

**Worship for the Sunday before Advent (complete text. A video version is also online)**  
**Keep safe. Keep caring. Keep praying.**

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*Welcome: to worship for the Sunday before Advent. We are grateful to all those who are taking part this week.*

*If you would like to take part, then please get in touch with the Circuit Office on [swc.katetennyson@gmail.com](mailto:swc.katetennyson@gmail.com)*

THE PREPARATION

*Call to worship*

Psalm 100 (NRSVA)

A Psalm of thanksgiving.

<sup>1</sup>Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

<sup>2</sup> Worship the Lord with gladness;  
come into his presence with singing.

<sup>3</sup>Know that the Lord is God.

It is he that made us, and we are his;  
we are his people, and the sheep of his  
pasture.

<sup>4</sup>Enter his gates with thanksgiving,  
and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

<sup>5</sup>For the Lord is good;

his steadfast love endures for ever,  
and his faithfulness to all generations.

Hymn: StF 77 – Give thanks to the Lord, our God  
and King

- 1. Give thanks to the Lord, our God and King:  
his love endures forever.  
For he is good, he is above all things.  
His love endures forever.  
Sing praise, sing praise.**
- 2. With a mighty hand and an outstretched  
arm  
his love endures forever.**

**For the life that's been reborn,  
his love endures forever.**

**Sing praise, sing praise.**

**Sing praise, sing praise.**

***Forever God is faithful,  
forever God is strong.***

***Forever God is with us,  
forever.***

***Forever God is faithful,  
forever God is strong.***

***Forever God is with us,  
forever.***

***Forever.***

- 3. From the rising to the setting sun,  
his love endures forever.**

**By the grace of God, we will carry on,  
his love endures forever.**

**Sing praise, sing praise.**

**Sing praise, sing praise.**

***Forever God is faithful,  
forever God is strong.***

***Forever God is with us,  
forever.***

***Forever God is faithful,  
forever God is strong.***

***Forever God is with us,  
forever.***

***Forever.***

*Chris Tomlin (b1972)*

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Kingswaysongs tym@kingsway.co.uk

### *Opening Prayers*

Good morning, and now it is time for prayer. Let us pray.

Dear Lord, we thank you for this world that you have given us. We thank you for food and water and shelter at this time. Lord we are living through very difficult situations at the moment and we rely heavily on our family and friends to get us through. And Lord we thank you that we can do that. We thank you Lord that we can praise you and come to worship you, not in a church at the moment, but online and that we can still be there as one body. So Lord we thank you for our church family as well.

Lord we think of all those people who are without today; we think of the prisoners, the persecuted, those refugees and people who do not have a good future at the moment. And Lord we ask you that people will help them in their time of need.

Lord we think of people who need food – we think of the food banks that are run by organisations like the Trussell Trust. And we thank you Lord that all of the workers that get involved with this, they're doing this all to help one another, and they're looking after your people. So Lord we thank you for these key people to be able to continue to do this good work.

Lord we thank you for the teachers that are going in to work at the moment to look after the many children who are there. And Lord we ask you to keep them safe at this time.

We also ask you to keep safe those who are vulnerable and who are shielding at home, that although they may feel isolated and lonely, they will know that you are there, and they will feel your warm embrace.

Lord also at this time, we think of all of the things that we have done wrong, how we sin on a daily

basis, and Lord we are sorry for all of the sins that we have committed. So we confess dear Lord that we do wrong, we know all the things that this week that we have done wrong in our lives and we ask you Lord to truly forgive us and to make that slate clean again.

And so Lord we ask all in your precious name.

Lord, we think of the many who at this time are homeless and who do not have a place of shelter or do not have food around them. And Lord, again, we ask that these people will be able to find some shelter within the area that they live in. That they will be able to be protected and they will know and feel your love within them.

### *The Lord's Prayer*

So Lord we want to say the Lord's prayer as we know how you taught your disciples:

**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 who 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 693 Beauty for brokenness

- 1. Beauty for brokenness  
hope for despair,  
Lord, in your suffering world  
this is our prayer.  
Bread for the children,  
justice, joy, peace,  
sunrise to sunset,  
you kingdom increase!**

2. Shelter for fragile lives,  
cures for their ills,  
work for all people,  
trade for their skills;  
land for the dispossessed,  
rights for the weak,  
voices to plead the cause  
of those who can't speak.

*God of the poor,  
friend of the weak,  
give us compassion we pray:  
melt our cold hearts,  
let tears fall like rain;  
come change our love  
from a spark to a flame.*

3. Refuge from cruel wars,  
havens from fear,  
cities for sanctuary,  
freedoms to share.  
Peace for the killing-fields,  
scorched earth to green,  
Christ for the bitterness,  
his cross for the pain.

