

5th November – Giving and receiving

Led by Rev Kate Whyman

1. INTRO MUSIC 'Love will guide us' Lisa Redfern

<https://youtu.be/15OuCCZ208U?si=idxQXGVTe87CAzca>

2. WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHT

Welcome. Welcome to those of you here in our beautiful sacred space. And welcome back, too, to those of you joining us online. It's so good to share this time with you once again. Together we each contribute to making a holy time for us all.

Each of us comes here with our own stories, our own ways of making sense of life and the universe, our own troubles and our own blessings. Here we can each find a place of acceptance and an invitation to be fully ourselves. Here may give what we can give, and receive that which we are given, in the knowledge that we are each an integral part of the great ebb and flow of the universe.

I'll start by lighting our chalice this morning, as a symbol of our free religious faith.
If you have a candle you might like to light yours with me now.

CHALICE LIGHTING

May this flame remind us of the eternal gift of light.

May we receive it gladly and follow it wherever it may lead us. Amen

3. 1st HYMN 43 (P) Gather the spirit

Gather the spirit, harvest the power.

Our sep'rate fires will kindle one flame.

Witness the mystery of this hour.

Our trials in this light appear all the same.

Gather in peace, gather in thanks.
Gather in sympathy now and then.
Gather in hope, compassion and strength.
Gather to celebrate once again.

Gather the spirit of heart and mind.
Seeds for the sowing are laid in store.
Nurtured in love and conscience refined,
with body and spirit united once more.

Gather in peace, gather in thanks.
Gather in sympathy now and then.
Gather in hope, compassion and strength.
Gather to celebrate once again.

Gather the spirit growing in all,
drawn by the moon and fed by the sun.
Winter to spring, and summer to fall,
the chorus of life resounding as one.

Gather in peace, gather in thanks.
Gather in sympathy now and then.
Gather in hope, compassion and strength.
Gather to celebrate once again

Words and music © Jim Scott

As we are approaching the festive season, today's theme is giving and receiving.
And I'd like to start with some words by Parker J Palmer:

'When the gift I give to the other is integral to my own nature, when it comes from a place of organic reality within me, it will renew itself - and me - even as I give it away. Only when I give something that does not grow within me do I deplete myself and

harm the other as well, for only harm can come from a gift that is forced, inorganic, unreal.'

4. **STORY: The Emperor's Gift, from Wisdom Stories, Margaret Silf**

There was once a poor, penniless beggar, who sat in the streets of an Indian town, day after day, begging passers-by for a little rice. At night he would sleep on his mat with only a few rags to protect him against the cold night air.

Most days, he would be give enough rice to make himself a meal at night, and enough coppers to buy a little firewood, to cook the rice. And so his life continued, day after day. Until one day he heard that the emperor was coming to town to make a state visit.

'Sure', he thought, 'the emperor is a good and stately man. He will give me good gifts. He won't pass me by with only a handful of rice.' So the next day he made sure he was sitting on the route the emperor's carriage was taking.

Soon the sound of the imperial procession could be heard, and the beggar took up his position on the roadside. As the Emperor's coach approached, he got ready to step out and beg for alms. But to his great surprise the Emperor himself got out of the coach, walked up to the beggar, greeted him warmly, and asked if could spare a handful of rice!

Well, the beggar was astonished! Here was he, a poor man, with nothing, and yet this powerful, wealthy Emperor dared to ask HIM for rice! He was furious. But he couldn't really refuse the Emperor's request, so very reluctantly he counted out five grains of rice from his meager supply and gave them to the Emperor, who received them most graciously, thanked the beggar warmly and then went on his way.

That night the beggar began to prepare his meal. As he washed the rice he noticed something gleaming among the grains. It was a small rice-sized nugget of gold! And

then he noticed another. And another. He sifted through the rice with the utmost care, and in fact there were five nuggets of gold. Five. No more.

He thought back to his encounter with the Emperor. For each of the five grains of rice he had so reluctantly given to the Emperor, he now had a nugget of gold. The Emperor had returned his grudging gift with its equivalent in gold.

'How mean and foolish I have been!' he exclaimed. 'How I wish I had given the Emperor every grain of rice I possessed!'

More of that story later...

One of the ways we give and receive, especially in community, is to share our stories. Thelma and Linda have both written something about their childhood experiences of the war. And as I won't be leading next week's Remembrance Service and I've asked them to read them for us today. As receivers, I invite you to open your hearts in generosity.

5. Thelma's memories of the Second World War.

Nine-year Old Thelma. Written November 2023

Unconditional surrender on Tuesday, May 8th 1945. Mr Winston Churchill broadcast to the millions of listeners (no TV sets, just radios those days) in Great Britain and the British Empire the following victory message ~ "Yesterday morning at 2:41 a.m. at General Eisenhower's Headquarters, the representative of the German High Command, and the designated head of the German State, signed the act of unconditional surrender of all German Land, sea, and air forces in Europe to the Allied Expeditionary Force."

