

*This short act of worship has been produced for you
by the Revd Julia Wiktorska
If you are well enough and able,
why not spend a few moments with God
knowing that others are sharing this act of worship with you.*

Call to worship

Listen with ears of hope,
discern with minds of wisdom,
learn with hearts of faith,
as we are moved by the word.

**For God speaks to us now, Christ calls us anew,
and the Spirit opens us to God's will and way.
Let us worship God.**

Singing the Faith 254 Seek ye first the kingdom of God

Sing / read / pray / proclaim the words or listen to it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XjRYtMHthw>

Seek ye first the kingdom of God,
and his righteousness,
and all these things shall be added unto you;
Allelu-, alleluia:

alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, allelu, alleluia!

Ask, and it shall be given unto you;
seek, and ye shall find;
knock, and the door shall be opened unto you;
Allelu-, alleluia:

We shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word
that proceeds out from the mouth of the Lord;
Allelu-, alleluia:

Karen Lafferty (b. 1948)

Prayer of confession

Let us acknowledge before God our weakness and sin.

Silence.

When we are tempted to look at the lives of others
as though they had the same opportunities as we do,
ignoring the differences in beginnings, nurture, support,
circumstances, and levels of struggle:

forgive us and open our hearts and minds to you, O God.

When we fail to search our hearts about the things
which distract and seduce us in this life
or take away our dependence on you
and divert us from the journey of faith:

forgive us and open our hearts and minds to you, O God.

When we simply carry on without thinking deeply at all,
treating one day like any other, complacently choosing to
avoid engagement with the big issues of equality, justice,
respect for all God's children, and care of the planet:

forgive us and open our hearts and minds to you, O God.

Even as we bring our confession to God,
the commitment of costly grace still stands.
There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
We are forgiven!

This is God's gift to us. Amen. Thanks be to God.

Today's reading Matthew 13:3b-9, 18-23 (NRSV)

In this story, well-known to us as the parable of the sower, Jesus paints a picture of farming as it was done in his day, but with the unexpected ending of a glorious harvest. The words of interpretation remind us of some of the influences and pressures which hinder response to the gospel.

“Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!”

“Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but

endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

Time to reflect

‘I sometimes wonder why we bother.’ ‘People want to make use of our premises, but they aren’t interested in coming to church.’ ‘It’s all very well talking and sharing these big ideas, but nothing will change.’ ‘Young people just don’t want to know; our worship is too traditional.’ ‘We’re all getting older; we can’t do what we used to.’ ‘We’ve started eating into our reserves; it’s a slippery slope.’ ‘I don’t think this church will be here in 5 years’ time; I’d just like it to see me out.’ These are a few of the things I’ve heard people west side of the circuit say in my 5 years working with you. More recently, during lockdown, I’ve listened to a few folk ponder whether some people will have lost the habit of coming to church and not come back when we re-open. If you’re not among those who’ve said such things maybe that’s because though you’ve thought something similar you’ve never voiced it - perhaps content to let ‘things be’. Dispirited, disappointed, frustrated: to some it all feels a hopeless prospect.

When his friends are feeling a not so dissimilar frustration and disappointment, Jesus tells them a story which we know as the parable of the sower. Jesus' mission is not quite the big success they thought it was going to be. They're experiencing hostility and opposition from the religious leaders, and some of those who've been following Jesus are deserting him - perhaps because they can't cope with what's being asked of them or deal with the response they're getting. Jesus' followers are discouraged and disheartened at what feels like failure. They are going through a very 'rough patch'.

In this story Jesus paints a picture of farming as it was done in his day. It may seem to us a waste, but the farmer first sows the seed over all the land and then ploughs. The trodden path is ploughed up, the rocky ground is only revealed on ploughing, and the thorn bushes are ploughed back into the soil. The seeds on the path lie exposed on the flattened earth and some are eaten by the birds before the farmer has a chance to plough. The seed sown in what turns out to be rocky ground grows quickly but not all the plants survive the hot sun because little depth of soil means that the roots are poor. The seeds sown among thorn bushes grow well but some of the plants are choked by the bushes which also grow back after ploughing.

Up until now Jesus' listeners would be nodding their heads in agreement; yes, that's what it's like to farm ... a hard and risky business. But then comes the unexpected twist in the tale,

the surprise ending that has them sit up and take notice: 'Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.' (Matthew 13:8) Jesus is telling his followers that there will be a great harvest.

What a contrast between the story's beginning and its end; the indiscriminate sowing of seed leads to a glorious harvest. Despite the losses due to birds, shallow soil, and choking thorns, the harvest is abundant. Jesus tells his followers then - and us now - that whatever the seeming difficulties or apparent failure, there will be growth and a harvest to surpass all expectation and understanding. You know, I think to call this story 'the parable of the sower' is to miss its point; surely this is 'the parable of the great harvest'.

This was Jesus' way of helping us understand something of God's reign, the time of salvation with its abundant riches. No doubts about him or his mission, no scorn, no desertion by some of his followers, no lack of faith or trust can make Jesus waver in his certainty that God's time will come. His message is that despite present apparent failure, his followers - then and now - can be confident that God's kingdom will come.

