

# Church at home

East Leake Methodist Church 2021

*Sit comfortably in a quiet place and prepare, start with a brief period of silence, turning your mind and spirit towards God. You may want to have a cross or candle in view as a focus.*

## Opening Sentences Psalm 90:12-17

Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

Relent, LORD! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants.

Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.

Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble.

May your deeds be shown to your servants, your splendour to their children.

May the favour of the Lord our God rest on us; establish the work of our hands for us— yes, establish the work of our hands.

## Hymn StF 75 From all that dwell below the skies

From all that dwell below the skies

Let the Creator's praise arise:

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Let the Redeemer's name be sung

Through every land, by every tongue.

*Alleluia! Alleluia!*

*Alleluia! Alleluia!*

*Alleluia!*

Eternal are Thy mercies, Lord;

Eternal truth attends Thy word:

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Thy praise shall sound from shore to shore,

Till suns shall rise and set no more.

*Alleluia! Alleluia!*

*Alleluia! Alleluia!*

*Alleluia!*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eTtK3v26hoA>

## Opening Prayers

Jesus, you are the glory of eternity shining now among us,  
the tenderness of God here with us now.

God who is with us,  
**we adore you.**

Jesus, you are the Healing Person,  
the pattern of goodness,  
the fulfilment of the highest human hopes.

God who is with us,  
**we adore you.**

Jesus, you are the champion of the weak,  
the counsellor of the despairing,  
the brother of us all.

God who is with us,  
**we adore you.**

Jesus, you are the splendour of the Father, the Son of Mary,  
our Bridge between heaven and Earth.

God who is with us,  
**we adore you.**

Jesus, you are the source of life, the goal of the universe,  
the people's friend, the world-pervading God.

God who is with us,  
**we adore you.**

Jesus, you are one of the human family,  
Joy of Angels, Prince of Peace.

God who is with us,  
**we adore you. Amen.**

## Community Prayers

Reading Job 23:1-9, 16-17

Then Job replied:

“Even today my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy in spite of my groaning. If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would find out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say to me. Would he vigorously oppose me? No, he would not press charges against me. There the upright can establish their innocence before him, and there I would be delivered forever from my judge.

"But if I go to the east, he is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find him. When he is at work in the north, I do not see him; when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him.

God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me.  
Yet I am not silenced by the darkness, by the thick darkness that covers my face.

Hymn StF 433 Out of the depths I cry to thee

Out of the depths I cry to thee,  
Lord God! O hear my prayer!  
Incline a gracious ear to me,  
and bid me not despair:  
If thou rememberest each misdeed,  
If each should have its rightful meed,  
Lord, who shall stand before thee?

'Tis through thy love alone we gain  
the pardon of our sin;  
the strictest life is but in vain,  
our works can nothing win;  
that none should boast himself of aught,  
but own in fear thy grace hath wrought  
what in him seemeth righteous.

Wherefore my hope is in the Lord,  
my works I count but dust;  
I build not there, but on his word,  
and in his goodness trust.  
Up to his care myself I yield,  
he is my tower, my rock, my shield,  
and for his help I tarry.

And though it linger till the night,  
and round again till morn,  
my heart shall ne'er mistrust thy might,  
nor count itself forlorn.  
Do thus, O ye of Israel's seed,  
ye of the Spirit born indeed,  
wait for your God's appearing.

Though great our sins and sore our wounds,  
and deep and dark our fall,  
his helping mercy hath no bounds,  
his love surpasseth all:  
our trusty loving Shepherd, he  
who shall at last set Israel free  
from all their sin and sorrow.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juvfK\\_i4axs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juvfK_i4axs)

### Reading Mark 10:17-31

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"

"Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."

Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"

The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?"

Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

Then Peter spoke up, "We have left everything to follow you!"

"Truly I tell you," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

### Address "Money, money, money"

You might recall that the last time I preached, and croaked my way through the service, I mentioned that Mark's gospel was divided into three sections – the miracles and signs, followed by the chapters about preaching and teaching, and finally the story of the crucifixion and resurrection. The passage we read this morning comes from that middle part – Jesus has revealed himself to his disciples as the Messiah and, in the Transfiguration, has shown his divinity to Peter, James and John. From now on he will be teaching with the disciples as he makes his way to Jerusalem. He is accosted by the Pharisees who ask him difficult questions about marriage and divorce, and the answers he gives causes the disciples some concern.

