

Circuit Service – 19th July 2020

Prepared by Revd Andy Moffoot, with prayers prepared by Mrs Sarah Armstrong-Stacey and sermon by Mr Jon Skeet

Call to worship:

Come among us God
You who creates the world
And asks us to look after it

Come among us God
You who speaks
And asks us to listen to you

Come among us God
You who calls each of us
And asks us to follow you

Come God, and meet us here

Hymn StF 94, H&P 463; To God Be The Glory

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-15v9iworAU>

1. To God be the glory great things He has done
So loved He the world that He gave us His son
Who yielded His life an atonement for sin
And opened the life gate that all may go in

2. O perfect redemption the purchase of blood
To every believer the promise of God
The vilest offender who truly believes
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives

3. Great things He has taught us great things He has done
And great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son
But purer and higher and greater will be
Our wonder our worship when Jesus we see

*Praise the Lord, praise the Lord
Let the earth hear His voice
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord
Let the people rejoice
Come to the Father
Through Jesus the Son
Give Him the glory
Great things He has done*

Prayers of adoration and confession:

Living God, Beginning and end
Giver of food and drink,
Clothing and warmth,
Love and hope:
Life in all its goodness –
We praise and adore you.

Jesus, wisdom and word;
Lover of outcasts,
Friend of the poor;
One of us yet one with God;
Crucified and risen:
Life in the midst of death –
We praise and adore you.

Holy Spirit, storm and breath of love;
Bridge-builder, eye-opener,
Waker of the oppressed,
Unseen and unexpected,
Untameable energy of life –
We praise and adore you.

Holy trinity, forever one,
Whose nature is community;
Source of all sharing,
In whom we love, and meet, and know our neighbour:
Life in all its fullness, making all things new:
We praise and adore you.

Brian Wren, Christian Aid Prayers (1990)

For the greed which exploits human labour and lays waste the earth,
Father, forgive.
For the hatred which divides nation from nation,
Race from race, class from class,
Father, forgive.
For our envy of the welfare and happiness of other,
Father, forgive.
For our indifference to the plight of the homeless and refugee,
Father, forgive.
For the pride which leads to trust in ourselves, and not in God,
Father, forgive
Be kind to one another, tender hearted,
forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.
Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever. **Amen.**

Junior Church Presentation

Song: God's Love is Bigger Than A Burger by Doug Horley

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRPJeqjbGPI>

God's love is bigger than a burger, it is bigger than a mouse
Bigger than an elephant, bigger than a house
It is bigger than a bus and bigger than a tree
Bigger than a mountain, bigger than the sea

What about a cloud? - bigger!
What about the sky? - bigger!
What about the earth? - bigger!
What about the moon? - bigger!
What about the sun? - bigger!
What about the stars? - bigger
Anything bigger than this big love? - er... no!

It's a big and wonderful, big and wonderful
Big and wonderful, wonderful love
Big and wonderful, big and wonderful
Big and wonderful love, love, love!

Is this big love, oh big enough,
To handle all my doubts and worries
Is this big love, oh big enough,
To help with all my fears - yes!

Bible Readings: Romans 8: 12-25

Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

Hymn: Ancient Words

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vmTkXNpwzs>

1. Holy words long preserved
for our walk in this world,
They resound with God's own heart
Oh, let the Ancient words impart.

3. Holy words of our Faith
Handed down to this age.
Came to us through sacrifice
Oh heed the faithful words of Christ.

2. Words of Life, words of Hope
Give us strength, help us cope
In this world, where e'er we roam
Ancient words will guide us Home.

***Ancient words ever true
Changing me, and changing you.
We have come with open hearts
Oh let the ancient words impart.***

4. Holy words long preserved
For our walk in this world.
They resound with God's own heart
Oh let the ancient words impart.

***Ancient words ever true
Changing me, and changing you.
We have come with open hearts
Oh let the ancient words impart.***

Sermon

Introduction

What a contrast between these readings: Jesus explains what he means, while Paul is even harder to understand than normal. This doesn't mean that interpreting Jesus further is straightforward though, or that we can't take anything from Paul.

Paul covers a lot of topics, and I'm certainly not going into everything today. I'm also not going to go into details of the implications of the "fiery furnace" Jesus talks about. I'm happy leaving judgement to God.

Suffering and punishment

Looking at the two readings, it feels to me that the Gospel and Paul's message are linked by Paul's mention of "present sufferings".

Perhaps surprisingly, this puts me in mind of some psalms that I find problematic. They're the ones that either ask God "please smite my enemies" or declare enthusiastically "God will smite my enemies." Here's an example from Psalm 55: "But you, O God, will bring down the wicked into the pit of corruption; bloodthirsty and deceitful men will not live out half their days."

This is echoed in some more modern nationalistic songs – yes, including some that we treasure in this country. While the music of "Land of Hope and Glory" still stirs my heart, some of the words give me pause. Think about these lines in terms of our Christian beliefs: "Wider still and wider shall thy bounds be set. God, who made thee mighty, make thee mightier yet." Is that really what we want to be asking God for? Do we think that represents the nature of God?

