

# Morning Worship for 26 July 2020

from the United Reformed Churches at Morpeth, Widdrington, and Gt Bavington.

## Opening Words

*"Give praise to the Lord, call on his name, make known among the nations what he has done. Sing of him, Sing his praises, tell of all his wonderful acts."*

Welcome to our service this morning. We come to worship the God who is beyond all our imaginings, and who knows us more intimately than we know ourselves. Let us sing together:

## Hymn: 67 Immortal Invisible

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,  
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,  
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,  
Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,  
Nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou rulest in might;  
Thy justice like mountains high soaring above  
Thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all life Thou givest, to both great and small;  
In all life Thou livest, the true life of all;  
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,  
And wither and perish, but nought changeth Thee.

Great Father of Glory, O help us to see:  
'Tis only the splendor of light hideth Thee.  
And so let Thy glory, Almighty, impart  
through Christ in the story, thy Christ to the heart.

*W. Chalmers Smith*

## Prayer of Approach

Lord Jesus,  
We come each with our own experiences and understanding,  
we each have our own knowledge of who you are and what your purposes for this world may be.

We come to listen to your Word today that speaks of your Kingdom,  
using images and illustrations that fail to capture in themselves the reality of what your kingdom is like.

As we reflect on this Kingdom,  
to which we are called to play our part,  
we recall that we have not lived as faithful citizens and have done much to contribute to the hurt that is done to others and to the planet.

Forgive us Lord.

Teach us the truth of your kingdom.

Lead us into ways of living that display justice and peace,

that our deeds may echo our praises.

May we may live as people

who have found this kingdom treasure

and having found something precious

go and share it with those we meet this week.

In Jesus name we pray,

AMEN

## Readings; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

In a world without high street banks, the only way most people had of protecting their belongings was to hide them in the ground. In the first of these two snapshots, a man stumbles across a fantastic hoard of treasure, buried for safe keeping and then forgotten. Rabbinic law was clear – "Finders, keepers!" – so he sells all he has in order to possess the field.

The second snapshot concerns a dealer searching for fine pearls. Pearls were highly prized; Cleopatra is said to have owned a pearl worth 25 million denari. When the dealer finds a pearl of unsurpassable beauty, he gives everything to acquire it.

Both parables make the same point; though it comes at a price, there is no joy to compare with the kingdom of heaven...

Phillipians 3: 8 says "I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in him."

*I want you to reflect on this passage by answering these question:*

*"What 'treasure' (a precious object, relationship, job) cost you a lot of effort to acquire?"*

*What lengths did you go to, to get it? Was it worth it?"*

If we look at that gospel passage in a bit more detail: The first man comes across the treasure by accident, but the merchant finds the pearl after a search. Which of the two parables is the best picture of your own encounter with Jesus Christ? Did it just happen, or where there years of searching before you came to faith?

Both men in the parable of the treasure and the pearl, regardless of how they came about the treasure, end up selling everything they have to acquire it. What have you had to give up to follow Christ?

The pearl in the parable is usually taken to represent Christ, and the joy of those who discover Christ and are willing to sacrifice everything for him. But the parable also has been understood as a picture of Christ (the merchant) searching for his church (the pearl). In Luke 19 it says "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Luke 19:10)

Which interpretation of the passages resonates with you today – are you the one doing the searching, or are you waiting to be found?

### **Introduction to Hymn**

John Wesley struggled with his faith, feeling that his life of preaching was achieving nothing, and he found himself crying out, "Lord, help my unbelief!" He felt dull within and little motivated even to pray for his own salvation. And then on May 24th, 1738 he opened his Bible at about five in the morning and came across these words, "There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, even that ye should be partakers of the divine nature." That evening he reluctantly attended a meeting in Aldersgate. Someone read from Luther's Preface to the Epistle to Romans. About 8:45 p.m. "while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

It took him some time to learn how to live the life of faith, that seed that was silently growing away in him unnoticed was growing though he did not know it. And though John searched and searched for the Kingdom, in the end he stumbled across it almost by accident.

The next hymn illustrates his struggle with faith, and his assurance that from such small beginnings great things grow. The last line pays tribute to that evening at Aldersgate when he finally received the assurance that he was searching for, and recognised the true value of what he had been holding all along.

### **Hymn: How small a spark has lit a living fire!**

How small a spark has lit a living fire!  
How small a flame has warmed a bitter world!  
How great a heart was moved to hope, to dare  
and bring the faith out in the open air!

