

ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE – SUNDAY 12th JULY 2020

INTRODUCTION

"You did what?!!" I can just imagine what Mrs Sower might have said when Mr Sower got home. "You took our last bag of seed and scattered three quarter of it on the path, among the rocks and in the weeds?!" He clearly hadn't tuned into Gardener's World!

Jesus' story of the Sower is so well-known, but it still has the capacity to surprise and challenge us. If your idea of God is that He is a bit miserly with His blessings, then think again. Here is a Sower who scatters the seed with extravagant generosity, even in the most unlikely of places.

Where do we see God's generosity in our lives? In daily blessings – yes! In comfort through tough times – yes! But above all in the love we have received in Christ. Says St Paul, "There is now no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus." Accepting that forgiveness can be the hardest thing for people who try to live good lives: but to do so can turn even the stony, thorny places of our hearts into rich soil.

Pause for a moment to hear God's offer: no matter how hard or unfruitful your life may feel, God's generous gifts can yield a harvest of love, and joy, and peace – for you, and for others.

CALL TO WORSHIP

From the rising of the sun to its setting

GOD'S HOLY NAME BE PRAISED.

On the lips of children and adults

GOD'S HOLY NAME BE PRAISED

In the glory of heaven and the dark corners of the world

GOD'S HOLY NAME BE PRAISED

In the corridors of power and the dwellings of the humble

GOD'S HOLY NAME BE PRAISED

In the rocky paths and thorny ground and good soil of our lives

GOD'S HOLY NAME BE PRAISED

Let all that has life and breath praise the Lord.

AMEN. WE PRAISE THE LORD.

TURNING AGAIN TO GOD

Does God find good soil in our hearts – or stony, rocky or thorny ground? The answer usually feels like – a bit of all of those! Sometimes the seed of God's word has fallen on stony paths or rocky patches in our own hearts. Sometimes weeds have choked our response. But hear God's Word: "There is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus."

Let us open our hearts to the searchlight of God's love.

Where the seed of your word has fallen on the stony paths of our lives

Lord, have mercy

Lord, have mercy

Where we once responded with enthusiasm but now our love has grown cold

Christ, have mercy

Christ, have mercy

Where the cares of this life have crowded out our devotion to you and our compassion for others

Lord, have mercy

Lord, have mercy

May Almighty God have mercy upon us,
forgive us our sins,
and bring us to everlasting life.

Amen.

WHO IS THE GOD IN WHOM WE TRUST?

**We believe in God the Father,
from whom every family
in heaven and on earth is named.**

**We believe in God the Son,
who lives in our hearts through faith,
and fills us with his love.**

**We believe in God the Holy Spirit,
who strengthens us
with power from on high.**

**We believe in one God;
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

NEW TESTAMENT READING (Romans 8:1-11 New Living Translation)

So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. 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. 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. 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.

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. So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace. For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God's laws, and it never will. That's why those who are still under the control of their sinful nature can never please God.

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.) 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. 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. Thanks be to God.

SAYING 'THANK YOU' FOR GOD'S WORD

Rise and hear! The Lord is speaking
As the gospel words unfold;
We, in all our age-long seeking
Find no firmer truth to hold.

Word of goodness, truth and beauty,
Heard by simple folk and wise,
Word of freedom, word of duty,
Word of life beyond our eyes.

Word of God's forgiveness granted
To the wild or guilty soul,
Word of love that works undaunted,
Changes, heals and makes us whole.

Speak to us, O lord, believing,
As we hear, the sower sows;
May our hearts, your word receiving,
Be the good ground where it grows.

HCA Gaunt (1902-1983)

GOSPEL READING (Matthew 13:1-9,18-23 NRSV)

Later that same day Jesus left the house and sat beside the lake. 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. He told many stories in the form of parables, such as this one:

"Listen! A farmer went out to plant some seeds. As he scattered them across his field, some seeds fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate them. Other seeds fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The seeds sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow. But the plants soon wilted under the hot sun, and since they didn't have deep roots, they died. Other seeds fell among thorns that grew up and choked out the tender plants. 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! Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand."

"Now listen to the explanation of the parable about the farmer planting seeds: 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. The seed on the rocky soil represents those who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy. 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. 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. 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!"

Thanks be to God.

REFLECTION (by Margaret Mandrell)

When I was a child, I had two grandmothers who were very different. One sat and prayed each night for her family, and then stretched out her arm and said reverently "I am ready Lord". She prayed this from the age of 60 until her death at 87. My other grandmother spent weekdays at the Mission for Poor Children, where she supported any who sought help, giving food, clothing and compassion. In her spare time, she visited the lonely and sick, made cakes and visited the patients in the local geriatric hospital ward each Sunday, and practically demonstrated God's love. This pattern of service lasted until her mid- 80s.

