

Circuit Service – 12th July 2020

Prepared by Mr Neil Graham

Call to worship

We all love a good story;
we can't wait to hear how it ends.
Come and worship the Lord God, author of our stories –
each one so different,
but if properly rooted in God, they can be amazing.
Come and hear God's story for us today,
and make it part of your story.

Amen.

This is the day that the Lord has made.

We will rejoice and be glad in it!

A gathering prayer

Lord, we might not be sitting by a lake today,
nor are we in the buildings we erected to worship you in.
However, as the crowds eagerly gathered
to listen to the stories and truths you told them,
we too await your word to us.
With joy in our hearts, and anticipation,
we pray that you will give us listening ears,
and hearts open to receive your love,
your teaching, and your wisdom.
Help our lives to be full to bursting, bearing your fruit.

Amen.

We shall not be hearing the Psalm that comes with today's lectionary readings however the Psalm would have been Psalm 65: (1-8), 9-13 please feel free to read it later. Our first hymn echoes its theme.

1st Hymn – All Creatures of our God and King (StF 99 or H&P 329)

1

All creatures of our God and King,
lift up your voice and with us sing,
alleluia, alleluia!
O burning sun with golden beam,
and silver moon with softer gleam:
O praise him, O praise him,
alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

5

And all who are of tender heart
forgiving others, take your part,
sing, 'Praise him, alleluia!'
All who long pain and sorrow bear,
praise God, and on him cast your care:

2

O rushing wind that is so strong,
and clouds that sail in heaven along,
O praise him, alleluia!
O rising morn, in praise rejoice,
and lights of evening, find a voice:

3

O flowing water, pure and clear,
make music for your Lord to hear,
sing 'Praise him, alleluia!'
O fire, so masterful and bright,
giving to all both warmth and light:

4

Dear mother earth, who day by day
unfolds rich blessings on our way,
O praise him, alleluia!
The flowers and fruits that bloom and
grow,
let them his glory also show:

6

And now, most kind and gentle death,
waiting to hush our fading breath,
O praise him, alleluia!
You homeward lead the child of God,
and Christ the Lord the way has trod:

7

Let all things their creator bless,
and worship him in humbleness,
O praise him, alleluia!
Praise, praise the Father, praise the Son,
and praise the Spirit, Three in One:

St Francis of Assisi
(1182–1226)

A prayer of approach

Holy God,
Holy and strong,
Holy and immortal:
Have mercy on us.

**Holy God,
Holy and strong,
Holy and immortal:
Have mercy on us.**

Lord, it is so good to read your Word,
and hear the parables you told.
But, Lord, we can't leave it there.
We must take note of the explanation,
and work it out in our own lives.
Help us, O Lord, to listen, to learn and to act.
Amen.

All age prayers - Optional

Lord,

I don't want thorns or weeds in my life.

(shake head)

I have ears, let me hear you speak to me.

(cup ears)

I don't want to be without roots,
and get scorched by the sun.

(shake head)

I have ears...

I don't want to shrivel up
through not enough rain.

(shake head)

I have ears...

I need your sunshine and your rain. to help me grow.

(nod head vigorously)

I have ears, let me hear you speak to me.

(cup ears)

Amen.

[Optional 2nd Hymn \(Junior Church Choice\) – StF 61 – Our God is a Great Big God](#)

No H&P suggestion

*Our God is a great big God,
our God is a great big God,
our God is a great big God,
and he holds us in his hands.*

*Our God is a great big God,
our God is a great big God,
our God is a great big God,
and he holds us in his hands.*

He's higher than a skyscraper,
and he's deeper than a submarine.
He's wider than the universe,
and beyond my wildest dreams.
And he's known me and he's loved me
since before the world began.
How wonderful to be a part
of God's amazing plan!

Jo Hemming and Nigel Hemming

Prayers of praise and adoration

Almighty God,

Creator and ruler of the universe, we praise you for your great love, your faithful guidance and your sovereign purpose.

Great is your name,
and greatly to be praised.

We praise you that throughout history, and throughout our lives, you have been at work, bringing good out of evil, hope out of despair, love out of hate, and life out of death.

