

# twelvebaskets



## ORDINARY 31A

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

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**Ordinary 31 - Year A**  
5th November 2023



## **Order of Service**

Call to worship

**Hymn:**

**609 STF – As we gather in your presence OR**

**624 STF – Calm me Lord, as you calmed the storm**

Opening Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

**Hymn:**

**81 STF – Now thank we all our God OR**

**611 STF – Brother, sister, let me serve you**

Readings: Joshua 3:7-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13; Matthew 23:1-12

**Hymn:**

**548 STF – Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine OR**

**313 STF – Thine be the glory**

Reflections on the readings

**Hymn:**

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

**416 STF – There's a wideness in God's mercy**

Intercessions

Offering / collection

Blessing the offering

**Hymn:**

**465 STF – Guide me, O thou great Jehovah OR**

**713 STF – Show me how to stand for justice**

Blessing

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The Vine Services are compiled and produced by twelvebaskets.

Many more resources and inspiration for this week's lectionary, leading worship and other church use are available on [www.theworshipcloud.com](http://www.theworshipcloud.com).

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## Call to worship

God is relationship, and you are invited in this day.

God is connection, and the Spirit is reaching out for your hand this day.

God is love, and the heartbeat of the divine is for each and every one of us, this day, and always.

Come, by your Spirit, Lord God.

Amen.<sup>1</sup>

## Hymn:

609 STF – As we gather in your presence OR

624 STF – Calm me Lord, as you calmed the storm

## Opening Prayers

Spirit of the invisible God,  
draw us close to creation, we pray.

*[Pause]*

We worship you,  
For by you all things are made, and we give thanks and praise.

Let us face this day renewed and refreshed, to share the concerns of yesterday,  
For we are one community, life breathed by God, to be the poetry exclaiming the kingdom  
of God.

Come amongst us, as we worship,  
Forgive us, and set us free, we pray,

Amen.<sup>2</sup>

## We say together the Lord's Prayer

## All Age Talk

Time and time again in the Gospels we see examples of Jesus speaking truth to power. When we say "truth to power" it's about risking something personal or upsetting the status quo to respond to a problem, rather than taking an easy or selfish option.

We might hear about those who speak truth to power in stories of Malala Yousafzai, who stood up to her oppressive government for the idea that women should be educated. Or how about Edward Snowden, who leaked information about how governments were developing surveillance programs that were ethically removing an individual's right to privacy. Perhaps think of Martin Luther King Jr. who led marches for rights to vote, labour

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<sup>1</sup> Call to worship written by Tim Baker

<sup>2</sup> Opening prayers written by Tim Annan-Hood

rights, civil rights and non-violent resistance of Jim Crow laws in the US. Each saw a moral failing in society and felt stirred to speak out against those in places of power, so that they themselves would institute change.

The Reading today is Matthew 23: 1-12. We see Jesus do this very same thing, but he pointed out something that we are still struggling with today:

*(Matthew 23: 1-7, in the translation you are comfortable with)*

What Jesus said is explosive for the time! Similar to Dorothy pulling back the curtain in the Wizard of Oz. Jesus pointing out the two-faced nature of teachings. How they instruct those they lead to follow the scriptures, but they themselves do what they like! Jesus even goes so far as to say that the scholars and the pharisees use the teaching of God's law to keep ordinary people in line!

Today, I think Jesus would say that the scholars and the pharisees let power go to their head, or even let the trapping and lure of fame change their behaviour.

But Jesus doesn't stop there! After warning the crowds about those in charge, he continues:

*(Matthew 23: 8-12)*

Just as we're warned to be careful about following those who don't practice what they preach, we're then told to not fall into the same traps! Instead, we're told about the best way to follow gospel values:

"Do you want to stand out? Then step down. Be a servant. If you puff yourself up, you'll get the wind knocked out of you. But if you're content to simply be yourself, your life will count for plenty."

Jesus was the servant leader. The one who lead with compassion, strong ethics and wisdom. He stood up to change a system of power that was disenfranchising people, and his impact is still felt to this day. The same can be said about MLK. Even with Malala and Snowden we are still talking about them and their impact on the world today.

The question then is: What injustices is God calling you to speak out on? How will you follow the example of Jesus and speak truth to power?

Let us pray.

May God grant us the wisdom to see the injustices in the world, the courage to speak out, and be supported by the spirit of God to make the world more like the one Jesus spoke of.

