

**Sunday Worship from the URC's Daily Devotions
Sunday 19th JULY 2020**



Francis Brien

Introduction

Good morning and welcome to worship. My name is Francis Brien and I am Deputy General Secretary (Mission) for the United Reformed Church. I am speaking to you from my home in North London, where at the time of recording we are still in lockdown. Yet I know that as I do so, I am connected with God's people all across the UK. Wherever we are, we meet together in God's presence. We may be scattered and dispersed, but we are still God's church, called to be a light to the world. So let us worship God.

Call to Worship

We meet in the name of God, the Holy Trinity of Love **who knows our needs, hears our cries, feels our pain, and heals our wounds.**

God is our light and our salvation. In God’s name we light this candle and are reminded of Jesus, the Light of the World, God’s own Voice who came to live with us. **May our hearts be open to you, O God, now and always. Amen**

Hymn *Bless the Lord O My Soul*
Matt Redman and Jonas Myrin based upon Psalms 103: 1-5

<i>Bless the Lord,</i>	2: You're rich in love
<i>O my soul,</i>	and You're slow to anger
<i>O my soul!</i>	Your name is great
<i>Worship His holy name</i>	and Your heart is kind
<i>Sing like never before,</i>	For all Your goodness,
<i>O my soul.</i>	I will keep on singing
<i>I'll worship Your holy name</i>	Ten thousand reasons
	for my heart to find
The sun comes up,	3: And on that day
it's a new day dawning.	when my strength is failing,
It's time to sing	the end draws near
Your song again.	and my time has come;
Whatever may pass	still, my soul will sing
and whatever lies before me,	Your praise unending
let me be singing	Ten thousand years
when the evening comes.	and then forevermore.

Prayers of Approach

Living God, Lord of heaven and earth, you are the promise of eternal life: you love us for ever, treasuring each of us in our uniqueness from the moment of our creation until we join the whole company of heaven.

Sources and Thanks

Call to Worship from the Church of England's *New Patterns of Worship*.
Affirmation of Faith from the Reformed Church of France (translated by Andy Braunston) all other liturgical material by Francis Brien.
Prayer of Confession first published in 'A Restless Hope', Prayer Handbook 1995
Assurance of Pardon based on Psalm 86, 11-17

Organ Pieces *Opening: Fugue in G Minor* by Johann Sebastian Bach (organ of The Spire Church, Farnham – 2020) *Closing: Nun Danket Alle Gott – Marche Triomphale* ("Now thank we all our God") by Sigfrid Karg-Elert (organ of All Saints', Odiham – 2020) Both played by Brian Cotterill. <http://briancotterill.webs.com>

Thanks to...

The choir of Barrhead URC, Jonnie Hill, Carol Tubbs, Marion Thomas, Ray Fraser, John Young, and Leslie Bailey for recording various parts of the service.

Bless The Lord (10,000 Reasons) by Tim Hughes and Jonas Myrin © 2011 Thankyou Music, Said And Done Music, sixsteps Music, SHOUT! Music Publishing performed by the author.
Everyday God by Bernadette Farrell © OCP Publications performed by the author from the Restless Heart album.
Amazing Grace by John Newton performed by Judy Collins and the Global Virtual Choir.
It is the Cry of My Heart Terry Butler © 1991 Mercy / Vineyard Publishing performed by Terry Butler.

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Living God, through life you journey with us: our companion in the questioning, the spur to our search for truth, the passion in our indignation, always gently, tenderly, holding us in love.

We come to you, God of love, for with you there is room for everyone, and for all our broken promises, our fears and our pain.

Prayer of Confession

Loving God, we confess that we have failed, we have not been what you intend us to be, we have not been what we want to be:

We would touch the world with goodness,
but we chase after our own salvation.
We would care for your creation,
but we squander it with little thought for those still to come.
We would meet the needs of others,
but we find ourselves reluctant to share.
We would stand for truth, but we remain silent in the face of evil.
We would live with love and compassion,
but we take on the values of this world.
We would share our faith joyfully, but we lack courage to trust in you.

