

**Prelude:** “Vesper Voluntary” by Elgar played by John Crombie

**Words of welcome**

Each new day is a gift from God. Each morning, noon and evening speaks of his presence and loving care. Each day is a new beginning for those of us who seek to walk in his way. So we praise God with the hymn

**Hymn:** Sing for God’s glory that patterns and colours creation

**Prayer:**

Lord God, on this Sunday when many will pause to remember those whose lives were changed or cut short by war, we would thank you that there is nothing we can remember that you do not know all about. Indeed you know better than we do, and remember more fully than anyone can. And as we remember we pause also to give you glory, for your presence with us which colours all our days, whether the events in them are happy or sad, stressful or delightful.

We thank you for the gift of life, which we treasure, even in its difficult times. And we pray that in turning to you every day we would know your light shining through our lives.

In the times of trial in which we live, keep us from becoming self-centred, and help us to remember that you call your disciples to live facing outward, living to help others know your presence and your love.

And hear us now, as we pray as Jesus taught us, saying:

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 debts as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. Amen.

**Reading:**

2 Samuel 12:1-7; Mark 4:21-25

I wonder if you have ever read the Gospels and wished to yourself that you could have had the experience of hearing Jesus for yourself? If you have, and it is a common wish, you maybe should remember that when we read the Gospels we have the advantage over the crowds who pressed around Jesus: we get to hear every recorded word. Of course we can’t hear all the words that were spoken, and it is intriguing to wonder what else Jesus said that the Gospel writers didn’t record and the disciples who informed them did not remember or didn’t count as important. One of the items of faith we have when we call the Gospel records “Scripture” is that we trust that they contain what we need to know, what God wants us to know, so that what is not recorded would not make a great difference to our understanding of the truth. And remember, when Jesus spoke to the crowd he did not explain himself.

But in any case, what most people heard was not a coherent narrative. They would hear snippets and be distracted by gusts of wind or passing birds, or someone standing on their foot. And anyway, when Jesus spoke to the crowd, he spoke in parables, stories, illustrations. They remained in the mind partly because you had to think about them, and partly because he spoke of things that you would see every day, and so be reminded of the parable. But Jesus didn’t give the crowds systematic teaching. He knew that such teaching would only work when it was delivered to a smaller group.

But here are some of the illustrations that the crowd might have heard and gone away to think about. The first is that of the lamp. The illustration of the lamp is an illustration of what would be ridiculous and dangerous. Only a fool would suggest that you place the lamp under the bed or the basket – open flames remember, small, oil lamps which burned a wick of reed as often as not! – Way to burn the house down, as well as not the best use of the light!

And the purpose of light is to reveal things, to show what the darkness would otherwise conceal. So the illustration of the lamp can remind you about things being revealed: that nothing is hidden for ever. And if you try to conceal, then as like as not – like putting your lamp under the bed, you will make a larger conflagration and draw more attention to the hidden matter. This is definitely true in these days of social media, where lapses and failings and things we no longer think cannot be deleted, but are there for anyone who would search to find. But it has always been true. Social media uncovers the worst in people (sometimes) because there has always been a human appetite to do just that. And the gossip network did it quite efficiently, if more locally in Jesus day and beyond. The lamp reveals. What is the light that Jesus is referring to? He doesn't say. Could it be God's word? (see Psalm 119) Could it be himself, the living word of God? Is it just a thing that is true – that time reveals everything in the end?

Whatever it is they are to listen and pay attention. To attend too to the injunction that the measure given is the measure that will be received. This ties in with generosity – if you are mean to others, no one will want to give to you. It ties into forgiveness “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” It makes sense, and is fair, even though we might not always want to live with such justice.

But what is fair in the idea of those who have getting still more and those who have nothing losing even what they have? Nothing is fair about it, and you can't make any but the most tortured argument that it is. These statements are not about the kingdom of God, but about life as we know it: we hope for justice that gives to us what we give to others, but in fact the way that life works is too often not just, with the haves getting more and the have nots being put upon and losing even what they have – think of the story Nathan told David about the lamb. David was outraged, because it was such a blatant piece of injustice, but he hadn't noticed that he had himself perpetrated a similar piece of villainy. It is an injustice that we too often live with, and live fairly comfortably with, if we are on the have and get side of the equation.

