

**Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

**Opening Prayers**

*Psalm 105:1 – Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name*

Give praise to the Lord, call on his name. God whose love is at the same time sufficient for the whole of creation and for each of us individually, We worship you.

Give praise to the Lord, call on his name. God whose spirit is moving amongst us today and is available for each one of us, We worship you.

Give praise to the Lord, call on his name. God who calls us into community and has a role for each one of us in his kingdom, We worship you.

Give praise to the Lord, call on his name. God whose son Jesus Christ is alive and invites us into abundant life, We worship you.

Give praise to the Lord, call on his name. As we turn to you today, take this humble offering of our praise, and turn our whole lives into our worship to you. Amen.

**We now say the Lord's Prayer**

**Hymn: Glorious things of thee are spoken**

Glorious things of thee are spoken,  
Zion, city of our God ;  
he whose word cannot be broken  
formed thee for his own abode.  
On the Rock of Ages founded,  
what can shake thy sure repose ?  
With salvation's walls surrounded,  
thou mayest smile at all thy foes.

See! the streams of living waters,  
springing from eternal love,  
well supply thy sons and daughters,  
and all fear of want remove.  
Who can faint while such a river

ever will their thirst assuage —  
grace which, like the Lord the Giver,  
never fails from age to age ?

Saviour, since of Zion's city  
I, through grace, a member am,  
let the world deride or pity,  
I will glory in thy Name.

Fading is the worldling's pleasure,  
and all boasted pomp and show ;  
solid joys and lasting treasure  
none but Zion's children know.

John Newton (1725–1807) (*alt.*)

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**Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52**

**The Parable of the Mustard Seed**

<sup>31</sup> He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; <sup>32</sup> it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

**The Parable of the Yeast**

<sup>33</sup> He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with <sup>[a]</sup> three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

**Three Parables**

<sup>44</sup> "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

<sup>45</sup> "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; <sup>46</sup> on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

<sup>47</sup> "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; <sup>48</sup> when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. <sup>49</sup> So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous <sup>50</sup> and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

**Treasures New and Old**

<sup>51</sup> "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." <sup>52</sup> And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

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**Reflections on the readings**

How do you tell someone how much you love them, or how beautiful the sunset is tonight?  
How do you describe the love God has for us, or the way your imagination works?

When we try to describe things, it can be hard to find the right words, especially when we want to show someone just how important or strong our feelings are, or just how special or difficult something is. In these situations, we might try to tell a story in order to communicate more clearly our message.

We see Jesus do this a lot in his ministry. He was a great story teller, and what he was trying to explain was often really difficult for people to get their heads around. You see, what Jesus was trying to do was to change how people understood God – he was inviting them to see that God is close, not far away. God is loving, not always angry. God is not judgemental but forgiving. God is inviting each of us to be a part of his plan for the world. He's trying to make us see that he is not pulling the strings like some kind of puppet-master who has complete control. God wants us to be part of his plans. To help people understand God in this way Jesus used lots of stories to tell that message.

In today's stories, or 'parables, there is a lot about 'smallness'. Jesus is trying to show that we don't have to be big, grand, clever or rich to be a part of God's family. In fact, it probably helps if we are none of those things! The Kingdom of heaven is like a seed, like a few grains of yeast, like a pearl, like a net. Simple, small, everyday items. I have no idea who said this and I don't know if I'm quoting them entirely accurately but I've never forgotten hearing these words "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." That small group of citizens could surely be referring to none other than Jesus and his disciples. It is easy to look out onto the challenges of our world, and make the assumption that they can *only* be resolved by big business, by governments or someone richer, cleverer, more powerful than you or I.

But the Jesus story reminds us that this is not true. Jesus' invitation throughout the gospels is to be part of something small, a little band of disciples, a seed, a pearl, a few grains of yeast. Then, with God's love, and the power of his Spirit when we work together, when we invite others to offer their 'smallness', we see change begin to happen.

