

This short act of worship has been produced for you by
Mrs Nancy Hands.

If you are well enough and able, why not spend a few moments with God, perhaps at a time when you would normally be sharing with others in church and pray for them as they pray for you.

A warm welcome to each of you, on this last Sunday of September. We offer God this time, our hearts and our lives, as we come together to worship him.

Call to Worship Psalm 25: 4-5

‘Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long.’

The Psalmist knows he doesn't have the answers. He knows his need and that trying to live a righteous life in his own strength will fail. He humbly submits to God and his divine authority over him.

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Majestic God, we praise you with our whole being for who you are - beyond us and within us.

We raise our eyes to the cross and see the Christ who emptied himself, pouring out newness of life.

We raise our hearts to heaven and receive the embrace of the Spirit overflowing with compassion and joy.

We stretch our arms towards the world and find them grasped by the Creator, energising us with hope and love.

We worship, we adore, we give thanks and we will respond.

O Christ, whose wisdom and love are beyond compare...

We confess that we are challenged by your questions with no easy answers...

We proclaim newness of life, whilst clinging to old ways of being...

We want to share your love, but struggle when it is revealed through unexpected people...

Help us to listen, to understand and to change, that we may act as your children, as your disciples, and as your body.

‘Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.’ (1 Timothy 1:15)

We are offered pardon and peace. **Thanks be to God. Amen.**

Our theme this morning is authority and humility: the paradoxical mystery of Christ and The Way we are charged to follow.

That mystery is expressed in our hymn.

Hymn Singing the Faith 362 Meekness and majesty

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

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXggFYQQTJ0>

Meekness and majesty, manhood and deity,
In perfect harmony - the Man who is God.
Lord of eternity, dwells in humanity,
kneels in humility and washes our feet

*Oh, what a mystery - meekness and majesty:
bow down and worship, for this is your God,
This is your God!*

Father's pure radiance, perfect in innocence,
yet learns obedience to death on a cross:
suffering to give us life,
conquering through sacrifice -
and as they crucify, prays, 'Father forgive'.

*Oh, what a mystery - meekness and majesty:
bow down and worship, for this is your God,
This is your God!*

Wisdom unsearchable, God the invisible,
love indestructible in frailty appears:
Lord of infinity, stooping so tenderly,
lifts our humanity to the heights of his throne.

*Oh, what a mystery - meekness and majesty:
bow down and worship, for this is your God,
This is your God!
This is your God!*

Graham Kendrick (b.1950)

Reading: Philippians 2:1-13 NRSV
Imitating Christ's Humility

¹ If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

⁷

but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸

he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.

9

Therefore God also highly exalted him

and gave him the name

that is above every name,

10

so that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11

and every tongue should confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

¹² Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; **13** for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Reading: Matthew 21:23-32. NRSV

The Authority of Jesus Questioned

²³ When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” ²⁴ Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by

what authority I do these things. ²⁵ Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ ²⁶ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

The Parable of the Two Sons

²⁸ “What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ ²⁹ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. ³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Reflection

Jesus’ teaching and behaviour had been resented, mocked and criticised by the Jewish leaders, all through his public ministry. Authority in all matters of religious observance and life belonged exclusively to them, in a culture where their word

was law. They were profoundly threatened and disturbed by first John and then Jesus, disrupting their power base and influence, and were jealous of such popularity and appeal. That opposition was building to a crisis, as this was now the last week of Jesus' earthly life. He had had the audacity to ride triumphantly into Jerusalem on a donkey, hailed by the jubilant crowd as the Son of David. That was followed by the shock in the temple precincts, of him running amok, turning over tables and driving out the money changers and sellers. Then here he is, back in the temple the next day, teaching, as if he owned the place!

The agitated chief priests and elders aim to trap him into giving them evidence of blasphemy. They demand by what authority he does what he does - authority they clearly don't recognise or acknowledge.