4. Rest for the ravaged earth,  
oceans and streams  
plundered and poisoned –  
our future, our dreams.  
Lord, end our madness,  
carelessness, greed;  
make us content with  
the things that we need

*God of the poor,  
friend of the weak,  
give us compassion we pray:  
melt our cold hearts,  
let tears fall like rain;  
come change our love  
from a spark to a flame.*

5. Lighten our darkness,  
breathe on this flame  
until your justice burns

**brightly again;  
until the nations  
learn of your ways,  
seek your salvation  
and bring you their praise.**

***God of the poor,  
friend of the weak,  
give us compassion we pray:  
melt our cold hearts,  
let tears fall like rain;  
come change our love  
from a spark to a flame.***

*Graham Kendrick (b1950)*

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#### THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

*1<sup>st</sup> Reading Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 (MSG)*

<sup>11-16</sup>“God, the Master, says: From now on, *I myself* am the shepherd. I’m going looking for them. As shepherds go after their flocks when they get scattered, I’m going after my sheep. I’ll rescue them from all the places they’ve been scattered to in the storms. I’ll bring them back from foreign peoples, gather them from foreign countries, and bring them back to their home country. I’ll feed them on the mountains of Israel, along the streams, among their own people. I’ll lead them into lush pasture so they can roam the mountain pastures of Israel, graze at leisure, feed in the rich pastures on the mountains of Israel. And I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. I myself will make sure they get plenty of rest. I’ll go after the lost, I’ll collect the strays, I’ll doctor the injured, I’ll build up the weak ones and oversee the strong ones so they’re not exploited.

<sup>20-22</sup>“Therefore, God, the Master, says: I myself am stepping in and making things right between the plump sheep and the skinny sheep. Because you forced your way with shoulder and rump and

butted at all the weaker animals with your horns till you scattered them all over the hills, I'll come in and save my dear flock, no longer let them be pushed around. I'll step in and set things right between one sheep and another.

<sup>23-24</sup>“I'll appoint one shepherd over them all: my servant David. He'll feed them. He'll be their shepherd. And I, God, will be their God. My servant David will be their prince. I, God, have spoken.”

*Gospel*            *Matthew 25:31-46 (NLT)*

### *The Final Judgment*

<sup>31</sup>“But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. <sup>32</sup>All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup>He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left.

<sup>34</sup>“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. <sup>35</sup>For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. <sup>36</sup>I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.’

<sup>37</sup>“Then these righteous ones will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup>Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? <sup>39</sup>When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?’

<sup>40</sup>“And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!’

<sup>41</sup>“Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, ‘Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his

demons. <sup>42</sup>For I was hungry, and you didn't feed me. I was thirsty, and you didn't give me a drink. <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger, and you didn't invite me into your home. I was naked, and you didn't give me clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn't visit me.’

<sup>44</sup>“Then they will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and not help you?’

<sup>45</sup>“And he will answer, ‘I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.’

<sup>46</sup>“And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life.”

### *Sermon*

A couple of weeks ago I watched the Festival of Remembrance and took part (remotely) in the Remembrance Sunday service for Kineton. On the Saturday evening I found memories crowding together from my childhood The Festival of Remembrance was one of the few things my father watched on T V and my sister and brother and I were allowed to sit up and watch. Years later we watched when my oldest son was privileged to attend representing the Army Reserve. As we watched and listened to the stories and pageantry this year I was a son and a father in the same moment in my mind. I believe this is some small insight into eternity and the life beyond this life in which we are no longer constrained by time and space.

This parable is set in the context of “end time teaching” and the “life beyond this life” as Jesus prepares his disciples to continue his ministry after his death, resurrection and return to His father's throne. His followers, that's all disciples including and especially church leaders, need to hold together Christ's compassion for all especially those in need, alongside the tough

words he spoke to those who misunderstand and distort his teaching. As so often Jesus uses metaphor and parable to make his point and drive home simple truths. Typical with many parables there is a surprise, even shocking conclusion at the end.

There is a rapid succession of four parables. The first is less well known and is often skipped over in reading plans. "The parable of the faithful and unfaithful servant" (Matthew 24:45 – 51) Here we see judgement on a manager who exploits and abuses the staff during the 'master's absence and is caught napping on His return..

The Wise and foolish virgins at the wedding ceremony is much better known and often presented as a drama. Be ready and think ahead so you will not miss out on the celebration. Then there is the story of the "talents" where we are reminded to use the gifts we are given and not avoid risks in mission and service.

Today we heard the metaphor of judgement and the signs Jesus will look for as he sorts the flock. While at one level I find the image straightforward and I "get it" I also find some unsolved puzzles with it.