Great is your name,
and greatly to be praised.

We praise you for the way you have changed lives across the centuries – your call of Abraham to set out in search of a new land, of Moses to lead your people out of Egypt, of judges and prophets to speak your word, of disciples to follow Jesus, and of leaders and teachers to build your Church.

Great is your name,
and greatly to be praised.

We praise you that even when your people have gone astray you have been there, looking to lead them back to you, striving to restore the broken relationship, to put the past behind them and help them start again. Though time and again your love has been betrayed, always you have remained faithful.

Great is your name,
and greatly to be praised.

We praise you that with us too you have been patient, always willing to forgive and forget, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, your nature always to show mercy.

When we have lost our way, when we have lost sight of your goodness, even when we have lost our faith, still you have stayed true, seeking to draw us back to your self.

Great is your name,
and greatly to be praised.

Almighty God,

Lord of human history, Lord of *our* history, we come to you with gladness, with praise in our hearts, and thanksgiving on our lips.

Renew us now through your gracious presence, assure us of your forgiveness, and equip us to serve you as you deserve.

Great is your name,
and greatly to be praised.

In the name of Christ.
Amen

Prayers of Confession

For the times we dash haphazardly into your presence, finding it hard to leave behind our cares and worries:

forgive us, good Lord, and make us new.

For the times when we don't learn from our experiences:

forgive us, good Lord, and make us new.

For the times when we don't take care of ourselves, or the people we share our lives with:

forgive us, good Lord, and make us new.

For the times we don't see what you want us to see and just take things at face value:

forgive us, good Lord, and make us new.

For the times when we want our seed planted in neat rows, when our own plans become more important than yours, rather than letting the Holy Spirit prepare the soil of our lives and blow where the Spirit wants to:

forgive us, good Lord, and make us new.

Amen.

Silence

Here is the good news for all who put their trust in Christ.

Jesus says: 'Your Sins are forgiven'

Amen. Thanks be to God.

The Readings

Isaiah 55.10-13

Romans 8.1-11

Matthew 13.1-9,18-23

3rd Hymn – StF 167 - Colours of day dawn into the mind

Suggested Alternative from H& P 145 Jesu, Jesu

1
Colours of day dawn into the mind,
the sun has come up, the night is behind.
Go down in the city, into the street,
and let's give the message to the people we
meet.

Chorus
*So light up the fire and let the flame burn,
open the door, let Jesus return.
Take seeds of his Spirit, let the fruit grow,
tell the people of Jesus, let his love show.*

2
Go through the park, on into the town;
the sun still shines on;
it never goes down.
The light of the world is risen again;
the people of darkness are needing a
friend.

3
Open your eyes, look into the sky,
the darkness has come, the sun came to
die.
The evening draws on, the sun disappears,
but Jesus is living, his Spirit is near.

Sue McClellan, John Paculabo, Keith Rycroft

Sermon/Preaching talk

The readings set for this and the next two weeks are taken from the third block of teaching in Matthew's Gospel, which consists of a set of parables communicating aspects of the kingdom of God. Parables consist of short narratives to illustrate a point. Sometimes the elements in the narrative are explicitly identified as pictures of, or metaphors for, something that helps us understand the meaning. Sometimes the meanings are explained, while at other times they are not spelt out. For example, several of these parables concern seeds, but the picture language, or metaphor, of a seed is used in varying ways in the different parables. For this reason, it is important to take each parable as a whole to determine its meaning, rather than focusing on single words or taking the metaphors too far.

I would like to start with a monologue written by a lady called Marjorie Dobson, if you're from Christ Church Woodley you may recognise the style as I have used her work before instead of readings.

It's all very well for you to laugh at us disciples, but would you have been any better at understanding if you were hearing one of the tales he told for the very first time?

I know you think we were a bit thick in the head – having to ask him to explain the meaning of the story to us – but we didn't have your hindsight. That story was only minutes old, not aged by two thousand years of interpretation. We didn't get the chance to get bored with it, or to say, 'Oh no! Not that one again!'