Amen.<sup>3</sup>

### **Hymn:**

81 STF – Now thank we all our God OR

611 STF – Brother, sister, let me serve you

**Readings:** Joshua 3:7-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13; Matthew 23:1-12

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<sup>3</sup> All Age Talk written by Tim Annan-Hood

## Hymn:

548 STF – Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine OR

313 STF – Thine be the glory

## Reflections on the readings

It's fascinating how laws can cause division. I think particularly of the recent change to the speed limit on 30mph roads in Wales - now 20mph - and how much disagreement I've seen online. But I won't join in with the debate here. In theory laws and rules exist to help us have some sort of shared understanding of what's right and wrong, which are then meant to help us live better together. But do they always?

For some, the more rules the better; for others, more freedom, less rules. Politically, this can mean some believe the state should control much more, for others that screams of a nanny state and humans should have more freedom to explore what it means to live well together.

Schools often show these differences of viewpoints on a smaller scale. Regularly we read of school rules that some think a step too far, while others think they're necessary for better order. Hair styles often come into this debate. Even uniform regularly gets challenged, particularly when it comes to gender differences and boys being unable to wear shorts when it's hot. 'Will a skirt do?' some boys ask as they challenge the rules to get cool in the sweltering heat.

The church is no exception when it comes to places with rules. Some might argue we love a rule. The people called Methodists, which I count myself among, even have a rather large rule book. Many of our rules help with good order and ensure we keep things legal within UK law, others ensure we prioritise safety and protect people such as with safeguarding.

On the other hand, some are downright baffling. I remember my amusement discovering the rule in our Methodist rule book explicitly permitting dancing on Methodist premises. I mean great: I love to dance. But the fact we had to make a decision and say so might just reflect a very different context where some people thought it ludicrous that dancing be allowed on church premises.

All churches grapple with similar issues and often those outside church have a perception of Christians as people who are more concerned about what you can't do than living life in all its fullness – one of the things that Jesus seems to be truly interested in giving to people.

Sometimes our focus on rules can even spill into social conventions, those 'unwritten' rules we have where we judge others by whether they follow them or not. Things like whether you remove your hat when you go inside, whether it's ladies first or not, whether you put your elbows on the table, whether you sit in silence before a church service starts and remain quiet for a postlude.

Laws, rules and conventions are not synonymous with morality. In 1958 when the Methodist Church agreed with The Wolfenden Report recommendation that homosexual behaviour between two adults be made legal, it did so because 'sin and crime are not synonymous terms'.

Les Miserables (the book, the show, the film) is a great example of this. The loaf of stolen bread to feed a starving family is a great symbol of when justice needs to overrule law. Stealing food might be against the law of a particular society, but when that society is structured in such a way to favour some over others, the bigger picture makes morality much more complex.

The American Civil Rights movement is an example of this. It had been perfectly legal to segregate people on the basis of the colour of their skin, but it was and is totally unjust. Sometimes laws and rules just aren't right. But if we have a comfortable life, we are much more likely to accept the way things are and not notice the injustices, because the way things are ordered protect our own way of living.

Jesus was astute to this. He could see how the leaders and law-makers had created a framework that protected those in power and kept things comfortable for them - and they didn't like him challenging that. But they'd also built up so many rules, laws, conventions and ways of doing things that it had become so complex and burdensome for people to follow. People wanted to do the right thing, they wanted to be right with God, and the religious leaders made out that to be right with God, it was necessary to follow every rule and law absolutely. But things are never that clear cut.

What happens when someone is injured on the Sabbath when no work should be done? Jesus challenged the rules by seeing the picture beyond them and 'doing good', even when the rules said it shouldn't be done. The good Samaritan story told by Jesus blurs the lines of what is legally and conventionally right and wrong, to show what is good. The priest feared being made unclean and therefore didn't stop and help, yet the good in the story is stopping and helping.

When laws, rules and conventions prevent good from happening, we have to stop and question them. We have to challenge them. We have to rethink them. The Sabbath, the holy day of rest, is central to the faith found in the Hebrew scriptures, and yet Jesus recognised there were limits to this absolute sacredness. When Jesus said the Sabbath was made for humanity and not the other way round, he gets to the heart of why we have rules, laws and conventions. They are there to serve humanity and not for us to serve them. They can and should be questioned.

Even God breaks God's own rules, particularly those concerning the order of physics, biology and chemistry. Every time we read of or experience a miracle or 'supernatural' event, we are witnessing God do good by breaking the rules that God has set. God stopping water for the Israelites to cross and the Psalm-proclamation that God can turn deserts into rivers are two examples of this. When God so desires, when Jesus wishes, rules can be broken for the purposes of doing good.