It is helpful for us to remember that the author of Matthew's Gospel was preoccupied by the issue of authority and leadership, because of 'false prophets' and splinter groups in his church community, which threatened both faith and unity. He emphasised Jesus' divine authority, as it was gifted to the first church leaders - his followers. We are told at the end of chapter 7 that Jesus taught 'as one having *authority*, and not as their scribes', and in chapter 9 that 'the Son of man has *authority* on earth to forgive sins'. At the end of the Gospel, when Jesus commissions the disciples, he says, '*All authority* in heaven and on earth has been given to me'.

In response to the question about his authority, Jesus didn't give them a lesson on theology or preach a sermon; he tossed a question back at them, as he often did - a clever question. By mentioning John, the wild man of God in the style of Elijah, Jesus pointedly places him in the long line of God's prophets, who were ignored, persecuted and killed by God's chosen people over centuries. The temple hierarchy is wrong footed; they have a dilemma: they can't say John's authority was from God, because they despised and rejected him, but they can't deny it either, for fear of the crowd. They were clinging on desperately to the power they felt was slipping away.

Jesus knows that if they could not recognise God's work in John's ministry and baptism of repentance, they would be unable and unwilling to see the truth in him. And so he tells a story - a parable unique to Matthew.

I discovered something very odd. In our English translations, the first son says no, and then changes his mind and goes to the vineyard, and the second son says yes and doesn't go. But in the Greek, the first son says yes and doesn't go, and the second son says no and does. I am intrigued as to why the order was changed in English translations; the Greek order seems to make more sense!

However, it is obvious which son does the father's bidding, and the Jewish leaders have no trouble answering Jesus this time: it is the one who does eventually obey. But they are so wrapped up in their self-righteous law-keeping, that they cannot see

they are the disobedient ones in God's eyes: all talk and no action - saying the right things but not doing them. They had the privilege of being the 'chosen people', with the promise, the history, the teaching and the knowledge of God: charged with being a light to the nations, demonstrating God's love and mercy to all and shepherding the people of God. And yet, it was those who didn't have the law or the knowledge, or the favour or the dignity, who listened to the message, saw their need of God, repented and had their lives turned around. The chosen ones couldn't see that true obedience wasn't preserving tradition and keeping the status quo at all costs; it was responding in faith to God, in whatever he was doing or asking of them.

In the story, the father had a 'vineyard' - a much used metaphor in the Hebrew Scriptures for the people of Israel. A lot of work has to go into the managing of a vineyard: clearing, preparing, planting, tending, pruning, gathering. All that diligent, repetitive hard work is directed towards achieving a bountiful harvest.

Suppose the vineyard in modern times is a picture of God's people now - where we are sent by God to go to do his kingdom work. Maybe the task feels as though it is beneath us or not our job, or too time-consuming: tending the disadvantaged and excluded, caring for the troubled or sick, stopping to see and listen, putting their needs ahead of our wants, our security or our comfort zone.

It's ok for us to have said no in the past, to be afraid, to feel inadequate, but a change of heart is also possible; we can pray for the mind of Christ to say 'yes - send me!'

Meister Eckhart, a 13th century theologian, philosopher and mystic wrote that in the soul is "something like a spark of divine nature, a divine light, a ray, an imprinted picture of the divine nature". Commenting on that in his book, 'Passion for Creation', Matthew Fox writes, "But we have to make contact with this divine spark by emptying ourselves or letting go. And then we will know the unity that already exists."

Writing from prison, Paul urges his beloved church at Philippi to recognise that even in his absence, they have the love, strength and example to live faithfully in unity, being obedient to God just as they had been obedient to him: 'it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.' (v13). The beautiful hymn he quotes, thought to be one of the earliest Christian affirmation hymns, says it all: Jesus had all the authority of God - was equal with God - and demonstrated it by his letting go of his status, in order to serve and save humanity. That was his path to glory. He chose to be limited as we are: to location, to the frustrations of unjust policies, cruel leadership, bigoted and careless discrimination, hunger and tiredness, poverty, anxiety and betrayal. And he got his hands and his reputation dirty, working in the chaos of his father's vineyard.

