

## Call to Worship

Lord God,  
Every word you give us is a miracle word  
— how could we help but obey?  
Break open your words,  
let the light shine out,  
let ordinary people see the meaning.  
Smile on us, your servants;  
teach us the right way to live. (from Psalm 119 .vv129,130,135 - The Message)

Welcome again to the meditation for The Cotteridge Church, and today I have come down to the church garden for the reflection. Today is the third of three weeks in which we've been looking at parables of Jesus contained in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel. Today we have several parables, short stories that Jesus told to encourage people to think what the Kingdom of God was like. Mustard seeds yeast and buried treasure all feature today.

Let us pray

## Opening Prayer

Lord, as we hear your word today  
may it transform our life  
as yeast leavens the dough,  
may it grow in our hearts  
as a tiny seed grows into a mighty tree.  
May we treasure your word,  
may it fill us with joy,  
may we live it in our lives  
that we may be found worthy  
among your disciples  
when, in its fulness, your Kingdom comes.  
Amen.

We live in an area that is blessed by an abundance of trees. Some of them quite magnificent specimens. Whether in parks, gardens and streets they offer us shelter from rain or sun. We marvel at the wildlife they are home to. Trees crop up quite often in the Jewish scriptures, which make up most of our Old Testament, where often they are symbols of immense worldly power - political and military. We only have to think of those mighty Cedars of Lebanon that crop up in the psalms. In Ezekiel (Chapter 31) a tree represents the great might of the empire of Assyria. In that reading Assyria is warned that because of its vanity and pride it will be chopped down, it will meet its end. In Daniel (Chapter 4) King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon has a dream in which he visualises a mighty tree in which the birds of the air have made their nests. In his dream he sees that tree chopped down. Daniel interprets as a warning to the King that unless he amends his ways he too will be chopped down.

In both of these images the birds that have made their nests are the nation states that the great empires of Assyria and Babylon have taken over and annexed as part of their empires.

Jesus in his parables often inverts imagery. Instead of being images of political and military power, the Kingdom of God is one of love and of service. Jesus then is inverting the imagery of that tree as representing power when he gives his first parable today, that of the mustard seed. And he follows it up with a parable about something even smaller, the parable of the yeast.

### Reading: Matthew 13 .31-33

#### *The Parable of the Mustard Seed*

31 He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.'

#### *The Parable of the Yeast*

33 He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'

Yeast is even smaller than a mustard seed. So small in fact that its true nature wasn't realised until the use of microscopes. But its effect was known well enough. Its a vital part of brewing and fermenting - little wonder therefore that in Old English its effect and whatever, unbeknown to them, was causing it was simply known as 'God-is-Good'.

But Jesus hearers would also have known that yeast was not always good. In the wrong place, or if it was the wrong kind, it could give rise to problems. That's why publicans today spend so much time cleaning out beer pipes. It was known in New Testament times too. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians we read, has this to say about yeast being where it was unwanted:

"Let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth". (1 Corinthians 5 .8) \

As well as being useful yeast can also be a contaminant. But Jesus' point with these two parables is that something small can have an immense effect. That is true also of the Kingdom of God.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu tells of how when growing up in apartheid South Africa, the seed of the Kingdom of God was planted in his heart and mind by Bishop Trevor Huddleston. When Huddleston, a white English Bishop, walked around the Black township that Tutu was born and brought up in, Huddleston would show acts of kindness to those he met in the street. Sometimes those acts of kindness were as small and as simple as just doffing his hat to the women he met on the street. One of those women was Desmond Tutu's mother, often accompanied by young Desmond. That small act of

kindness sowed a seed in young Desmond from which would grow a mighty fire and passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Kingdom of God is a breaking down of barriers. It can also bring great joy and Jesus spoke about that in the next two parables we are going to hear.