Then we have this passage about the rich young man. The initial question that the young man asked Jesus is not hostile, though when he addresses Jesus as "good teacher" Jesus promptly responds by saying that only God is good. Now there's a sermon here about the nature of Jesus' divinity – how do you marry up what Jesus says with the experience of the Transfiguration? But I'm not going to talk about that! The young man then gets Jesus' conventional answer about what he must do to inherit eternal life in terms of a summary of the Ten Commandments. The young man's reply seems to be quite cocky – he knows all that stuff, and he's kept it since a lad. But there must have been something in the way he replied that Jesus could see some genuine enquiry, some genuine yearning for the path to righteousness, for we are told he warmed to the lad but then set a challenge. He was to sell everything he had, give it to the poor, and then join the disciples and follow him. It was a challenge the young man could not meet. There's room here for a sermon too. We can see the way in which the young man's wealth got in the way of the single-mindedness necessary to follow Jesus as disciple. A preacher could challenge his or her congregation to ask themselves what aspects of their life got in the way of a single-minded following Jesus. But I'm not going to preach that sermon either!

What I want to concentrate on is the comments that Jesus makes about riches and the kingdom of God, and the reaction of the disciples. Jesus' initial comment about the difficulty of the wealthy getting into the kingdom of God shocks them. It's not difficult to see why. It goes against all the conventional thinking about the relationship between righteousness and wealth. The commonly held belief was that if you were a righteous person, then your reward would be visible to everyone in terms of your wealth. This is the thinking that underlines the passage that we read from Job.

The story of Job tells how Job's riches were stripped away from him as some form of test, or competition, between God and Satan. Now the meaning of this contest isn't relevant here, but what is clear is that the link between the righteous person and their wealth. When Job lost everything, the assumption made by his friends was that he must have sinned against God and this was his punishment. When Job protests his innocence, Job's friends – his so-called comforters – insist that he must have sinned, even if he didn't realise that he had sinned. In the passage we read Job is replying to their insistence of this conventional link between righteousness and wealth by saying that if he had the opportunity of putting his case before God then surely God, who is just, would see something had gone wrong and restore him to his wealth. The problem that Job faces is that he doesn't know where to find God – hence this wail of despair.

The disciples, steeped in this conventional thinking, are shocked by what Jesus says. What is more Jesus goes on to emphasise the point by talking about how easy it would be for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Now, picking up the point that I made earlier about the single-mindedness needed to follow Jesus, some commentators have suggested that Jesus here was referring to a particular narrow gate into Jerusalem called “the Needle” which a camel could only pass through if it's pack or load was removed first. That fits in nicely with the comments about the obstacle faced by the rich young man. Get rid of the obstacle and the way to the kingdom of heaven is open. Alas, it's a good sermon point but it has no substance in reality. There is no narrow gate called the “Needle” into Jerusalem, through which an unladen camel could be taken. Jesus means what he says – and the disciples are shocked to the core. Because if what's Jesus says is true then following Jesus and being righteous with God does not bring with it the prospect of reward. Peter, ever the spokesman, picks up on this. The disciples have left everything to follow Jesus – will they get no reward for it? Remember, that earlier in this journey they were arguing about who was going to have the place of honour in the kingdom of heaven. This suggests that there will be no places of honour. Jesus' answers to their shock and dismay aren't exactly encouraging. Saying that God can do anything, doesn't exactly sound like a guarantee. And saying that they will be rewarded, but with that reward will also become persecution doesn't sound much of a deal either.

But this righteousness/riches linkage is very persistent. There are groups of Christian churches who practice a gospel of “claim the promises”. If you give generously to the Church and support the lifestyle of its pastor, then you can claim the promises of God and you will get a reward greater than your “investment”. People do so, particularly the United States, where this kind of false gospel seems more prevalent. They continue to do so, despite the all too frequent media exposure that the pastors on a pedestal have feet of clay. The Christian way is not like doing a deal with God. There is no guarantee of worldly wealth with being a Christian. Some sociologists have pointed out that many of the behaviours exhibited by the faithful have often been seen in a market orientated world as being favourable – honesty, diligence, sobriety,

and a willingness to defer current gratification – so that it has been said that wealthy business owners preferred to promote Christian nonconformists like Methodists to posts of responsibility – thus increasing their wealth. It was also said, a bit like the rich young man, that the more wealthy people became the less they became attached to Christianity. They call it “lift and drift”.

So what are we to make of Jesus’ remarks about riches and the kingdom of God. I think these remarks have been treated as contextual – that is they have been applied in different circumstances to the situation in which Christians and the Church have found themselves through time. In the earliest days, when the Church was a Jewish sect in Jerusalem, they had an expectation that Jesus would return very shortly. Consequently they practised a form of social communism – “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need”. That worked fine until it became clear that Jesus’ return would not be imminent, and the money ran out. Paul had to organise a whip round from his newly created Gentile churches as a donation and support to the church in Jerusalem. And as the Church bedded down for the long term, so initially the questions of riches and poverty were not a big issue. The early Christian Church was despised by many of the more wealthy Romans as being a church and religion fit only for slaves and lower class people. That changed when the declining Western Roman Empire found it necessary to enter into a strategic alliance with the Christian Church whereby the Roman state gave the Church privilege and protection, in return for the Church providing a form of social support that it created as part of its ministry to its people. But through this relationship the Church became richer, the more so since wealthy widows, encouraged by the Church not to remarry, were in the habit of leaving the Church significant amounts of money and property. Indeed those approaching death and taking Jesus’ remarks on wealth literally, would often leave the Church significant amounts of property in return for the employment of priests to say masses for their souls.

