

*This short act of worship has been produced for you
by Nancy Hands.*

*If you are well enough and able, why not spend a few
moments with God knowing that others are sharing this act
of worship with you.*

Welcome to our worship this morning on the 6th Sunday
after Trinity.

Call to Worship

From wherever we are, in our own homes or another's, in
hospital or a Care Home, living independently or not, we
gather as one community in the name of the living Christ, to
worship God.

**Surely, God is in this place and calls us to worship him in
spirit and in truth.**

God's love and blessing is for each of us and for all people
everywhere. His arms are wide open to welcome us -
whatever is in our past and how ever difficult our present.

Praise the Lord!

As has been the case with so many of our online services
during the various stages of lockdown, our readings today
speak in a very contemporary and immediate way to our
situation. Many of us - and those we know- have suffered
grief, loss, changed circumstances, fear and anxiety about
the future.

The exiles in Babylon cried out, 'How shall we sing the Lord's
song in a strange land?' The answer is we can, because God
is with us, even when the landscape alters, the control we
thought we had has gone, and everything that was familiar
is different.

**Opening hymn: StF 626 Even though I walk through the
valley**

Sing / read / pray / proclaim the words or listen to it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pC3NV8DFudc>

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of
death, your perfect love is casting out fear.
And even when I'm caught in the middle of the storm of this
life, I won't turn back; I know you are near.
And I will fear no evil, for my God is with me.
And if my God is with me, whom then shall I fear?
Whom then shall I fear?

*Oh no, you never let go, through the calm and through the
storm.*

Oh no, you never let go, in every high and every low.

Oh no, you never let go,

Lord, you never let go of me.

And I can see a light that is coming for the heart that holds
on, a glorious light beyond all compare.

And there will be an end to these troubles, but until that day comes, we'll live to know you here on the earth.
And I will fear no evil, for my God is with me.
And if my God is with me, whom then shall I fear?
Whom then shall I fear?

Oh no, you never let go, through the calm and through the storm.

Oh no, you never let go, in every high and every low.

*Oh no, you never let go,
Lord, you never let go of me.*

Yes, I can see a light that is coming for the heart that holds on, and there will be an end to these troubles, but until that day comes, still I will praise you, still I will praise you.

Yes, I can see a light that is coming for the heart that holds on, and there will be an end to these troubles, but until that day comes, still I will praise you, still I will praise you.

Oh no, you never let go, through the calm and through the storm.

Oh no, you never let go, in every high and every low.

*Oh no, you never let go,
Lord, you never let go of me.*

Matt Redman (b. 1974) and Beth Redman

Prayer of Adoration

Awesome God, we hold a moment of silence before you, allowing our bodies to relax, our minds to still and our hearts to open to you.....

Holy God, we praise you for the majesty, the intricacy and diversity of your Creation. Before all things, you were there: hovering, planning, sculpting, designing, balancing, weaving and perfecting.

You are life and light, hope and truth, mercy and grace. In Jesus we see your face and your purpose for all humankind. You formed us in your image, to walk the earth as he did and to draw all people to your side. We worship you.

You treasure and trust us; lead us and guide us, love us and rescue us. Through your Spirit, you speak to us in dreams, prompt us through conversation, stop us in our tracks. You confront us, discomfort us and challenge us to remain faithful, to never give up and to believe your promise that you will never let us go. We adore you.

God of surprises, of the unexpected, of authority and humility, of infinite patience and faithfulness, of justice and compassion, we bow before you now, in the name of Jesus and guided by your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Prayers of Confession and Assurance

To worship you in spirit and in truth, Merciful God, we must be honest with ourselves and with you.

We confess that too often, we take you for granted, or forget about you, and think of ourselves more highly than we should. We let you down and put our trust elsewhere, holding on to resentment and pride, stoking anger with our self-righteousness - unwilling or unable to face our own shortcomings. We are half-hearted in our service and distort your message of love for the world by our words and actions.

Father, forgive us.

We claim to be your sons and daughters, but so often fail to see those around us as brothers and sisters - equally precious in your sight.

Father, forgive us.

We confess our inaction, when we might have spoken for the voiceless or protected the vulnerable; for the times we have held on to the prejudice we deny; for being judgmental and self-centered; for going our own way and not listening to your voice.

Father, forgive us.

We have given in to despair and cynicism, apathy and fatalism, rather than trusting in you and offering your hope to those we meet.

Father, forgive us.

We keep a moment's quiet, resting in God's embrace as he receives our confession....

As we confess our faults, we also confess our faith, wanting our hearts to be changed and renewed by your grace. Thank you that you know our thoughts and hear our prayers.

We have confidence in Jesus' gracious words: Our sins are forgiven.

