Personal service 15 November 2026

Living God, you always seem out of reach but you never let us go;
You allow us deep doubts but call us to live by faith;
You lead us to great discoveries but let us be broken and barren;
You offer us abundant life but tell us it is to be found in places of pain;
You give us an insatiable desire to know you but offer only a tantalizing back view.
We know it is all for love;
part of the exquisite dynamics of faith,
where doubt becomes the springboard of faith;
pain the fertile ground for growing;
and failure the gateway to new beginnings.

From 'The Word in the World', collection copyright Donald Hilton 1997

StF 499/ HP 500 Great God, your love has called us here

Prayer

Loving God, source of all being and creativity, and engine of all that is life-giving, we come to you in our inadequacy and our short-sightedness. We come with the failures of our lives and those of others, asking for your healing. [silence]
We come with the gifts and abilities you have given us, and we pray that we may be more able to face each day with hope and compassion. Help us to look with fresh eyes on difficult situations, that we may be vehicles of love in your world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Readings

1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11
Matthew 25: 14-30

Reflection

The present time seems like a period of uncertainty and anxiety, with government advice to stockpile essentials in preparation for the disruption of possible cyber attacks, or devastating weather extremes. Wars continue in Ukraine, Sudan, Yemen and elsewhere, and catastrophic destruction and killings in Gaza, with mounting settler violence in the West Bank.
We can't avoid the widespread sense that, for certain world leaders, everything depends on winning, and having power over others, that life is

about winners and losers, and you have to make sure that you are a winner, in all spheres of human activity, whatever the cost for others.
Jesus was born among us to demonstrate what the 'kingdom of God' is about. It's not 'getting to heaven when you die'; the kingdom of God is here now, shown to us in the life of Jesus. God isn't some autocratic Roman emperor who demands our subservience. Jesus comes among people like us, heals and forgives them, washes their feet, and dies on a cross, the ultimate punishment and humiliation of a human empire. It's not about winners and losers, it's about love.
In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul uses the language of the 'second coming' of Christ, and the need for Christians to be prepared, through the way they live their lives in the present, for a true accountability to God for the gift of sacrificial love shown in the life of Jesus. Paul aligns believers with daylight, self-awareness, 'sobriety' (or being realistic about one's self and others?), and unbelievers with darkness, lack of self-awareness and irresponsibility.
Faith, love and hope are the qualities that should characterise Christians, and enable us to encourage and build each other up.
The parable from Matthew is part of a series of parables which are directed at Jesus' disciples, to get them to look at what it means to live faithfully in the 'in-between times' that we are part of. There is a sense of human life and destiny having purpose and meaning, which the bible describes in terms of 'the last days', the 'Lord's return', the 'day of the Lord' etc. Each human life has a beginning and an end, and we endow it with worth as a precious gift because of that. There is a deep instinct that the whole human race which has come into being so slowly over millions of years, must have purpose, must be moving towards some sort of fulfilment. We are made to look forward, to find meaning and hope.
Matthew puts a series of pictures in the mouth of Jesus about being watchful, prepared and productive. Last week we saw the wise and silly bridesmaids – those who looked forward and prepared for a long wait, and those who hadn't even thought about it. This week, we have the parable of the talents – the wealthy landowner goes away, leaving his servants with large sums of money each (but greater or lesser amounts, depending on their abilities). The return of the master is certain but unpredictable. The challenge to believers is to use all that God has given for the sake of the kingdom of God. This demands risk-taking. The first two servants have done just that, and maximised the potential of the resources given to them, so they are entrusted with greater responsibility and invited into a closer relationship with the master. The third

servant believes the master doesn't think much of him, has low expectations of him and doesn't trust him as much as the other two, so the servant is both afraid and resentful. His resentment bursts out on the master's return, and he vents his true feelings. He has decided nothing he does can please the master, and he feels a failure, so he can't see an opportunity when it is presented to him, but rather 'buries' it. The servants were expected to use their abilities to make a profit for the master's business, which demands risk. Jesus tells the story to prepare his disciples for a time of testing; they are living in anticipation of the 'day of the Lord'. The real challenge of life is to use the 'waiting time' well, so as to demonstrate the nature of the kingdom of God that Jesus showed us.

Faith has to be about taking risks. If we are only concerned with not doing anything 'wrong', keeping faith as something private, then we are ignoring the God that Jesus shows us.

Meanwhile, at this time of year we remember those who have died in war in the past, and those who are dying in war today. Increasingly, these are civilians, for whom there may be no memorial. Evil is always there to be confronted; violence and exploitation, greed and power-seeking are part of human nature.

I would like to be a pacifist, but it seems that sometimes short-term violence in some form may be required in order to stem the advance of greater evil. What we must recognise, however, is that most conflict is caused by radical injustice and inequality at some level; where that exists, it is a strong spur to fundamentalism and irrational evil. We are called to be peacemakers – that means doers of justice who share the vision that brought Jesus to the cross. But within that Christ event the reassurance and hope in God's eternal presence are to be found.

Narges Mohammadi is an Iranian human rights activist who works chiefly on women's issues in Iran. She has suffered brutal punishment in prison, sustaining severe injuries from continual beatings. She writes 'I am certain that no power can erase hope from our hearts, and no power can sustain tyranny permanently.'

StF 346/ HP 455 Christ is the world's light

<u>Prayers of intercession</u>

Loving God, we offer our prayers for the world you have given us as our home. We give thanks for the beauty and complexity of nature, the richness of plant and animal life. Give us a sense of what our stewardship requires of

us. We pray for politicians who try to develop policies to reduce carbon emissions, and struggle with competing demands.
[Silence]
We remember the people of America following the mid-term elections. We pray for a world in turmoil, with widespread social unrest. We pray for asylum-seekers and refugees, for all who are seeking a place to live in peace and security. We give thanks for carers, for all who dedicate their lives to supporting and giving dignity to the vulnerable.
[Silence]
At a time when much is being spoken and written about the impact and continuing effects of the transatlantic slave trade, and the involvement of many institutions, including the Methodist Church, we pray that there may be an honest listening and dialogue with those whose ancestors were enslaved, and a recognition of the need for repentance and reparation in some form. We pray for those who are being exploited by modern slavery.
[Silence]
We pray for countries where people are living in conditions of conflict and oppression – for Sudan, Yemen, Ukraine, Gaza and the West Bank, Iran, and all places where human life is threatened by war or hunger and instability.
[Silence]
We pray for all those known to us who are sick or sorrowing or anxious, and we pray for ourselves. We offer all our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen
Lord's Prayer

StF 345/ HP 216 And can it be?

<u>Closing prayer</u>
May the God of all ages, who is the ever-young,
bless, inspire and warm you.
May the risen Christ, a living mystery among us,
burst the tombs which deaden you.
May the Spirit, who is the dance of life,
be your companion and guide,
now and always.

From 'The Word in the World' collection, copyright Donald Hilton, 1997