### Reading: Matthew 13 .44-45

#### *The Parable of the Treasure in the Field*

44 'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

#### *The Parable of the Pearl of Great Price*

45 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46 on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

In the year 1373 a woman, who in her own words was described as aged "30 and a half" was seriously ill and seemingly at the point of death. She had a series of visions including "a little thing the size of a hazelnut lying in the palm of my hand". In her vision she saw that hazelnut represented "all that is made". Later she wrote these words:

"In this little thing I saw three properties: The first is that God made it, the second is that God loves it and the third is that God keeps it. When I behold the Maker, the Lover, and the Keeper I know that I won't see true bliss unless I fully unite with God and rest in Him, with naught between us. The knowledge I need is that God loves us and we should have love for God"

*from 'Revelations of Divine Love' - Julian of Norwich (translated by Zam Walker)*

That woman was Julian of Norwich and, after receiving her vision and recovering from her illness she dedicated her life to prayer and helping others on their spiritual journey. Her experience made her value the wonder and the joy in each moment of the gift of life that God gives us. She had discovered her treasure in the field, her pearl of great price, that she was part of The Kingdom of God.

A modern poem by Alizon Sharun:

#### **The Kingdom of Heaven**

*A prayer by Alizon Sharun*

The Kingdom of heaven slips between the cracks  
in the meaning of words.

The languages of this world cannot contain it.

In the depths of the ocean of our desperation it lies,  
a pearl of enormous wealth.  
It fills the cavern of our need.

It soothes the pain that fills the corner of a prison cell.  
It pours into the cup of suffering passed around in an upstairs room

It is the immensity of small acts of compassion.  
It is the sea of living water  
contained in a single tear of our contrition.

It is the split second between the welling up of joy  
and the eruption of laughter.  
It is the dancing to our own beat.

It is the wide eyes of a child.  
It is the filling of our lamps with expectation  
for the bridegroom at the end of time.

It is the seed for our hope of life.  
It is here.  
It is now.

The Kingdom of God, and our vision and experience of it, will be as diverse as each of us. But all that grows in our lives will not necessarily be of the Kingdom. In the next parable Jesus warns that, just like the wheat and the tares last week, there will have to be a sorting out.

### **Reading: Matthew 13 .47-50**

#### *The Parable of the Seine Net*

47 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; 48 when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. 49 So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50 and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The collection of parables that we have encountered in Matthew's Gospel over the last three weeks have been varied and challenging. The collection finishes with Jesus asking his hearers whether they have understood what he has been saying in the parables. Have we? Through the parables have we seen and encountered the Kingdom of God in new ways? Our final passage from today's reading:

### **Reading: Matthew 13 .51-52**

(Jesus said) 51 'Have you understood all this?' They answered, 'Yes.' 52 And he said to them, 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.'

Like that man, that scribe, and his treasure chest we are invited to dig deep. Our gifts, our treasures, may be ones we've already used, or maybe we have ones yet to see the light of day that can be used for the building up of the Kingdom of God where we are. Old and new are useful for the building of the Kingdom of God.

Let us pray:

## Closing Prayer

In love, O Lord all your works have begun;  
by love you sustain them  
and in your love our life is everlasting.  
So let the beginning and ending of all our loving  
be to see you O God,  
for ever and ever. Amen

*(Julian of Norwich, c.1343 - 1417)*

## Closing remarks

There's a transcript of this morning's reflection on the resource site. There are links also to worship there too along with a whole host of other resources.

Also on the resource site I'm inviting feedback on what material people have found useful and are still finding useful. It'll help me decide how to develop it in future.

For now, take care, stay safe, and best of all God is with us!

## Call to Worship

“Happy are those who delight in the law of the Lord,  
They are like trees planted by streams of water,  
which yield their fruit in good season,  
and their leaves do not wither. (Psalm 1 .1a,2,3)

Welcome to this meditation for The Cotteridge Church. I'm starting in our garden today as we will be contemplating another of Jesus' parables about growth of crops and, today, whether to uproot the weeds that grow alongside what is good.