These short statements, images or parables which the crowd could take away with them are naming the current situation – current to Jesus and unchanged in its relevance today. But then Jesus goes on to talk about the kingdom of God and how that is different.

We pause here for a hymn, a hymn which is about how the kingdom of God is different from the way of the world.

**Hymn:** Singing we gladly worship the Lord together

**Reading:** Mark 4: 26-34

The Kingdom of God is different from the way of the world, and yet illustrations for how it works are found in the world: but not in the world of human scheming and striving, where the haves get more and the have nots always lose out, but in the world of God's creation. Jesus shows that God works in his kingdom the way he works in his creation. Although the good farmer who prepares the soil can get a better harvest than the one who sows among thistles, yet the general principle of growth is that God makes it happen. The sower having sowed goes about his business, sleeping without worry, rising and going through the day, and the earth itself works on the seed to send up the harvest, which the sower then delights in

harvesting. The kingdom of God works that way – its growth does not depend on our worry and work, but on the seed being sown and God giving the growth.

And it is like mustard seed, small, unnoticed, but which when it grows secretly, produces a tree which the birds of the air are grateful to perch on. Birds which might have ignored the scattered seed, it is so small, are glad to rest on the perches and amid the shade that the tree can provide. The mustard that Jesus refers to here is not the mustard and cress we grow, which could in no way be described as a tree, but is probably a name given locally in Israel to what is officially called *salvadora persica*. This tree, which springs up in desert areas where there is little other growth, is indeed the tallest of trees that grow in such settings and provides rest for birds where there is no other.

But the point of the parable is that it grows. The kingdom of God has unlikely beginnings – a wandering teacher in Palestine who would later be put to death – and it may well be discounted by many or thought of as negligible. But God gives the growth. God gives the growth. The church, Christians, need to think deeply on these parables and remember that God gives the growth.

There is no growth without God. The kingdom, the rule and reign of God spreads and grows because God makes it flourish, and its purpose is to feed us and to provide for us, but not only us, we who have come to know God through Jesus, but also to give rest even to those who had deemed it negligible and of no regard. And God does this. We are not called on to seek to make ourselves big and important as a church (or as individuals). Our job is to pay attention to what Jesus says, to listen well and think about his words and images. We are called on to act in the ways that he indicates: rejecting the grasping, self-serving ways of the world that mean that those who have gain ever more, and embracing the truth that God who gives growth does, if we will follow him, give us more than enough for our lives and will through those who pay attention to him and embrace his kingdom, spread the branches and give the growth.

None of that may be new to us, but it is when we do as the crowds had to do, take the illustrations and pictures and parables and think on them, think on them, think on them, that we will learn new ways that old truths apply in each new day of our lives.

Some of the new ways of God's kingdom are summed up in what we can read in Matthew's gospel as the beatitudes. And our hymn reminds us of them.

**Hymn:** Blest are they, the poor in spirit

### **Prayer**

Lord God who invites us to live in your kingdom, and who spreads your kingdom through your children, we pray today for our world. We bring to you the many, many places where we see the ways of the world hold sway: where those who have get more and those who lack lose out; ways which are at odds with the quiet ways of your kingdom. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray today for all those who will today be remembering past conflict and suffering which still can continue to affect lives in the present. You are the one who can bring good out of evil, and who can turn all our hurts into reflections of your glory, and so we pray the in our remembering we would find healing as we find your presence and your peace.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray with those who are troubled about the way that self-interest and disregard of the poor and weak seems still to be the principle by which too often our lands are governed. Make us people who in your name continue in your way of selflessness, even when it seems that no one sees or cares, for we know that your kingdom grows from the smallest seed. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray still for those who are affected by the coronavirus: those who are ill, those who are fearful, those whose lives are more constrained than ours are, those who work hard to find ways to treat and prevent the illness. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

And we ask that you will keep us faithful to you, trusting that as we live with you day by day, so you will grow your kingdom in our lives and homes and communities. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.  
Hear all our prayers for we ask them in the name of Jesus, Amen.

**Hymn:** God is working his purpose out

**Benediction:**

Live in God's kingdom and be ruled by God's love.  
And may grace, mercy and peace  
from God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit  
be with you and keep you now and always. Amen.

**Postlude:** "Now thank we all our God" by Karg-Elert played on the St. Bride's organ