

2 The kingdom of God
is mercy and grace;
the captives are freed,
the sinners find place,
the outcast are welcomed
God's banquet to share;
and hope is awakened
in place of despair.

3 The kingdom of God
is challenge and choice:
believe the good news,
repent and rejoice!

His love for us sinners
brought Christ to his cross:
our crisis of judgement
for gain or for loss.

4 God's kingdom is come,
the gift and the goal;
in Jesus begun,
in heaven made whole.
The heirs of the kingdom
shall answer his call
and all things cry 'Glory!'
to God all in all.

Blessing

Let us go in peace, to love and serve God. And may the Holy God surprise us on the way, Christ Jesus be our company, and the Spirit lift up our lives. Amen.

Sources and Thanks

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Sunday Worship for the URC Daily Devotions August 2nd 2020



The Rev'd Dr Kirsty Thorpe

Introduction

Good morning, and welcome to this act of worship. I'm Kirsty Thorpe, the minister of Wilmslow United Reformed Church. This small town grew from an agricultural village during the 19th century once the railway came. That meant people could live in leafy Cheshire and work in Manchester, a few miles to the north. Our church began 176 years ago, with a strong focus on worship and educating young people. It's founders began and housed a local school which was on the church site until the early 1900s. In the last five years we've discovered a fresh call to serve young people through a new charity, in partnership with another church nearby. Source Youthwork reaches out to the 2000 plus pupils of the High School a few hundred yards down the road from our front door. It's after school cafes and counselling sessions usually fill the social space under our worship area with young people several afternoons and evenings a week in term time. Since March the church buildings have been very quiet. We're keen to see the youth work re-start. It worries us to think about the loss of confidence and wellbeing there will be among the school pupils, especially those who struggled with their mental health before the pandemic began. Meanwhile, behind our church are a large health centre and pharmacy.

Early on in the lockdown one of the GPs asked if we could help to steward the pharmacy queue. That grew into three months of volunteering. As a result, I spent hours marshalling outside the pharmacy and looking at our buildings from a distance. I gained a whole range of new perspectives on our place in the community. That's a good preparation for coming before God to worship.

Call to Worship

One: To all who are imprisoned, **God says, "Come out."**

One: To all who are living in darkness, **God says, "Show yourselves."**

One: To all who hunger and thirst,

Many: God gives food and springs of water.

One: To all who are far away,

Many: God makes smooth the way home. God will not forget us, we are inscribed on the palms of His hands.

Hymn: *Let All the World, In Every Corner Sing*
George Herbert 1593-1633

Let all the world
in every corner sing,
"My God and King!"
The heavens are not too high,
His praise may thither fly;
the earth is not too low,
His praises there may grow.
Let all the world
in every corner sing,
"My God and King!"

2 Let all the world
in every corner sing,
"My God and King!"
The Church with Psalms must shout:
no door can keep them out.
But, above all, the heart
must bear the longest part.
Let all the world
in ev'ery corner sing,
"My God and King!"

Prayers of Intercession

In a world that is hungry for truth, righteousness and justice,
we hold before you the leaders, the movers and shakers,
the ideas people and those who put plans into action.
Help us to build communities where each person has a voice,
where the needs of those on the edges are seen and met,
and the rich and powerful learn what it means to wait
rather than pushing to the front of the queue.

In a world that is hungry for bread
we pray for those in food poverty,
depending on hand outs, on food banks and aid programmes.
Help us to renew our commitment to the global bodies
and international charities that address the causes of poverty
and give people tools for self-reliance.

In a world that is hungry for contact and care,
we pray for those who find themselves isolated
by grief, loss of paid work, sickness of mind or body.
Help us to reach out in love to those in need,
even the people we find it hard to help,
so your light and hope break into their lives.

Hymn: *The Kingdom of God is Justice and Joy*
Bryn A Rees (1911-1983)

The Kingdom of God is justice and joy;
for Jesus restores what sin would destroy.
God's power and glory in Jesus we know
and here and hereafter the kingdom shall grow.

3 Spirit of our God, descending, fill our hearts with heavenly joy,
love with every passion blending, pleasure that can never cloy:
thus provided, pardoned, guided, nothing can our peace destroy.

Affirmation of Faith

**We believe in God, creator of all,
whose word sustains the life of humanity,
and directs our history. God is our life.**

**We believe in God's Son,
born amongst the poor, light in our night,
first-born from the dead. He is alive.**

**We believe in the Holy Spirit,
who gives birth to the new life of God,
who breathes life into the struggle for justice,
who leads us to hope, who is a living force.**

**We believe in the holy universal Church,
herald of the Good News
which frees people and brings new life.
We believe in the coming of a new world
where Jesus Christ, our Lord, will be all in all. Amen**

Offering

Generous God, you give us the gift of life, you send Jesus your son to share our life on earth, and you have given us the gift of this new day. Bless the gifts we bring to your table – our hopes and prayers, our dreams and visions, and help us to use the resources you place in our hands to feed one another and nourish new growth. Amen.