There's an implication that virtue or holiness is – or should be – rewarded with power and an easy life, while corruption and greed is – or should be – thwarted by divine retribution, right here and now. If you look around the world, and consider the last two thousand years of history, does that sound like reality to you? Do you think everyone "gets what they deserve" during life?

The parable of the weeds implies a less simplistically interventionist God. The weeds and the wheat live and grow together. Judgement comes at harvest time (the end of the age) rather than the weeds being pulled up immediately, to avoid the wheat being uprooted. This is not the same as saying God is inactive in our world. I'll come back to that.

But it's particularly important right now, because at a time when some people are calling Covid-19 a judgement from God, this parable says "No, that's not how the Kingdom works." Coronavirus isn't punishment. It's a tragedy and an emergency, and a time for the world to unite – to recognize our common humanity and fragility.

In the same way, climate change isn't a punishment; it's an injury against Creation, inflicted by humanity. There's nothing divine about it. While obviously Paul wasn't actually talking about climate change when he wrote "the whole creation has been groaning" it's hard not to read that into the text today.

So when Paul talks about suffering, in Romans and elsewhere, that isn't a suffering caused by God as punishment. A lot of suffering is the result of brokenness though; of humanity not being at one with God. That's not God at work though. The persecution suffered by early Christians was the result of their steadfastness in the face of a world reluctant to hear their message. I don't agree with Paul on everything he says on suffering, but at least here we see eye to eye.

More than an absence of punishment

If that's all these passages said, it would be disappointing. But when we look more closely at the parable, we see that Jesus doesn't really explain everything after all.

On the last Sunday in June, Martin started the second part of his video sermon by catching us off-guard: "Ha ha ha, if you thought I was done, no I wasn't." Jesus almost does the opposite in this passage, with what he doesn't say: "Ha ha ha, if you thought I was going to explain everything, no I wasn't."

Just imagine the disciples saying, "Yes, we get the whole 'end of the age' bit, but what about now, Jesus? What about the weeds and the wheat growing together? Is God abandoning us until the end of the age?" I wonder how he would have replied.

Within the confines of the parable, it's hard to have a middle ground. In this context, each plant is either a weed or wheat, and will be forever. If we decide to think of wheat as "people we like" and weeds as "people we don't like" – which is what our prejudices usually end up as, really – then we're stuck. But what if we're all wheat, and we're all weeds? Then there's room for change, and growth.

Paul talks about glory being revealed in us, in a way which reminds me of 2 Corinthians: "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory." This glory is brought about through our adoption as children of God as Paul describes it. There's something powerful about the idea of being adopted by God, in a way that I'm afraid I lack the words to express succinctly. I invite you to take some time later on to roll that thought around, and appreciate its richness.

But the idea of this increasing glory, of one-ness with our Creator through the sacrifice of the Son and the testimony of the Spirit, well that squashes any notion that God is a passive observer. God is active in the wheat field because God is active in our lives – in every one of us, whether we feel we're "mostly wheat" or "mostly weed".

What is the Kingdom of Heaven like within our lives? Jesus himself gives us an answer, in a bonus single-verse parable between the parable of the weeds and the explanation. We'll hear it again next week, but I don't think it counts as a "spoiler" to include it today as well. "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough." God's love works all the way through every part of us; what may start as a small whisper of "I love you, no matter what" can transform us from head to toe.

Faith

One final thought on that transformation though: it can be quite hard to spot from within.

If God simply showered us with riches when we did something pleasing and threw lightning bolts at us when we went astray, it would at least be easy to tell when we're on the right track. Instead, we need to have faith: the assurance of things hoped for, the convictions of things not seen.

This is particularly important when we consider controversies within the Church, and the Methodist approach to "living with contradictory convictions." It's a matter of some sadness to me that our Circuit conversations on the "God in Love Unites Us" report had to be postponed after the first event, due to Coronavirus. The conversations will resume in person when it's safe to do so, but we don't need to wait before thinking and praying. Today, we can each consider how we respect the honest convictions of others while staying true to our own beliefs. How the very existence of those different views affects our understanding of God. How maybe the difference between "wheat" and "weed" can be hard to tell.

Thinking about this, I was reminded of the Prayer of Abandonment, by a 20th century Trappist monk called Thomas Merton:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you and I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing.

And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road although I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for you are ever with me and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Conclusion

As plants in God's field, we seek the love, and power, and transformation of the sower as the wheat seeks the warmth of the sun. The Spirit working within us can do more than we'll ever know. No-one is so "wheaty" that they can grow without the Spirit's nourishment, and no-one is so "weedy" that they are beyond the Redeemer's power to save. If you have ears, then hear... and listen... and grow in God's love. Amen.