And none of us were farmers either. Not proper ones. We may have thought we knew all about farming, seeing it around us every day, but we had our own work to do – and it took a lot of time and effort to keep body and soul together, I can tell you.

So when Jesus first told us that story about the farmer and sowing the seed, we couldn't really see what it was supposed to mean. He was meant to be teaching us about God and showing us how to help people. What use was a story about a farmer who couldn't even plant all his seed into the right place to grow?

We talked about it among ourselves, but none of us could really work it out. And if we couldn't, what chance was there that any of those rough, ordinary folk following us around would have a clue about it?

So we asked him to explain. We disguised our question, of course. Asked him why he had to tell stories, instead of speaking the truth straight out. James and John reckon that Jesus was trying to keep a grin off his face when he got round to telling us. He certainly seemed to let out a sigh before he started out on his explanation. But he was gentle with us in the end, explaining that we were being given a special privilege by being told the meaning. Other people would just have to search around to find that out for themselves.

Then Jesus took us through the whole thing, step by step, until he was convinced that we understood.

And he was right about telling stories. You know yourselves that you're far more likely to remember a story than a sermon – even if one is as meaningful as the other. Look how long the story of the sower has lasted so far and how many times you've heard more detailed explanations of it.

So those are the potential thoughts of Peter defending their (the disciples') actions in asking for clarification.

Although this parable is 'explained' by Jesus, there is a tension between hearing a parable and fully understanding it. The parables (in general) seem designed to carry ambiguity or mystery. They invite us to keep thinking about what they might mean – both for Jesus'

audience and for us in the 2020s. It is not all completely explained. We need to think about what the thorns are in our contemporary world, and what forms of persecution might draw someone away from God.

We may want everything explained, but that is not how the parables work. The first half of this week's reading presents the picture, familiar to Jesus' audience, of someone sowing seed, probably throwing it across each side of the ground as they walked along a path of beaten earth through a field. Jesus notes reasons, within the story, why the seed falling in each of four different places might be more or less productive. He then calls on the crowd to listen (v.9).

The second half of the reading jumps a few verses to where, having answered the disciples' question about why he uses parables, Jesus calls them to 'hear' the parable (it is the same root word as that translated 'listen' in v.9) and he proceeds to explain it. This is where our tidy categories of meaning fail us; it is meaningless to argue whether the germinating seed (v.21) or the soil type (v.19) represent the person. The wording is ambiguous but the meaning is clear. The different growing situations are metaphors for different responses to the word of the kingdom. As such, they help explain why Jesus' message is not received with acclaim by all of Israel. Various factors affected how the same 'seed' of God's word fared in different circumstances in Jesus' time: distraction by forces against God, by hostility from others, by worries of life and concern for wealth. Beyond that, we may find that the parable helps us understand why people outside the Church today respond in varying ways to the gospel, and it may also reflect how Christians feel that they respond to the ongoing call of God on their lives. This range of potential applicability reflects the power of a good parable. It can speak to various situations in differing ways – but all may be fruitful.

In the new testament reading Paul contrasts two ways of being/living and having one's mind set or thoughts centred 'by the flesh' and 'by the Spirit'. The former leads to death, the latter to life and peace. With regard to believers, they are 'in' the Spirit and the Spirit is 'in' them (v.9). For Paul, having the Spirit within is the same as being 'in' Christ. And since the Spirit is the Spirit of the God-who-raised-Christ, we have life through that same Spirit.

The passage from Isaiah uses picture language of rain and snow watering the earth and producing growth as an illustration of how God's word always achieves whatever God intends.

It continues with another picture, this time of creation itself bursting into praise. Here, as elsewhere in the Scriptures (e.g. Psalm 98.8), there are reminders that all created entities may be understood as responding to God in some way. Although these passages are poetic pictures, in our environmentally stressed world they resource reflection on the relationships between God and nonhuman creation and, by implication, believers' responsibilities towards God's world.

We use pictures to communicate ideas all the time. Isaiah and the psalmist both make poetic use of pictures to speak of abstract concepts, such as God's word, or to express the way in which they saw the whole of creation giving praise to God. Paul uses metaphors of walking and dwelling to speak of the ways in which believers' lives are bound up with the

Spirit of God. Jesus, the master storyteller, conjures up pictures to communicate deep truths about people and about the work of God.