This set up a situation in the Middle Ages where the Church became extremely wealthy, and these words of Jesus acted as a rebuke to that wealth, which seemed to get in the way of the Church carrying out its job bringing in the kingdom and caring for those in the community. From time to time there were movements for reform, particularly among monastic communities, and they almost always involved a return to a state of poverty, rather than wealth. But the kind of Christian attitudes identified by sociologists in the “lift and drift” thinking also applied then, and increasingly the Church became more wealthy and more powerful. That made it an attractive target for some more reformist rulers during the period of the Reformation – when Christians revolted against the wealth and the corruption of the Church that went with it. By the time Henry VIII decided to close down the monasteries, it was reckoned that the Church had 35% of the wealth of this country. Henry decided that he needed the money more than they did, and as new head of the Church of England, he felt he was entitled to it!

So the text has been interpreted against the background of the changing pattern of the Church throughout history. For much of this period growth in wealth creation was very slow to develop. It was very much a subsistence economy. But as the world opened up to trade, and new technologies began to be introduced so the generation of new wealth became more significant. The Industrial Revolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century was closely associated with the development of rational thinking in the Enlightenment which tended to undermine the traditional faith and authority of the Christian Church. As wealth grew, and became more unevenly distributed, so those who looked for Christian revival looked for a way of interpreting Jesus's words in a new context – that of increasing inequality and increasing wealth. John Wesley's approach to the question of wealth and the Christian faith was admirably summarised in his sermon "On money" when he said:

*Having, First, gained all you can, and, Secondly saved all you can, Then give all you can.*

This has been a byword for Methodists ever since, and is a sound summary of an appropriate Christian response. But times change, and I believe the challenge of these words now needs to shift to meet the circumstances that we now face.

When the classical economists, like Adam Smith, looked at the developing modern market economy they used the rational scientific thinking of the Enlightenment. They attributed the rapidly increasing wealth and its distribution to secular, not religious reasons. But they retained an understanding that the nature of human society and its politics were relevant to the key economic issues that they were striving to understand. But in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century all this changed. The so-called neoclassical economists decided that in a new scientific age they needed to promote a new scientific economics – and they came forward with theories and ideas which have dominated our thinking ever since. For them the market economy could be shown to be the most efficient way of distributing the generated surplus of the economy. The questions that Jesus raised about righteousness and wealth were simply irrelevant. The market did it best, and what you received in terms of wealth and income was scientifically what was due to because, to use a current advertising phrase, "you're worth it".

But now that approach is being seriously questioned, because we face social and environmental challenges that undermine this traditional thinking about income and wealth. Increasing levels of inequality have created social and political tensions that politicians now believe they have to address. To do this they believe that they need to share more equitably an increasing level of wealth. Yet the pattern of wealth creation in the economy that is dependent on a cycle of increasing consumption fuelled by debt is creating strains on our physical environment that are a threat to our society and our existence. And our increasing short-sightedness in looking for immediate gratification and profit threatens to undermine even the stability of our economy. Some economists, and I include myself in that grouping, believe that we have to



reconnect our social, political, and I believe our moral thinking, with the way the economy is run. For the drift in the traditional pattern of economic thinking from reality is becoming more and more pronounced. The experience of the pandemic has shown us that certain tasks are essential to our well-being as a community. But so often people carry out these tasks are poorly paid. The difference between the value that we place on certain jobs, and the wages that are paid for those jobs is stark. Health and social care staff, HGV delivery drivers, and key workers in power and water supply appear grossly underpaid, compared to the CEOs and managers of banks, hedge funds, and sports clubs who appear to be grossly overpaid. Classical economists worried about the discrepancy between value and price. The neoclassical economists said that the price was the value – that is plainly not the case.

This is only one example amongst many, but the truth is that we measure our wealth in terms of what we can price and call it GDP – gross domestic product. But there are things which are valuable which are not counted, like household tasks, or charitable works, because they are not priced. When Jesus spoke to his disciples about the kingdom of God and riches he was challenging the orthodox thinking of his time. Throughout the Church's history and development Jesus's words have challenged the orthodox thinking – that God was glorified in magnificent churches, instead of care for the poor in the Middle Ages. Now I think Jesus's words are challenging our assumptions about the “scientific” basis of our economic thinking, and asking us whether this thinking is in line with the kingdom of God, a proper stewardship of this planet and its resources, and a proper care of the poor and the marginalised within our societies. Times change, but Jesus' challenge to change our thinking remains.

