

Worship for 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time (complete text. A video version is also online)
Keep safe. Keep caring. Keep praying.

Greetings this morning. to all who come to worship the one God who came to us in Jesus. Services of any kind do not 'just happen' and for services in this genre there are lots of components that involve many people – we have a pastoral letter, a sermon, readings, prayers, hymns and then the assembly of these elements into a coherent format. To all those taking part – seen or unseen - I give my thanks.

THE PREPARATION

Call to worship

As our call to worship here are the following verses from Psalm 8

'O Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.

When I look up at the heavens,
the work of your fingers, the moon & the stars
that you have established,
what is humanity that you are mindful of us?
Who am I that you are mindful of me?'

Hymn introduction

Now the dominant thought for today from our preacher is that faith in Christ means our lives have meaning and purpose. This is expressed in our first song so let us join together in praising God by singing No 72 from StF.

Hymn: Stf 72 – Father God I wonder how I managed to exist

**Father God, I wonder
how I managed to exist
without the knowledge
of your parenthood
and your loving care.**

**But now I am your child,
I am adopted in your family,
and I can never be alone
'cause, Father God,
you're there beside me.**

**I will sing your praises,
I will sing your praises,
I will sing your praises forever more.
I will sing your praises,
I will sing your praises,
I will sing your praises forever more.**

Ian Smale (b. 1949)

Prayer of approach

Gracious God we open our hearts and lives before you. Open our souls to receive your word, open our wills to accept your instructions and lead us back into the world that we may show your goodness.

Prayer of adoration

Lord, you are far beyond us, but since you came to be alongside us in Jesus. we can now meditate on your unfailing love poured out for us.

(Pause)

Prayer of confession

Awesome God, as we worship you in your splendour we become acutely aware of those times when our thoughts, words & actions have not brought you glory.

In the following moments of quiet, please show us the times when we have failed you, so that we can repent of them.

(Pause)

Declaration of forgiveness

Father God, on account of your grace and mercy you are always ready to forgive us. As we accept this certainty, we are a truly grateful people, so let our love for you grow daily.

Amen.

Hymn introduction

As well as being merciful and gracious, our God remains faithful as he restores us and gives value to our lives, so we will now sing about that using No 628 from StF - 'Faithful One, so unchanging.'

Hymn: StF 628 – Faithful One, so Unchanging

**Faithful One, so unchanging,
Ageless One, you're my rock of peace.
Lord of all I depend on you,
I call out to you again and again.
I call out to you again and again.
You are my rock in times of trouble.
You lift me up when I fall down.
All through the storm your love is the anchor,
my hope is in you alone.**

Brian Doerksen (b. 1965)

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Epistle 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-18
(NRSVA)

⁶So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord— ⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

¹⁴For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

Gospel Mark 4:26-29 (NRSVA)

The Parable of the Growing Seed

²⁶He also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

Sermon

I wrote these words with a glorious picture in front of me. Vincent Van Gogh painted his golden "Wheat Field with a Reaper" in 1889, sadly only 12 months before his self-inflicted death. It was a view of the French countryside from his hospital bedroom while being treated for mental stress.

Can you find it now on the internet or in an art book? (Include the date because he created many reaper pictures.) This one illustrates so well our text: "But when the grain is ripe, at once

he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.” (Mark 4.29)

Note the sudden drama: “*at once* he goes in with his sickle”. Within a story of just three sentences, Christ produces a complete change of mood. At first there is routine, even boredom. “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground and would sleep and rise, night and day.” Something is going on but it’s slow and unspectacular.

The seed sprouts and grows, the sower doesn’t know how – the rudiments of natural science were at least a thousand years away. He knows only what his eyes tell him: slowly, unaided, the earth produces first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain. More time passes, the grain ripens, the wheat grows high.

Suddenly – swoosh! The farmer wields his sickle.

What is Christ telling us? That life has a purpose, and it’s God’s purpose. He does this in three ways. First, the seed: even when life seems a routine without results, God’s work is taking shape. Second, the sickle: a moment of divine reckoning. Third, the sheaves: a loving Lord safely gathers in his people.

So first the seed. It often seems true that as the popular saying goes, “Life is just one damned thing after another”. Especially, perhaps, in this year of coronavirus. Rule after rule, advice after advice. Stay at home. Don’t meet people. Don’t go to work. Or school. Don’t travel. Then new instructions, reversing some rules – until they are reimposed. One thing after another.