Sorting sheep based on sound judgment. I see that every week at Stratford Livestock Market. Experienced staff at the mart move among the sheep and separate into different pens according to weight, condition, fat and flabby away from lean and fit – luckily I don't get judged on those criteria!- Some go to the right, some to the left; some will be bought for butchers and some will be kept a while longer and some will be taken home for breeding. But in Jesus' picture it is separating sheep from goats. That I don't 'get'. True, some goats look very sheepish and some sheep are less woolly than other breeds so it might take a more knowledgeable person than average to see which is which. I understand that within Jesus' flock there are some who want to be seen as sheep, i.e. a Christian follower, when

they are far from it but the parable I think is weak. What's wrong with being a goat? After all they, like us, have nannies and kids! Why does the parable work.

My guess is that there are things we just are not aware of 2,000 years later. In my youth we had sheep and goats though I admit not at the same time. They behave differently. Put simply, sheep are grazers while goats are browsers. Let me explain those terms. A grazer eats grass. She is happy to walk around for hours head to the ground eating grass and other tasty nutritious vegetation like clover and vetches. Farmers will grow some root crops and kale for sheep to self feed in the winter. The classic browser is the giraffe. She spends hours eating leaves and twigs from shrubs, bushes and trees. Eating grass that someone has walked over is beneath her dignity and only eaten in desperation. As a teenager neighbours would sometimes ask if they could borrow one of our goats to eat their lawn down after a holiday. I politely pointed out that grass is way down their menu choice. First to be eaten would be the flowers, shrubs and hedge then in desperation would grass get mown down! Goats can survive in drought conditions better than sheep because of their diet. In southern Africa where I lived for some years goats are the livestock of the poor surviving on poor soil in dry conditions. So one doesn't expect to see flocks of sheep (symbols of wealth and goats(associated with the poor) running together.

So, I wonder, and I have no proof of this, whether in Jesus time and place goats were the butt of the jokes (pun intended!) whereas sheep were valued. The old testament uses the metaphor of sheep and shepherd repeatedly as metaphors for God and humans. Both Moses and David who were held in such high regard in the faith of the Hebrews spent formative years as shepherds. And one's wealth and status is measured in the number of sheep. A lamb is so

valued that the shepherd will go to great lengths to seek the lost.

I am in danger of getting absorbed in the detail of the parable and not its primary purpose to compare, contrast and surprise Jesus' listeners. Matthew includes all four of these parables to challenge and teach his church what marks the true Christian from the false one just as Ezekiel contrasts good and faulty shepherds of Israel. In these parables, this one especially, Jesus is being true to Torah – the law as understood and taught by Moses. It identifies the hypocrisy of the temple teachers and priests with whom Jesus has so recently - in the order of the gospel- been in conflict following his Palm Sunday entrance. Its fully consistent with Micah who said "And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6: 8).

Some think that Jesus is limiting the marks of true discipleship to the fellowship but I believe that is to misinterpret the parable. We are all called to live out our faith according to these tests. To meet these six humanitarian challenges if we want to fully experience His blessing in this life and the next:

Feed the hungry: Costly hospitality – within COVID restrictions of course – Food banks qualify as a start but He asks that we really think through whether what we buy and eat denies others the right to sufficient food.

Give drink to the thirsty: As above but includes toilet twinning, Water Aid, how we use and should not waste water, pollution etc.

Welcome the stranger: Accepting all humans into our society and avoiding language and action that excludes. I just loved hearing that the couple who have pioneered the COVID vaccine soon to be available we all hope and pray are Turkish migrants. How communities really need

each other's gifts! Its much easier to divide society than to unite it.

Clothe the naked: As we buy our clothes do we pass on our good garments that others might wear them out, are we sure that the wages paid to the factory staff are sufficient for them to buy clothes? It goes beyond clothes of course to be about giving others dignity. Depriving women and men their clothes and exposing their private parts is deliberate humiliation used by despots.

Heal the sick : Few of us have the gift of miraculous healing as we saw in Jesus and some of his followers but caring for, providing for, comforting the sick will at times need professional knowledge and skills but some of us are tempted to avoid our responsibility by delegating compassion to professionals "Am I my brother's/sister's keeper? You bet you are!

Visit the prisoner: Something that the Wesley brothers were famously good at in the appalling eighteenth century Oxford jails. I have been to visit prisoners taking care not to use up their monthly slot and deprive family! Pray for prison chaplains and volunteer visitors and all who can be positive role models. Prison should be a place of rehabilitation but sadly has been used as a place for radicalisation.

To these six I would add a seventh. Its possible to read this parable and think that to be a true Christian is only about acts of goodness and compassion. I don't think that was Jesus' intention or meaning. Rather these six are a demonstration of the unspoken seventh. Believe in Jesus and trust him for this life and the next. True believers incarnate Christ in this way to set the scene for seeds of faith to be nurtured. To provoke the question often heard by Street Pastors as they give out water and heat blankets to cold inebriated usually young people "Why do you give up your night's sleep to do this?" they ask. I believe Godly compassion and self giving are the demonstration and authentication of our

faith not an alternative. Worship is enriched when tired followers seek renewal in spirit and a day of rest as Genesis suggests for work life balance for the Lord's servants.

