

St John's Kingston Park
Home Worship, 12th July 2020

*Words to be said together (if you would like to do so) are in **bold type**.*

Welcome, wherever you are, to worship with the people of St John's Church, Kingston Park. Whether you're on your own or with others, the same God is with all of us, and He is just as much where you are as He would be if you were sitting in church this morning. So we begin our worship with some words from a song: Be still. You might like to follow the link and sing along – or sing it where you are, read it aloud, or just reflect on the words.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZugvUQ4m90U>

Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the holy one, is here.
Come bow before him now with reverence and fear.
In him no sin is found: we stand on holy ground.
Be still for the presence of the Lord, the holy one, is here.

Be still for the glory of the Lord is shining all around.
He burns with holy fire; with splendour he is crowned.
How awesome is the sight: our radiant king of light.
Be still for the glory of the Lord is shining all around.

Be still for the power of the Lord is moving in this place.
He comes to cleanse and heal; to minister his grace.
No work too hard for him: in faith receive from him.

Be still for the power of the Lord is moving in this place. *(David J. Evans. © 1986 Thankyou Music)*

Lord, we thank you that you are present with us – that you are with us every moment, and that however poor we feel our worship is, you long to receive it. We thank you that you speak to us through your Word, and hear us when we pray. We thank you that you want to meet with each one who comes to you now. We pray that you will open our minds and our hearts, to receive from you and to give ourselves to you.

The Lord invites us to confess our sins and receive his forgiveness. We take a moment to recall in silence those things that we need to bring to God.

Lord, we have not always lived as you would wish. We are sorry.
Lord have mercy. **Lord, have mercy.**

We have not always let your Word transform us. May our lives show your grace.
Christ, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

We have not always let your Spirit lead us. Make us your faithful people.
Lord have mercy. **Lord, have mercy.**

May almighty God, who sent his Son into the world to save sinners,
bring us his pardon and peace, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Psalm 119:105 says,

“Your word is a lantern to my feet, and a light to my path.” May God speak to us through his word.

Isaiah 55:10-13 (NIV)

¹⁰ As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,

¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
it will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

¹² You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.

¹³ Instead of the thorn-bush will grow the juniper,
and instead of briars the myrtle will grow.

This will be for the LORD’s renown,
for an everlasting sign,
that will endure for ever.’

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23 (NIV)

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. ² Such large crowds gathered round him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. ³ Then he told them many things in parables, saying: ‘A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. ⁹Whoever has ears, let them hear.’

¹⁸ ‘Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: ¹⁹ when anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰ The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ²² The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²³ But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.’

Reflection.

If you've heard a lot of sermons, you've probably been told many times that when we hear stories from the Bible, we should think how the people they were told to would have understood them. And that's true. But sometimes, Jesus told stories that his hearers didn't understand at all! Take the Parable of the Sower. At this point in Matthew's gospel, Jesus is attracting large crowds, but there's also opposition - the Pharisees are plotting to kill him. In response, Jesus emphasises the importance of hearing and obeying God's word, and from then on, Matthew tells us that he is teaching the crowds by means of parables – only his close followers get the full explanation. Only those who really want to find God will be able to puzzle out the parable. And then he goes on to explain it to them.

In modern agriculture, sowing a field with grain is highly mechanised, with equipment that makes furrows and sows seed all in one pass. But in Jesus' day, seeds were scattered by hand. The fields were long strips with paths of trodden earth between them. In the parable, some grain falls on the path, and the birds get it. Some ground has rocks just under the surface, and the young plants soon appear because there's not much soil above them – but they wither and die in the hot sun. Some land might look clear, but there are seeds or roots already in the soil, and the thorns grow up and choke the growing crop. But some seed falls on good soil and produces a bumper harvest.

Later, Jesus explains what the parable means.

The seed is the Word – the message of the kingdom. And the people who hear the word are shown by the different types of ground in the parable. Jesus doesn't say who the sower represents. Surely it's Him – but not only Him. The apostles have also been sent out to preach, so they are sowers too. They need to be aware that not everyone is going to accept the message. And we still need sowers now – all of us who try to pass on the good news about Jesus. If we find ourselves discouraged, even Jesus didn't get through to everybody - but there can still be an excellent harvest. Remember what our reading from Isaiah says: when God sends out his word, it does his work, just as he intends.

The seed is the word of the Kingdom, then. But what about those four types of soil? Jesus uses them to show the different ways people react to the message.

The seed that falls on the edge of the path - by the wayside, as the old translations say - is like when people hear the message but Satan immediately takes it away. Matthew includes something more specific, that Mark and Luke leave out: Jesus says that those people hear the word but don't understand it. Maybe they listen to a parable, and think it's just a story about farmers getting a good crop. Maybe when Jesus teaches about the kingdom, it doesn't fit their idea of what the kingdom should be, so they disregard it. Maybe, today, it's someone who hears about Jesus, and how he died for them, but doesn't believe it – or doesn't really see what it's all about – or why they should be interested in that. That's for other people. So the seed never begins to grow. Do we ever let God's word bounce off us, without trying to get to grips with it and really understand it?