We sometimes strive hard to be more spiritual, but perhaps we need to balance that, by being more earthy. Jesus was at home in the earthiness of life, dealing with difficult relationships, misunderstandings, sickness, abject suffering, opposition. He spent hours listening, explaining, comforting, teaching, restoring and understanding all those no-one else had time for. He demonstrated a new way of leadership - by loving, forgiving, serving and being alongside. As Tom Wright puts it, 'This is a God who is known most clearly when he abandons his rights for the sake of the world.'

This, Paul writes, is how the followers of Jesus are to live: having a serving mentality and culture as a church community; not clinging to power or pride, but by their actions to 'shine like stars in the world', as it says in verse 15. They have the authority to do the right thing in humility: to endure persecution from the zealous Jews and resist the teaching of the false prophets; to continue to love and serve and live the Gospel. As a Christian community, they need to focus all they do on and for Christ, so they share the same kingdom-shaped values; to open their eyes and see what God is doing, even in the awfulness of Paul's imprisonment and their suffering.

As people of faith, we can be blind to what our revolutionary God is doing around us and in the chaos of the world. We like to think we are in control.

In 1989, I was in a pilot pain management therapy unit for a month, with 9 other sufferers of chronic pain. The psychologist told us that life for each of us was like a car, in which pain had taken over the wheel, taking us where we didn't want to go. Their task in the Unit was to get *us* to take the wheel and shift the pain into the boot. We couldn't kick it out of the car, but we could limit its influence on us. I think the analogy works well here, but turned around. Sometimes we behave as if we are the driver of our destiny and try to confine God safely in the boot, where he can't cause too much disturbance. Our task under the Holy Spirit, is to choose to let God take the wheel of our life and be content to be his passenger and co-traveller. That is disruptive - to our egos, our lifestyle and our direction - possibly our reputation. It takes courage and faith - and a good dose of humility.

Have we been driving down the wrong alley? In the past, has 'church work' or 'duty' taken hours and focus away from our faithful living and serving? Have we spent our time and energy maintaining an institution or a building, at the expense of those suffering on our doorsteps: the lost and rootless, those in ignorance of the love of God? Have we been blind to God's active grace at work in people and places we wouldn't expect, or may disapprove of?

The theologian Douglas Hare remarks in his commentary on this parable, 'We say that we are going to work in the vineyard,

but instead of harvesting the grapes, we spend our time rearranging the stones along the path.' Ouch.

I hope our experience of lockdown restrictions, and the disruption we have all experienced, have sharpened our senses and brought in to focus what is really important in our lives and fellowships. I pray it has shone a light on where and when we were 'rearranging the stones', rather than tending the vines. Perhaps some of our practices and routines can be re-evaluated, for purpose and missional function. We all need reminding occasionally that our worship, both in services and in our daily lives, is primarily to glorify God, not to satisfy ourselves; that the kingdom is his, not ours - 'out there' on the margins as well as 'in here' in our church family. We can claim no faithful living for ourselves, unless we are willing to step aside or forego our positions, privilege, entitlement or preferences, and join God in the new things he is doing, which may look very different from the old.

'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose' (Rom 8:28) - even in a pandemic.

Perhaps through this difficult time, we have learnt to pray with more zeal and energy, like the Psalmist, 'Show us *your* ways, O Lord, teach us *your* paths; guide us in *your* truth and teach us, for you are God our Saviour, and our hope is in you all day long.' Thanks be to God, Amen.

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Eternal God, we thank you for the freedom you give us: freedom to work out the meaning and purpose of our own lives; freedom to accept or deny love, to accept or deny life, to accept you or deny you, to let you lead or not.

You too, eternal God, are free: bound by no chains or agendas, limited by no lack of power, unrestrained in ability.

But we have seen you in action in the life of Jesus, when you denied your freedom to come to our aid. You bound the chains of love around your power; you shackled your strength with compassion and limited yourself to our advantage.

Help us to control our freedom by the love we also find within us, from you.

And in that love we pray with thanksgiving, for the Church and the world.