What’s new? Life has often been like that. Running a home. Earning a living. Daily routines and mundane tasks. In church life too: duties to be done, people to be helped, meetings to attend, prayers to be said. (I suppose we

shouldn’t call church life one *damned* thing after another. Let’s say, one *blessed* thing after another. Same difference!)

And where’s it getting us, we wonder? All that work, all that caring, all that praying?

Have faith, says Christ. All the while God’s kingdom grows. Often unspectacular. Often in secret. Always mysterious. But person by person, victory by victory, by each act of love and each changed heart, the kingdom grows.

This reassurance would have been hugely welcome to Mark’s first readers. They were probably a house church of Jews and Gentiles in Rome, some 40 years after Jesus. There was a long way to go before the Christian faith was firmly established.

So in the one parable that only Mark tells, there is the promise that God’s holy seed is growing, and there will be a result. “When the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

Here’s the second theme: the reaper. A figure with a scythe is traditionally an image of death or judgment. There is a frequent theme of judgment in Christ’s parables and in Christian teaching.

But it’s not the kind of judgment that tots up good deeds on one list and bad deeds on another, and settles your eternal fate by which has the bigger score. What God wants to know is where your heart lies.

St Paul made this clear in a letter to a congregation born out of his evangelism in the Greek city of Corinth. The letter dates from about 20 years after Christ, so even earlier than Mark’s gospel. Paul says the aim of the Christian life is to please God. Then he adds: “For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ,

so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.”

We are each responsible for the lives we lead, no getting away from it. I do believe that in some form God passes judgment on us. That does not mean we must be perfect but that we sincerely seek to please the Lord. The late Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, linked “responsibility” to “response” – our morals are shaped by our response to God.

In a bitter irony, only two months before his assassination the Rev. Martin Luther King described in a sermon what he hoped would be said at his funeral. He didn’t want a tribute focused on awards and honours.

“I’d like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Junior tried to give his life serving others. I’d like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King Junior tried to love somebody . . . I won’t have any money to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind.”

This moving reminder of a life and a death given to the Lord takes us to the third image in the story. If you have laid hands on Vincent’s picture, notice the bound sheaves in the foreground.

He wrote from the hospital to his brother Theo in Paris: “I see in this reaper the image of death, in the sense that humanity might be the wheat he is reaping. But there’s nothing sad in this death, it goes its way in broad daylight with a sun flooding everything with a light of pure gold.”

That optimism, those joyous colours, match the Gospel promise that an affectionate God will honour and save everyone who sincerely believes and sincerely loves.

They are assured a place in his kingdom – which begins here and now. What are the marks of that kingdom? The truths we find in the Bible, especially in Jesus. The commands and comforts of the Christian religion. The companionship of fellow Christians. Our solidarity with people of other religions or none who are filled with the same Spirit. The secular life of the world when it embodies justice and compassion.

And the kingdom stretches beyond death. In a way we cannot conceive, he welcomes his faithful ones into eternity and heals their sins and sorrows.

So to conclude, Christ’s parable tells us that life – your life and mine – has a purpose. That is shown in three images: the seed – God is steadily at work and we can be part of it; the sickle – he will make a judgment on our lives; and the sheaves – he will honour and save his faithful ones.

Let me close with our text and, as a prayer, a few lines from the harvest hymn “Come, ye thankful people, come”. It is only briefly about crops from the field and mainly about the Lord’s spiritual harvest. It’s a shame we sing it only at harvest festivals. Do read it (StF 123 and other books).

“But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

*Even so, Lord, quickly come –
bring your final harvest home!
Gather all your people in,
free from sorrow, free from sin.*

Affirmation of faith:

As members of the worldwide Church, let us affirm our faith.

