Virtual Worship: Sunday 12th July 2020

Good morning everyone, and welcome to worship with the churches of Fleet URC and Beacon Hill URC. My name is Ruth Dillon and I am the minister of Fleet URC and Beacon Hill URC and I shall be guiding us in prayer today, along with Rev John Mackerness, who will be leading our reflection, closing prayer and blessing.

Our opening words come from **Psalm 65; 9-13,** and if you are able, and have a Bible to hand, please say the words with me.

*You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it.*

*You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth. You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness.*

*The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.*

The theme for today’s service is ‘***God’s amazing generosity’***, focussing on the Parable of the Sower in the Gospel of Matthew.

However, let us pause and put aside the distractions of the moment,

to be still before our God,

to abide in the shadow of God,

to be with the God in whom we trust.

**Opening song**

Jubilate, everybody,

serve the Lord in all your ways,

and come before His presence singing:

enter now His courts with praise.

For the Lord our God is gracious,

and His mercy everlasting.

Jubilate, jubilate, jubilate Deo!

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**Call to worship**

Leader Gracious Lord, we might not be sitting by a lake today. However, as the crowds eagerly gathered to listen to the stories and truths you told them, we too await your word to us.
**All With joy in our hearts, and anticipation, we pray that you will give us listening ears, and hearts open to receive your love,
your teaching, and your wisdom. Amen.**

**Prayers of Adoration, confession and Lord’s Prayer**

Gracious God,
we thank you that all good gifts come from you.
We thank you for all you have already given us.
And, as the good soil welcomes the seed,
and causes it to grow,
we welcome you to take root and flourish in our lives.**.**

But, Lord, we cannot leave it there.

May we always recognise your goodness for us in the small ways, not just the grand gestures.

For the times we dash haphazardly into your presence, finding it hard to leave behind our cares and worries:
**Response: Forgive us, good Lord, and make us new.**

For the times when we don’t learn from our experiences:
**Response: Forgive us, good Lord, and make us new.**

For the times when we don’t take care of ourselves,
or the people we share our lives with:
**Response: Forgive us, good Lord, and make us new.**

For the times we don’t see what you want us to see
and just take things at face value:
**Response: Forgive us, good Lord, and make us new.**

For the times when we want our seeds planted in neat rows, when our own plans become more important than yours, rather than letting the Holy Spirit prepare the soil of our lives and blow where the Spirit wants to:
**Response: Forgive us, good Lord, and make us new.**

Help us, O Lord, to listen, to learn, to act and grow.
*And now let us be silent before God as we open our hearts to seek God’s forgiveness.*

God, in whom we live and move and have our being,

Your tenderness and mercy surround us,

and make us whole again -

restored, forgiven and free.

In your sight we are new creations, full of potential and vessels of love.

In Jesus name we pray Amen

And now let us say the prayer that Jesus taught his friends to say:

**Readings:** Now we shall hear today’s readings.

**Isaiah 55:10-13** read by Colin McClune

**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 thornbush will grow the juniper, and instead of briers the myrtle will grow. This will be for the LORD’s renown, for an everlasting sign, that will endure forever.

**Matthew 13:1-9.18-23** read by Liz McClune

1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake.

2 Such large crowds gathered around 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. 9 Whoever 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: Rev’d John Mackerness**

Hello. It’s good to be sharing worship with you from our back bedroom that has become my study as Jane, my wife, has taken over the office.

I doubt that there are many of us who haven’t heard the parable of the sower before and preachers have interpreted it in many different ways.

The people that created the lectionary have set the parable of the sower against three other readings which so often get ignored. Taken together these readings encourage us to look at the reading from Matthew in a slightly different way.

The Old Testament readings from Isaiah and Psalm 65 encourage us to look at the story from the perspective not of the seed or of the soil but of the sower. For this is God’s story of amazing generosity to God’s people that Jesus draws on when he tells the parable.

Even in lockdown it’s hard for most of us to imagine what it must be like to be a prisoner or to be cut off from our own land not just for a few weeks but for many years. But if we are to experience the full power of Isaiah 55 then that’s what we are being asked to do.

Imagine your land ravaged by an enemy. Your sacred buildings and texts have been destroyed. You’ve no king and you have been sent into exile where your life has often been little better than that of a slave. Even your God appears to have deserted you. You have been handed a sentence that will last for generations.

Then along comes someone with a message of hope.

Your God hasn’t deserted you but has been with you all the time. Now the time is coming when you will be set free. What’s more your God promises you that the journey home will be easy and that the whole of creation will rejoice at your return. Your God who you had rejected is about to show his amazing generosity to you. God’s grace will fill your lives. Your God will even make use of foreign Kings to make good all his promises; promises that were made not just to you but to your ancestors right back to Abraham and beyond.

Your God is a faithful God who doesn’t abandon his people even if they turn their back on him. God’s plan will come good in the end even when it looks as though things have gone wrong.