Now, before I go any further I would suggest that, if you haven't watched last weeks reflection, it might be a good idea to do so at some point as there I talk there about what a parable is, and how the story within it may have many layers of meaning over it's development in the life of the Church. In particular as with last weeks parable and this weeks, the explanation that follows it in Matthew's Gospel may not have been its original interpretation.

Let us pray

## Opening Prayer

God, you have placed your seed  
within each of your people.  
You provide water through the Holy Spirit,  
and nourishment through Christ your Living Word,  
yielding an abundance of fruit in the gifts  
you have bestowed on your people.  
Help us to discern how to use those gifts  
through all of your people;  
in each time, in each need, in each challenge,  
That your Kingdom come! Amen.

My mom loved gardening. This is a photograph of her that we used at the Thanksgiving Service after she died eight years ago. I have to report though that the gift of being a good gardener isn't hereditary. If I attempt to do anything other than cut the lawns it can bring fear and apprehension. Others may be able to discern what is a plant that should be there, and what is a weed. But that gift of discernment has not been given to me. Weeding a flower bed can be a dangerous task. Those beloved perennials - see I know some of the language - are in danger of disappearing into the garden waste bin along with the thistles, dandelions and couch grass. What is a weed anyway? Who was it who said "A weed is only a plant that's growing in the wrong place".

Our reading today is a parable of Jesus and features weeds and the dangers of trying to pull weeds up. Attempt to pull them up and you are in danger of losing the good crop too. As Jesus taught using images from daily life it may well be that he's basing this parable on a real incident - in other words a first century example of crop sabotage!

## Reading: Matthew 13 .24-30

24 He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; 25 but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. 26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 27 And the labourers 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?" 28 He answered, "An enemy has done this." The labourers said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" 29 But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 30 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." '

Not risking any gardening I had a look through some old boxes the other day and came across one of my old school reports. I know that some of you have heard this before. Looking back at these can be a fascinating exercise and brings back the memories - good and bad. Characters, fellow pupils and also teachers, are some of the influences that have shaped us into the people that we are today.

There are always the little barbed comments in reports though. For example this is my Religious Education report when I was in the equivalent of today's Year 9. The RE teacher wrote as follows:

"Michael has done some good written work - on occasion"

And he only gave me a C+. No sign of the budding Church Minister there then.

Reading other people's school reports can also be great fun. Listen to some of these comments, each of them real comments about people who later found fame, but while they were at school. See if you can guess who the pupils are when I read out the comment from the report:

*(Note: In the video the answers are given straight away. In the transcript I've put the answers in the notes at the end)*

1. "He will never amount to anything"
2. "He's too interested in sport. You can't make a living out of football."
3. She "writes indifferently" and "knows nothing of grammar".
4. "He has set himself low standards which he has failed to come up to."
5. "It would seem that he thinks he is running the school and not me. If this attitude persists one of us will have to leave."
6. "He will either go to prison or become a millionaire"

and finally, make of this what you will:

7. "She must learn that liveliness should cease at lights out."

In the parable that we heard earlier you'll recall how the farmer tells his labourers not to try and pull up the weeds because, in doing so, they may inadvertently pull up the good wheat as well. The weeds, in this case a plant called darnel, which particularly in its earlier growing stages looks very similar to wheat. Discerning what is good, and what isn't is a difficult - even impossible task. "Let it all grow" says the farmer, "We'll sort it out later.

As I said last week Jesus tells parables to say that "The Kingdom of Heaven is a bit like this". The story can then speak in different ways - that's why we refer to the Bible as God's Living Word. One way to interpret a parable is to treat it as an allegory - where everything in it represents something else. A few verses later Matthew does that with this parable in verses 36-43, which you might like to look up. But a parable doesn't have to be interpreted as an allegory. There are early Christian texts, including The Gospel of Thomas, (see last week's reflection) that omit the interpretation as an allegory and leave the parable, the story, to stand by itself.

This parable may simply be saying that God's people need to take time to discern what is of the Kingdom and what is not. Jesus lived out that message in the call of his disciples. We can only imagine what some of their school reports would have been like!