Doing good is often about putting people and their needs first. Love is intrinsically contained in doing good. Love of neighbour means doing good. When someone's worth, wellbeing, dignity, wholeness is at stake, rules diminish so that love can take central place, and good be done.

That's not to say that rules and laws don't matter; many of them have been made to help humans live well together. But as with any human constructs or interpretations, they are susceptible to being distorted or overly contextualised, or sometimes serving the purpose of a few, rather than the many. Sometimes, they become more about protecting our own way of life, than thinking about the good of the whole of humanity, reflecting selfish wants, rather than love.

We, as God's people, as Jesus followers, are called to live beyond a simplistic approach to rules. We're called to live with a Spirit-filled wisdom that enables us to see beyond the surface, into the depths of good and love. We are called to follow Jesus in challenging rules that favour some but deny the fullness of life to others. Ultimately we are called to be people who love our neighbours by serving them, making ourselves low and our own selfish wants secondary, doing what is good, loving and just, even when it means bending or breaking a rule. For it is the way of Jesus.

Here are some questions that you might like to go to ponder over this week, but let's start the conversation today. Why not turn to the person sitting next to you and hear their reflections?

*[It might be helpful to have the questions written up on a flipchart, shown on a slide or repeat them a few times so people have them in their head].*

- Are there laws, rules or conventions that need to be challenged?
- What about current political decisions?
- What about things that happen in the life of the church?
- Is there agreement about these in your group? Church? Community?
- What might you do to challenge these in ways that might bring about good change and in love of neighbours?<sup>4</sup>

### **Hymn:**

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

416 STF – There's a wideness in God's mercy

### **Prayers of intercession**

God of all grace, we come to you this day in prayer.

Come amongst us, be known to us, come by your grace, we pray.

In our own lives, our families and our world, we know there is much that is not as you would have it, there is brokenness, pain, sadness, grief and illness. In the midst of all this, come Lord Jesus.

We take a moment, firstly to pray for those closest to us. In the stillness, just offer the name and situation of someone you hold dear, perhaps it might be someone in your family, a close friend, even someone who is part of this church community.

Just hold them in the light of God's love, in your mind.

*[Pause to let people say their own prayers. You might like to light a candle if it's appropriate.]*

Lord you know our hearts and you know our hurts – you know the pains we carry on behalf of those we hold dear. Into those situations and to those people who we have named, come Lord Jesus.

Next, let us pray for this community that we call home – this church community and the surrounding villages, towns and cities. We know there is much pain here too, much brokenness, and we take a minute to pray for the situations and people we are aware of, who need our prayers and who need to know something of your love this day.

In the stillness, hold those names and situations, and any prayer requests you have received, in the light of God's love.

*[Pause to let people say their own prayers. You might like to light a candle if it's appropriate.]*

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<sup>4</sup> Reflection written by Gary Hopkins

Finally, we pray for your world, recognising that there is much darkness and sadness in the world. Every time we open a newspaper or turn on the news, we see something of a grieving world, longing for healing.

Perhaps there is a particular news story or two that has really struck you today? Perhaps there is a situation that you have a connection with, or recognise the way that God's heart is grieving for a particular person or place in the wider world.

In the stillness, hold those situations and the people involved, in the light of God's love.

*[Pause to let people say their own prayers. You might like to light a candle if it's appropriate.]*

Lord, you hear all of our prayers, spoken and unspoken, and for that we remain eternally grateful.

Hear us again today, we pray.

Amen.<sup>5</sup>

### **We will now take up the offering.**

Family God, you are a God of relationships, and you call us into relationship again today – relationship to each other, to the earth and to people and places we have never met or visited.

May we use our gifts, and these gifts of money, to build better relationships and connections,

In Jesus' name,

Amen.<sup>6</sup>

### **Hymn:**

465 STF – Guide me, O thou great Jehovah OR

713 STF – Show me how to stand for justice

### **Blessing**

Christ before, and Christ beside,  
God all around me, and the Spirit at work in and through me,  
May each of us take the assurance that is God with us, into the relationships and situations we will find ourselves in this week.

Show me how to love with your divine love, O God.

Amen.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Prayers of intercession written by Tim Baker

<sup>6</sup> Additional prayers by Tim Baker

<sup>7</sup> Additional prayers by Tim Baker