

twelvebaskets



ORDINARY 23C

A complete Sunday service ready to use
for worship and inspire ideas in your church

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Order of Service

Call to worship

Hymn:

440 STF – Amazing grace – how sweet the sound OR

570 STF – As we gather, Father, seal us

Opening Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk (including Luke 14: 25-33)

Hymn:

676 STF – Christ from whom all blessings flow OR

433 STF – Out of the depths I cry to thee, Lord God! O hear my prayer!

Readings: Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Philemon 1:1-21

Hymn:

564 STF – O thou who camest from above OR

611 STF – Brother, sister, let me serve you

Reflections on the readings

Hymn:

566 STF – Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee OR

707 STF – Make me a channel of your peace

Intercessions

Offering / collection

Blessing the offering

Hymn:

545 STF – Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart OR

687 STF – One human family God has made

Blessing

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Call to worship

Here I am,
Here we are,
Present to you and to the presence of your Spirit,
O God.
Come, Lord God, by your Spirit.

Amen.¹

Hymn:

440 STF – Amazing grace – how sweet the sound OR
570 STF – As we gather, Father, seal us

Opening Prayers

Loving God,
You know us better than we can ever know ourselves
All we have done
All we want to do
The pain and regret we carry
The hopes we hold onto
The things we want to say, still finding shape in our hearts.

You welcome us with open arms, just as we are
In your presence we can just be.

No pretending
No brave faces
No need to say, ‘I’m fine’ unless we mean it.

Real love;
Real acceptance.

May we be ready to hear your word and accept your challenge
As we seek to share your life-changing and life-giving love with the world.

Thank you Lord.

Amen.²

We say together the Lord's Prayer

¹ Call to Worship written by Tim Baker

² Opening prayers written by Emma Dobson

All Age Talk

Has anyone seen a tall building before? Maybe even walked up a tower? Some of these buildings are just incredibly tall! But did you know that the world record for the world's tallest building for the longest amount of time is found in the UK? It's Lincoln Cathedral, which held the title for 237 years! It held it with a height of 160m and took 219 years to build!

But that building is tiny compared to the current World Tallest building, which is the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, which is 829.8m tall, and took only 5 years to build! Or to put it another way: You can stack 5 Lincoln Cathedrals on top of one another and still not be taller than the Burj Khalifa!

Imagine the time, effort, planning and patience it took to build such tall buildings!

Well! We can't build a tower that tall today, but we can make smaller towers!

(Ask for volunteers)

Game:

Requires: Two (2) Jenga Towers (1 with 7 bricks missing and no box, 1 with all the bricks needed and the spare bricks from tower 1 and including instructions saying what a complete standard Jenga tower is: 54 Blocks, 18 layers high and 3 blocks per layer), two tables.

- Have volunteers split into 2 groups (ideally with an adult with each group)
- Group 1 has the missing brick tower, Group 2 has all the bricks and the extra ones Group 1 needs
- Group 1 has 3 minutes to build their tower. Group 2 has 2 minutes to read the instructions and 1 minute to build their tower.
- Read "The tower must be completed to the standard Jenga starting set-up."

(The idea is that Group 1 will start, but not be able to finish their tower fully. Group 2 will be able to read and plan their tower and might realize they have the resources needed to help Group 1 finish. If they realize they can share the blocks or instructions, then great! Encourage it! If they don't and there is 30 seconds remaining, subtly point it out!)

Just look at these incredible towers! Just shows what two different approaches can do, if we can all work together!

Jesus spoke a lot about building. "Kingdom Building" he called it! Some of his instructions we still have today, which can be found in the bible. Such as this one:
(Read Luke 14: 25-33 in a version that you are comfortable with)

Sometimes we are so incredibly excited to build something that we rush ahead, but then realize that we don't have the resources to finish what we started. It takes the help of others to support us along the way to make sure we finish. Other times, we spend a long time preparing the foundations and planning what we want to do, but then find we don't have a lot of time left to finish what we started!

I think what Jesus was saying here was that we need to find a good balance between rushing into things and planning things, but always we must pick up our tools and build those towers!

Let's pray: "Dear God, Help us to have the spirit to rush into doing your work, the knowledge to be able to plan for you, and the wisdom to find the balance between them.

Amen.³

Hymn:

676 STF – Christ from whom all blessings flow OR

433 STF – Out of the depths I cry to thee, Lord God! O hear my prayer!

Readings: Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Philemon 1:1-21

Hymn:

564 STF – O thou who camest from above OR

611 STF – Brother, sister, let me serve you

Reflections on the reading

The readings from Luke and Jeremiah are not easy, are they?! They put us firmly in our place! Let's look at Jeremiah first.

Have you ever seen 'The Generation Game'? The family gameshow that has been on TV in several forms since the 1970s. It has had numerous presenters over the years. One of the most popular games for the families to attempt was the one where a potter showed them how to make a shaped vase or a jug using a potter's wheel. Having watched the demonstration, the contestants threw the wet clay on the wheel... and the fun began. The clay shot off sideways as they spun the wheel too fast. Or the clay was not in the middle and the jug became lop-sided and misshapen. Inevitably, any emerging vase would eventually collapse and the contestant would have to start again. Great hilarity!