### Prayer

God of the Economy - the whole created universe –  
Teach us to use money as a servant of the common good.  
Teach us to use the market as a guide, not as a god.  
Teach us to invest in what brings long-term well-being  
to the planet and its people.  
And teach us to combat the cheats  
dressed in sheep's clothing. **Amen.**

### Hymn StF 243 A rich young man came seeking

A rich young man came seeking-  
God's kingdom was his aim.  
The law had been his guidebook.  
His life was free from blame.  
But Jesus asked the courage  
to give his wealth away.  
The young man turned in sorrow,  
that price he could not pay.

The rich men's gifts were lavish  
and made for public show.  
The widow's gift was humble  
and only God would know,  
in giving to the Temple,  
although her coins were small,  
her gift had so much meaning  
because she gave her all.

One boy brought loaves and fishes,  
no other food was there,  
but Jesus fed the thousands  
and still had bread to spare.  
The miracle of plenty  
soon spread beyond that place.  
That simple gift was offered,  
then multiplied by grace.

Lord, keep our care for money  
from turning into greed.  
Help us to use it wisely  
to meet each other's need.  
For whether poor or wealthy,  
we have so much to share  
and open-hearted giving  
will show your loving care.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6O4DljEuoU>

### Prayers of Intercession

Let us lay down our own agendas  
and seek the face of God,  
and his will for the Church and for the world.  
We pray for all who are seeking God,  
and for the nurturing process in this village.  
We pray for opportunities to share God's love and draw others to meet him.

*Silence*

Your will be done:  
**on earth as in heaven.**

We pray for all who are fighting against evil  
for goodness, truth and justice,  
both those who make the world news

and those whose battles are known only to God.  
We pray for our country and its leaders,  
that this nation may seek God.

*Silence*

Your will be done:  
**on earth as in heaven.**

We pray that wealth and comfort may not divert us  
from searching out the heart of God;  
that we may hear God's challenging  
and gladly respond to him;  
that our homes and communities  
may sparkle with God's glory.

*Silence*

Your will be done:  
**on earth as in heaven.**

We pray for the disillusioned and depressed  
and all who have lost their way in life;  
we pray for those corrupted by evil,  
trained in hatred and twisted by bitterness.  
We pray for the transforming of these lives.

*Silence*

Your will be done:  
**on earth as in heaven.**

We pray for those whose earthly life  
has come to an end,  
and for those who mourn their going.  
May the dead rest in the peace and joy of heaven  
through the mercy of God.

*Silence*

Your will be done:  
**on earth as in heaven.**

With thankful hearts we recall the times when God has rescued and forgiven us,  
leading us deeper into his friendship.

Merciful Father,  
accept these prayers  
for the sake of your Son,  
our Saviour Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer

We say together the prayer that Jesus gave us:

**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your Name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the  
power and the glory  
are yours,  
now and for ever. Amen.**

Hymn StF 673 Will you come and follow me if but call your name?

Will you come and follow me  
if I but call your name?  
Will you go where you don't know  
and never be the same?  
Will you let my love be shown,  
will you let my name be known,  
will you let my life be grown,  
in you and you in me?

Will you leave yourself behind  
if I but call your name?  
Will you care for cruel and kind  
and never be the same?  
Will you risk the hostile stare  
should your life attract or scare?  
Will you let me answer prayer  
in you and you in me?

Will you let the blinded see  
if I but call your name?  
Will you set the prisoners free  
and never be the same?  
Will you kiss the leper clean,  
and do such as this unseen,  
and admit to what I mean  
in you and you in me?

Will you love the 'you' you hide  
if I but call your name?  
Will you quell the fear inside  
and never be the same?  
Will you use the faith you've found  
to reshape the world around,  
through my sight and touch and sound  
in you and you in me?

Lord, your summons echoes true  
when you but call my name.  
Let me turn and follow you  
and never be the same.  
In your company I'll go  
where your love and footsteps show.  
Thus I'll move and live and grow  
in you and you in me.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-Bq1YtpQL8>

### Blessing

Go peaceful  
in gentleness  
through the violence of these days.  
Give freely.  
Show tenderness  
in all your ways.

Through darkness,  
in troubled times  
let holiness be your aim.  
Seek wisdom.  
Let faithfulness  
burn like a flame.

God speed you!  
God lead you,  
and keep you wrapped around His heart!  
May you be known by love.

Be righteous.  
Speak truthfully  
in a world of greed and lies.  
Show kindness.  
See everyone  
through heaven's eyes.

God hold you,  
enfold you,  
and keep you wrapped around His heart.  
May you be known by love. **Amen.**