But you must have faith. You must trust in God.

In the same way that I have never been a prisoner or in exile I’m also not much of a gardener. But experience tells me that you never get 100% germination of seed.

Every year the sower goes out into the field knowing that not all the seed that is sown will grow and yield a harvest. Even today when farming techniques have improved vastly over the way that seed was sown for centuries that is still true.

But does it stop the farmer? No, it doesn’t.

The farmer simply carries on and makes allowance for the wastage in the hope that, given the right amounts of rain and sun and in land that is properly prepared enough of the seed will germinate and yield a sufficient harvest to give seed corn for next year, feed the family and leave some to sell to buy the things that are needed for the next year.

God knows that not everyone who hears the good news of God’s love and saving grace will respond and believe. And Jesus proved that when he preached to the multitudes and some responded but others ignored what he said.

But does that stop God loving people? Does that stop God being generous and only keeping the good news for a select few?

Of course it doesn’t, even if that’s what we would like to do sometimes. The harsher the conditions the more generous God is.

So why should we get discouraged when our efforts at sowing the gospel produce such a poor reward?

Perhaps our task is simply to prepare the ground in which, one day, the seed will land and grow and yield a rich harvest; and what a harvest it is. A normal harvest might yield 6 to 10-fold but this harvest will yield 30, 60 or even a 100-fold. If we want a final reminder of God’s incredible generosity, then we only need to turn to the Epistle for today Romans 8:1 - 11.

In it Paul reminds us of God’s ultimate act of generosity, of love for all creation, the gift of his son our Lord Jesus Christ who was crucified, rose again and ascended into heaven so that by faith in him, we might be set free from sin; that we might live the life which God has set out for us; that we wouldn’t face the condemnation that God’s law demands of us.

As spirit filled people, ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, gifted by God we are expected to be the ground that yields that marvellous harvest as the Word under the guidance of the Holy Spirit takes root in our lives.

That is our response to God’s amazing grace.

But there is more.

Isaiah wrote ‘For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they’ve shut their eyes; unless they look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn. And I would heal them’ says God.

One of the positive things to come out of this crisis is that more people have been searching for spiritual things. They have discovered the Christian faith online and some will have turned, and God will have healed them.

Whether they will be like the seed that grows amongst the weeds and is choked only time will tell. But some will go on to yield a rich harvest.

Lord God, help us to identify the people around us whose soil is shallow and where little will grow.
Help us to hold them up in love before you. Show us practical ways to help them and share your love with them.
Amen.

**Prayers of Intercession**

God of Amazing Grace,

we pray today for all the people
given the great responsibility of spreading your gospel.

**May your seeds of love and grace flourish and grow.**

We pray for the Church worldwide,
but particularly in the places where people
are still persecuted for their beliefs.

**May your seeds of love and grace flourish and grow.**

We pray for our ministers,
who prayerfully seek your face, and bring us the words
and understanding we need to become more faithful followers of you.
**May your seeds of love and grace flourish and grow.**

We pray for writers and poets, as they pore over your word,
and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit
to bring your message to life on the page.

**May your seeds of love and grace flourish and grow.**

We pray for artists and all craftspeople who draw inspiration
from your word, and speak to us through their creations.
**May your seeds of love and grace flourish and grow.**

***Now in the silence let us bring our private and personal prayers before God.***

**Finally, Lord, we pray for ourselves,**

**that we may be faithful disciples of your amazing generosity,**

**allowing the Holy Spirit to carry us**

**like the seed on the breeze,**

**accepting your seeds of Love and Grace to flourish within us.**

**Amen**

**Hymn**

All my hope on God is founded; *(Tune Michael)*
he doth still my trust renew.
Me through change and chance he guideth,
only good and only true.
God unknown, he alone
calls my heart to be his own.

Human pride and earthly glory,
sword and crown betray his trust;
what with care and toil we fashion,
tower and temple, fall to dust.
But God's power,
hour by hour,
is my temple and my tower.

God's great goodness aye endureth,
deep his wisdom passing thought;
splendour, light, and life attend him,
beauty springeth out of nought.
Evermore from his store
new-born worlds rise and adore.

Daily doth the almighty giver
bounteous gifts on us bestow;
his desire our soul delighteth,
pleasure leads us where we go.
Love doth stand at his hand;
joy doth wait on his command.

Still from earth to God eternal
sacrifice of praise be done,
high above all praises praising
for the gift of Christ his Son.
Christ doth call one and all
ye who follow shall not fall.

Joachim Neander (1650-1680) paraphrased Robert Bridges (1844-1930)

**Closing prayer and blessing:** led byRev’d John Mackerness

God be with us.

God be in us.

God be around us.

God be behind us.
Sow in our hearts the good seed of love and joy and peace, that we may be a blessing to the people around us.

And the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us and those we love today, tomorrow and forever more. Amen.