Now let's look at that gospel reading again. Gaze on this field – it's easy to imagine, for Jesus has painted such a detailed picture. You may pass through such fields when you walk the dog. Together you stroll along the path, where in spring a few brave seeds have had the temerity to root. But the stones of the path and the tread of wellington boots soon batter them down. Gaze on the field in July: the sun comes out from behind a cloud, there is a light breeze and there before you stretch acres of summer wheat glowing gold and bending with grace and gratitude. Your dog chases away and is hidden by the height of the wheat, heavy with its crop. Around the field is a tough British hedge of hawthorn, holly and beech, all intertwined, smothered by brambles. Come autumn, you'll pick the succulent blackberries, but the farmer's seed has no chance here.

Consider why this is the first of Jesus' parables reported in Matthew. It is accessible and straightforward, easy to understand, and paints a picture anyone can envisage. Some of his later parables are more complex, but for now Jesus is willing to be gentle with his listeners. Up till this moment in Matthew, Jesus has taught and healed, and only now does he turn to the 'many things in parables'. Perhaps that is why he is willing to elaborate and take the trouble to explain, whereas usually we must make the effort to understand. Indeed, his first retort was 'he who has ears, let him hear', but he softens and bends over backwards to help the disciples. Not that this parable needs much explanation. How easily we recognize ourselves as the one who lets worries or wealth choke them, or who gives up at the first obstacle. As it was once said, Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been tried and found difficult.

But consider the crumb of comfort in the last verse. Jesus knows we all have different strengths and weaknesses, different experiences and hardships that lessen our power. So if one person seems to yield a hundred times in Christ's service, but another 'only' thirty, if that thirty is all she or he has, it is enough. Remember the widow's mite? Jesus does not force harsh comparisons between his disciples.

Contemplate which seed represents you at present; more importantly, what you can do to change from being the seed on the path or the one caught in the hedge. Pledge yourself today to one change in your prayer or social life which will give the seed a greater chance of flourishing.

The final part of the parable describes three different yields resulting from seed planted in good soil – one hundredfold, sixtyfold and thirtyfold. What would it look like in our church to experience this level of growth?

In my church we have been in decline, slowly, but decline. Yet during this pandemic we have changed a lot of what happens at our church, we have been forced to change and to adapt. Our Sunday congregation is hard to judge in numbers as we have about 30 to 40 on Zoom, which leaves I guess about 20 – to 30 unaccounted for, but I know some are taking their worship with old friends like Andrew Emison from his new home in Frodsham and their

YouTube stream. Others are reading the service we produce and others are taking services via the TV and or Radio.

We have had some join us on Facebook via the streams of our services and some follow our services on YouTube, at least one visitor is joining us live from Singapore, had it not been for being forced to make changes these new avenues would not be out there connecting with people.

But looking closer to home, I and I know others have really enjoyed connecting with our community via the plant swap table and Food bank / CCA collection point. It has been nice to see people stop on their way to the shops or on their way back, it has been good to connect with them to chat and to be able to share our God's love with them.

Question is are we equipped to help nurture the seeds that are sown, can we be the tool God uses.

Back to the parable, – one hundredfold, sixtyfold and thirtyfold. What would it look like in our church to experience this level of growth? What would have to change? How would we have to adapt? Are we actually hungry for growth such as this, or have we become comfortable with the yields we currently experience?

It seems to me we have been offered opportunities within this strange time we find ourselves in but are we willing and able to adapt and hunt down the opportunities, and if we can are we equipped to share and help others to understand the word of God.

Prayers of thanksgiving

Sovereign God,

We thank you that you have made us all different, in character, temperament, background and experience. We thank you for the diversity this gives us, and for the opportunities it brings to share with one another. Help us to be open to all we might learn and offer, to recognise that our differences should not be a source of weakness but strength, not a cause of division but a chance to display the underlying bond that unites us.

Though we are many, you have made us one.

Lord, we thank you.