The same is true of disciples today. In his 20s a certain young man was interested in being an ordained Minister in the Church of England. He went to see his bishop; John Hughes, Bishop of Kensington, one of the bishops in the Church of England's Diocese of London. It's the bishops role, along with others, to discern whether an individual is suitable to be an ordained minister. After meeting the young man, the bishop delivered his verdict with the statement:

"There is no place for you within the Church of England."

Who was that young man? No, not me! It was Justin Welby - later accepted for ordination and now Archbishop of Canterbury.

All of those people whose school reports we heard went on to surprising things. In some there was already the hint of what was to come in their later lives. In others there wasn't even the slightest clue. That's how our human lives develop; shaped by others and shaped by God.

We can apply that to the building of God's Kingdom in other ways. Let us not be too judgemental. Let us not reject things that seem worthless or even contrary to the building of the Kingdom. What might look like darnel, may actually be the finest wheat. What might look like a weed may turn out to be the most beautiful of orchids.

Let us pray:

## Closing Prayer

God, grant us the gifts of discernment,  
and above all the gift of patience,  
in nurturing your growing Kingdom.  
Help us to trust that you are at work;  
often unseen, often inexplicable  
and often in surprising ways,  
In the name of Jesus Christ,  
who called, and calls today,  
the most unlikely people  
to build his Kingdom. Amen

## Closing remarks

If you'd like to read through this reflection we've shared this morning, you'll find a printable version on the resource site as always. There's more about parables and their development in last weeks reflection and that, as video and transcript, is on there too. As always there are links there to live worship there too.

Also on the resource site I'm inviting feedback on what material people have found useful and are still finding useful. It'll help me decide how to develop it in future.

For now, take care, stay safe, and best of all God is with us!

## Notes:

Answers to the 'School Reports of the famous':

1. "He will never amount to anything"  
(Albert Einstein's school report)
2. "He's too interested in sport. You can't make a living out of football."  
(Gary Lineker's school report)
3. She "writes indifferently" and "knows nothing of grammar".  
(Charlotte Bronte's school report)
4. "He has set himself low standards which he has failed to come up to."  
(Jon Snow's school report) (That's Jon Snow TV presenter, not actor!)
5. "It would seem that he thinks he is running the school and not me.If this attitude persists one of us will have to leave."  
(Richard Briers' school report)
6. "He will either go to prison or become a millionaire"  
(Richard Branson's school report)
7. "She must learn that liveliness should cease at lights out."  
(Sarah Ferguson's school report)

## Call to Worship

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

(Isaiah 55 .10,11)

Welcome to this week's reflection on behalf of The Cotteridge Church which this week comes from Rowheath Park. The words we've just heard from Isaiah set this week's theme of God bringing forth abundant life even in unlikely circumstances. In one of Jesus' best known stories we'll hear how, even when times seem futile and you seem to be labouring in vain, God can still bring about a bounty of a rich harvest.

In this context our opening prayer is a prayer of praise and thanksgiving based on Psalm 65. In thanksgiving and in praise, let us pray:

## Opening Prayer

Praise to you, O God!

You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it;  
the river of God is full of water;  
you provide the people with grain,  
for so you have prepared it.

You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges,  
softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.

You crown the year with your bounty.

(Psalm 65 .1a, 9-11a)

**Thanks be to God! Amen!**

Jesus often teaches using images from rural life. His was a predominantly agricultural society and images of farming would have been familiar to his disciples and all those who heard him teach. Some of Jesus' teaching was carried out by telling parables; short stories from everyday life that encourage the listener to think deeply about faith. Parables such as the Parable of the Sower - which we'll now hear in the version from Matthew's Gospel:

## Reading: Matthew 13 .1-9

1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. 2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up

and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 Let anyone with ears listen!’