We need you, God, if we are to become who you want us to be.
Transform us by the power of your Spirit.
Renew our faith day by day and make it as big as a mustard seed,
full of promise and possibility,
so that we may live with courage and purpose
and see the signs and parables you have for us in the world today.

Assurance of pardon

God's love for us and for the world is faithful and steadfast.
God is slow to anger and full of mercy and grace.
God breathes new life into us, so that we can start afresh,

thinking new thoughts and making new choices. **Thanks be to God!**

Prayer of Illumination

We thank you, God, that we are never left alone.

We live confident that you will lead us on the journey of faith.

So we ask that you speak to us now:

Holy Spirit, open our minds and our souls to the truth.

Move us with your word -

that we may listen with ears of hope,

learn with hearts of faith

and live in your world with love. **Amen**

Reading: *St Matthew 13: 24-30 & 36-43*

Jesus put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?" He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.' He answered, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are

Hymn:

It is the Cry of My Heart

Terry Butler © 1991 Mercy / Vineyard Publishing

It is the cry of my heart to follow You!

It is the cry of my heart to be close to You!

It is the cry of my heart to follow all of the days of my Life!

1: Teach me Your holy ways O Lord
so I can walk in Your truth.

Teach me Your holy ways O Lord
& make me wholly devoted to You.

2: Open my eyes so I can see
the wonderful things that You do.

Open my heart up more and more
and make it wholly devoted to You

Benediction

This is still God's world. May we live in it with faith.

This is still God's world. May we live in it with hope.

This is still God's world. May we live in it with love.

May we be good.

May we be light.

May we be salt.

And trust that God will take care of the rest.

And may 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.**

Gracious God, you have created us, you have set us free and loved us into life, You have spoken your word and shown us your way. Trusting that you hold this world in your loving care, we bring to you our prayers for this day.

For your world in need, where poverty, conflict, political chaos, and destruction of the earth are overwhelming: hear our prayers, gracious God....

For the leaders of all nations and for all in positions of power and responsibility, that they may act in such a way that the earth and all its people can flourish: hear our prayers, gracious God...

For the church of Jesus Christ around the world, for the United Reformed Church and for our sister churches here in the UK, that we may be faithful to our calling hear our prayers, gracious God....

For those we know and name now – for family members, friends, people in our congregation, neighbours who need our prayers: hear our prayers, gracious God....

And for ourselves we pray. Guard us against all that distracts us from your kingdom. Bless us with wisdom and patience and keep us rooted and grounded in you.

This we pray, as we say:

The Lord’s Prayer

angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

Hymn: *Everyday God*
Bernadette Farrell 2016 © OCP Publications

Earth's creator, Everyday God, Loving Maker, O Jesus, You who shaped us, O Spirit, recreate us, Come, be with us.	6: God of laughter, Everyday God, God of sorrow, O Jesus, home and shelter, O Spirit, strong & patient, come, be with us.
2: In your presence, Everyday God, we are gathered, O Jesus, You have called us, O Spirit, to restore us, Come, be with us.	7: Way of freedom, Everyday God, Star of morning, O Jesus, timeless healer, O Spirit, flame eternal, Come, be with us.
3: Life of all lives, Everyday God, Love of all loves, O Jesus, Hope of all hopes, O Spirit, Light of all lights, Come, be with us.	8: Word of gladness, Everyday God, Word of mercy, O Jesus, Word of friendship, O Spirit, Word of challenge, Come, be with us.
4: In our resting, Everyday God, in our rising, O Jesus, in our hoping, O Spirit, in our waiting, come, be with us.	9: Gentle father, Everyday God, faithful brother, O Jesus, tender sister, O Spirit. Loving mother, come, be with us.
5: In our dreaming, Everyday God, in our daring, O Jesus, in our searching, O Spirit, in our sharing, come, be with us.	10: Our beginning, Everyday God, our unfolding, O Jesus, our enduring, O Spirit, journey's ending, come, be with us.

11: Alleluia, Everyday God, now and always, O Jesus,
alleluia, O Spirit, through all ages, come, be with us.