Prayers of Approach and Confession

Gracious and generous God, we are glad to gather in your presence, drawn together through your loving invitation in Jesus and united as your people in the power of your Holy Spirit. We remember those people we like to see on Sundays, the gatherings we think of as our spiritual home, and the aspects of worship that feed and nurture us. As part of your Church - worldwide, multi coloured, diverse, past, present and to come - we place our lives before you. Help us now to put aside those things that distract us from you, prevent us from sensing your presence, limit our understanding and confine our vision. May we look at our lives in the light of God's love – the faults and failings we recognise in ourselves but struggle to change - our lack of trust in the possibility of transforming forgiveness. In the silence we seek God's compassion and goodness - we remember his slowness to anger and his steadfast love.

Silence

We start again, gracious God, as we receive your gift of forgiveness, forgive ourselves and extend forgiveness to one another. We celebrate our new life in Jesus Christ as we say the prayer he taught us: Our Father...

Prayer of Illumination

God of light and understanding, speak to us now through your word in Scripture. Give us open hearts and minds to hear and open hands to respond to your call.

Readings

Isaiah 55 1-5

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

St Matthew 14. 13-21

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

had food taken to them at home. What struck me was the contrast between the limited facilities and food, and the determination and cheerfulness of the women who prepared the meals.

I also think of Rose Anne, a Haitian nurse who founded a charity called Aprosifa almost 30 years ago in a poor community on the edge of Port au Prince. Rose Anne was away from Haiti when the earthquake struck in January 2010, and her first priority was to get home and start helping. As soon as she could return, and once she knew her own family were safe, she started to set up an emergency food system for people in the area where she works. With help from Christian Aid her charity employed 60 people to cook meals for up to 6,000 people, five days a week, until two months after the disaster. It was a way of getting families back on their feet – a temporary help that kept people together under the stresses and strains of the disaster. A group of us from the UK met Rose Anne when Christian Aid took us to visit rebuilding projects eighteen months after the earthquake. 'You never go to Aprosifa without being fed', the local staff member told us. She was right. That's a sign of followers of Jesus at work building the Kingdom of God.

Hymn *Lead Us, Heavenly Father, Lead Us*
James Edmeston (1821)

<p>Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us o'er the world's tempestuous sea; guard us, guide us, keep us, feed us, for we have no help but thee; yet possessing every blessing, if our God our Father be.</p>	<p>2 Saviour, breathe forgiveness o'er us: all our weakness thou dost know; thou didst tread this earth before us, thou didst feel its keenest woe; lone and dreary, faint and weary, through the desert thou didst go.</p>
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him in changing the world but that is how he chooses to do things. We are God's partners, God's chosen collaborators, and God makes us the vehicles through which people's lives can be transformed. No wonder that, when the first people heard Matthew's gospel and his version of this story, they understood the parallels between this feeding and the meal he celebrated with his disciples before his death. On that occasion too Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it and divided it out amongst people. When we come to share communion now we normally sit in rows of seats indoors rather than outdoors. Our stomachs are usually full after breakfast rather than empty at the end of a long day. Perhaps it would help us to understand God's nourishing love better if we were less comfortable sometimes.

I am less concerned about the logistics of this large meal than I am interested to see there was enough for everyone and twelve baskets of leftovers too. This story of Jesus feeding a large number of people confirms for me the importance of practical outreach in church life and community life. People who bring us a meal when we're isolated and alone, who come to our door with a food delivery when we're unable to go out, who stock the local foodbank and give food to destitute refugees and asylum seekers, are all reminding us of God who seeks us out in love and meets our needs.

Communities with very few resources are often those who understand this ministry best. I think of two places where I have seen hospitality in action over the years. One was a lunch club in a small Reformed Presbyterian Church in Cuba, far from Havana and the tourist trail. The cooking facilities in the small rooms at the back of the church were very basic – a small gas hob and two electric slow cookers. Power cuts quite often meant the cooks had to rely instead on a charcoal barbecue. The supply of food they had was not plentiful either, but the meal was welcome as a supplement to the ration card food everyone was getting. Some people were able to get in to church for their lunch, while others

Hymn: *Holy Wisdom, Lamp of Learning*
Ruth C Duck (b. 1947) © The Pilgrim Press.

