

**LAIRG CHURCH OF SCOTLAND & ROGART (ST CALLANS) CHURCH OF SCOTLAND
SCO20871 and SCO10035**

Call to worship

Lord of heaven and earth, of all nations and peoples, all faiths and no faith
reveal yourself, to those who are suffering, to all who are refugees, to those who are powerful,
to all who are powerless, to ordinary people in their everyday lives
Reveal yourself to us as we gather now to worship, that this world might reflect your love and your
glory. AMEN

Hymn: My Jesus, my saviour

My Jesus, My Saviour
Lord there is none like you
All of my days, I want to praise
The wonders of Your mighty love
My comfort, my shelter
Tower of refuge and strength
Let every breath, all that I am
Never cease to worship You

Shout to the Lord, all the earth let us sing
Power and majesty, praise to the King!
Mountains bow down and the seas will roar
At the sound of your name!
I sing for joy at the work of your hands
Forever I'll love you, forever I'll stand
Nothing compares to the promise I have in You

Darlene Zschech
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Prayers

Lord of Creation, we confess that we have squandered your gifts and used them as if they had been
given for us alone.

We have not loved you with our whole heart. We have failed to be an obedient church.

We have not done your will, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love,
we have not loved our neighbours, and we have not heard the cry of the needy.

Forgive us, we pray. Free us for joyful obedience, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hear the Good News: We have not been faithful in all things. But our God still welcomes us with
patience and kindness. Therefore, as people of God's promise, let us receive forgiveness, embrace
hope, and faithfully respond, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Glory to God! We are forgiven. We have hope. We will respond. Amen.

An Affirmation of our Faith.

I believe in a God who created all things

and seeks for all to be in communion as God's people.

I believe in Jesus Christ who showed us how to share love,

and who commissioned us to go out into the highways and byways
inviting all to be a part of God's work in the world.

I believe in the Holy Spirit who leads and guides us into the world,

then touches the lives of those around us in ways that make them receptive to love.

I believe in the harvest and the call for labourers to receive and respond,
sharing light and life with the world. Amen.

We say together the Lord's Prayer

Readings: Matthew 25:14-30 - The Parable of the Talents

¹⁴“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five

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more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' ²¹ His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' ²² And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' ²³ His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' ²⁴ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' ²⁶ But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹ For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ³⁰ As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Reflections on the reading

Today's Gospel passage is one of the stranger stories in the New Testament. It belongs in that group of sayings and stories from Jesus that we find a little bit uncomfortable and maybe wish weren't there.

Now we've all heard the straight-forward, Sunday School interpretation of this passage: 'use what you've got'. 'Put your talents to work'. 'Don't hide your light under a bushel'. That's not a bad message, and I do believe it's important to see people's potential fulfilled, and them using their gifts, but I think there might just be something else going on in this parable of Jesus.

Let's see what happens if we turn the thing on its head?

The traditional interpretation hinges on one assumption, for which I don't see any clear evidence in the passage: that the master, the giver of gold is somehow meant to represent God. But is that really true? Jesus never seems to say so. Do we really believe in a God who would give more gold to people who were more talented already, or who would say 'to those who already have, more shall be given... and to those who have little, what little they have will be taken away'. This certainly doesn't seem to match with the image of the Kingdom of God that Jesus paints elsewhere in the gospels.

So, stay with me for a moment. What if it's the other way round...

What if this is not a story about how we should use what we have wisely (an interpretation that is helped by the confusing translation issue that the currency in this story is translated 'talents', the same word as we use for gifts/skills). What if, instead, it's a story about how unfair the world is and how many of us will be cast out by the system if we stand up to greed, or are unwilling to line the pockets of the wealthy with our hard work? Suddenly it becomes quite a different reading.

In this version, we see the Master as a sort of archetypal capitalist overlord – someone who has plenty of wealth to spare, but only really wishes to use it to generate more. 'Wealth creators' is a modern phrase for this kind of master. He may not be evil, but he is certainly playing the game in order to benefit himself. Hence the story – he makes a small investment in three small businesses he is connected to, and leaves with an expectation of some return on his investment.

