

A Podcast for North Coventry Group – 12 July 2020 ('Sixth after Pentecost')

Hello and welcome to a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This has been prepared for 12 July, the sixth Sunday after Pentecost, 2020.

Details of music and sources are in the online transcript, and I would like to thank Erica, Alison and Rachel for their contributions to this week's edition.

Music¹ – *Fantasia para un Gentilhombre: 2nd mvt, Adagio (excerpt)*
by Joaquín Rodrigo
performed by John Williams on guitar, with members of
the English Chamber Orchestra
conducted by Charles Groves

Call to Worship: Psalm 65.9-13

*You care for the land and water it;
you enrich it abundantly.
The streams of God are filled with water
to provide the people with corn,
for so you have ordained it.
You drench its furrows and level its ridges;
you soften it with showers and bless its crops.
You crown the year with your bounty,
and your carts overflow with abundance.
The grasslands of the wilderness overflow;
the hills are clothed with gladness.
The meadows are covered with flocks
and the valleys are mantled with corn;
they shout for joy and sing.*

We echo the psalmist's praise of all that God has done, has been and will be for us and all Creation... *Now thank we all our God.*

Hymn: *Now thank we all our God*
Sung by the Choir of King's College, Cambridge,
Accompanied by Richard Farnes, conducted by Sir Stephen Cleobury

Now thank we all our God,
with heart and hands and voices,
who wondrous things has done,
in Whom this world rejoices;
who from our mothers' arms
has blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love,
and still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God
through all our life be near us,
with ever joyful hearts
and blessed peace to cheer us;
and keep us in His grace,
and guide us when perplexed;
And free us from all ills,
in this world and the next!

All praise and thanks to God
the Father now be given;
the Son and Him Who reigns
with Them in highest Heaven;
the one eternal God,
whom earth and Heaven adore;
for thus it was, is now,
and shall be evermore.

Words by Martin Rinkhart (1586-1649), translated by Catherine Winkworth (1827-78)

Prayers

Lord God, as we pause once again to take time to focus on you, help us to look outside.

Help us to look outside wherever we are constrained to live and work during these weeks and months. Whether in private or public gardens, in parks, driving or walking, exercising or travelling to fulfil our next obligation, help us not just to look but to see. See your love for your Creation translated into growing and living things around us. Some growing for our purposes, others as part of the system that millions of years have brought into being. As we take responsibility for our part in your world, give us appreciation of its wonder and beauty.

Help us to look outside our own circles of friends and acquaintances, outside our communities and neighbourhoods to realise that beyond any boundaries we erect for ourselves there are yet more people like us, part of the human family and loved by you. Even where others do not look or sound or even behave like us help us to see a unity with them. The psalmist imagined the natural world responding to you with praise and thanks – may we bring you our response with the same joy in being.

Help us to look outside our own needs and find new ways to help others, learning afresh - as we look at your Word in scripture - just what our role in your world should be.

And as we turn to you in this time of worship help us to look *inside* ourselves to identify our potential and our calling to be part of the Church universal, active and effective. Forgive us the barriers to action that we erect, the excuses for inaction that we invent and the opportunities we squander to share your love and bring your kingdom closer.

In the name of Jesus, our guide and example, who taught us how to pray...

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.

Scriptureⁱⁱ: Isaiah 55.10-13

¹⁰ As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth

and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
it will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

¹² You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.

¹³ Instead of the thorn-bush will grow the juniper,
and instead of briars the myrtle will grow.
This will be for the Lord's renown,
for an everlasting sign,
that will endure for ever.'

Reflection (1)

As it was with the verses from Psalm 65, so it was with those words from the prophet Isaiah – nature responds to God by breaking into song. Isaiah gives us one of those passages where you may suddenly realise you are listening to the words of a 20th-century praise song. *You shall go out with joy and be led forth in peace, and the mountains and the hills shall break forth in singing. There'll be shouts of joy, and the trees of the field shall clap, shall clap their hands...* Not quite our Bible translation but a metricized version by the songwriter Stuart Dauermann, whose tune you'll hear in a few minutes.

The poetic sections of the bible have plenty of similar metaphors of nature's praise. In Psalm 19, *the heavens are telling the glory of God*. Psalm 148 – *Praise him sun and moon and all you twinkly stars*.

You can see how it happens – as people discover more and more about the world they reason that this complexity and interconnectedness surely can not exist without a cause, a purpose and some supreme being having brought it into existence. And so all of Creation ought to praise its creator. It stands to reason.

Though of course libraries full of books have been written about why this **doesn't** necessarily 'stand to reason'. Do we feel this way? How do you feel when you look at the natural world?

Within the last year, as Erica began to work more or less exclusively from home I was obliged to relocate my own study space, desk and computer to the bay window on our ground floor overlooking the garden. I feel so blessed things have turned out this way! I have been able to observe the changing pattern of plant growth in the garden and the woods beyond, the comings and goings of squirrels and birds – more species of birds than I thought we played host to. As I type there is a dunnock on one of our feeders and a great tit queuing up for its turn. A woodpecker paid a visit the other day. This just within one domestic garden. This just a miniscule part of the natural world.

