Cheshire South Methodist Circuit Worship at Home - Sunday 28th September 2025

Loving God, may we know your Spirit within us as we turn to you in worship: to offer praise to you; to seek to know your will for us; to grow in faith and understanding; and so to live out in actions each day the faith we now proclaim in words.

HYMN StF 157 God has spoken...

- God has spoken by his prophets, spoken his unchanging word; each from age to age proclaiming God, the one, the righteous Lord. Mid the world's despair and turmoil one firm anchor holding fast, God eternal reigns forever, God the first, and God the last.
- 2. God has spoken by Christ Jesus, Christ, the everlasting Son, with the Father ever one; spoken by the Word incarnate, God from God, ere time was born; Light from Light, to earth descending, Christ, revealing God to all.
- 3. God is speaking by the Spirit,
 Speaking to our hearts again,
 In the age-long word expounding
 God's own message, now as then.
 Through the rise and fall of nations
 One sure faith is standing fast;
 God still speaks, the Word unchanging,
 God the first, and God the last.

George Wallace Briggs (1875-1959)

PRAYER You are a God of good news, always seeking to address your world:

speak to our hearts this day so that we can share in your communicating.

Open our ears to hear what you have to share through Scripture and saint.

Open our hearts to receive your call through the cries of the world's wounded.

Open our arms to embrace our neighbours in compassion and care.

Open our mouths to pass on words and thoughts which glorify you.

Open our minds to sift and weigh what we experience and feel.

Then, open our churches as communities where words of hope and love are made flesh.

Open doors of opportunity so that your voice can be heard through the sharing and caring; To the glory of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

CONFESSION

Merciful God, accept, we pray, the sorrow we express, for we know we have failed you. Thoughts, words and actions of ours have been against your will. Inaction, silence and thoughtlessness have been equally rebellious. Forgive us our failings. Heal, we pray, the hurt we have caused, and breathe new conviction into our discipleship. For Christ's sake.

READING Luke 16: 19 – 31

There was once a rich man who dressed in the most expensive clothes and lived in great luxury every day. There was also a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who used to be brought to the rich man's door, hoping to eat bits of food that fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

The poor man died and was carried by angels to sit beside Abraham at the feast in heaven. The rich man died and was buried, and in Hades, where he was in great pain, he looked up and saw Abraham, far away, with Lazarus at his side. So he called out, "Father Abraham! Take pity on me and send Lazarus to dip his finger in some water and cool my tongue, because I am in great pain in this fire!"

But Abraham said, "Remember, my son, that in your life you were given all the good things, while Lazarus got all the bad things. But now he is enjoying himself here, while you are in pain. Besides all that, there is a deep pit lying between us, so that those who want to cross over from here to you cannot do so, nor can anyone cross over to us from where you are." The rich man said, "Then I beg you, father Abraham, send Lazarus to my father's house, where I have five brothers. Let him go and warn them so that they, at least, will not come to this place of pain."

Abraham said, "Your brothers have Moses and the prophets to warn them; your brothers should listen to what they say." So the rich man answered, "That is not enough, father Abraham! But if someone were to rise from death and go to them, then they would turn from their sins." But Abraham said, "If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone were to rise from death".

(As a prayer) HYMN StF 501 Help us, O Lord, to learn ...

- **1.** Help us, O Lord, to learn the truths your word imparts, To study, that your laws may be inscribed upon our hearts.
- **2**. Help us, O Lord, to live the faith which we proclaim, That all our thoughts and words and deeds may glorify your name.
- **3**. Help us, O Lord, to teach the beauty of your ways, That all who seek may find the Christ and make a life of praise.

Williams Watkins Reid (b. 1923)

MESSAGE

Over 500 years before Jesus lived on Earth, Aesop (a Greek) was writing 'fables' - short stories which survive today: moral tales based on observation of the natural world, the particular characteristics of various animals providing lessons for human behaviour. We all know the expression "sour grapes"; we may recall the contest between the cruelty of the Wind and the kindly warmth of the Sun; or the artfulness of the Tortoise pitted against the physical ability of the Hare.

Story-telling also played a significant part in Jewish tradition, and especially in the Old Testament often took the form of dreams and visions: Joseph, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Amos, and many more. Samuel may be the best known for hearing God's voice, but mental images or analogies from everyday life were common.

By Jesus' day, the Pharisees had their own stories. Educationalists today would approve of sharing a familiar illustration from life before introducing the real lesson. Regardless of the effort they put into the sermon and whole act of worship, many preachers are told that the best-remembered part was the children's talk!

Stories Jesus told are known as 'parables'. In my Sunday School days these were defined as "earthly stories with a heavenly meaning", although nowadays this is considered too simplistic. Like Aesop, Jesus featured real things, events and attitudes. We miss much of the significance by knowing too

little of his life and times, but almost certainly he was watching a farmer at work in his field when he realised how the fate of the seed paralleled the people's response to God's Word. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was rough and steep, and notorious for gangs of bandits lying in wait for a lone traveller. As a nation, Jews demonstrated deep hostility and disdain for Samaritans, and would not credit them with any good or charitable behaviour. Sometimes he simply commented on events before his eyes – the wealthy arrogantly flaunting their gifts to the Temple funds ("a little of what they had to spare") beside the poor widow who gave her last coins and would not know where her next meal might come from. By now, those who heard Jesus must have noticed that he typically lampooned the rich and influential who projected inflated images of themselves, while he lovingly and admiringly extolled those characters whom society considered of no worth.

