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Call To Worship from *Worship Aids for the Revised Common Lectionary from the Presbyterian Church of the USA*

Affirmation of Faith from selected sections of the *Belhar Confession of Faith*.

All other prayers by Ruth Dillion.

*Beautiful City, Heavenly Salem*, Latin 7<sup>th</sup> Century translated by J M Neale performed by Vocal Ensemble Magnificat, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2016.

*Inspired by Love and Anger* written by John L Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community © WGRWG performed by Stephanie Hollenberg and Luke Concannon.

*My Song is Love Unknown* by Samuel Crossman sung by the Choir of the Cathedral of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Truro.

God of the Poor by Graham Kendrick performed by the writer.

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## URC Daily Devotions Worship

Sunday 4th October 2020



### The Rev'd Ruth Dillon

#### Introduction

Good morning and welcome to worship. My name is Ruth Dillon and it is my privilege to serve two United Reformed Church congregations in Wessex Synod. Today we will be thinking about one of the most striking images in Matthew's Gospel, the strong vineyard imagery, and the challenging, threatening and violent image of the parable that Jesus shares with his disciples.

#### Call To Worship

The wisdom of God calls to us, from the heights, along the paths, and at the crossroads. Come into God's presence to worship, sing, and pray.

**From our scattered places we come. Let us worship God.**

**Hymn:** *Beautiful City, Heavenly Salem*  
from a Latin 7th Century hymn  
translated by JM Neale (1818-66)

Blessèd city, heav'nly Salem,  
vision dear of peace and love,  
who of living stones upbuilt  
art the joy heav'n above,  
we, with all thy holy people,  
glorious to thy glory move.

2: Christ is made the sure  
foundation,  
Christ the head and corner-stone,  
chosen of the Lord and precious,  
binding all the Church in one;  
holy Zion's help for ever,  
and her confidence alone.

3: All that dedicated city,  
dearly loved of God on high,  
in exultant jubilation  
ours perpetual melody.  
God, the One in Three, adoring  
in glad hymns eternally.

4: To this temple where we call  
thee,  
come, O Lord of Hosts, today  
with thy wonted loving-kindness  
hear they people as they pray;  
and they fullest benediction  
shed within its walls for aye.

5: Hear vouchsafe to all thy servants  
what they ask of thee to gain  
what they gain for thee for ever  
with the blessed to retain,  
and hereafter in thy glory  
evermore with thee to reign.

### **Prayers of approach and confession**

Leader: Come, the Holy Spirit encourages us to glorify

**All the one true God,  
the Almighty  
the creator of heaven and earth**

*God of the poor  
Friend of the weak  
Give us compassion we pray  
Melt our cold hearts  
Let tears fall like rain  
Come, change our love  
From a spark to a flame*

3: Refuge from cruel wars  
Havens from fear  
Cities for sanctuary  
Freedoms to share  
Peace to the killing-fields

5: Lighten our darkness breathe on this flame  
Until your justice burns brightly again  
Until the nations learn of your ways  
Seek your salvation and bring you their praise

Scorched earth to green  
Christ for the bitterness  
His cross for the pain

4: Rest for the ravaged earth  
Oceans and streams  
Plundered and poisoned  
Our future, our dreams  
Lord, end our madness  
Carelessness, greed  
Make us content with  
The things that we need

### **Blessing**

May the faithfulness of God keep you secure and safe  
May the friendship of Jesus bring you joy and contentment  
May the inspiration of the Holy Spirit enable you to break from the fears  
you have, and rediscover what it means to live in harmony with each  
other.

May you feel God's blessing every moment of every day now and for  
evermore. Amen

We pray for your Church, that they may always be witnesses to unity and community and wherever conflict emerges, your Spirit of Hope and reconciliation will prevail.....

Silence for personal prayer.

Landowner God, we pray for ourselves that the fruit on your vine will always yield a bountiful harvest obedient to your word and message .....

Silence for personal prayer

God of the vines, source of all nourishment and growth, keep us always in your vineyard, tend and care for us for the Glory of Christ and the creativeness of the Holy Spirit Amen

### **Offertory**

Lord God, we offer what we have; coins of different worth, notes of different colours. Accept these gifts for we give them gladly, for they are the work of our hands of minds; they are our faithfulness in action; they are an expression of all that you mean to us, and for our brothers and sisters throughout your world. Bless us in our giving Lord and bless us in our discipleship. In Jesus name we pray Amen

**Hymn:** *God of the Poor*

Graham Kendrick © 1993 Make Way Music

Beauty for brokenness  
Hope for despair  
Lord, in the suffering  
This is our prayer  
Bread for the children  
Justice, joy, peace  
Sunrise to sunset  
Your kingdom increase!