I love parables. There are at forty of them in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke - none in John. Some occur in one Gospel only, some of them are in two, but only four of them are in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and the Parable of the Sower is one of them. (*cf Mark 4 .3-8; Luke 8 .5-8*)

Although Jesus based some of his parables on ancient tales, most seem to be original stories that Jesus composed to prompt people to think about the nature of God, God’s Kingdom, and our response. Later the parables went on to be retold by Jesus’ earliest followers, and later still they were retold by the earliest Christians and so they eventually found their way into the Gospels, written a generation after the events of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. At each of those stages the parable may have been interpreted differently. A parable may have many different layers of meaning. Often the parable as received by us today may look completely different as heard in the first context of Jesus speaking, in today’s case, from a boat, overlooking the crowd, on the banks of the lake. A parable is a good example of how God’s Word, encountered by us partly within the pages of scripture, remains alive and active today. Parables can still speak to us. Sometimes in surprising ways.

Within the pages of our Gospels The Parable of the Sower is one of the few parables where we have an explanation of its meaning. In Matthew’s Gospel, after a few verses where Jesus is depicted as expounding why he teaches in parables (*Chapter 13.10-17*), we encounter this explanation of what the parable is about:

**Reading:** Matthew 13 .18-23

18 ‘Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. 20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. 22 As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. 23 But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.

In this passage the parable has been allegorised! An allegory is where everything in a story represents something else. Here the seed is God’s word, the birds represent evil snatching it away, the thorns are the temptations of the world choking it out, but the good soil is the devout believer in whom God’s word can grow tall, strong and unshakable.

There is good reason to believe that the the explanation in verses 18-23 was added during the earliest years of what became Christianity. In a context of persecution and hardship the parable could then be read as an exhortation to believers to examine themselves and test the sincerity of their conversion. The hearer is invited to ask

themselves whether they are the sort of person in whom God's Word and call will be snuffed out by thistle-like temptations, or the stony ground of hardships? But a parable doesn't have to be interpreted as an allegory. In other words everything in a parable doesn't have to represent something else.

There are other early Christian texts in addition to those that found their way into the New Testament. In one of these, the Gospel of Thomas, we also find The Parable of the Sower but it omits the passage explaining the parable.

Try and imagine that you've never heard that explanation and that you are listening to the parable for the very first time. Here's the parable again.

3 Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. *(Matthew 13 .3-8)*

Someone could ask why is the sower is scattering good grain so carelessly? Why not restrict the sowing to the good fertile ground? Scattering good grain in thistle patches, on hard pathways, and rocky outcrops seems a waste of valuable grain. Jesus' listeners wouldn't have asked those questions, simply because that's how it was done. Today we're used to seeing fields immaculately ploughed and harrowed before seeds are sown. In Jesus' locality and time the seed was scattered first on the fallow ground and only then was the ground ploughed; seed, thistles, pathways, stones and all. Even then the sower still faced many frustrations. Seeds would still be eaten, thistles would grow up again, drought was often a threat. There were other frustrations too. In the Gospel of Thomas pests are mentioned and "a worm" devours the seedlings. Presumably the sowers also faced the frustrations of locusts and the 'sirocco', a scorching wind. Sometimes sowing grain must have seemed a hopeless prospect!

Maybe the writer of Ecclesiastes had turned their hand to sowing and knew it's frustrations:

Vanity of vanities! All is vanity  
What do people gain from all the toil  
at which they toil under the sun? *(Ecclesiastes 1 .2,3)*

A key to understanding the Parable of the Sower is that the beginning and the end are separated by the growing season. Despite pests, weeds and droughts, previously unpromising fallow ground is turned into a field of wavy corn with a yield surpassing all expectations. As Psalm 65 says, God has indeed crowned the year with bounty (*Psalm 65 .11*).

A parable doesn't have to be interpreted as an allegory. It can simply be taken at face value, a story to make us think "God's Kingdom is a bit like that". In the Parable of the

Sower, a situation of futility is yielding a rich harvest. In working for God's Kingdom failures and frustrations can also bring about God's bounty. After all, Jesus chose Peter with his stubbornness and denials, Thomas with his doubts and James and John with their power grabbing mother! (*Matthew 20 .20ff*). He chose me and you too.