I was nine-years old. Before the surrender my life was walking to school carrying my gas mask in its case. At school if there was an air-raid we had to go to the school

shelter and we passed the time away singing.

One day I was walking in Plymouth Central Park with my mother and my grandmother, pushing my dolls pram when a plane flew overhead and started to fire at us! We took cover in one of the many bushes in the park. My father built an Anderson air-raid shelter in our garden. Sometimes if my parents had heard it was to be a bad bombing raid that night we would go to the Central Park shelter. One night we stayed in our own shelter and the Central Park one was hit, and many people lost their lives.

At night we had to keep our curtains closed so that no light shone out of the windows drawing the attention of the German planes.

How would the young of today have coped! We never had computers or computer games! We played in our lane, making up games, or playing with marbles or skipping with ropes; and with a chalk we played hopscotch. One night we had a very bad bombing raid! During that day the King and Queen, (George VI and Queen Elizabeth the late queen's parents) had come to Plymouth on a visit but had returned to London the same day.

The enemy must have thought they were going to be staying overnight! It was that night (20th March 1941) that St. Andrew's Church was hit and Plymouth looked very sad the following day.

When VE Day (Victory in Europe) came, we had a lovely street party. Despite living through the war, I can say I still had a happy childhood living a simple life.

6. 2nd HYMN 90 (P) Let us give thanks and praise

Let us give thanks and praise for the gifts which we share,
for our food and our friendship, for water and air,
for the earth and the sky and the stars and the sea,
and the trust we all have in God's love flowing free.

Give a shout of amazement at what life can bring,
put your heart into raising the song all can sing.
What a world we could build with our minds and our hands
where the people live freely and God understands.

Let us give of our best with the tools we shall need,
use our eyes, hands and brains so that we may succeed.
Inspire us to cultivate what we have sown
so that nature and nurture make a world we may own.

We adore you, great Mother, O help us to live
with a love for each other that each one can give.
Let the pain of our brothers and sisters be faced
and the healing of all souls on earth be embraced.

7. Linda's Memories of the Second World War.

War Baby. Written November 2023

I'm what is referred to as a 'War Baby'. I was born three years after the second world war ended. My mother and father first met at my father's de-mob party. Dad's sister worked with my mum, so had been invited to the party; if she hadn't, perhaps I wouldn't be here today!

My dad had been an armourer in the R.A.F. serving in Dorset and then going abroad to Egypt and later South Africa. My mother worked in a parachute factory and her younger siblings were evacuated to Diseworth, a village in Leicestershire. Many young children were sent away from their homes in London to the safety of the countryside.

My parents married in the August of 1947 and I was born in the August of the following year. I lived in London from 1948 until 1955, when we moved to one of the many New Towns that were being built to house people from the slums of London.

The bombing had destroyed so many houses that some were living three families in one house. My father's family were bombed out of three addresses during the war, but all managed to survive. I remember seeing bomb damage. Terraces of houses with one or two houses missing. It took a long time to clear the devastation the war had caused!

In London mum and dad had a rented basement flat, with just one bedroom and a living-room, a kitchen at the back, and a yard with an outside toilet. Dad was a plumber after the war and he put a bath in the kitchen with a lid on, though I used to have my baths in a tin bath by the fireplace in the living-room.

Money was tight and rationing was still on-going and didn't finish until 1954, so to make ends meet mum worked as a typist in an office in the city. I started school in 1953 the year of the late Queen's Coronation; I stood near mum's office, which was above a shoe shop to watch the procession and remember it very well, and the party afterwards.

8. REFLECTION/SILENCE

Giving and receiving are the core of what it means to be in relationship, relationship of any kind. They are the basis of interaction and interdependency. They speak to what Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh called 'Interbeing'. This is most true, perhaps, when we give of ourselves. When we give our time, our acceptance, our heart. When we listen, when we extend ourselves to understand, when we forgive. To give and to receive are then two sides of the same coin. When we give we naturally receive. When we receive we are also giving.

I'm going to invite you to sing another of the chants in the back of the purple hymn book, 226 From you I receive. It is a prayerful. For this I invite you to look at each other, around the room, or online. And to sing to each other.

From you I receive, to you I give,
together we share, and from this we live.

SILENCE

9. INTERLUDE 'In the end', Olivia Fern

<https://youtu.be/T9ABh5z7oIQ?si=83QqyE3YCADyoNyV>

10. ADDRESS

Alfred North Whitehead (English mathematician and philosopher) writes that...

'The secret of happiness lies in knowing this: that we live by the law of expenditure. We find the greatest joy not in getting, but in expressing what we are. There are tides in the ocean of life, and what comes in depends on what goes out. The currents flow inward only where there is an outlet. Nature does not give to those who will not spend; her gifts are merely loaned to those who will not use them.'