2: Shelter for fragile lives  
Cures for their ills  
Work for the craftsman  
Trade for their skills  
Land for the dispossessed  
Rights for the weak  
Voices to plead the cause  
Of those who can't speak

God of Grace in whom we live and move and have our being,  
We come to you this joyful day, aware of your presence in the world.

Each new day we marvel at your touch – we feel the breeze caress our face, or a person smile when greeting one another.

We marvel at your creativity – as we ponder the fragility of butterfly wings, and the wonders of the human body.

We marvel at your fragrance of freshly baked bread and the heady rose in summer bloom.

All these things, and many more bring us to the point of saying you are a creative and awesome God. A God worthy of praise and adoration.

God of grace, you have moulded us in love. But there have been times when we have refused to acknowledge your presence in the world: when our lack of touch has been cold and disheartening; when our lack of creativity has been unhelpful and destructive; when our lack of sensitivity sours our relationships;

In the silence we humbly come before you and ask your forgiveness

*Silence*

### **Prayer of Illumination**

God of grace in whom we live and move and have our being.  
By your grace we are restored healed and transformed.  
By your grace we can bathe in your love.  
You have wiped the slate clean.

Enable us to be your touch in the world,  
enable us to be your fragrance in the world,  
enable us to be your voice in the world.

Illuminate our whole bodies, physically, emotionally and spiritually to your goodness and open our minds to your words of forgiveness and wisdom.

You say to each one of us 'your sins are truly forgiven', yet you also say these words, 'come now and follow me'.

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

**Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name;  
thy kingdom come;  
thy will be done,  
in earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those that trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation;  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
the power, and the glory,  
for ever and ever. Amen.**

### Readings

*Isaiah 5: 1-7 (The Message)*

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard:  
My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

### Affirmation of Faith

Do you believe in the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects, and cares for the Church through Word and Spirit. This God has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end.

**We do**

Do you believe that God is the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people. **We do.**

Do you believe that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, and the wronged? **We do.**

This is the faith of the Church! We are proud to confess it in Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**

### Prayers of Intercession

Landowner God, you have planted and tended the vines, you have pruned us that we may continue to bear good fruit.

We pray for the world; that the world may hear your words of justice and peace and act in harmony with each other instead of competition and possessiveness.....

Silence for personal prayer

We pray for those finding life hard; for the victims of violence left with external and internal scars, who find it difficult to express emotions and feelings and to experience love and tenderness.....

Silence for personal prayer

**Hymn:** *My Song is Love unknown*  
Samuel Crossman (1624 – 1683)

My song is love unknown,  
my Saviour's love to me;  
love to the loveless shown,  
that they might lovely be.  
O who am I, that for my sake  
my Lord should take  
frail flesh, and die?

2 He came from His blest throne  
salvation to bestow;  
but folk made strange,  
and none the longed-for  
Christ would know:  
but oh, my friend,  
my friend indeed,  
who at my need  
His life did spend.

3 Sometimes they strew His way,  
and His sweet praises sing;  
resounding all the day  
Hosannas to their King:  
then "Crucify!"  
is all their breath,  
and for His death  
they thirst and cry.

7 Here might I stay and sing, no story so divine;  
never was love, dear King, never was grief like Thine.  
This is my friend, in whose sweet praise  
I all my days could gladly spend.

4: Why what hath my Lord done?  
What makes this rage and spite?  
He made the lame to run,  
He gave the blind their sight.  
Sweet injuries! yet they at these  
themselves displease  
and 'gainst him rise.

5 They rise and needs will have  
my dear Lord made away;  
a murderer they save,  
the Prince of life they slay.  
Yet cheerful He to suffering goes,  
that He His foes  
from thence might free.

6 In life, no house, no home  
my Lord on earth might have;  
in death, no friendly tomb,  
but what a stranger gave.  
What may I say?  
Heav'n was His home;  
but mine the tomb  
wherein He lay.