No boundary sign will stand against this faith,  
no wall restrain this preaching of the Word:  
the Good News travels on, it rides the road  
and draws to unity the realm of God.

The single note becomes a psalm of praise,

the single voice grows to a swelling choir  
and born in song, new stories now are sung  
of freedom, chains unbound and loosened tongue.

Thank God for all who listened and believed,  
who still are by the Spirit set on fire -  
our hearts be warmed again, for Christ will wait  
on beach, in upper room, or Aldersgate.

*Shirley Erena Murray*  
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The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard tells a story about Jewellery thieves that has become famous. He writes this:

*One night, a group of thieves broke into a jewellery store. But rather than stealing anything, they simply switched all the price tags. The next day, no one could tell what was valuable and what was cheap. The expensive jewels had suddenly become cheap, and the costume jewellery, which had been virtually worthless before, was suddenly of great value. Customers who thought they were purchasing valuable gems were getting fakes. Those who couldn't afford the higher priced items were leaving the store with treasures.*

When Jesus came and shared the good news with us, what he did a lot of the time was to switch the price tags. For those who chose to live in his kingdom, the values of the world were turned upside down. The rich were told to sell everything they have. The poor were told they were heirs to the kingdom. The outcasts were welcomed into the inner circle of his acquaintance. The popular were rejected and told to change.

How do you explain such a kingdom – especially to such an uneducated bunch of people. C S Lewis writes that it would be as hard as telling you what the fruits of that country taste like. So we see Jesus using a myriad of parables that each give an illustration of a different aspect of the Kingdom that continues to swap the price tags and turn the values of this world on its head.

Jesus says "The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed" – the smallest of all seeds known to that society. Now the peoples expectations at that time, were that when God's kingdom was going to come it was going to come in a big way. It would be powerful. It would be world changing. For Jesus to say God's kingdom is like a mustard seed would have been really quite a shocking thing to say. People would ask - how then will the ruling powers pay attention, how will things change. But Jesus says, the kingdom is so small – its already here and you don't know it – it is a tiny manifestation that slowly will grow and grow.

This really should not have come as a surprise to the Jews at that time. The narrative of the history of the Jewish people was that theirs was the smallest of nations.

In Deuteronomy Moses told the people:

*“For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt...” Deut 7: 6-9*

And as the history of Israel developed, it was through the small and insignificant that God’s will would be achieved:

When Samuel was sent to anoint the true King of Israel, he went to Jesse in Bethlehem and considered each of his sons. And God warns him – *“Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things human beings look at. People look at the outward appearance but God looks at the heart”*

So Samuel anoints David, the youngest and the least of the brothers.

And from David’s line the promised Messiah was to come:

*“But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity.” Micah 5:2*

So it should come as no surprise to the Jews that Jesus says, God’s Kingdom is like a mustard seed, small and insignificant.

Our Christian story too begins with God coming as a tiny seed in an insignificant young peasant girl. A seed that grows, and continues to grow today, so that today there are 1.3 billion active Christians, and a further 1 billion nominal Christians in the world today (and that is not including China where it is difficult to get any statistics on this – but whose Christian community exceeds now 60 million and set to grow by around 10 million new Christians every year).

That tiny seed, continues to grow and grow today.

So whenever we are discouraged about our dwindling congregations, when we moan about the size of our memberships, when we are disheartened at an

increasingly secularized society – let us remember that that seed continues to grow around the world today – that we are part of a worldwide movement. And though we may be small – *“what may not look like much to the world will in fact fulfill all of God’s promises.”* Our congregations may be small – but let’s not underestimate the effect we can have on the community around us. With just a tiny seed, God can move mountains!

And then Jesus says *“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman mixed into about thirty kilos of flour until it worked all through the dough”*

Again this would have been shocking to those Jews who heard Jesus say this. Yeast was a fungus and as such was always used to represent evil. It represented disintegration and corruption – that pervaded the society. But Jesus uses this illustration to show the hidden nature of the kingdom.

This tiny amount of yeast works through the whole dough. And this is another illustration of just how a small congregation like ours can permeate and affect the whole community. By the way we live our lives, encourage one another, the ways in which we engage with the community around us, can have a big impact and permeate through the whole of society.