Sermon

Just as the country was about to go into lockdown and when panic buying was rife, I was waiting at the bus stop near the supermarket. I was soon joined by an elderly woman, carrying shopping. She was clearly keen to talk. She could not believe how people were behaving in the supermarket. As she was about to take a packet of biscuits to put into her basket, someone had pushed in front of her and in one fell swoop emptied the entire contents of the biscuits shelf straight into their trolley. They then marched off without so much as a by your leave. My bus stop companion was outraged and after venting about it for quite a while, she concluded with the rather memorable comment: Well, I hope that by the time this lockdown is over they will be really fat!

This is a rather trivial story to illustrate something very difficult and troubling, which is that good and bad co-exist, that the good don't always get their reward and those who need justice are sometimes denied it. What goes around doesn't always come around. Our world is messy and it is hard to understand why things are the way they are. As people of faith what do we say? Where is God in all this? Why can the children of the evil one roam freely and even seem to flourish?

These are the theological questions that Matthew's parable seems to raise too. They are difficult questions, and they are uncomfortable.

Matthew addresses them through a parable that Jesus tells his disciples. It is unique to Matthew, though there are some parallels with the parable of the dragnet we find in Mark. Matthew places it right at the heart of his gospel, as part of a set of parables about God's kingdom, the reign of God - the essence of Jesus' good news to the world. It is a complex parable, but told in imagery everyone could relate to: wheat and weeds. It deals with difficult issues, and it is perhaps really told to

We believe in Jesus Christ.

**Despite the centuries which separate us
from the time when he came to earth, we believe in His word.**

**Despite our incomprehension and our doubt,
we believe in His resurrection.**

Despite his weakness and poverty, we believe in His reign.

We believe in the Holy Spirit.

Despite appearances we believe He guides the Church;

despite death we believe in eternal life;

despite ignorance and disbelief,

we believe that the Kingdom of God is promised to all. Amen.

Offertory

Our giving is an essential part of our discipleship and of our worship. Reflect for a moment on the gifts you have been able to give in the past week. Perhaps you have volunteered, helped a friend or neighbour, given to your local food bank, or made a donation to a charity of your choice. Think also for a moment on how you give to your local church: perhaps you are filling and keeping your envelope for each week for when you gather again in your church building. Perhaps you give by standing order or bank transfer. However we give and whatever we give, all our gifts are a response to the overwhelming generosity of God. So let us pray:

Generous God,

we offer you our gifts - of love, of service, and of money.

Use these gifts, we pray, that they may sow seeds of hope
and bring closer your dream of justice and peace. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

We join now in prayer as the people of God. Where there are silences,
please use them to offer your personal prayers...

who governs the Church? You or the Holy Spirit? Very well, then, go to sleep, Angelo.”

We may not like or understand some of the things that happen in our lives or in our mixed and messy world. But we can trust that ultimately our lives and the world we live in are in God’s hand. All we need to do is just be: being true to our roots, stretching out to the light so that we will shine like the sun and trusting that in the end the harvest is God’s. Amen.

Hymn *Amazing Grace*
John Newton

Amazing grace (how sweet the sound) that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.	3 Through many dangers, toils and snares we have already come: 'twas grace has brought us safe thus far, and grace will lead us home.
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2 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved; how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!	4: When we’ve been there ten thousand years bright shining as the Sun, we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise, than when we’ve first begun.
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Affirmation of Faith

We believe in God.
Despite His silence and His secrets we believe that He lives.
Despite evil and suffering we believe that He made the world
so that all would be happy in life.
Despite the limitations of our reason and the revolts of our hearts,
we believe in God.

warn of premature judgement, and to tell the disciples who is really in charge.

Jesus tells the disciples that the world is not pure and perfect. It may have started out that way, but some time during the night, while everyone was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and then went away. So, when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well.

You may be a keen gardener, or you may have taken it up during lockdown. If so, you will know how annoying weeds can be. They grow rather well; they don’t need any help from anyone. This particular weed was a very tricky one: darnel or rye grass according to the commentaries. A weed that looks just like wheat. I looked it up and it is described as wheat’s evil twin. That says it all really. It looks just like wheat especially in the early stages.