And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry.

*Matthew 21:33-46 (The Message)*

"Here's another story. Listen closely. There was once a man, a wealthy farmer, who planted a vineyard. He fenced it, dug a winepress, put up a watchtower, then turned it over to the farmhands and went off on a trip. When it was time to harvest the grapes, he sent his servants back to collect his profits.

"The farmhands grabbed the first servant and beat him up. The next one they murdered. They threw stones at the third but he got away.

The owner tried again, sending more servants. They got the same treatment.

The owner was at the end of his rope. He decided to send his son. 'Surely,' he thought, 'they will respect my son.'

"But when the farmhands saw the son arrive, they rubbed their hands in greed. 'This is the heir! Let's kill him and have it all for ourselves.' They grabbed him, threw him out, and killed him.

"Now, when the owner of the vineyard arrives home from his trip, what do you think he will do to the farmhands?"

"He'll kill them - a rotten bunch, and good riddance," they answered.  
"Then he'll assign the vineyard to farmhands who will hand over the profits when it's time."

Jesus said, "Right - and you can read it for yourselves in your Bibles: The stone the masons threw out is now the cornerstone. This is God's work; we rub our eyes, we can hardly believe it!"

"This is the way it is with you. God's kingdom will be taken back from you and handed over to a people who will live out a kingdom life."

Whoever stumbles on this Stone gets shattered; whoever the Stone falls on gets smashed."

When the religious leaders heard this story, they knew it was aimed at them.

They wanted to arrest Jesus and put him in jail, but, intimidated by public opinion, they held back. Most people held him to be a prophet of God.

**Hymn:** *Inspired by Love and Anger*  
John L Bell and Graham Maule  
©Wild Goose Resource Group

Inspired by love and anger,  
disturbed by need and pain,  
informed of God's own bias,  
we ask Him once again:  
"How long must some folk suffer?  
How long can few folk mind?  
How long dare vain self-interest  
turn prayer and pity blind?"

2: From those forever victims  
of heartless human greed,  
their cruel plight composes  
a litany of need:  
"Where are the fruits of justice?  
Where are the signs of peace?  
When is the day when prisoners  
and dreams find their release?"

- In the Gospel of John we hear the words, 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid'.
- In the Gospel of Matthew we hear the words, 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God'.
- And again from Matthew's Gospel, 'Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age'.
- And finally from Romans, Paul writes, 'Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.'

As I said, this isn't a pretty parable, but it is one that is steeped in the context of its day, and yes, in ours too.

This does not erase our grief or lessen our call to act to make such atrocities less likely. But it does, in the meantime, offer us hope; and hope is the birthplace of faithful action, compassion, and resolve.

Let us pray

Enter our lives, Lord, that we may understand that tragedy, death and hatred can be replaced by life, forgiveness, and peace.

Enter our lives, Lord, that we may accept the work that needs to be done in your name.

Enter our lives, Lord, that the peace that is truly beyond all human understanding will be with us this day and each day we live in your service. Amen

Jesus does not shrink from the sacrifice on the cross, he does not return with vengeance, he does not kick anyone out of the kingdom of heaven. Instead, the resurrected Jesus, having taken on the worst that our violence can inflict, comes back and instructs his disciples to take the good news of the Gospel to the very ends of the earth, promising to be with them always.

And for me, reflecting on the violence in the world you and I live in, that good news means in part that violence does not, and will not, have the last word.

That the only response to violence is not more violence.  
That tragedy and death and loss and hatred are, in the end, no match for love and life and forgiveness and peace.

Historians have suggested that members of Matthew's largely Jewish community, perhaps worn down by distress and danger in the wake of the destruction of the Temple, were contemplating returning to the faith of their youth and that Matthew consequently saw the Pharisees as competitors for their loyalty.

When I keep in mind that Matthew's community was a vulnerable religious minority of the day, I can sympathize with his plight and response. But I still regret it, because when Christianity went from a minority to a majority religion of the Roman Empire, and grew into the most powerful political and cultural force in Europe, these same verses, and others like them, helped to justify centuries of mistreatment of Jews by Christians. Violence yet again.

For while Jesus' words, Matthew's words, and our words all matter, Jesus' deeds matter even more, as Jesus' death and resurrection create more possibilities than those we can see, including the possibility of peace.