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

The Psalm set for today is Psalm 139 and it gives us the backdrop to the two readings we are going to hear.

We listen to a musical setting of the Psalm by Bernadette Farrell, which can be found in the hymn book at no 728:

'O God, you search me and you know me.'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ciyUOkm-js>

O God, you search me and you know me.
All my thoughts lie open to your gaze.
When I walk or lie down you are before me:
ever the maker and keeper of my days.

You know my resting and my rising.
You discern my purpose from afar,
and with love everlasting you besiege me:
In every moment of life or death, you are.

Before a word is on my tongue, Lord,
you have known its meaning through and through.
You are with me beyond my understanding:
God of my present, my past and future, too.

Although your Spirit is upon me,
still I search for shelter from your light.
There is nowhere on earth I can escape you:
Even the darkness is radiant in your sight.

For you created me and shaped me,
gave me life within my mother's womb.
For the wonder of who I am, I praise you:
safe in your hands, all creation is made new.

Bernadette Farrell (b, 1957) based on Psalm 139

The God who created us so lovingly and knows us so
intimately, is also a God of mercy, of patience and of infinite
grace.

We listen out for those qualities as we hear our bible
readings.

The Readings from NRSV:

Genesis 28:10-19a: Jacob's dream at Bethel

*Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. He came to
a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the
sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it*

*under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed
that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it
reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending
and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and
said, 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the
God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and
to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of
the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to
the east and to the north and to the south; and all the
families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your
offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you
wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I
will not leave you until I have done what I promised you.'*
*Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is
in this place - and I did not know it!' And he was afraid and
said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the
house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'*

*So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone
that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and
poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel.*

Matthew 13:24-30,36-43: The Parable of Weeds among the Wheat

*He (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."

Jesus explains the Parable of the Weeds

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 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!'

Reflection.

'How awesome is this place', says Jacob. Have there been times when you have said or thought that: when you have been speechless with wonder? A stretch of pristine beach at dawn, or the pastoral harmony of the Dales; a snow-capped mountain top on a crystal-clear day or magnificent forest with centuries-old trees? Awe can overcome us and we feel the presence of God.

Places are important and we attach significance to them. Jacob felt that overwhelming awe, but it was nothing to do with the place. It was no picture postcard. He simply found a stopping point; a random, in-between, nowhere place, convenient for the night. He was a runaway - a fugitive - escaping from his brother Esau's murderous anger, having conned him out of his birthright and blessing from their father Isaac. Jacob had been conniving and deceitful, egged on by his mother who favoured him, and their plan had worked, but at a cost. Jacob had to flee for his life, to an exile that lasted 20 years, leaving his family, his friends and all he knew - under a cloud of guilt, shame and dishonour. He was alone, facing a long unknown journey from Canaan to Haran - interestingly, the reverse of the journey his grandfather Abraham had made in obedience to God's call, so many decades before.

But for Jacob, God was not on his radar, until he had this dream.

In sleep, our defences are down and we are vulnerable. Jacob perhaps couldn't sink much lower and God took this opportunity to show him that he was cared for and wanted, in spite of what he had done; that there was more on offer from God than anything Jacob could steal; that there was hope for him in a future with God. He was shown in the dream that heaven and earth are not disconnected; that God is not separate from Jacob's world; that making wrong choices and hurting other people - contributing to the mess the world is in - does not mean he will be cut adrift. God does not use the angels to impart a message and he doesn't speak from heaven. Verse 13 says, 'The Lord stood beside him' in the dream. God was *with* him: knowing all things and yet, not judging or condemning; not compounding the alienation Jacob felt, but rather forging a relationship, making a connection and giving him a blessing - not just as an individual, as Isaac's blessing was, but a blessing for all people through him, that 'all the families of the earth shall be blessed'.

When Jacob wakes, the dream is still vivid and he is afraid, in awe of what he has witnessed. He uses the present tense when he says, 'Surely the Lord is in this place - and I did not know it.' He has to respond and does so by marking the spot where he had his revelation, so that he and others who pass that way will remember and know that it is a sacred place. To him it has become 'the house of God' - the meaning of the name Bethel - and he commits himself to worshipping God.

It is a place he will return to all through his life and in chapter 35, we read that God tells him to settle there. Before this dream, Jacob knew *of* God, from his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham. Now he has *met* God and it changes his life.

And yet, it was not the place that was important; it was the encounter.