Pray for God's help and strength as you live the gospel in these difficult days. Keep well, keep safe, keep the faith.

Hymn: StF 481: The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want (Townend)

- 1. The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want;  
he makes me lie in pastures green,  
he leads me by the still, still waters,  
his goodness restores my soul.**

*And I will trust in you alone,  
and I will trust in you alone,  
for your endless mercy follows me,  
your goodness will lead me home.*

- 2. He guides my ways in righteousness,  
and he anoints my head with oil;  
and my cup – it overflows with joy,  
I feast on his pure delights.**

*And I will trust in you alone,  
and I will trust in you alone,  
for your endless mercy follows me,  
your goodness will lead me home.*

- 3. And though I walk the darkest path –  
I will not fear the evil one,  
for you are with me, and your rod and staff  
are the comfort I need to know.**

*And I will trust in you alone,  
and I will trust in you alone,  
for your endless mercy follows me,  
your goodness will lead me home.*

*Stuart Townend (b 1963)*

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## THE RESPONSE

### *Prayers of thanksgiving*

Dear Father, we thank you today for all that You have done for us, for all that You do for us and for all that You will do

Father we thank You for the hope that is starting to kindle in the wake of a very difficult year

We thank You for the renewed value we place on things that we had previously taken for granted, and for a You continuing help in coping with in ever changing world

Dear Friend we thank You for you ongoing presence, for the price You paid so that we may spend time with You each day. We thank You for building ways where none exist and leading us in the way to walk

Kind Spirit we thank You for Your daily guidance. For your continued peace when times are hard and for the fruits that Your friendship births within us. Which help draw us closer to You, the 3-in-1 God, Parent, Friend and Spirit

**Amen**

### *Prayers of intercession*

Lord we live in a strange and confusing world, a world where emotions change day by day and people learn to cope at different rates. At this time of great confusion help us to be Your hands and Your feet to others around us who are struggling

Lord in our world searching for hope  
**Help us Shine your light**

To neighbours, colleagues, bubbles and households. Let us build up and not tear down each other. Help us to see how You would act, too shown your love even when we wind each other up. Help us to show mercy and grace, in place of frustration and hostility

Lord in our world searching for hope  
**Help us Shine your light**

To our families and friend from whom we are isolated, help us to share Your love and peace with each other although we may be apart. Help us to show kindness and gentleness when people are coping with this world worse than ourselves.

Lord in our world searching for hope  
**Help us Shine your light**

To our wider communities help us to be pillars of Your strength and wisdom at this time of uncertainty and frustration. To be a channel of your peace when anger is present and to shine for You when the world seems dark.

Lord in our world searching for hope  
**Help us Shine your light**

For our world let us remember to follow the advice given even when we don't understand or agree with it. Provide those with power with patience and wisdom in order to gain insight and do what's best for all people. Help us to remember that we are all Your children and this is a time to love not to fight.

Lord in our world searching for hope  
**Help us Shine your light**

**AMEN**

*The Offering & prayer*

Lord God we come to You today not from one place but in one Spirit and knowing that while the building lies empty Your Church is strong, accept our offering today in whatever form it comes, financial, time, effort, self sacrifice or any other form. Bless the offerings of Your children and let it bear fruit

THE DISMISSAL

Hymn: StF 713 – Show me how to stand for justice

- 1. Show me how to stand for justice:  
how to work for what is right,  
how to challenge false assumptions,  
how to walk within the light.  
May I learn to share more freely  
in a world so full of greed,**

**showing your immense compassion  
by the life I choose to lead.**

- 2. Teach my heart to treasure mercy,  
whether given or received –  
for my need has not diminished  
since the day I first believed:  
let me seek no satisfaction  
boasting of what I have done,  
but rejoice that I am pardoned  
and accepted in your Son.**
- 3. Gladly I embrace a lifestyle  
modelled on your living word,  
in humility submitting  
to the truth which I have heard.  
Make me conscious of your presence  
every day in all I do:  
by your Spirit's gracious prompting  
may I learn to walk with you.**

*Martin Leckebusch (b 1962)*

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*Prayer & blessing*

As we go our separate ways today  
Let us go following the shepherd  
Enthused by His joy, surrounded by His Love  
And may goodness and mercy follow us always

We pray God, keeps you safe warm, and true  
until we see each other again

**AMEN**



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### *Hymn Words:*

StF 77 – **Give thanks to the Lord, our God and King**, *Chris Tomlin*

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StF 693 **Beauty for brokenness**, *Graham Kendrick*

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StF 713 – **Show me how to stand for justice**, *Martin Leckebusch*

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