Holy Wisdom, lamp of learning, bless the light that reason lends. Teach us judgment as we kindle sparks of thought your Spirit sends. Sanctify our search for knowledge and the truth that sets us free. Come, illumine mind and spirit joined in deepest unity.	2.Vine of truth, in you we flourish; by your grace we learn and grow. May the word of Christ among us shape our life, your will to know. Joined to Christ in living, dying, may we help the Church convey witness to the saving gospel, bearing fruit of faith today.
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Sermon

Sometimes people imagine Christian faith is all about spiritual things. Today's readings give the lie to that idea through two pieces of scripture - one two thousand years old and the other at least five hundred years older – which can speak to us and touch us today. They are about real needs and the God who knows what we human beings must have to lead a healthy life. They remind us that God offers us a lasting relationship within which to grow and flourish as part of a community of faith. They show us that this way of living is not a secret to be kept to ourselves but an offer to be broadcast widely. When that happens others can gain relationship with God and join us in serving the wider community. So the world becomes a better place for all those alive now and generations yet to come.

People don't always get this message – they never have done – and God gives us freedom to accept or to reject relationship with him. Over the centuries, faith-filled people have offered others their take on God's good news. One of these was the prophet Isaiah – a man of prayer and insight who tried to give God's perspective on events to God's people in his day. The words we heard from him in our reading were probably

written for people far from home, whose grandparents and great grandparents had been taken off into exile by the Babylonians when the city of Jerusalem was overrun and the Jewish nation collapsed before a strong, invading army. 'Now', the prophet says, 'God wants to lead you back from exile'. A long journey lies ahead, with much rebuilding work to restore their homeland when they get back once more but the prophet assures them that God will provide for them. We cannot survive without water. We need grain to make bread. Milk is a staple that helps our bodies to grow and drinking wine both makes the feast and boosts morale. Isaiah says that God is offering all these things – water, grain, wine and milk – even though people have no money with which to buy them. God holds out the promise of a good life and there is no great mystery about how to secure this. It is the fruit of building a lasting relationship with him – a covenant – where we offer our love and faithfulness in return for God's care and provision for us.

It sounds like an attractive offer on the face of it so why do people hold back from saying 'yes' to God? Perhaps one favour the Covid 19 experience has done for many of us is to demolish the idea that anyone can be totally self-sufficient. Those people who say they do not need God or other people, and can get all they want brought to their doorstep with a few online orders, may now have some re-thinking to do. Our communities are fast rediscovering the value of neighbourliness, mutual help and care for one another. It is interesting that worship on the internet is attracting back people who have lost touch with church in person and reaching others who may be searching for God in a new way. Maybe one obstacle to establishing a lasting relationship with God for some of us is that question of time span which Isaiah mentions. In a world that has not yet done the risk assessment for next week's activities, how can we honestly enter into an 'everlasting covenant' with God? It is hardly believable that God should be bothered about each one of us in the first place. Did those who heard Isaiah's words wonder why God was giving his people this new chance at a relationship, when their

forebears had failed so often to be faithful in the past? Perhaps one reason we draw back from promising ourselves to God is our awareness that if we say 'yes' then we'll have no control over **who else** receives the same offer – some of them far from being our first choice of co-worshippers. A temptation to put everything in terms of 'them and us' is always lurking at the back of our minds to trip us up and prevent us from establishing intimacy with God.

Our second reading from Matthew's gospel shows us God's offer of nourishment and lasting relationship in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. At the start of today's passage Jesus has just heard the sad and troubling news that his cousin, John the Baptist, has been brutally murdered by the puppet ruler of Galilee, Herod Antipas. Jesus wants time alone, to mourn and perhaps to consider the even greater threat now to his own ministry. Going further around the shore of the Sea of Galilee on his own in a boat is not enough to guarantee him solitude. A large crowd gathers in this isolated place, bringing with them people in need of healing. Jesus responds compassionately to those who are suffering but the day draws on. As the shadows lengthen the disciples alert Jesus to the other need of the people before them – that for food.

The ensuing dialogue between Jesus and the disciples tells us a lot about the way God's love operates. We discover how deeply God is concerned about our practical, bodily needs alongside all the other things we lack in our lives. By accepting the challenge of feeding large numbers of people in an isolated place, Jesus opens himself up to fresh attention from the authorities as a disturbing, crowd-gathering influence who needs to be watched and quite possibly put out of action. The gospel writer makes it clear the large-scale feeding is not something Jesus achieves by acting totally alone. He starts by asking the disciples what they can bring to the feast – 'You give them something to eat', he says to them.

There is no reason why God in Jesus should invite us to cooperate with