Maybe these calamitous images are all we have of potters at the wheel – or perhaps we have seen an expert potter at work somewhere making it look so easy. Jeremiah was an active prophet for the four decades leading up to the sack of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. and the beginning of the Babylonian Exile. Scholars believe that editors continued to add to the book after Jeremiah's death. We are not sure whether chapter 18 was written prior to the Exile, or during the Exile.

We are told that the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord was: "Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message."

In the ancient world, pottery was everywhere – so Jeremiah would not have had far to travel to the local potter. People used clay pots for storage and cooking. They

³ All Age Talk written by Tim Annan-Hood

used clay bricks to line their ovens. They used small clay figures for decorations—and even for toys. The potter was one of the most important craftspeople in the community. God is preparing Jeremiah for an object lesson—revealing God's word using pottery as an example—and people will be reminded of this lesson every time they see a clay pot.

Jeremiah takes up the story. "So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands (The Generation Games comes to mind again) so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him."

That apparently insignificant phrase about the potter's work: "shaping it as seemed best to him" is where the message that Jeremiah hears comes uncomfortably to life.

"Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. "Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?" declares the Lord. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel. If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it".

For a nation that saw itself as God's chosen people, it must have hit Jeremiah hard to consider the possibility that God's favour was something that could be lost. Was it really credible that God might permit, let alone ordain, the destruction of Israel when they are 'his' people?

The message from Jeremiah is that there are times when tough love is necessary to bring healing and reverse the effects of evil in the world.

Jeremiah was required to tell the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, 'This is what the Lord says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.'

We are left in no doubt – once again the people of God have been warned by a prophet of God. We would do well to heed such warnings. A few chapters earlier in Chapter 9, Jeremiah writes of oppressing the stranger, the fatherless and the widow – of spilling innocent blood and walking after other gods. A few verses later, he warns against stealing, murder, adultery, and swearing falsely. But in Chapter 18 when God asked Jeremiah: "Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?" God does not identify the actions that might lead him to this response. God identifies the possibility that a nation or kingdom could be uprooted, torn down and destroyed – but God does not specify the deeds that might bring this about. There is no exhaustive list of the ways in which we can fall short of God's will. In our times we might think of additional flaws in the potter's clay: climate change, plastics, pollution, deforestation, animal extinctions, poverty, hunger, homelessness, inequality, injustice, racism, misogyny, violence ... we are called to turn away and reform our ways and actions.

If the words from Jeremiah are uncomfortable, so too are the words of Jesus in the second half of Chapter 14 in Luke's gospel. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem – and large crowds were travelling with him. Perhaps many of them thought that Jesus was going to be crowned in Jerusalem. Jesus knew he was going to be crucified. We are told that he turned and spoke to the crowd – and told them how it was for those who wanted to be his disciples. But what he had to say wasn't exactly encouraging or enticing.

Marketing and advertising are so much a part of modern life aren't they? As technology changes, the marketing gets more and more sophisticated.

We are used to the idea that what we search for on the internet determines the adverts that follow us everywhere we go online for the next week or so. We hear conspiracy theories that if we discuss something in the same room as our digital assistants, we will also get unprompted adverts online. We are just getting used to the idea that the digital screens in many of the large UK shopping centres are fitted with cameras that can identify the age, gender and even the mood of shoppers – then display marketing for the specific audience, for instance flashing up a shaving-foam ad to men without beards. We have become very used to companies selling us their brands.

Here are some claims by an organisation trying to sell us a particular lifestyle – can you guess the word in the blanks?

Our mission is to inspire, inform and enable people to be _____.

We believe that being a _____ is a wonderful way to live. And we're not the only ones. There are millions of _____ in the world.

Being a _____ is one of the best things you can do – it's also loads of fun!

Being a _____ is easy. There's more to it, but don't worry about the other stuff yet.

The organisation using those phrases to sell a particular lifestyle is the Vegetarian Society in its website. Would it be possible to fit the word Christian into those blanks? Let's listen to what that sounds like...

Our mission is to inspire, inform and enable people to be CHRISTIAN.

We believe that being a CHRISTIAN is a wonderful way to live. And we're not the only ones. There are millions of CHRISTIANS in the world.

Being a CHRISTIAN is one of the best things you can do – it's also loads of fun!

Being a CHRISTIAN is easy. There's more to it, but don't worry about the other stuff yet.

It works up to a point – but that last line may be a bit of a sticking point. It would be nothing like the way that Jesus 'marketed' or 'sold' being a disciple of his in Luke 14. Let's look at the words of Jesus from our earlier reading.

