

Worship at home for 12th July 2020

To all our readers I hope that this finds you well and coping in these strange times. We are all finding new ways of worshipping while longing for the return of 'normal' Sunday mornings. This is my offering of a reflection on the lectionary readings set for this week which include the Parable of the Sower - appropriate as we have been spending so much time in our gardens sowing and waiting to see what comes up. Dorothy and I have swapped so many seedlings and cuttings over the fence that soon I think our gardens will be identical. Friendly neighbours are a precious resource in these times.

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Joan Bailey

Call to worship

Come to the Sower of seeds,
Planter of hearts.
Come today
to the enriched,
fertile ground of God's love.
Come away from the stony ground,
away from the strangling weeds.
Come let your roots be strengthened
and your hearts flourish.
Come and worship God.

StF 116

Sing for God's glory that colours the dawn of creation,
racing across the sky, trailing bright clouds of elation;
sun of delight
succeeds the velvet of night,
warming the earth's exultation.

Sing for God's power that shatters the chains
that would bind us,
searing the darkness of fear and despair that
could blind us,
touching our shame

with love that will not lay blame,
reaching out gently to find us.

Sing for God's justice disturbing each easy illusion,
tearing down tyrants and putting our pride to confusion;
lifeblood of right,
resisting evil and slight,
offering freedom's transfusion.

Sing for God's saints who have travelled
faith's journey before us,
who in our weariness give us their hope to restore us;
in them we see
the new creation to be,
spirit of love made flesh for us.
Kathy Galloway (b. 1952)

Let us pray (words in italics) including words from Psalm 119 (words in plain text)

*Lord God we approach you in worship
expecting to find and experience things beyond
the everyday,
We come expecting to hear words of
inspiration,
to find our hearts strangely warmed
and our desires attuned to you.
We thank you for the joy knowing you has
planted deep within us,
a joy which gives assurance even when times
are hard,
when sadness and joy sit side by side.
A joy which reaches out and touches us when
we least expect it,
a joy which enables us to recognise and live by
all that is good and beautiful
and to share that through the words we say
and the actions we do.*

Joyful are people of integrity,
who follow the instructions of the Lord.
Joyful are those who obey his laws
and search for him with all their hearts.
They do not compromise with evil,
and they walk only in his paths.
You have charged us
to keep your commandments carefully.

Oh, that my actions would consistently reflect your decrees!
Then I will not be ashamed when I compare my life with your commands.

And yet Lord, even as we are reminded of your words we acknowledge that so often we do not behave as people who know themselves freed by your love so often we fail to share that love with all, so often we forget or act selfishly putting ourselves and our immediate needs first.
Forgive us Lord as we confess now the things we did that we should not have done.....
the things we did not do that we should have done.....

As I learn your righteous regulations, I will thank you by living as I should! I will obey your decrees. Please don't give up on me!

Thank you, Lord, that we know that all who repent are given your forgiveness and enabled by your Spirit to begin afresh and live as we should and desire.

Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path.
I've promised it once, and I'll promise it again:
I will obey your righteous regulations.
I have suffered much, O LORD;
restore my life again as you promised.
LORD, accept my offering of praise,
and teach me your regulations.
My life constantly hangs in the balance,
but I will not stop obeying your instructions.
The wicked have set their traps for me,
but I will not turn from your commandments.
Your laws are my treasure;
they are my heart's delight.
I am determined to keep your decrees
to the very end.
For all you have taught us through your word,
your Word revealed perfectly in Jesus,
we praise and thank you. Amen

Some thoughts

'Words, words, words I'm so sick of words', sang Eliza Doolittle in My Fair Lady. We have not been short of words during the last months as we tuned in daily to the Coronavirus update and then listened to the questions and debate which followed.

Today, however, we hear references to the Word of God which is more, much more, than the words we hear and speak in our everyday lives.

God spoke at creation and his Word brought everything into being.

God speaks through the prophets to warn, to guide and to reassure and promise.

God spoke through the embodiment of his Word, in Jesus, 'In the beginning was the Word'. What Jesus said and did speaks to us still.

Gods still speaks to us through his Spirit, through the thoughts we have in answer to prayer and through words of discernment given to us by others.