Hymn StF 351: In Christ Alone (H&P alternative 230 There's a wideness in God's mercy)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKJfs8C14yc>

(Sung by National Methodist Choir of Great Britain)

1. In Christ alone my hope is found,
He is my light, my strength, my song
This Cornerstone, this solid Ground
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
What heights of love, what depths of peace
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease
My Comforter, my All in All
Here in the love of Christ I stand.

2. There in the ground His body lay,
Light of the world by darkness slain:
Then bursting forth in glorious day
Up from the grave He rose again
And as He stands in victory
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me,
For I am His and He is mine
Bought with the precious blood of Christ

3. No guilt in life, no fear in death,
This is the power of Christ in me
From life's first cry to final breath,
Jesus commands my destiny
No power of hell, no scheme of man,
Can ever pluck me from His hand
Till He returns or calls me home
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand.

I find my strength, I find my hope, I find my help, in Christ alone!
When fear assails, when darkness falls, I find my peace in Christ alone!
I give my life, I give my all, I sing my song, to Christ alone!
The King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, All heaven sings, to Christ alone!

Prayers of Intercession:

Lord we thank you for the earth, which mothers us, feeds us, clothes us, shelters us.

For air to breathe, we thank you

For water to drink, we thank you

For food to eat, we thank you

For shelter and warmth, we thank you

For beauty and fun, we thank you.

Simon Taylor, Wild Goose publications.

Creator God, we pray for our world, your world. For all its people in their diversity, that we may be able to embrace that diversity, and see that each and every one of us, regardless of gender, age,

sexuality or race, is made in your image. We pray for wisdom to see our differences as blessings which can reveal you to us, rather than ways to divide and oppress.

We pray for the leaders of our world, and of our country, for those trying to see the way through this current crisis, to find ways to allow normal life to resume while keeping people safe. We pray for countries at greater risk from Coronavirus, where isolation and hygiene are difficult, and healthcare is limited. We pray for the situation in Hong Kong, for those fearful of the future and those speaking out.

Generous God

plant your seeds of love in our world

Strengthening God, be with your church in these challenging and uncertain times, as we seek to discern the way forward for our communities and our mission. We ask for your guidance as we speak your truth to our world, that as lockdown eases and normal life begins to return, we might be a voice for the voiceless, and a challenge to the assumptions that life can just go back to the way it was.

We pray for the Methodist church, for the conversations had and decisions made at conference this year, for ministers and churches considering next steps and new beginnings as stationing conversations begin, and for ministers moving on this year.

Generous God

plant your seeds of love in our world

Living God, we pray for our own communities, for those feeling isolated, and those struggling with juggling too many demands on their time. Be with those who are struggling with financial difficulties, job uncertainty or worrying about keeping themselves or their family safe.

Be with the churches busy with online services and virtual activities, and with those where online worship and fellowship is not possible. We pray for the people getting to grips with new technology, and those struggling with the isolation of not being able to meet face to face. Help us as we seek new ways to show your love and peace to those around us.

Generous God

plant your seeds of love in our world

Mothering god, nurturing and bringing forth new life, be with those who are suffering or in pain. We pray for all those living with ill health, whether mental or physical, who for whatever reason are unable to live full lives. We pray for those who are separated from loved ones, caring for sick relatives at home, and those worrying about their own health. We bring to you those mourning the loss of loved ones. We hold before you those known to us personally, who are in need of your comfort and peace today...

Generous God

plant your seeds of love in our world

Hymn: 407 StF Hear the call of the kingdom (H&P alternative 770 Go Forth and Tell)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5AkyRFIKaM>

or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WL-UdwB0Qvc> live worship version with lyrics

1. Hear the call of the kingdom,
Lift your eyes to the King.
Let His song rise within you
As a fragrant offering
Of how God, rich in mercy,
Came in Christ to redeem
All who trust in His unfailing grace.

***King of heaven, we will answer the call;
We will follow, bringing hope to the world,
Filled with passion,
Filled with power to proclaim
Salvation in Jesus' name.***

2. Hear the call of the kingdom
To be children of light,
With the mercy of heaven,
The humility of Christ.
Walking justly before Him,
Loving all that is right,
That the life of Christ may
shine through us.

3. Hear the call of the kingdom
To reach out to the lost
With the Father's compassion,
In the wonder of the cross,
Bringing peace and forgiveness
And a hope yet to come;
Let the nations put their trust in Him.

Blessing

God who sows
and God who reaps,
God who allows growth
even in the hard places,
God who waits patiently
for the right time,
send us out now
into the fields of your world
to plant hope
amidst the weeds and seeds of life.
And may we learn
to scatter love wisely
till you gather us in once more.
Amen.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUtl3mNj5U>

The Blessing

The Lord bless you and keep you,
Make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you,
The Lord turn his face towards you,
And give you peace.

Amen

May his favour be upon you,
And a thousand generations,
And your family and your children,
And their children and their children.

May his presence go before you
And behind you and beside you
All around you and within you
He is with you, He is with you.

In the morning, in the evening
In your coming and your going
In your weeping and rejoicing
He is for you, He is for you.

Amen