'Empty your lungs and breathe. [he writes] Run, climb, work, and laugh; the more you give out, the more you shall receive. Be exhausted, and you shall be fed. Our gladness is not in taking and holding, but in doing, the striving, the building, the living. It is a higher joy to teach than to be taught. It is good to get justice, but better to do it; fun to have things, but more fun to make them. The happy person is the one who lives the life of love.'

Jesus said something very similar in Luke 6:38: "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

Which is just what the poor beggar discovered in our story. He gave 5 grains of rice, and received 5 nuggets of gold in return. He'd been rewarded, richly in fact, but only in proportion to what he had given. If only he'd given more! If only he'd been more generous! Then he might have become really rich, he thought.

Of course, the story is not really about giving grains of rice to an Emperor, and receiving material wealth in return. This is a wisdom story, and like all wisdom stories, it works as a metaphor.

And this Emperor is no ordinary Emperor. He's not demanding payment from the poor so he fill his own barns or line his own coffers, as so many in power have done through the ages and continue to do today. No, quite the opposite. So we might intuit that we are to understand this Emperor is no ordinary mortal, but is God, or Life, or the Universe, asking us for our energy, or commitment, our love and compassion, perhaps. And like the poor beggar, who is only human, we too might feel a bit begrudging. Surely, we might think, God and the Universe have everything already and we have so little! Why would they need anything from us?

But here I think we are being called into relationship, and trust, and with that, generosity. Not necessarily in the form of gifts of food or money – though they may be welcome – but generosity of spirit. Because this is how we grow, not by being small but by expanding ourselves. And so the Universe, God, Life is always asking something of us, always encouraging us to give a little more of ourselves than perhaps we're comfortable with.

Regardless what you believe about the precise nature of the Divine, do you feel something is being asked of you at the moment? In our Heart & Soul gatherings which we hold monthly online, one of the prayers we use includes that very question – what is being asked of you right now? What are you being called to do? Or how are you being called to be?

I think it's a really good question because it asks us to stop, to pause for a while and to reflect, to take a step back and consider.

What *is* Life asking of me at the moment? Many things. At a personal level it seems I'm being asked to reflect on what it means to grow older and how I want to use the time I have left. Which is a big question. And like any difficult question, I might be tempted to ignore it. Or be stingy with the answer. I *could* just give it a passing thought - the equivalent of a meagre 5 grains of rice. Or I could really open myself up

to that question with an open mind and generous spirit. And I think we know which would be the most rewarding and might lead to an enriched experience. Similarly, how am I being called to respond in a difficult, complex and troubled world. What can I give of myself to that world that, as Parker J Palmer, puts it 'is integral to my own nature'? That will be not be forced but will be renewed even as I give it away?

It seems to me that the story of the beggar and the Emperor is really suggesting that it's when we give more deeply of *ourselves*, when we give freely - to ourselves, to our world, to our God - with love and without expectation of reward, that is when – paradoxically - we begin to receive gifts greater than we could have imagined.

May it be so.

11. 3rd HYMN (P) 193 We laugh we cry

We laugh, we cry, we live, we die,
we dance, we sing our song.

We need to feel there's something here
to which we can belong.

We need to feel the freedom just
to have some time alone.

But most of all we need close friends
we can call our very own.

*And we believe in life,
and in the strength of love,
and we have found a need to be together.
We have our hearts to give,
we have our thoughts to receive,
and we believe that sharing is an answer.*

A child is born amongst us and
we feel a special glow.

We see time's endless journey as
we watch the baby grow.
We thrill to hear imagination
freely running wild.
We dedicate our minds and hearts
to the spirit of the child.

*And we believe in life,
and in the strength of love,
and we have found a time to be together.
And with the grace of age,
we share the wonder of youth,
and we believe that growing is an answer.*

Our lives are full of wonder and
our time is very brief.
The death of one amongst us fills
us all with pain and grief.
But as we live, so shall we die,
and when our lives are done
the memories we shared with friends,
they will linger on and on.

*And we believe in life,
and in the strength of love,
and we have found a place to be together.
We have the right to grow,
we have the gift to believe,
that peace within our living is an answer.*

We seek elusive answers to
the questions of this life.
We seek to put an end to all
the waste of human strife.

We search for truth, equality,
and blessed peace of mind.
And then we come together here
to make sense of what we find.

*And we believe in life,
and in the strength of love,
and we have found a joy to be together.
And in our search for peace,
maybe we'll finally see:
even to question truly is an answer.*

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12. CLOSING WORDS Two verses from the Tao te Ching, translated by Stephen Mitchell

The Master can keep giving
because there is no end to her wealth.
She acts without expectation,
succeeds without taking credit,
and doesn't think that she is better
than anyone else.

The Master has no possessions.
The more he does for others,
the happier he is.
The more he gives to others,
the wealthier he is.

13. CLOSING MUSIC John Batiste Wonderful world?

<https://youtu.be/9542BuRJq6k?si=d9Wo-mBgHYtMC6dY>