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple"

That sounds ever so harsh, doesn't it? Some bible commentaries wrestle with this sentence but we can be assured that Jesus does not mean this as literally as we might read it. Everything from the commandment telling us to "respect your Father and your Mother" to Jesus' commandment to "love your neighbour as yourself" tells us that Jesus does not want us to hate our parents, spouses, children and our own lives. We should count this as hyperbole – exaggeration for effect. There are several instances in scriptures when the word 'hate' is used simply to mean that you like or love something less than you love something else. In Genesis 29:30-31 there is a reference to Leah being "hated" by Jacob but it appears to mean just that Jacob loved Rachel more than he loved Leah. Jesus is not calling his followers to hate their families in terms of emotional response; instead, he is calling for undivided loyalty to himself - above family loyalties.

But even when we get over the first comment, Jesus immediately suggests that anyone who does not carry their cross and follow him cannot be a disciple. Luke was

writing to Christians who understood what cross-bearing meant all too well. Persecution had begun, and Christians were being killed on crosses. For the person desiring casual discipleship, Jesus' words about cross-bearing would be discouraging—but for Luke's church, experiencing persecution, these words would approve their sacrifices.

This is strange marketing. This is not exactly persuading us to be followers or pupils of Jesus. Yet what Jesus is doing here is much the same in as in some earlier passages in Luke's gospel account. In Luke 9:58 he tells one would-be disciple that: "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head". To another who wanted first to bury his father Jesus said, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead" (9:60). To one who wanted to say goodbye to his family, Jesus said, "No one, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God" (9:62).

Back in Luke 14, Jesus adds two parables to emphasise his point. The first tells about someone who wanted to build a tower. Wouldn't they sit down and estimate the costs of the tower to be sure they could afford to complete it? The second tells of a King about to go to war. Wouldn't he sit down and consider whether his 10,000 men could defeat the 20,000 men of a rival king?

Jesus is saying: "Before you become a disciple of mine – won't you sit down and calculate the cost of following me?" And then adds for good measure: "...none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions".

Jesus calls people to a kind of discipleship that is not cheap. His command to "Follow me" is both gift and demand. And he extols a commitment to finishing the discipleship journey once begun or not beginning it at all. Following Jesus is an all or nothing proposition.

So where is the hope? In Jeremiah 18, the hope rests with God's assurance that: "... if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned". There is more than a glimmer of hope here – God always offers us a way back home. In Luke 14, the hope comes from the knowledge that Jesus doesn't require anything of his disciples that he himself is not willing to give. But it also comes a few Chapters later in Luke's gospel when Jesus promises that our commitment will be rewarded. "Most certainly I tell you, there is no one who has left house, or wife, or brothers, or parents, or children, for the Kingdom of God's sake, who will not receive many times more in this time (and in the world to come, eternal life)".

Today's contemporary Church has to wrestle with the reality of following a radical, counter-cultural prophet. His message and actions will not always be easy to follow or to transfer simplistically into our twenty-first century context. He does not offer an easy payment plan. He never tries to disguise the cost of discipleship. Instead, he writes the price tag of self-sacrifice large for all to see. But this self-sacrificial life in the service of the Lord is an extraordinary gift. Jesus sums it up like this: "whoever loses their life for me will save it".⁴

Hymn:

566 STF – Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee OR

707 STF – Make me a channel of your peace

⁴ Reflection written by Paul Craine

Prayers of intercession

Lord God, in our freedom guide us,
that we may choose love and not hatred,
that we may choose light rather than darkness,
that we may choose life and not death,
that we may turn freely to you, and so abide for ever.

Grant your church courage to proclaim the gospel and to reveal your glory in the way we live.

Loving God, guide us
and grant us a glimpse of your glory.

We pray for all people who are confused in a world of multi-choice,
for all who lack clear direction, and all who are led astray.
We pray that the leaders in our world and in the media may set good examples.
We remember especially those who teach the young and influence them.
We pray for youth leaders and all who support growing people.

Loving God, guide us
and grant us a glimpse of your glory.

We give thanks for our own homes and loved ones, and ask you to bless them with
your love and peace.
We pray for the newly married, and for those looking after children;
we ask your blessing on nursery classes and all child-minders.

Loving God, guide us
and grant us a glimpse of your glory.

We pray for people whose lives are insecure,
all whose relationships, homes or work are at risk;
we pray for all who have become captive to vice and drugs.
We ask your blessing on all whose health is failing,
on those whose powers are waning and are becoming dependent on others.
Lord, give strength and courage to loved ones who are ill.

Loving God, guide us
and grant us a glimpse of your glory.

Amen.⁵

We will now take up the offering.

Blessing the offering

God of all grace, accept these gifts and use us to transform this church, this
community and this world to a place where the Spirit is at work.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.⁶

⁵ Prayers of intercession taken from *Glimpses of Glory* by David Adam (SPCK)

⁶ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

Hymn:

545 STF – Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart OR

687 STF – One human family God has made

Blessing

Let us go out with joy,
And be sent forth with peace,
Let us bear the imprint of the divine, out into the world around us.
In Jesus' name.

Amen.⁷

⁷ Additional prayers by Tim Baker