As churches we can become distracted by focussing on large church buildings, full to bursting with people. We often speak sorrowfully about the small size of our worshipping community. I'm sure we have all experienced the buzz of worshipping in a packed church or being part of a huge conference like Keswick or Spring Harvest or Greenbelt. It's natural to be attracted to gatherings like that. We are certainly called to seek growth in our churches, and to bring new people into the love of Christ – but have we sometimes forgotten about the actual people and looked only for better statistics, more members?

In this time of Coronavirus, where large gatherings have been impossible for several months now, we are being reminded of Jesus' commitment to smallness. Jesus' desire to bring a small group of followers around him to learn, listen and challenge one another. Over the course of Christianity, alongside our ongoing fascination with the big, there have been people who have kept alive this commitment to the small. Perhaps in the foreseeable future this is what we need to be looking at. After all the early church met in small groups in one another's homes. Perhaps we should be thinking about this again, just two or three families coming together for a different style of worship.

We have a small group that meets weekly for prayer (at the moment via Zoom), in the past we've met as a small group for Bible study. As we look at how we continue to worship God during the ongoing Covid crisis we should perhaps be considering different ways of meeting to worship. I'm currently meeting with a small group for weekly Bible study and reflection (again via Zoom) and have made some new friends from all across Scotland, and indeed met up again with old friends.

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We need to have open minds. The only thing we can be certain of is that after this Covid crisis church is not going to be the same. We are all going to have to change but we can take comfort in the knowledge that the one we will be continuing to worship does not change. Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever. Amen.

Are you prepared to accept the challenge of a new style of worship?

**Prayers of intercession**

God of love and wisdom, in our prayers today we bring to you the nations of the world and their leaders amid growing tensions, accusations and mistrust.

We give thanks for those pooling their resources to find a vaccine for the corona virus; for those offering sanctuary to refugees.

We remember and pray for those countries where we have family and friends, and all those places whose suffering touches our hearts.

**Lord, may the truths of your kingdom be our strength.**

We pray for those industries hardest hit economically; for all who are struggling with self-worth after losing their jobs; for young people applying for university; for those applying for benefits; for charities struggling to cope with increased demand and reduced income.

**Lord, may the truths of your kingdom be our strength.**

We pray for churches and places of worship as they welcome congregations back; for courage as they encounter new challenges and joy as they embrace new opportunities. We pray for one another as we reflect on the parables and live out our faith.

**Lord, may the truths of your kingdom be our strength.**

We pray for those heading to the coast this summer for days out and holidays; for safety on the roads, on the beaches and in the sea; for those who work in the emergency services; for lifeguards and lifeboat crews.

We pray that everyone would respect the environment and we pray for those who collect litter. We pray too for those unable to get away or take a break.

**Lord, may the truths of your kingdom be our strength.**

And we pray for those who are ill, those in hospital and those at home; those awaiting operations and treatment; and those receiving palliative care.

We remember those who have died, and pray for those who are grieving – especially those who were unable to gather to comfort one another.

**Lord, may the truths of your kingdom be our strength. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

**Hymn Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart**

- 1 Be thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart ;  
naught be all else to me, save that thou art ;  
thou my best thought in the day and the night,  
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.
- 2 Be thou my Wisdom, be thou my true Word ;  
I ever with thee, and thou with me, Lord ;  
thou my great Father : and I thy true son;  
thou in me dwelling, and I with thee one.
- 3 Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight ;  
be thou my armour, and be thou my might,  
thou my soul's shelter, and thou my high tower ;  
raise thou me heavenward, O Power of my power.
- 4 Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise,  
thou mine inheritance, all of my days;

thou, and thou only, the first in my heart,  
High King of Heaven, my treasure thou art.

- 5 High King of Heaven, after victory won,  
may I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's sun !  
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,  
still be my Vision, O Ruler of all.

Irish, 8th century

*translated* Mary Elizabeth Byrne (1880–1931)

*revised* Eleanor Henrietta Hull (1860–1935) (*alt.*)

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**Blessing**

As we rise to face the week ahead, Rise with us, O God.

As we go to face the challenges of the days and weeks to come, Travel with us, O God.

As we go to seek to be the best we can be, May we know your presence alongside us, may we recognise your Spirit at work.

In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.