the Lord in Holy Communion let us sing the Lamb of God.

O Lamb of God, come cleanse our hearts, and take our sins away.

O Lamb of God your grace impart, and let our guilty fear depart,

have mercy, Lord, we pray, have mercy Lord, we pray.

O Lamb of God, our lives restore, our guilty souls release.

Into our lives your Spirit pour and let us live for evermore

In perfect heav’nly peace, in perfect heav’nly peace.

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# **Blessing**

May the One who used humour to make devastating points,

the One who challenged the structures of His Day,

the One who championed the poor, fill you with His Spirit,

that you may reject mammon’s false security,

challenge the economic systems of our day,

turn your backs on dishonest wealth,

and lift up the poor and dispossessed.

And the blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

be with you, and all whom you love, now and always, Amen.

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| Hymn SuggestionsRS – Rejoice and Sing, CH4 – Church Hymnary 4/Hymns of Glory, Songs of Praise, StF – Singing the Faith, MP – Mission Praise |
| Title | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| Sent by the Lord Am I |  | 250 |  |  |
| As a Fire is meant for burning |  | 252  |  |  |
| Singing We Gladly Worship the Lord Together |  | 257 |  |  |
| When the Hungry Who Have Nothing |  | 258 |  |  |
| Come now you blessed, eat at my table |  |  | 695 |  |
| For the Healing of the Nations | 620 | 706 | 696 |  |
| Freedom is coming |  |  | 697 |  |
| God of Justice Saviour to All |  |  | 699 |  |
| God Weeps |  | 168 | 700 |  |
| Heaven Shall not wait |  | 362 | 701 |  |
| I will speak out |  |  | 702 |  |
| In An Age of Twisted Values |  |  | 703 |  |
| Show Me How To Stand for Justice |  |  | 713 |  |