The evangelist's words of interpretation in Matthew 13:18-23 remind us that, yes, there are influences and pressures which hinder people's response to the gospel - and that includes us too! The sower expects some of the seed to be lost and so should we. The farmer does not always know which ground

is to be the most fruitful and nor do we. We cannot make assumptions about where and how God will work. The sowing of the seed is to be indiscriminate, even if that may feel at times like a waste of time and energy.

Jesus calls on us to take God seriously, confident in his word of promise and hope. This is similar to the prophet in Isaiah chapter 55 telling us that the word of God is like the certainty of sowing and growing, reaping and bringing in the harvest: 'For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.' (55:10-11) The prophet tells God's people that they can trust the divine promise of salvation for God's word will achieve its purpose and they will rejoice in their return from exile: 'For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.' (55:12)

So ... where are we? Maybe some of us remain tired of present difficulties and feel that there's little point in doing God's work in the particular place we find ourselves or are content to let things slide. Perhaps the real issue here is that we limit our thinking to 'our church' and what we've always done in the way we've always done it with ears shut to the

gospel's kingdom imperative. God forbid that we are the thin soil, the rocky ground, the thorn-chokers of new ideas or possibilities. God's kingdom isn't about trying to persuade people to come to 'our church' and make up numbers so we can feel good about ourselves. It is about us asking how we are to be God's people open to the prompting of the Spirit's call to engage in God's mission.

Reading the Circuit Newsletter June-August 2020 I was struck by the exciting vitality of Gabriel Dedji's journey not only as novelist but also as mentor and encourager of others to use their gifts and talents, by the MHA Live at Home team's openness and commitment to do things differently in listening to and supporting our 'older community', by progress at 'The Space', Ponders End, and Edmonton to remodel community engagement, refurbish, and redevelop.

These are all signs of us daring to take God seriously and putting our trust in God, confident that the kingdom will come. Yes, there will be setbacks along the way but maybe these are a natural part of the growth of God's kingdom and, in facing them, we can be challenged by them and learn from them ways of doing things differently. Be assured, no matter the difficulties, God's time will come and there will be a glorious kingdom harvest of love, joy, and peace.

God's power and glory in Jesus we know
and here and hereafter the kingdom shall grow. (StF 255)
Thanks be to God. Amen.

Act of thanksgiving and dedication

The word of God declares that the life
which is laid down in faith
will be raised and produce a rich harvest.

This we celebrate as we proclaim:

**Christ has died. Christ is risen.
In Christ shall all be made alive.**

The witness of preachers and teachers
of this and every age
has borne fruit in our lives
and enables us to proclaim:

**Christ has died. Christ is risen.
In Christ shall all be made alive.**

We give ourselves anew
to the will and purpose of God.
In us and through us
may the Spirit proclaim:

**Christ has died. Christ is risen.
In Christ shall all be made alive.**

A time of prayer (trusting that others pray with us and for us)

Let us pray for those who are deaf to the message of the
kingdom that they may be alerted to their need of God and
the fullness of life God alone can give.

Lord, your kingdom come; **your will be done.**

Let us pray for those in whom spiritual and emotional growth
is fragile that they may receive encouragement and support
to develop and mature.

Lord, your kingdom come; **your will be done.**

Let us pray for those who have put their trust in money,
pleasure, or success that the nudge of disillusion may prompt
them to rethink their priorities and way of life.

Lord, your kingdom come; **your will be done.**

Let us pray for those in need, those who have asked for our
support, and those who have given us time and care that they
may know the comfort, peace, and strength of Christ's
presence.

Lord, your kingdom come; **your will be done.**

Let us pray for Christian people everywhere that we may not
be discouraged by apparent failure nor make assumptions
about where and how and with whom God can work but
rather continue in faith and trust, open to listen to and learn
from people of all faiths and none, confident of God's
kingdom harvest of love, joy, and peace.

Lord, your kingdom come; **your will be done.**

Let us remember those who have died, among them those
who nurtured and sustained us in life and faith, that we with
them may share the fullness of eternal joy, praying as one
people in heaven and on earth,

**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.

Singing the Faith 255 The kingdom of God

Sing / read / pray / proclaim the words or listen to it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOrkdW5NAM0>

The kingdom of God
is justice and joy;
for Jesus restores
what sin would destroy;
God's power and glory
in Jesus we know
and here and hereafter
the kingdom shall grow.

The kingdom of God
is mercy and grace;
the captives are freed,
the sinners find place,
the outcast are welcomed
God's banquet to share,
and hope is awakened
in place of despair.

The kingdom of God
is challenge and choice,
believe the good news,
repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners
brought Christ to his cross:
our crisis of judgement
for gain or for loss.

God's kingdom is come,
the gift and the goal,
in Jesus begun,
in heaven made whole;
the heirs of the kingdom
shall answer his call,
and all things cry glory
to God all in all.

Bryn Rees (1911-1883)

Blessing

May life in all its beauty and colour be spread before us,
and the roots of faith grow deep into the earth around us
as a living testimony to the joy of the Holy God,
our Creator, Saviour, and Friend. **Amen.**

*The call to worship, prayer of confession, and blessing are
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