



**Serve - We will help people in our communities and beyond**

**Call to Worship:**

John 15: 5 Jesus said "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit".

**Hymn - StF 58 Lord, I come before your throne of grace;**

Lord, I come before your throne of grace;  
I find rest in your presence  
and fullness of joy.  
In worship and wonder  
I behold your face,  
singing what a faithful God have I.  
*What a faithful God have I,  
what a faithful God.  
What a faithful God have I,  
faithful in every way.*

Lord of mercy, you have heard my cry;  
through the storm you're the beacon,  
my song in the night.  
In the shelter of your wings,  
hear my heart's reply,  
singing what a faithful God have I.

Lord all sovereign, granting peace from heaven,  
let me comfort those who suffer  
with the comfort you have given.  
I will tell of your great love for as long as I live,  
singing what a faithful God have I.

*Robert Critchley (b. 1959) and Dawn Critchley (b. 1965)*

**Prayers:**

Let us pray.  
God of all grace,  
you call your Church to be a holy people  
to the praise of your name.  
In the power of your Spirit,  
fill our hearts with your love  
and our lives with your glory;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Let us Confess our sins to God.

**God of mercy,  
your love for us is strong,  
but our love for you is weak.  
You call us to follow Jesus,  
but we are slow to obey.  
You care for all that you have made,  
but we ignore the needs of others  
and misuse your creation.  
We are sorry for our sins.  
Forgive us,  
and help us to please you  
by the way we serve;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

God is love and forgives our sins through Jesus. **Amen.**

**Reading: Matthew 25: 31-46**

<sup>31</sup> “When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup> and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. <sup>34</sup> Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, <sup>35</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup> And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ <sup>40</sup> And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’ <sup>41</sup> Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, <sup>42</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ <sup>44</sup> Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?’ <sup>45</sup> Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ <sup>46</sup> And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life.”

**Reflection:**

When I candidated to be a minister, among the many other evaluations I had to undergo, I had to have a thorough medical examination. I had never needed one of these before and so I had no idea what was involved when I saw my doctor. It was certainly thorough and when I found myself wearing nothing but an undergarment at one point, I did wonder what this had to do with my desire to serve God as a presbyter in the Methodist Church. At the end of the examination the doctor summarised his findings and then uttered some words which made me question whether or not he was a real doctor. He said I was fine and the only issue was that I was overweight, but then he added that this was not a health risk. I thought to myself, that’s not what they tell you on the telly!

Despite this ordeal, I guess the reason the Methodist Church required me to undergo a medical examination was to determine if there were any underlying health issues that I was unaware of that would impact on my long term ability to be a minister. The health checks I am sure become quite a common feature in our lives as the years tick by are about spotting potential problems before they become far more serious.

Today, as we continue to reflect on our Discipleship Pathways and consider what it means to “serve”, the reading we are considering is the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats from Matthew 25. This is a challenging passage and one all of us should consider from time to time. As we do, I want to suggest that one way we can understand these challenging words is as a spiritual health check.

The background to this passage in Matthew 25 is hugely important. Matthew is a teaching gospel. It presents 5 distinct blocks of Jesus’ teaching. These cover many different topics, but the basic underlying theme is discipleship and how we are called to live the Christian life. Now the parable of the sheep and the goats is in one of these 5 teaching blocks. Actually perhaps I need to be more precise. This parable comes in the final block of teaching Jesus gives before his arrest, crucifixion and his resurrection. This final block of teaching is his last set of instructions to his disciples in how they should live their lives when he is no longer with them. But actually the position of the parable of the sheep and goats is even more significant. For this passage is not only in the final block of teaching that Jesus gives, it is the final passage in this section. This is the very last thing that Jesus will teach his disciples before his crucifixion. I want to suggest to you that this makes it rather an important passage!

On top of that, this is also the last parable that Jesus uses to speak about the last days, when he will return to judge the living and the dead. And just in case we have not quite grasped the significance of this bit of teaching to the disciples, he then emphasises what is important in this final judgement by repeating the key phrases again and again, four times! When someone was hungry we gave them something to eat, when someone was thirsty we gave them a drink, when someone was a stranger and we welcomed them, when someone was naked and we clothed them, when someone was sick and we took care of them, when someone was in prison and we visited them.

Now you do not need me to tell you that this is a very challenging passage for us as we strive to live out our lives as followers of Christ. It is very clear and straightforward, but incredibly difficult to fulfil. However, despite its obvious importance I do not believe Jesus wants anyone to feel guilty about these demands when we consider this passage. I believe his intent is somewhat different.

I want to suggest that Matthew’s depiction of the last judgement in this parable is like a spiritual health check-up, a wellness check. Its purpose is not to condemn or terrify us all, it is not designed to raise our blood pressure, but to provide a snapshot of our overall spiritual health, development and learning. If we are living a healthy Christian life, this will lead to new habits and new ways of life, it will be characterised in acts of service. Just as our doctor wants us to be well, so does our Creator, Redeemer, Judge and King.