**We believe in God the Father,
who made the world.**

We believe in Jesus Christ, his Son,

**who redeemed humankind.
We believe in the Holy Spirit,
who gives life to the people of God.**

Hymn: Hymns & Psalms 769 – God is working his purpose out

- 1. God is working this purpose out,
as year succeeds to year;
God is working this purpose out,
and the time is drawing near;
nearer and nearer draws the time,
the time that shall surely be:
when the earth shall be filled with the glory
of God
as the waters cover the sea.**
- 2. From utmost east to utmost west,
where human feet have trod,
by the mouth of many messengers
goes forth the voice of God:
“Give ear to me, ye continents,
ye isles, give ear to me,
that the earth may be filled with the glory of
God
as the waters cover the sea.”**
- 3. Let us go forth in the strength of God,
with the banner of Christ unfurled,
that the light of the glorious gospel of truth
may shine throughout the world.
Let us all fight with sorrow and sin
to set the captives free,
that the earth may be filled with the glory of
God
as the waters cover the sea.**
- 4. All we can do is nothing worth
unless God blesses the deed.
Vainly we hope for the harvest-tide
till God gives life to the seed.
Yet nearer and nearer draws the time,
the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled with the glory**

**of God
as the waters cover the sea.**

Arthur Campbell Ainger (1841-1919)

THE RESPONSE

Prayers of thanksgiving

God of all blessings,
we thank you for the gift of life and for the air,
the food and water that sustain us.
We thank you for the marvel of creation with its
incredible diversity.
We thank you for communities – especially
church communities with whom we can share
the experience of your love for us.

Prayers of intercession

Father God,
We pray for this earth.
Where there are scars – and there are many -
help us to bring healing.

We know that we are meant to live in unity,
so we pray for all nations – that their leaders
may fear you and be led by your wisdom.

We pray for our loved ones,
asking that the light of Christ may shine into any
hearts cloaked in darkness.

By the power of your spirit, help us to live as we
pray, so that your world may be at peace.

Amen

The Lord's Prayer

We say the Lord's prayer:

**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**

The Offering & prayer

We are able to honour God by the giving of our money, our time and our talents in his service. We ask for his blessing on our gifts that are now given with gladness and sincerity.
Amen.

THE DISMISSAL

Hymn introduction

The seed that is planted in us through faith continues throughout our lives. As John Wesley told us 'God is with us'. Let us affirm this in our closing hymn No 479 from StF 'The king of love my shepherd is'.

Hymn: StF 479 – The King of Love, My Shepherd is

- 1. The King of love my shepherd is,
whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am his
and he is mine for ever.**
- 2. Where streams of living water flow
my ransomed soul he leadeth,
and where the verdant pastures grow
with food celestial feedeth.**
- 3. Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,
but yet in love he sought me,
and on his shoulder gently laid,
and home rejoicing brought me.**
- 4. In death's dark vale I fear no ill
with thee, dear Lord, beside me;**

**thy rod and staff my comfort still,
thy cross before to guide me.**

- 5. Thou spread'st a table in my sight;
thy unction grace bestoweth;
and O what transport of delight
from thy pure chalice floweth!**
- 6. And so through all the length of days
thy goodness faileth never:
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise
within thy house for ever.**

Henry Williams Baker (1821–1877)

Prayer & blessing

As we travel into the days ahead of us, let's go with this Celtic blessing.
May the wind be at our backs, may the sun shine upon our faces, may God hold us in the palm of his hand.
Amen.

Copyright Notices

Hymn Words:

Integrity Music

The following hymns / songs are reprinted with permission from Integrity Music, under License number **007316**. All rights reserved

Stf 72 – Father God I wonder how I managed to exist

Ian Smale (*b.* 1949)

Reproduced from *Singing the Faith* Electronic Words Edition, number **72**

Words and Music: © 1984, Thankyou Music. Administered by worshiptogether.com Songs, excluding UK & Europe, administered by Kingswaysongs, a division of David C Cook <tym@kingsway.co.uk> Used by permission.

StF 628 – Faithful One, So Unchanging

Brian Doerksen (*b.* 1965)

Reproduced from *Singing the Faith* Electronic Words Edition, number **628**

Words and Music: © 1989 Vineyard Songs and ION Publishing. Administered by Integrity Music, , a division of David C Cook. Used by permission.

Public Domain

The following hymns are all in the Public Domain.

Hymns & Psalms 769 – God is working his purpose out

Arthur Campbell Ainger (1841-1919)

StF 479 – The King of Love, My Shepherd is

Henry Williams Baker (1821–1877)

Reproduced from *Singing the Faith* Electronic Words Edition, number 479 .

Bible Verses

NRSV & NRSVA

Scripture quotations marked NRSVA are from New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicized Edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

*If you would like to take part, then please get in touch with the Circuit Office on
07578 640013 or swc.katetennyson@gmail.com*