Then there's the rocky ground, where the seed falls in the shallow soil and starts to grow, but dies because it can't grow proper roots. That, Jesus says, is like a person who hears and believes – and at first they're really happy, but when that belief brings them trouble, their faith isn't deep enough to hold them firm, and they give up. Perhaps someone's attracted by the

gospel message, or by the church community, but hasn't really thought about what being a Christian will mean – or they think it means life will be easy. Perhaps they're fine until they may have to stand up for what they believe, and then they fear rejection - or worse, because some Christians do pay a dreadful price for their faith. Or perhaps they fear what people will think of them if they're a follower of Jesus, or if believing the Bible means holding unpopular opinions - and so their faith crumbles. Jesus tells us to count the cost of being his disciple. Do we know God well enough that we can hang on to him when things get tough?

Next, there are the seeds that grow up among thorns. This person starts off well, but (verse 22) "The cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing." This is the person who seems to be doing fine. They're growing in the Christian life, but gradually other things seem to get in the way. Or maybe they want God – but they want other things more. The 'lure of wealth' can mean things we have, or want. There are many things in our lives that aren't wrong of themselves, but do those things become our goal and our focus? Do we neglect Jesus for them? The cares of the world can be our responsibilities and problems. They aren't necessarily wrong things either - they can be really important, like making ends meet and caring for our families. But do they take us away from God, or send us towards him? Surely it's when those things are pressing in on us that we need God most! You know, cares and problems can be the things that make our living for Jesus a beautiful thing to see. I'm thinking of a friend who has a radiant Christian witness despite almost constant pain. Or perhaps you know someone who has many competing demands on their time – and still finds time to help and support other people and to stay connected to God. But someone else might let those things crowd God out of their life. They're still around, they even still believe, but they're not effective and fruitful – they never reach the full potential of all that God has in store for them. Is something getting between us and God?

Finally, there's the person who's like good ground – who hears the word and does what they need to do to understand it. Understanding can take time and effort – but when it grows, it's not just something they know in their head, but that belief permeates their life. And that person, Jesus says, bears fruit. In those days, a return of thirtyfold or sixtyfold or a hundredfold meant not just an ordinary harvest but an amazingly good one. So what is this fruit? All sorts of things have been suggested. Grain grows more grain – so is the fruit more seed – the word being shared more widely, and making more disciples? Surely that's part of it. But perhaps we shouldn't be too literal. Fruit in the New Testament often has to do with the quality of our lives – with obedience, and character, and the fruit of the Spirit growing in our lives as we allow God to transform us. But that's what happens as the Kingdom spreads – lives are changed, relationships are changed, people are made new as God's life grows in us and we obey him as King in our lives. And that itself is a sign and a witness to the life that he gives. So what will we do to make sure that we are, and remain, that good ground, and bring forth fruitful growth?

Prayers

Lord God our Father, we bring before you the needs of your world, thanking you that you are sovereign over every nation, every person, and every situation. We pray for our government, and other governments, as they face the challenges brought about by the coronavirus pandemic, and the economic problems that come in its wake. We ask that you will give them wisdom, and the benefit of good information and sound advice, and the ability to make decisions for the good of all.

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

We pray for your church throughout the world, that we will be faithful to you and share your love with others. Today we pray for the leaders of the denominations in our ecumenical partnership: our Bishops, Regional Ministers; Moderator and District Chair. Strengthen them, Lord, and give them your wisdom as they seek to guide the churches through the current situation.

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

We pray for Adele and Annie, our ministers, and for this church, that you will show us the way forward as we wrestle with the challenges that face us. Lord, may we be united in You, even though we cannot meet together at present. Please lead and empower us in the mission that you give us, and help us to care for one another and for those we have contact with.

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

Lord, we pray for those who are struggling at this time. For those who are unwell, those concerned about their work situation, those facing financial hardship or family worries. We remember now those known to us who need your care...

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

Lord, we pray for ourselves. Give us understanding of your Word of truth, and may our lives be deeply rooted in your love. May we be like the good ground in the parable, bearing the fruit of Christian character and faithful witness.

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

**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.**

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all, evermore. Amen.**

If you would like to finish by listening to another song, here are some suggestions.

Reign in me: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzEkhTwiODc>

We have a gospel to proclaim: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-SPYAgCtkw>

Everyone needs compassion: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=taluSSa9vYo>

Holy Bible, New International Version® Anglicized, NIV® Copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England (2000) (including the Psalter as published with Common Worship) material from which is included in this service, is copyright © The Archbishops' Council (2000).