This beauty and this variety doesn't prove the existence of God, but when I have within my heart a conviction that God **is**, then even if a proportion of the development of all of these species is down to natural selection and some down to plain luck, I can still praise God that he lies behind it all in some amazing way, and give thanks.

Our prayers spoke of looking outside. I meant this to be more of a metaphor than *really* looking out through a window, but it is good to look outside, either literally or figuratively. Horizons widen, fresh influences can come to bear. George Herbert's words come to mind:

*A man that looks on glass, on it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass, and then the heav'n espy.*

I wanted to respond to the psalm offered us this week by affirming that we can still respond to the amazing love of God shown in the natural world in the way that the ancient people did. We can still wonder, and we can still imagine nature's response, perhaps especially when we see some animals and birds apparently playing or frisking about or singing just for the joy of it, just for the joy of being.

The invitation to look outside would perhaps not have been so necessary in ancient times when our forebears spent more time literally outside and were much more closely in touch with nature.

This is not the sort of message that directly bears on what we do from day to day, but instead helps us create an environment within which we are, as I say, more ready to receive influences from outside our immediate and habitual surroundings. Sometimes those influences may be strange. Not what we are used to, and tending to unsettle us. But it has been said by someone who knew how to turn a good phrase that God in Christ comes to us not always to comfort the afflicted but to afflict the comfortable.

Look outside for inspiration. Look outside to see God's greatness evidenced by the natural world, and rejoice. Look outside to find those who need us. Look outside for challenge. Isolation may mean frustrations but it sometimes means insulation from the hard questions we ought to be trying to answer. Like, what is the Church for in this so-called new normal?

Music: *You shall go out with joy* (instrumental, excerpt)
Music by Stuart Dauermann
Performed by Rob and Gilly Bennett,
From their album *Be still and I will seek your face*.

Scripture Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake.² Such large crowds gathered round him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore.

³ Then he told them many things in parables, saying: 'A farmer went out to sow his seed.⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.⁹ Whoever has ears, let them hear.'

¹⁸ 'Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: ¹⁹ when anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰ The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹ But

since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.²² The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful.²³ But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.'

Reflection (2)

With the parable of the sower we are back in metaphor territory. We spend our lives using metaphors. We talked about being buried in work, our heads spinning, in a sticky situation where you could cut the atmosphere with a knife. When I had a day job I had colleagues who would conspire with me to mix metaphors, and we'd watch out for anyone who claimed that there was a cash cow ready to lay the golden eggs, or that the door was closing on a window of opportunity.

Using spoken images, word pictures to represent ideas, was something Jesus did a lot. Sometimes the image was a positive one – the picture of a shepherd is a good example. Sometimes not so nice – the 'whitewashed tombs, whited sepulchres representing people with habits seemingly good at a distance but inside there was corruption. Weaving these into stories produced these parables Rachel spoke about. And here is a goody. The parable of the sower.

When I saw this passage was coming up this week I looked at the story again and I thought about this metaphor of growth and the struggle for growth in different conditions. Some parts of our own garden are better than others and more productive when it comes to plants producing either flowers or in a few cases fruit. We have brambles popping up here and there, so the idea of one plant's territory being taken over by an invader is easy to comprehend. We can all understand the difficulty of anything growing from seed sown on a path.

Each time you hear a parable – and of course there will be few if any you have not heard before – you perhaps look to see who or what the characters in the parable represent. When the house is built on rock or on sand, the real-life individual is basing his life on figuratively firm foundations of faith, or on something altogether less stable. When the foreigner, the Samaritan, turns out to be the one to rescue the traveller after he was assaulted and robbed, we see mirrored our own relationships with those who are not like us, have different roots and traditions but are nevertheless our neighbours and to be loved. In the parable of the sower, who do you think you are?

Far be it from me to suggest our Lord would ever mix his metaphors, but I think in this story there are a mixture of images, and it is **not** immediately clear where we might look for our own lesson.

For there is the sower. Spreading the seed – one long established method of doing this was known as 'broadcasting', think on that one. After two millenia we might reasonably believe that sowing the seeds from which faithful followers grow is now the Church's task. Are we doing this, and doing it with care?

And there is the seed itself, and the plants that grow or don't grow from it. The ultimate ambition, as in the last couple of verses of the parable, is to produce more seed both for sustenance and to keep the cycle of sowing and harvesting going. Are we using our lives for the benefit of those who come after? Looking outside our own concerns and needs and wants?

Finally there is the ground onto which the seed is sown. For this, and not the seed – which after all we assume is all the same – is what determines the outcome. No use having the seed fall in the wrong place. No one in their right mind leaves seeds or bulbs or whatever lying on the path and expects a good outcome. Are we ready to *receive* the next planting, the next challenge from God?