For those who are house bound, the opportunities will undoubtedly be more limited and we need to recognise that, but if we look at our own lives and we realise that we never encounter the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger and those in prison, this is a spiritual warning sign for us on our wellness check. It suggests that our Christian lives are not as healthy as they should be. It suggests we may well be living in unhealthy, self-centred ways. This warning sign does not tell us

what the problem is, but it alerts us to it. Perhaps some of us have isolated ourselves from some of the harshest problems that others face. Perhaps we so rarely encounter those in need because they do not live down our street. Or perhaps it means that through fear of the unknown, fear of the stranger, we do not reach to serve out as often as we should.

And like the warning signs on our health checks, we need to pay attention to this one. Every missed opportunity to help someone in need, to serve, will begin to catch up on us. Jesus wants us all to sit up and take notice of this warning sign because if we keep ignoring it will lead to that most fatal of conditions for the Christian, the hardness of our hearts. This difficult teaching on service matters supremely.

But these challenging words are certainly not the end of this crucial teaching. Again, Jesus does not want any of us to feel guilty, like a health check up with the doctor, he wants us to live the most healthy lives we can as Christians. In amongst the challenging language of this parable, this promise of a better life of service still shines through.

In this parable, the righteous are surprised to hear that in ministering to the needy, they have cared for the King of all of creation. They had helped those they could, with what they had, without calculation or expectation. And it is precisely in reaching out to the most vulnerable and the most needy that they have encountered the risen Christ again. It is precisely when without regard to ourselves, but only conscious of the need before us, that we serve those in need that we too will find we have once again met with Jesus. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, all of us will be able to serve those that we meet in a myriad of ways and we start to experience the incredible loving and joy filled life that Jesus wants us to know. Amen.

### **Hymn – StF 272 From heaven you came, helpless babe,**

From heaven you came, helpless babe,  
entered our world, your glory veiled,  
not to be served but to serve,  
and give your life that we might live.

*This is our God, the Servant King,  
he calls us now to follow him,  
to bring our lives as a daily offering  
of worship to the Servant King.*

There in the garden of tears  
my heavy load he chose to bear;  
his heart with sorrow was torn,  
'Yet not my will but yours,' he said.  
*This is our God ...*

Come see his hands and his feet,  
the scars that speak of sacrifice,  
hands that flung stars into space  
to cruel nails surrendered.

*This is our God ...*

So let us learn how to serve  
and in our lives enthrone him,  
each other's needs to prefer,  
for it is Christ we're serving.

*This is our God ...*

*Graham Kendrick (b. 1950)*

### **Prayers of Intercession:**

Gracious God,  
whose Spirit helps us in our weakness  
and guides us in our prayers,  
we pray for the Church and for the world  
in the name of Jesus Christ.

Renew the life and faith of the Church;  
strengthen our witness;  
Grant that we and all who confess that Christ is Lord  
may be faithful in your service  
and filled with the Spirit,  
that the world may be turned to you.

Lord, in your mercy,  
**hear our prayer.**

Guide the nations  
in the ways of justice, liberty and peace;  
and help them to seek  
the unity and welfare of all people,  
especially those in greatest need.  
Give to all in authority  
wisdom to know and strength to do what is right.

Lord, in your mercy,  
**hear our prayer.**

Comfort those in sorrow;  
heal the sick in body or in mind  
and deliver the oppressed.  
Grant us compassion for all who suffer,  
and help us so to carry one another's burdens  
that we may fulfil the law of Christ.

Lord, in your mercy,  
**hear our prayer.**

Receive our thanks and praise  
for all who have served you faithfully here on earth,  
and especially those who have revealed to us  
your grace in Christ in their life of service.  
May we and all your people  
share the life and joy of your kingdom;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

### **The Lord's Prayer:**

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name;  
thy kingdom come;  
thy will be done;  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses

as we forgive those that trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation;  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the  
glory,  
for ever and ever.  
Amen.

**Hymn - StF 546 Behold the servant of the Lord!**

Behold the servant of the Lord!  
I wait thy guiding eye to feel,  
to hear and keep thy every word,  
to prove and do thy perfect will,  
joyful from my own works to cease,  
glad to fulfil all righteousness.

Me if thy grace vouchsafe to use,  
meanest of all thy creatures, me,  
the deed, the time, the manner choose;  
let all my fruit be found of thee;  
let all my works in thee be wrought,  
by thee to full perfection brought.

My every weak though good design  
o'errule or change, as seems thee meet;  
Jesus, let all my work be thine!  
Thy work, O Lord, is all complete,  
and pleasing in thy Father's sight;  
thou only hast done all things right.

Here then to thee thine own I leave;  
mould as thou wilt thy passive clay;  
but let me all thy stamp receive,  
but let me all thy words obey,  
serve with a single heart and eye,  
and to thy glory live and die.

*Charles Wesley (1707-1788)*

**Blessing:**

May the blessing of God,  
Faither, Son and Holy Spirit,  
Be with you now and for evermore.  
Amen.

**We go into the world in the power of the Spirit  
to fulfil our high calling as servants of Christ.**