3: From those forever shackled to what their wealth can buy, the fear of lost advantage provokes the bitter cry:  
"Don't query our position!  
Don't criticise our wealth!  
Don't mention those exploited by politics and stealth!"

4: To God,  
who through the prophets proclaimed a different age, we offer earth's indifference, its agony and rage:  
"When will the wronged be righted?  
When will the Kingdom come?  
When will the world be generous to all instead of some?"

### **Sermon... This is not a pretty parable**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts here, be acceptable to you O Lord, for you are our Rock, our Strength, and our Comforter. Amen

This is not a pretty parable.

Over recent years, violence seems to have been on the increase. From the tragic and pointless death of Stephen Lawrence in London in 1993, to the murder of Anthony Walker in Huyton in 2005, then to the recent global scene of violence in North America, Hong Kong and the Middle East, to name just a few. In fact the list is endless. These images have burrowed into my imagination relentlessly, and perhaps they have for you, too...and for many of our people.

5: God asks, "Who will go for me?  
Who will extend my reach?  
And who, when few will listen, will prophesy and preach?  
And who, when few bid welcome, will offer all they know?  
And who, when few dare follow, will walk the road I show?"

6: Amused in someone's kitchen, asleep in someone's boat, attuned to what the ancients exposed, proclaimed and wrote, A saviour without safety, a tradesman without tools has come to tip the balance with fishermen and fools.

Violence - inexplicable, seemingly random violence - is part of what is most frightening. It is becoming clear that not only is there no easy way to protect vulnerable crowds from gun violence, but also that we can discover no motive, which makes these acts of horrific violence seem even more random and harder to understand, and also makes us all feel more vulnerable.

Who next?

What next?

We think about 'when', not 'if'.

We may think that random violence is a recent phenomenon, but we would be mistaken. Random violence has been immersed in our culture since Cain and Abel. Two themes are often present: power and possessiveness are traps that we can all fall into; however for some people it is a thirst for power and desire to possess everything that causes the earth to groan through the petty feuds of humankind; and the blood stained earth cries out 'why?'

This is not a pretty parable.

It is violent and threatening, and the situation was all too familiar to Jesus' audience. Absentee landlords were not uncommon. Someone buying a field, improving it, leasing it to tenants, and then departing to live in another region was part and parcel of the ancient world, where a very few people often held much of the land and agricultural wealth.

Nor would it have been terribly uncommon to imagine tenants resisting the landlord's assertion of authority and demand for a return on investment. We don't know how long the landlord had lived away. It could have been years. The tenants may have assumed by this time that the landlord had died, or forgotten about them, and may have similarly assumed the land was now theirs by right of possession and labour.

None of this is uncommon. What is uncommon is the repeated requests of the landlord. Once, is ok... but several times? More likely, a landlord

wealthy enough to buy and improve land while living abroad, and who employed multiple servants - well, this kind of landlord likely would have sent not just servants but soldiers to collect his due.

There are two things that don't make a lot of sense about this parable.

- The first is the tenants' assumption that, if they kill the heir, they will now be inheritors, an assumption that the crowds listening to Jesus' parable intuitively contradict. It is, in short, a little far-fetched.
- The second is the landlord sending his son and heir, alone and unaccompanied, to plead for a sensible response from these tenants after all this violence. It is, quite frankly, the act of a landlord so desperate to restore relationship with these wayward and wicked tenants that he is willing to try anything, do anything to repair the breach between them. Or maybe it's the act of a desperate parent who will try anything, do anything to draw back a wayward child into a loving embrace. Or the act of a desperate God who will try anything, do anything to win back a wayward people.

This parable, violent as it seems, is about a passionate kind of love. The kind of love that makes no sense, that will listen to no counter argument, and that will never, ever give up, risking even violence, rejection, and death in order to testify to God's commitment to these tenants...and to us. Violence was ever present in the days of Jesus and we see the culmination of that violence towards Jesus in the stark and bloodied cross, with Jesus' arms outstretched, still desperate to find a way for God's people to turn to the God who is Love.

Matthew tells this parable to accuse those who rejected Jesus and to assure his community that justice, in time, will be served. But I do not think this parable is only about Jesus' opponents. I think that ultimately this parable tells the truth about how often we get caught up in our own devices and demands, to the point of absolutely rejecting God's just claim on our devotion, and also just how far God will go to win us back.