You may say I am hijacking this story to mean more than Jesus intended. After all he himself explained his meaning for his then audience. But if you are feeling kind you'll allow me to take the story itself as a seed and grow it, its depth of meaning and its possibilities for teaching how we ought to be.

If we are the sower we should be clear to whom we bring our message. And in today's idiom and another metaphor not assume a one-size-fits-all approach.

If we are the ground ready to receive the seed we should take care to prepare properly for the planting season. Take advantage of this time of lying fallow. Refresh ourselves, prime ourselves for new opportunities.

And of course we want to be the fruitful, productive and healthy plants of Jesus' original explanation. To borrow from yet another metaphorical saying of Christ, by our fruits we will be known. Let's work together in God's field to achieve our full potential – and everyone else's.

Prayers of Intercession

We turn in prayer to God the sower, God the landowner, God who will reap his harvest in his own good time.

Lord we want to be fertile ground. We want to be ready to receive what you send, to hear your call and to respond to your challenge. Not alone. Not isolated. Working together with your people, with women and men who look to your Son as their guide, Lord and Saviour. Lord, equip your church with the resources it needs and help us to discern what is necessary and what is sufficient to do your work well.

In these difficult times inspire the churches of this land to know how and when to resume a presence within church buildings and the right balance to strike between different modes of worship.

Lord, we want to help to prepare the ground. Help us to let go of what is no longer of use, no longer the right way - but at the same time to select means of communication and worship because they are appropriate and timely, not merely to follow a fashion.

In these days help us to reach and to help those who have found themselves marginalized and out of touch, unable to hear even what the most sophisticated technology is broadcasting. May our message – **your** message – take root in the right places.

Lord, we want to grow strong. Guide us as we find the right way to measure our own usefulness, and help us to avoid being satisfied with doing just enough. Reveal to us new opportunities to look outside our churches and beyond our preoccupation with Sundays and survival.

Lord, we want to bear fruit. The Church exists for others. Give us a sense of where our next action should be focused.

We know that your field is wide and your love reaches your people in many different ways. Be with all whose calling is to serve others as once again we thank you for those who have served *us* by their work in this pandemic time.

Be with those who are still falling ill even as others are recovering. Be with those who grieve or who struggle to find the basics of life even as others are preparing for outings and holidays. Be with those who seek next steps and facilitate decision-making even as others criticise their past choices.

Lord, we offer ourselves as sowers and as soil, as seed for your field, and into your hands we commit our futures.

In Jesus' name. Amen

A hymn that emphasises, the time for God to act through us is now.

Hymn *Heaven shall not wait* by John L Bell and Graham Maule
 sung by the Wild Goose Worship Group
 from their album *Heaven shall not wait*, reproduced by permission

Heaven shall not wait for the poor to lose their patience,
the scorned to smile, the despised to find a friend:
Jesus is Lord; he has championed the unwanted;
in him injustice confronts its timely end.

Heaven shall not wait for the rich to share their fortunes,
the proud to fall, the élite to tend the least:
Jesus is Lord; he has shown the master's privilege—
to kneel and wash servants' feet before they feast.

Heaven shall not wait for the dawn of great ideas,
thoughts of compassion divorced from cries of pain:
Jesus is Lord; he has married word and action;
his cross and company make his purpose plain.

Heaven shall not wait for triumphant Hallelujahs,
when earth has passed and we reach another shore:
Jesus is Lord in our present imperfection;
his power and love are for now, and then for evermore.

Blessing

As we return our attention to our part of God's kingdom, may God protect us as we listen for him calling us and confirming us in our roles within the Body of Christ.

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And may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with us all today and for ever. Amen

Music: *Suite 'Mozartiana' in G Major - Op. 61: 3rd Mvt, Preghiera*
 composed by Tchaikovsky, based on the Mozart motet *Ave Verum Corpus*
 Performed by the English Chamber Orchestra, conducted by James Judd

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Credits

An excerpt from *Fantasía para un Gentilhombre: 2nd mvt, Adagio* by Joaquín Rodrigo was performed by John Williams on guitar, with members of the English Chamber Orchestra conducted by Charles Groves

Now thank we all our God was sung by the Choir of Kings College, Cambridge, conducted by Sir Stephen Cleobury and accompanied by Richard Farnes, from the album *Abide with me*.

You shall go out with joy (instrumental, excerpt), by Stuart Dauermann was performed by Rob and Gilly Bennett, from their album *Be still and I will seek your face*.

Heaven shall not wait by John L Bell and Graham Maule was sung by the Wild Goose Worship Group of the Iona Community from their album *Heaven shall not wait*

The third movement (*Preghiera*) from the 'Mozartiana' Suite in G Major - Op. 61 composed by Tchaikovsky, based on the Mozart motet *Ave Verum Corpus* was performed by the English Chamber Orchestra, conducted by James Judd

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ⁱⁱ Bible quotations are all taken from the New International Version, Anglicised Edition