Imagine, today, God's words falling on us like sun and rain and being planted in us like seeds growing to produce food. Isaiah expresses it in our next reading, God planting, nourishing and always producing a crop. Note the promise at the end. A promise we can take for ourselves in these difficult and unusual days.

Isaiah 55:10-13

¹⁰ "The rain and snow come down from the heavens
and stay on the ground to water the earth.
They cause the grain to grow,
producing seed for the farmer
and bread for the hungry.

¹¹ It is the same with my word.
I send it out, and it always produces fruit.
It will accomplish all I want it to,
and it will prosper everywhere I send it.

¹² You will live in joy and peace.
The mountains and hills will burst into song,
and the trees of the field will clap their hands!

¹³ Where once there were thorns, cypress trees will grow.
Where nettles grew, myrtles will sprout up.

These events will bring great honour to the Lord's name;
they will be an everlasting sign of his power and love."

And now words from Jesus.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

13 Later that same day Jesus left the house and sat beside the lake.² A large crowd soon gathered around him, so he got into a boat. Then he sat there and taught as the people stood on the shore.³ He told many stories in the form of parables, such as this one:
"Listen! A farmer went out to plant some seeds.⁴ As he scattered them across his field, some seeds fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate them.⁵ Other seeds fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The seeds sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow.⁶ But the plants soon wilted under the hot sun, and since they didn't have deep roots, they died.⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns that grew up and choked out the tender plants.⁸ Still other seeds fell on fertile soil, and they produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted!⁹ Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand."

18 "Now listen to the explanation of the parable about the farmer planting seeds:¹⁹ The seed that fell on the footpath represents those who hear the message about the Kingdom and don't understand it. Then the evil one comes and snatches away the seed that was planted in their hearts.²⁰ The seed on the rocky soil represents those who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy.²¹ But since they don't have deep roots, they don't last long. They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God's word.²² The seed that fell among the thorns represents those who hear God's word, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life and the lure of wealth, so no fruit is produced.²³ The seed that fell on good soil represents those who truly hear and understand God's word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!"

Some thoughts

What a lovely pastoral scene, how easy to understand, how many sermons can be preached about the soil, the role of the church and how we, as Christians should respond to these words?

Of course, our churches are fertile soil, places where the seeds of faith are nurtured with gentle, loving rain and sun.

Of course, as the seeds/words fall on us we hear and understand and produce good fruit. Well maybe so or sometimes maybe not so.....

However, let us just think about what Jesus' listeners might have been thinking. Perhaps they wondered if this sower was really any good at his job?

Is it good to throw precious seed so carelessly so that it might fall just anywhere in places when it wouldn't grow well? And if the fertile soil is a symbol of Israel, of God's chosen people, then how wrong that seed is wasted on the outsiders, on those on the margins. Should God's seed/Word be thrown to all people.

To spread seed in such a random manner also, in modern terms, shows lack of planning. A modern company (or forward thinking church perhaps?) spreading their own message would do market research, target particular groups, prepare the margins to receive.

And there, we think, is the difference between then and now. Within the church and within society at large we know that we should care for those on the margins, but if recent riots have shown us anything, if we have anything to learn about the greater susceptibility to Covid 19 of the most vulnerable people in our society it is that we still have the haves, planted in fertile soil, and the have nots on the margins. We are right to be alarmed at the rise of populist politics where many would simply put themselves first and exclude all from outside. I do not have to give examples of this today just turn on the news.....

So how do we, as those who have heard God's Word, who respond to his message, who try to create fertile soil and grow ourselves to produce fruit, how should we hear this parable?

I'd like to quote here from some ideas from the website 'Spill the Beans' quoted in the Church of Scotland's notes for this week. Some thoughts about our response as individuals and a church.

"Indeed, when Jesus explains the parable, he doesn't explain the sower, he explains the soil. The seed falls on different grounds regardless. Perhaps we would target our limited resources to those areas that will bring the biggest impact or return, carrying out cost/benefit analyses to aid our decision making, but this is not how it is done in the Realm of Love. The Good News is given and offered and invited to grow no matter the condition you are in, the culture is in, the land is in, or the church is in. It is universally given and generously offered by the divine sower."