During the time I was ill with the corona virus, I thought about the future. All the familiar markers of the Church year had to become virtual or celebrated alone or with close family members. The precious days leading to Easter, Pentecost and

the Ascension, all celebrated for 2 millennia, could no longer be shared with our church family members. The churches were closed, sharing the Peace and the fellowship formerly enjoyed, became strange and distant as we tried to remain separate and free of the virus. Virtual hugs, telephone calls, food left on doorsteps, queues for shops became the new normal, and separation from loved ones a new reality.

The church responded to this situation in many ways, reaching out spiritually, with a break- out from the constraints of buildings and set times for services, into a more accessible and available medium, where people can be part of worship and praise at any time of the day or night. It is said that 1 in 4 have prayed during this pandemic, and many are accessing on-line resources which are strengthening faith or are introducing individuals to God's love and the Christian message. For many, there has been a deepening in faith, as all the usual distractions have become less significant and life has become simpler. Some have found joy in creative activities, many have spent time in gardens, appreciating the beauty and variety of God's creation, hearing afresh the singing of birds.

The message of the Gospel has been demonstrated as church members have shown care and compassion, with many acts of kindness, reaching out to those in need. Some have had a ministry of praying for our communities and those farther

afield, others have committed to regular telephone calls to the isolated and lonely.

The parable of the sower and his seed is still relevant today. We are used to thinking of God as the sower (and that is the steer Matthew gives us); but these past months have showed us again that we can all be sower's of God's seed, in whatever situation we find ourselves. We can show the fruits of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Some might be like one or other of my grandmothers, either one whose gift is prayer or an activist who works practically for others, but we all have a role to play in sharing the good news of the Gospel.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

[Spend a few moments in silence reflecting on what you have heard or read.]

PRAYERS

Gathered together as the people of God,
Though not under the same roof,
Let us pray to him now.

Heavenly Father, may your words of truth
Take root in our hearts and grow to rich maturity.
May we hear your will for us and act upon it;

May we take seriously our responsibility
To encourage and nurture one another in faith
At every age and at every stage.

Silence

Eternal truth, living God:

Your word is life and strength.

Heavenly Father, may every act of selfless giving
And every search for truth
Be richly blessed and rewarded;
Disturb assumptions and lead many to ponder more deeply
The spiritual dimension of their lives.
May the word of God reach all who are ready to receive it,
And let us set no boundaries here
As to who they might be.

Silence

Eternal truth, living God:

Your word is life and strength.

Heavenly Father, make our homes places of love and growth,
Welcoming all who visit them,
And accepting and forgiving of all who are nurtured there.
Help us through the rough patches and heartaches
And remind us to honour one another
As your cherished ones.

Silence

Eternal truth, living God:

Your word is life and strength.

Heavenly Father, may all whose bodies, souls or minds are
aching

Know the comforting and strengthening power

Of your companionship,

And the healing work of your love.

May we be more ready to befriend and support one another

Through the difficult times,

In the name and love of the God we worship.

Silence

Eternal truth, living God:

Your word is life and strength.

Heavenly Father, we pray for all

Who are making the journey through physical death,

as they put down earthly things

And wake to your presence.

Bring us all to share with them

Your life in all its fullness.

Among those who have died recently, we remember Peter

Young.

And among those whose anniversaries fall at this time, we

remember with love and gratitude: among them, Betty Wake,

Edwin Hulme, Freda Keightley, Reg Pritchard, Mary Pritchard,
Stanley Kennett, Elvina Kennett, Alan Dugdale, and Gordon
Neal.

May they rest in peace – and rise in glory.

Silence

Eternal truth, living God:

Your word is life and strength.

*Take a few moments to remember before God other people and
situations on your heart now.*

Heavenly Father, the seasons of the Earth

Speak to us of your faithful love:

The rain and the sunshine,

The growing and the harvesting;

And we offer you our thankful praise

For all your gifts to us.

Merciful Father

Accept these prayers

For the sake of your Son,

Our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

We pray as Jesus taught us, saying:

**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.**

**Our Father, who art in
heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily
bread.
And forgive us our
trespasses,
as we forgive those who
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.**

CLOSING BLESSING

**May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you,
wherever He may send you.
May He guide you through the wilderness,**

**protect you through the storm.
May He bring you home rejoicing
at the wonders He has shown you.
May He bring you home rejoicing
once again into our doors.**

ENDING

**Jesus, Lord of Time
Hold us in your eternity.
Jesus, image of God,
Travel with us the life of faith.
Jesus, friend of sinners'
Heal the brokenness of our world.
Jesus, Lord of tomorrow,
Draw us into your future.
May God the Good Sower
Sow in our hearts the seed of the Good News of His Son
For a harvest of the Spirit.
And may the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Be with us all evermore.
Amen.**

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