The places we go, the groups we are part of – if we are living as those who belong to the kingdom – if we are happy, and hopeful, and peaceful – that changes the whole atmosphere of the group. We have seen it ourselves with others, people come in and we say they are like a breath of fresh air, their whole attitude and manner seems in contrast to the rest of the group. And not straight away, but if they keep on being that way – then slowly and surely that influence will work its way through the group and the whole attitude of the group starts to change.

Jesus says, that’s what the kingdom is like – it starts to work its way through the whole of society until it is changed. The Jews were expecting a Messiah who would bring in God’s kingdom and usher an immediate and external and dramatic change. So when Jesus says he is the Messiah, and that God’s kingdom is here, they look around and say *“where – show me”*

But Jesus says *“don’t let the current inconspicuous form of the kingdom fool you. The kingdom is active even if you can’t see it because it begins with an inner transformation of the heart”*

When we become a citizen of God’s kingdom, when we call Jesus Lord and recognise that we are under his

authority, that we are brothers and sisters of Christ – then the seed is planted in us – and it starts to grow. We need to nurture that and recognise that and encourage that. We need to create in ourselves the right conditions for growth to take place. We need to continually prune the growth of the kingdom in us, just as we prune our rose bushes at home. We need to cut out of our lives all that dead wood, all those branches of our lives that do not yield the fruits of the spirit, so that the branches that yield this fruit can grow and become healthy.

That transformation needs to happen in us first, before we can start to transform the society around us.

So I urge you to spend time cultivating, looking at your life, your soul, the inner you, and seeing what needs to be done to help the kingdom grow in you. Because that seed, that yeast, that treasure, that pearl - the kingdom - is the most important and the most valuable thing you will ever have. And when we recognise the value, the true value of that, then we would want to do everything in our power, and give everything we have in order to get it, and keep it, and hold it forever.

When we see the kingdom in this way, everything else is transformed. The price tags are swapped – that which we thought was important and valuable – now seems so cheap – and that which was insignificant to us becomes the most important of all.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Lord ,  
we pray for what you have spoken to us today through your word and prayer.  
May we hear your message, and take it into our hearts, that we may live out your truth in our lives, as we go forward from this place.

We thank you for the diversity and beauty of this world. We ask for your guidance that we may be faithful stewards and care for the environment, and live lives that honour and not destroy what you have created.

We thank you for those who live around us, for the children and their honesty and innocence, for our friends and the joy of their companionship, and for those we love but seldom meet.  
We ask for hearts that are willing to listen to those around us, to hear their need, and to respond with loving care.

We thank you for those involved in medicine and scientific discovery, for those working on vaccines,

and finding cures for the current pandemic. We pray for all in medical research, who continue to find cures for cancer and other illnesses, and we pray for all those whose lives are disadvantaged by illness, frailty or damage. Give comfort and reassurance, healing, wholeness and peace.

We call to mind those who are no longer with us, those who have died and whom we have known and loved. We pray for all those who have made the journey from life to death alone, and gone unnoticed. We pray that we may all know your mercy and the everlasting peace that awaits all of us with you.

We thank you for your wisdom and truth and for your grace which is ours, and for all. We recognise our dependence on you for all that we have and praise you for providing all that we need. May we treasure these things, as pearls of great value, so that we may live lives as those belonging to your kingdom.

We make all our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, Our Lord and Saviour. AMEN

### **Lord's Prayer**

#### **Hymn:**

To what can the kingdom of God be compared?  
A mustard seed falls where a field's been prepared,  
And there, where predictable plantings should be,  
There grows up a wild bush — as big as a tree!  
*God of love, here on earth, hidden things still surprise:  
Loving deeds ... signs of birth ... faithful, Spirit-filled lives.  
Your reign is amazing, your ways still astound,  
Just like that new life springing forth from the ground.*

A small bit of leaven will change the whole bread:  
A poor woman sees that her neighbours are fed,  
A church reaches out to the youth in the town,  
A man shares his faith and God's blessings abound.  
*God of love, here on earth, hidden things still surprise:  
Loving deeds ... signs of birth ... faithful, Spirit-filled lives.  
Your reign is among us, creation is blessed,  
When even a few faithful lives change the rest.*

While some look for treasure or one priceless pearl,  
God's reign is the gift wise ones seek in this world.  
A girl sells possessions to help those in need;  
A boy chooses faithfulness rather than greed.  
*God of love, here on earth, hidden things still surprise:  
Loving deeds ... signs of birth ... faithful, Spirit-filled lives.  
Your reign is a treasure that wise ones pursue;  
May we seek your kingdom in all that we do*

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**Blessing**