As we have worshipped Sunday by Sunday these last few months, we have not been in our 'sacred places': our own recognisable 'house of God. Right now, we are probably in an ordinary, everyday, unremarkable place: the living room, kitchen, bedroom or study. Maybe in the garden. But it can still become an awesome place, imbued with the presence of God, if we allow our defences to fall, to become vulnerable and give up the control we so highly prize, so that God can connect with us, build the relationship he wants with us and show us that however we have messed up and gone wrong, his love, care and purpose for us never waver. He is a past master at waiting and his patience knows no bounds. We don't always give him the best raw material to use for the building of his kingdom on earth, but he takes what we are, with both the bad and the good choices we make with the free will he has given us, and uses us for his purpose.

And he will use ordinary places, in-between and nowhere places to draw us closer to him, if we let him. A place is changed, not just by God's presence (for he is with us

wherever we go, as he promised to Jacob), but by our *recognition* that he is present and alongside us, and that changes us too.

Having heard that story, perhaps it alters how we might have heard our reading from Matthew.

As I read it some weeks ago, a verse 'sang' in my head:

'Wheat and tares together sown,

Unto joy or sorrow grown;

First the blade and then the ear,

Then the full corn shall appear;

Lord of harvest, grant that we

Wholesome grain and pure may be.'

(It is verse two of 'Come, ye thankful people come' - a favourite old harvest hymn in Hymns and Psalms number 355.)

I think the hymn has the emphasis right. Our concern must be how *we* live out the gospel - not how everyone else fails - and it isn't easy, living alongside those who don't believe in God. As we serve as best, we can and join God in whatever work he is doing in lives and communities, we are answerable to him for ourselves, not for those around us. We are so prone to judging, sometimes subconsciously but often overtly. We would like to keep our church communities pure, and unsullied by unsavoury characters and influences, much as Matthew's community wanted. We

can be critical of infrequent attenders or those perceived to not pull their weight. We make assumptions about others' lifestyles and habits, all too often blaming, rather than understanding. We are suspicious of those who hold different views or tenets of faith. We like conformity - which is a little ironic as non-conformist! I am sure we are even more judgmental about those outside the Church and those most different to ourselves.

Why did Jesus tell this parable?

I'm sure we will learn much more in the podcast we shall hear on Tuesday, but for me, it demonstrates how messy life on earth is. There are good guys and bad guys. There is Gospel-living and secular living. In any road in our land, I suspect we would find people of faith and people of no faith. And the kingdom of heaven is sown in the world. Much as we may like it to be, it is not the province of the institutional Church, to be protected - in and for the Church. Our prayer is that Christian people everywhere will demonstrate kingdom values and sow God's seed *in* the world - shining light, beaming hope and scattering love in the world that belongs to God, that Jesus gave his life for.

During lockdown, it has been remarked on - in conversations, in online services, in social media and in political circles - how kindness, compassion, thoughtfulness and generosity have suddenly become visible and tangible in

communities, for whom it was a revelation.

Where there is goodness, there is God. God has been at work in the pandemic, using all sorts of unlikely people, to bring hope and comfort to countless others. People who have never been to church are tuning in to online worship. For that, we give him thanks and praise.

So, back to the parable. It speaks to me of God's patience and his grace. He is there; he is *here*; he knows. He is willing to wait and see what happens, and give all the seed a chance. Could it be that he *intends* his disciples to live alongside and among unbelievers? Without struggle, difficulty, opposition and temptation, can our faith really become strong and develop deep long-lasting roots? To whom would we tell our faith story, and account for the hope that is within us, if we all believed the same? It is God's empowering Spirit constantly with us, that enables us to thrive and be witnesses.

Perhaps in the world of parable, it is possible for weed to be transformed into wheat! Perhaps it says to all of us that we have been 'sown' where we are for a purpose, to show God's love through how we interact with our neighbours and colleagues and strangers; that our influence may be transformative in their lives, by God's grace. We are interconnected, with each other and with all creation. If we choose not to be, our faith would become rarified, disengaged and theoretical, and while appearing to be wheat, we would prove to be a weed at harvest time. That

says to me that any form of separatism or exclusivity can't be right. Martin Luther King wisely said, "We must learn together as brothers or perish together as fools". *And sisters of course*. And perhaps we are meant to learn from those we consider to be 'outside' the kingdom; to acknowledge in humility that we don't have a monopoly on goodness; that we can share and relate and see all people as brothers and sisters under God, whether they know him or not. And we can pray that they too will come to know Christ our Saviour, and the abundant life he offers.

The workers would have made a fine mess of the field, attempting to pull out the weeds, which looked so similar to the wheat. Through ignorance, negligence or enthusiasm, good wheat would inevitably be lost. I know from personal experience this summer, growing vegetables and flowers from seed for the first time, how easy it is to dislodge and uproot what I am nurturing, by trying to be 'tidy'.