We thank you that you meet us as we are, with all our quirks and foibles, everything that distinguishes us as individuals, the good and the bad, the pleasant and the ugly. You speak in the concrete circumstances of our lives, responding to our prayers, meeting our deepest needs, speaking to our innermost selves. Each of us has our own unique experiences of your love, yet we share the same faith and work towards the same goal.

Though we are many, you have made us one.

Lord, we thank you.

We thank you that you reveal yourself in different ways: through your still small voice, yet equally in the hustle and bustle of daily life; through exuberant songs of praise, but also through moments of quiet reflection; through traditional patterns of worship, yet just as much through spontaneous outpourings of your spirit; Through unforgettable moments of encounter, yet sometimes in the ordinary experiences of the day. What moves one leaves another cold, what speaks to some says nothing to others, but each is equally real, each a way of expressing faith and responding to your love.

Though we are many, you have made us one.

Lord, we thank you.

Sovereign God,

Help us to see you in one another not despite our differences but because of them. Help us to overcome the fear of what is foreign, the suspicion of what does not conform with our own ideas, and so we may learn more of your purpose and more of your saving love, our understanding of you enriched and our fellowship deepened, through the diversity you have given us to share.

Though we are many, you have made us one.

Lord, we thank you.

In the name of Christ

Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Father, we pray for the whole church, which you called into being through your Son. We are aware that it was always your intention that your church should be a blessing to all people everywhere. We ask that by your Holy Spirit your church may be daily renewed and empowered for the task for which you give it life.

The Lord hear our prayer.

Thanks be to God.

We pray, Father, that we and all our fellow Christians may be ready for any sacrifice, any action, any declaration that will clearly demonstrate faith, hope and love to our neighbours, our family and our friends, and to those with whom we work and those we meet on the journey of life each day.

The Lord hear our prayer.

Thanks be to God.

We pray for Christians who have trusted you, and for whom obedience has brought sorrow and loss; for those who, as an act of discipleship, have felt led to involvement in feeding the hungry, seeking the lost, healing the broken or enabling the defeated.

The Lord hear our prayer.

Thanks be to God.

We pray for those who, because they know God has made them his special people, do all they can to make others special too; for those who care for the sick and the dying; for those who care for others whose lives and emotions are in need of health and healing.

The Lord hear our prayer.

Thanks be to God.

We pray for those whose faith has lost meaning, whose worship is all ritual and empty words; for those who are no longer aware of Gods presence, his power or his love; for those who see only the hurt and the pain and the darkness of life. We ask that they may see the joy and the goodness and the light of Christ in the lives of his people.

The Lord hear our prayer.

Thanks be to God.

We pray for those we know who have been reduced to despair; for those whose joy has been crushed by the indifference of others; for those who have suffered great grief, who are left numb by sorrow and loss; for those still overwhelmed by the separation death brings from someone they loved and whom loved them.

The Lord hear our prayer.

Thanks be to God.

We pray for ourselves.

In the face of all of life's uncertainties, sorrows, hurts, disappointments and failures. We ask that the assurance of Christs presence, power and love may give us strength, hope and faith.

The Lord hear our prayer.

Thanks be to God.

In the name of Christ who claims us as his special possession. **Amen**

4th Hymn – StF 487 You shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace. Suggested Alternative from H& P 135 Go Tell it on the Mountain

You shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace,
and the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you.
There'll be shouts of joy and the trees of the field
shall clap, shall clap their hands,
and the trees of the field shall clap their hands,
and the trees of the field shall clap their hands,
and the trees of the field shall clap their hands,
and you'll go out with joy.

Stuart Dauermann b. 1944
and Steffi Geiser Rubin

Blessing

Lord God, the world outside awaits us with all its troubles and uncertainties – but also with its opportunities. Send us out now, in your name, to look consciously for ways of seeing you in the world around, and to act accordingly.

The blessing of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be among us and remain with us always.

Amen.

The following have been used as sources of material for this service.

- 500 prayers for all occasions – written by David Clowes
- Prayers for all seasons (Book Two) – written by Nick Fawcett
- The Methodist Worship book (1999)
- <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/>