Today's particular parable perhaps reminds us that we all see, or at least know of, poverty. We might occasionally find individuals living rough on our streets. We have no excuse to be ignorant of the scale of homelessness nationwide. Or of sectors of many societies who have been stripped of even their most basic rights by the powerful and wealthy. And even whole nations who have never had the opportunity to become established in self-sufficiency, let alone affluence.

Yet, as long as people convince themselves that such situations are of the person's own making, that their destitution is a life choice, and if they were diligent, not lazy, they could rise to a higher 'class''... a sense of responsibility and compassion will not be forthcoming. Sadly, some beggars do become aggressive, spend donations given in good faith on beer; and give a bad name to those who would have welcomed gratefully a hot meal or a little something to take home. Many societies – even ours! – exhibit standards not unlike the caste systems of, India, etc.: everyone must know their place and remain within it! Whatever 'safety nets' are in place (benefits, affordable housing, etc.) it is a sad fact that some people unavoidably fall through them.

It would be lovely to believe that Christians think differently, but there are devout people, regular church attenders, who (mis)quote that "the poor will be blessed in the Kingdom of Heaven", and almost imply that helping them out of poverty in this life would be defying God's purpose for them. They are not being pious but uncaring. Christian Aid were onto something profound with their slogan "We believe in life *before* death". Not only staying alive by the skin of their teeth and, hopefully, handouts from those more comfortably off … and love! - but having a *quality* of life that allows at least a glimpse of hope for the future, at least occasional days without bodies racked with the agony of hunger, the despair of being unable to care for their family, the soul-destroying humiliation of being ignored or condemned. Not a sudden leap into opulence, but simple gifts from the surfeit of others.

But back to our parable: people other than Jesus told folk tales in which wealth and poverty might be reversed in the future life. They often ended with permission being granted to get a message to folk left behind. The harsh ending Jesus gives would raise many questions among his contemporaries. Moses was known to have met with God on Sinai, and other prophets were held in great esteem. What more would it take for God's exposure of his heart and soul to be truly responded to?

More than that, a parable is not simply a story to entertain, but an exposition in picture language of something going on in Jesus' work. The Pharisees, who themselves loved money and power, were behaving towards the people Jesus welcomed just as the rich man treated Lazarus. It continues the

theme of preceding parables – for example, the elder brother would have kept the prodigal in poverty! All who heard Jesus speak or who read Luke's gospel, and were tempted to adopt a similar harsh line, were being urged to accept the challenge and change their ways while there was time - to recognise Jesus' work of putting into practice in the present world what they believed would happen in the future: "On earth as it is in heaven". Far from deserving condemnation for caring about the 'outcasts and sinners', he is simply asking them to obey Moses and the prophets, whose teachings were the bedrock of their religious and civic life.

Where do we stand in our love and respect for even the world's poorest: honestly, with Jesus?

PRAYERS of Intercession

Loving God, whose living word is active now, sharp as any two-edged sword: we pray for all for whom life is a confusing cacophony of tempting, persuasive and oppressive voices pulling this way and that, and shattering their resolve. We pray that they may hear your voice above all the clamour.

We pray for ourselves: may we learn to 'be still', knowing you are God, waiting on you, listening to you. May we be attentive to your voice and courageous to proclaim your word. Imperfect channels though we are, still may your grace, mercy and peace be known through us.

We pray for your Church: bless it within the world. May it stand as a sign of hope for all, an example of love to the world; may it faithfully respond to its mission, and rejoice in its calling to proclaim the good news of the gospel. Deepen our life together as your Church.

We ask our prayers in the name and for the sake of your Word become flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Lord's Prayer ...

HYMN StF 498 God of all power ...

- 1. God of all power, and truth, and grace, which shall from age to age endure, whose word, when heaven and earth shall pass, remains and stands for ever sure.
- 2. That I your mercy may proclaim, that all the world your truth may see, hallow your great and glorious name, and perfect holiness in me,
- **3.** Your sanctifying Spirit pour to quench my thirst and make me clean; now, Father, let the gracious shower descend, and make me pure from sin.

- **4.** Give me a new, a perfect heart, free from all doubt and fear at last; the mind that was in Christ impart, and let my spirit hold you fast.
- **5.** O that I now, from sin released, your word may to the utmost prove, enter into the promised rest, the Canaan of your perfect love!
- **6.** Now let me gain perfection's height, now let me into nothing fall, be less that nothing in your sight, and feel that Christ is all in all.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

A closing prayer:

How many people Jesus met! He loved them all. He healed the sick. He told them of God's love and care. Good news for all the people Jesus met. How many people we all meet! Help us, Lord, to love. Help us to be true friends. Help us to share our love for God. Good news for all the people we meet.