It doesn't seem likely to me that this is an allegory, as Matthew's explanation at verse 36 indicates - with a meaning given to different elements of the story - partly because not every element has an explanation; we are not told who the slaves are meant to represent, for example, or if being 'asleep' implies someone should be awake. But also, it shifts the emphasis. Yes, there will be judgement for us all, but Jesus seems to be saying in the story that we don't have to interfere or trouble ourselves about who is 'good' and who is not. His concern is that the wheat should not be disturbed; judgement is not our concern. In the explanation,

the focus seems to be on the fate of the condemned.

Perhaps this is more of a reflection of the understanding of Matthew and his concern for the state of *his* Church, and I think that view has persisted down the centuries in some quarters.

Is it not more likely that the whole parable is a metaphor for the kingdom, with God patiently watching and waiting for more good grain in the field, knowing and caring and ultimately being in control, even though there is injustice, cruelty, sickness and conflict all around us? The 'grain' we produce in response to the evil in our messy world will speak for itself, and the power that enables us to call God 'Father' and Jesus 'Lord', is the same power that enables us to wait in patient hope for the harvest to come.

God is consistent but not predictable. He is a God of surprises and a God of promises, but unfathomable. He chooses and uses unlikely characters for his purposes (including us) and we can't second guess him. I wrestle with things I don't understand and want God to act now and make things right: to stop the hurt and misery, fear and hopelessness in the world. I suspect I am not alone. I also believe we are meant to be a part of the pleadings and prayers we pray for our world, *being* Christ's compassion and justice, hope and grace by depending on him.

"What does the Lord require of you?", asks the prophet Micah, "to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God". It is how Jesus lived and I believe it is what he says to us today. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Intimate God, we praise and thank you for your presence with us, even when we are least aware and least deserve it. Heighten our senses we pray: open our eyes to see you in every human face and open our ears to hear your Word, for surely you are in this place.

We pray for light...

where the dark is doubly dark; where wrong dresses up as right and even saints are unsure what to believe; where life has gone into a tunnel and all that is known are confusing noises and stumbling blocks in the blackness; where faith, hope and love are in ashes, needing an angel to blow on them.

Lord, may the world recognise your light.

We pray to hear your voice....

where human words can no longer be trusted: where voices from the past echo loudly, saying 'you are not one of us' or 'keep quiet' or 'I do not need you anymore'; where the voice of the Church has been both sweet and sour, water from the same rock saying 'welcome' and 'watch it'; where the voice of God has been silent or submerged beneath jargon.

Lord, may the world hear your voice.

We pray for healing.....

where fear has extinguished hope; where diagnosis and treatment have been delayed; where resources do not keep

up with need; where mental anguish and suffering go unnoticed or unrecognised; where loneliness cripples; where abuse happens in silence.

Lord, may the world know your healing touch.

We pray for grace.....

in a climate of blame and judgement, of retribution and punishment, of arrogance and pride. May your grace prevail where forgiveness would restore; where a second chance would be a lifeline; where potential could be harnessed and mistakes learnt from; where compassion would restore trust. By your grace help us to see and follow the way to the cross and the way beyond it.

Lord, may the world experience your grace.

As we remember your goodness to us and the blessings you shower upon us, we offer up all those we love and care for, those we worry about and pray for, in to your keeping.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, Amen.

We join in the prayer that unites us all, in whichever version or language is most natural:

The Lord's Prayer

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 forever. Amen.

Hymn StF 610 Best of all is God is with us

Sing / read / pray / proclaim the words or listen to it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HKJ5siTbOWQ>

Best of all is God is with us,

God will hold and never fail.

Keep that truth when storms are raging,

God remains though faith is frail.

Best of all is God is with us,

life goes on and needs are met,

God is strongest in our weakness.

Love renews, will not forget.

Best of all is God is with us,

Hearts are challenged, strangely warmed,

faith is deepened, courage strengthened,

grace received and hope reformed.

Best of all is God is with us,
in our joy and in our pain,
Till that final acclamation:
'life is Christ, and death is gain.'

Best of all is God is with us
as we scale eternal heights,
love grows stronger, undiminished;
earth grows dim by heaven's lights.

Andrew Pratt (b. 1948)
Based on John Wesley's final words.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, now and evermore. Amen.

*(You may like to listen to the song ['Blinded by your grace'](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxsjQ967kV8) by Stormzy, a British Christian rapper
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxsjQ967kV8>)*

*Intercessions adapted from 'A Wee Worship Book', c.1989
The Wild Goose Worship Group*

Closing Prayer and Blessing

We draw our worship to a close with those words ringing in our heads: God IS with us.

As we walk with him into the coming days and weeks, into the unknown and the uncertain, may he continue to challenge our hearts, deepen our faith and strengthen our courage, as we receive his grace and blessing for our lives, re-forming our hope.

We bless each other in the words of the Grace.