The slaves of the householder want to spring into action immediately. Let’s pull them up before they take over everything. But the master stops them. If you gather the weeds, you will uproot the wheat with them, he says. Let both of them grow until the harvest; and at the harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.

That is a rather surprising and puzzling statement. Is the suggestion that we should be passive in the face of evil, that we should do nothing when we can see that things are going wrong? Even stronger, are we told that doing nothing is actually less harmful than doing good?

What this really is, I think, is a warning against premature judgement. I don’t really like weeding much and that is not just because it is back breaking. It’s because I just don’t know enough about plants. In my eagerness to tidy up I have weeded out many a good, and dare I say it, expensive plant. I have destroyed the good with the bad. And that is what is at stake here too: the weed and the wheat look too similar. It is

all too easy to exterminate something that is good. It is all too easy to wade into a situation thinking you are doing good and finding out you are doing the opposite.

Many years ago I was part of the leadership team of a youth in mission camp, as it was called, here in the UK, where an international group of young people came to work in and with a community on a practical project. At the end of the project we organised an open-air concert and invited a rock band to come and play. Their fee was a bit expensive, or so we thought, and being church we had some debate over having a collection. We decided against it, as it was our gift to the community. People turned out in great numbers and the concert was a huge success, but towards the end of it I noticed a woman from the community going round and asking people for money. She was known for begging by the local shop to buy alcohol. Indignant and over zealous I rushed to the local minister. How dare she use this occasion to beg for money, what would people think? Shouldn't we stop her? The minister was relaxed about it, he knew his people well. Just leave it, he said, it'll be fine. And he was right. Shortly afterwards she came over to him, gave him a hug, handed him her bag of money and said: This is for the church. Thank you for the concert.

I wish I could say that that was the last time I ever waded in, eager and over zealous, but that is not the case. And I am quite sure I am not the only one. And that is why this parable stands as a warning. Against reading situations wrongly and wading in. Against being so sure that we know what is good and what is bad.

Matthew's parable is in a sense a warning, against thinking that we have it all figured out how to judge good from evil, right from wrong, moral from immoral. The main characters in this very parable should remind us of that. It is not all that long ago that Christians thought it okay that a master should have slaves and used the Bible to justify it.

Best to wait, best to let the weeds and wheat grow together until it is time to harvest, when it is easier to tell the good from the bad.

And here's another thing. Weeds may turn out to be useful in the end. There is a hint of that in the parable. In first-century Palestine either manure or dried weeds would be used for cooking fuel. By letting the weeds grow too, the farmer would not only have wheat to make the bread, but also the fuel to fire the oven. All they needed was to wait, to tolerate the mess for a while, because it would come good in the end.

Our current situation seems to be full of weeds, in fact in the face of the Covid 19 pandemic the field seems to be full of that. We have seen behaviour in people that has been discouraging and sometimes shocking. Including in those we expect to govern and lead us. And yet, we have also seen incredible acts of dedication, kindness, care and love. We have seen a coming together of community and society in a way that we no longer thought possible, and it has been heartening. We have seen a rediscovery of what it is to be church. Not the building, but the people, people who have been finding ingenious ways to continue to worship and to serve their communities. It is as if the weeds have woken up the wheat and urged it to grow stronger.

And perhaps that is the message of this parable. Our world is a mixed and messy field of wheat and weeds, where the children of the kingdom and the children of the evil one live side by side. But it is still God's world. And in this mixed and messy field God calls us to be wheat. In fact, to be the best wheat we can be: to live the gospel, to be the light, to be the salt. To be the good in the world with the full awareness of what the resistance will be. To be light when darkness will surely try to snuff it out. To be salt when blandness and conformity are always the easier paths.

To be all that. And to trust that God will take care of the rest.

Barbara Brown Taylor recounts a story she once read about Pope John XXIII, who ended his lengthy prayers each night by saying to himself, "But