What Isaiah, and Jesus are both showing us is the generosity of God's provision. The soil is prepared, the seed is sown, warmed and watered what we do with that is our response. Next from the same source as above is a reflection to challenge us.

How awful!
How obscenely extravagant!
How indiscriminate of God
to throw open the gates of the kingdom
so that anyone might find a way in.
No standards.
No safeguards.
But a generosity
that is sure to be abused
and just as scandalous today
as was this message
to those who listened to Jesus.
Still there are those
who do not want to believe,
who want to rewrite
the story of God's unconditional welcome,
who want to maintain standards
and conditions
and limit the sphere
of the impossible kingdom of God.
Thankfully, the God of the Universe
knows no bounds
and cannot be subdued

but carries on regardless,
sowing and reaping,
shuffling and shoogling,
making space for all,
throwing wide the doors
and gathering us in.

(from Rev Nigel Robb's material for Weekly Worship notes - Church of Scotland)

Some thoughts

So far so good but over the last weeks the lectionary has been following a section from Romans. Paul's words explain how difficult it is for us to always live as we ought, how having rules and laws does not always help, that try as we might, we cannot always do what we should. Today's passage is an explanation of God's provision and generosity towards us as we struggle with ourselves and seek to respond to his Word. I mentioned before that God's words come to us through the work of the Spirit within us. God challenges us, but in his generosity, enables us to respond and grow. We no longer have to struggle but allow the Spirit to work within us and bring about growth.

Romans 8:1-11

8 So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus.² And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death.³ The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins.⁴ He did this so that the just requirement of the law would be fully satisfied for us, who no longer follow our sinful nature but instead follow the Spirit.

5 Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit.⁶ So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace.⁷ For the sinful nature is

always hostile to God. It never did obey God's laws, and it never will.⁸ That's why those who are still under the control of their sinful nature can never please God.

⁹ But you are not controlled by your sinful nature. You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you. (And remember that those who do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them do not belong to him at all.)¹⁰ And Christ lives within you, so even though your body will die because of sin, the Spirit gives you life because you have been made right with God.¹¹ The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you.

Let us pray

We are often invited to consider what a post-Covid world will be like. Will we simply revert, as quickly as possible, to the way things were-indiscriminate spending, brawling outside pubs-or will we have learned to appreciate the small things that have given us strength, the care of friends and stranger, less pollution from traffic etc.?

I know for myself that while I'm unlikely to brawl outside pubs I will be seriously tempted to spend (although now that is regarded as a virtue !), and already I'm tempted to go for longer drives in the car to see different views thus polluting the atmosphere more than necessary.

How will we react? Will we and our world be changed for the better or the worse?

Pause prayerfully now and think of those bad things which we have lost whilst being in lockdown. Place those things in the dustbin asking God to forgive us for all the wrongs which as a society we commit and to give us the resolve to overcome them in the future either personally or in society.



Now think of the good things that have come from our isolation and ask God to help us, with the strength of his Spirit, to maintain those good things in the future. Let those thoughts fly out through the window to spread through the world.



Finally prayerfully bring to God those things we fear and ask him for courage to face them and to give us his peace.

We pray

Loving God we bring these thoughts to you. We bring our anger, our joys and our fears, some too deep to find expression but knowing that you know everything even before we ask. Spirit of God give words to our deepest thoughts. Loving God, in your generosity, hear our prayers. 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 this today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins

as we forgive those who sin against us.

save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.

for the kingdom, the power and the glory are
yours
now and forever. Amen.

Let us sing 394 (tune Skye Boat Song and if you want some lovely pictures to go with it try <https://youtu.be/uGiCOx1obNg>)

*Spirit of God, unseen as the wind,
gentle as is the dove,
teach us the truth and help us believe,
show us the Saviour's love.*

You spoke to us long, long ago,
gave us the written word;
we read it still, needing its truth,
through it God's voice is heard.

Spirit of God, unseen as the wind...

Without your help we fail our Lord,
we cannot live his way;
we need your power, we need your strength,
following Christ each day.

Spirit of God, unseen as the wind...

Margaret V. Old

*As we say the these words let us imagine
ourselves in our churches looking into the faces
of those around us as we bless each other.*

And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus
Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of
the Holy Spirit remain with us all now and
always. Amen