Saving God, we thank you for all who brought the good news of Jesus to us and all who nourish our faith today. We pray that the whole people of God may work in unity and openness for the coming of your Kingdom. We pray for the churches in our Circuit, for our ministers, preachers and leaders. May they serve our communities with the authority and humility of Christ, and with wisdom and patience in this time of transition and change. We pray for the whole Body of Christ around the world, that she may be known by her love and compassion for all.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Universal God, we thank you that salvation is for all people and pray for a just and accepting world, where none is rejected, despised or treated with contempt. We pray for cooperation and dialogue between faith groups, the sharing of resources across boundaries and respect for all humanitarian and ecological action.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Faithful God, we thank you that we live in a democracy, even though life is not as it should be; that we have a voice, to speak out when we should. We pray for our leaders, national and local, that they will listen before they act, recognise wisdom when it is proffered, and see individuals behind statistics. May they, and all in a position of power in the world, use their authority with humility and compassion, to serve rather than dominate, to make the world a better place for those most disadvantaged.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Loving God, thank you for the riches we take for granted: for homes and loved ones, for food and clothing, for occupation, entertainment, friendship and community. We pray for areas of poverty, overcrowding and neglect, high unemployment and hopelessness; for the homeless, hungry, stateless and wandering; for the abandoned and abused who feel worthless. Jesus especially loved all these. We pray that with his servant heart, people of faith may bring to the world and our

communities the freshness and vitality of hope, relief, and care, and the knowledge of your love.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Merciful God, thank you for our health and strength; for free access to doctors and hospitals; for medicines and procedures. We pray for those whose treatment and care have suffered owing to the pandemic; for those on endless waiting lists; for those who have died waiting. We pray for our health service workers, suffering too from illness, bereavement, anxiety and inability to work any faster or harder. We especially pray for the millions in the world so much worse than us, without health care or access to hospital. We pray for all who suffer, grieve and worry about themselves or loved ones, and the state of the world. Lay your healing hand on them and meet them in their need.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Transforming God, thank you for trusting us to be your co-workers, even though we often go the wrong way. We pray for the areas of our own lives which need to be remade in Christ; where our minds need to be changed; for any trying or difficult relationships or attitudes; where we may be inflexible or stubborn; where we are blind to your goodness around us; where we try to contain and own you. Inspire us with your uncompromising love to give without limits and to be receptive to your prompting.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God our Saviour, our hope is in you. You hear our prayers, our longings and our sighs. Thanks be to God. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,

for ever and ever.

Amen.

Hymn Singing the Faith 660 Called by Christ to be disciples

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

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXQSh2iTj2I>

Called by Christ to be disciples
every day in every place,
we are not to hide as hermits
but to spread the way of grace;
citizens of heaven's kingdom,
though this world is where we live,
as we serve a faithful Master,
Faithful service may we give.

Richly varied are our pathways,
many callings we pursue:
may we use our gifts and talents
always, Lord, to honour you;
so in government or commerce,
college, hospice, farm or home,
whether volunteers or earning,
may we see your kingdom come.

Hard decisions may confront us,
urging us to compromise;
still obedience is our watchword -
make us strong and make us wise!
Secular is turned to sacred,
made a precious offering,
as our daily lives are fashioned
in submission to our King.

Martin Leckebusch (b.1962)

A Prayer of Hildegard of Bingen.

We offer you our hands, O Lord, to do your work; our lips to sing your praise; our life to proclaim your glory and our heart to serve you in our neighbour; for Jesu's sake, Amen.

Blessing

Bless us with humility and grace, Father God, as we go into this week: with eyes to see the new thing you are doing, and the courage and integrity to follow your way, in the name of Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

*First prayers: Rachel Poolman from URC Prayer Handbook for 27.9.20
Intercessions adapted from Prayers for the Church and Community,
compiled by Roy Chapman and Donald Hilton. NCEC 1990*

Song for reflection

'Does anybody hear her' Casting Crowns.

<https://youtu.be/lk6DGBezTPU>