Of course, he does rather well out of the whole affair, his investments double in the two larger of the three businesses. But the third appears to function more as a not for profit, a charity or a social enterprise company. This third investment does not grow. The third businessman appears to operate counter to the system of greed and wealth creation. He is doing something very differently. He's protecting the money that isn't really his to spend, and getting on with other things – things which are far less money-related or not driven by profit.

And the investor is bitterly disappointed. The counter-narrative offered by this third business doesn't help him get any richer, so the investor throws him out.

Where is the Kingdom of God in this story?

Where is the Kingdom of God in our story? In our week? In our day? Have we missed it, because we made certain assumptions about what it would look like?

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As we head towards Christmas and Advent, it strikes me every year that the incarnation of God, the birth of Christ, breaks all the assumptions that people have about what that might look like. The Kingdom of God comes near, and hardly anyone even notices, they are too wrapped up in the trappings of a commercial Christmas.

We are the people of the counter-narrative. The Jesus-stories are about a man who resisted the status quo and built a movement based around love, self-sacrifice, justice and peace. How are we building that counter-narrative today? As a church, and as individuals, have we fallen in with the master's way of thinking: profit, self-promotion and 'growth'? Or can we offer a different way of looking at the world, which goes 'not to those who need us, but to those who need us most?' Perhaps we should be asking God to forgive us for the times when our heads are turned by the world's agenda, by money and wealth and asking Him to show us how to stay focused on His Kingdom.

I'd like to leave you with two questions to ponder, perhaps later today or during the coming week.

- How does this 'alternative' reading of this famous story from Matthew 25 make you feel? Have you heard it interpreted like that before? Is it helpful, or not really?

- Are there other places or stories in the Bible where there could be an 'alternative sermon' to the traditional messages we draw out? See if you can think of any that could be looked at a different way...

Let us pray.

Holy God, we thank you for your holy book, the Bible and the Living Word we can unpack from within those scriptures. Show us, today, how we can continue to be challenged and inspired by the stories we find in the Bible. Show us how to read, interpret and apply those stories today, in 2020.

In Jesus' name we pray, Amen

Prayers of intercession

For our intercessions, we will hold three short periods of quiet, in which each of us is invited to bring our own prayers to God.

Firstly, we pray for those close to home, calling to mind the name or the face of somebody in our own family, amongst our church congregation or a close friend. In the quiet, we hold them and their situation up to God.

[Silence]

Living God, you know our hearts and our hurts. We commit them to you now, and invite you to come close to those we have prayed for, bringing them your healing, your comfort, your hope.

Secondly, we pray for situations further afield – taking a moment to pray for something we have heard in the news that troubles us, or for someone we have never met but whose story has affected us. In the quiet, we hold these people and situations up to God.

[Silence]

Living God, you know the pains of your world. It can feel like a dark world when we switch on the news, or read our newspapers. In the darkness, bring your light. In the conflict, bring your peace. In the brokenness, bring your healing.

Finally, we spend a moment praying for the church: perhaps this church congregation, the wider Christian church, or all people of faith. In the quiet, we pray for all who are gathering in worship today.

[Silence]

Living God, help us – your people – to be your hands and feet in the world. May we find ways to be an answer to prayer, to bring transformation in our own lives, communities and our world.

We pray these, and all our prayers, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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Hymn: Take this moment

Take this moment, sign and space;
take my friends around;
here among us make the place
where your love is found.

Take the time to call my name,
take the time to mend
who I am and what I've been,
all I've failed to tend.

Take the tiredness of my days,
take my past regret,
letting your forgiveness
touch all I can't forget.

Take the little child in me,
scared of growing old;
help me here to find my worth
made in Christ's own mould.

Take my talents, take my skills,
take what's yet to be;
let my life be yours, and yet,
let it still be me.

John Bell and Graham Maule
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Blessing

God of grace, Spirit of hope, Christ who transforms us – send us out with your courage, your love,
your peace to bring into a community and a world in need.
Go in peace, and serve the Lord. Amen