God's Kingdom grows from the most unlikely stuff in the most unlikely places!

Let us pray:

## Closing Prayer

Lord, we have meditated on your Word,  
and have marvelled at how your bounty  
produces crops in their seasons.  
We hold before you our lives; fragile and flawed.  
We hold before you our experiences;  
frustration and futility.  
Help us to remember that you are with us,  
ploughing the unpromising ground  
in which we find ourselves,  
and providing water and nourishment.  
Grant us a time of growth and  
may the bounty of Your Kingdom come! Amen

## Closing remarks

If you'd like to read through the reflection we've shared this morning, you'll find a printable version, with bible references etc, on the resource site as always. You'll also find a link there if you'd like to find out a bit more about the Gospel of Thomas. As always there are links there to live worship there too.

Like the sower we sometimes face frustration and sometimes we think that all of our work for Christ is futile. Like the writer of Ecclesiastes we may wonder what is gained by toiling away. But God is at work; sowing, and nourishing and ahead lies a harvest of plenty.

Next week w'll hear another agricultural parable. What do you do, how do you discern, whether all the grows is useful for God's Kingdom.

Take care, stay safe, and best of all God is with us!

## **Notes:**

### **Suggested reading:**

'Rediscovering the Parables' - Joachim Jeremias

### **The Gospel of Thomas**

Various translations, and commentary, online at:  
<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/thomas.html>

## Call to Worship

"The Lord is faithful in all his words,  
and gracious in all his deeds.  
The Lord upholds all who are falling,  
and raises up all who are bowed down". (*Psalm 145 .13b, 14*)

Welcome to this week's reflection on behalf of The Cotteridge Church. We start a little bit closer to home than last week when we were at Dudley Castle. I'm here in Cotteridge Park because this Saturday should have been CoCoMAD. CoCoMAD is a one day festival of music, arts and dance. This year of course it has fallen victim to the lock down. These are very uncertain and unsettling times, and we reflect that in our Opening Prayer.

Let us pray:

## Opening Prayer

God of those who falter:  
give us grace in our uncertainty;  
give us courage  
to persist in choosing you  
over and above all else;  
to keep on risking vulnerable love;  
to keep on keeping the faith. Amen.

The acronym CoCoMAD stands for Cotteridge Community Festival of Music, Arts and Dance. It's been running for a number of years now and I encouraged The Cotteridge Church to get involved in 2018 and 2019. There's no public event this year, although some households are decorating gardens and windows. But Cotteridge Park is quiet on a Saturday when there would usually be music, dance and arts. Ironically today's Gospel reading partially reflects music and dance. We'll hear it today as three separate passages.

## Reading: Matthew 11 .16-19

16 (Jesus said,) 'But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another,  
17 "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;  
we wailed, and you did not mourn."  
18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon";  
19 the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.'

I did have a wry smile when I saw what today's Gospel reading was today. Not just because of CoCoMAD. Today the 5th July is when some congregations have decided to meet together for corporate worship, the first time since the lock down began at the end of March. We haven't set a date for return to worship yet at The Cotteridge Church, more about that in a little while, but those who are gathering today will find that things are very

different. Seats will be socially distanced. There's no hymn singing, indeed those that have instrumentalists will find that there are no wind instruments at all. Unlike today's Gospel reading there's no flutes.

In that reading from Matthew's Gospel flutes refer to weddings and wailing refers to funerals. Jesus puts it into the context of a children's game where they are playing at weddings and funerals. One group of children say "We played the flute", and the other group say "We're not in the mood to dance. We don't feel happy". The first group then say, "Well we started wailing" and the other group replied "Well we're not really in the mood to be sad either". Its children squabbling, being uncertain. Jesus then relates that to his ministry and that of John the Baptist. John the Baptist, he says, was rejected because people regarded him as weird because he lived a solitary life, ate very simple food. Whereas they regarded Jesus as weird because he associated with those that 'decent' folk thought he shouldn't be associating with anyway. In other words it was a no win situation. Whatever Jesus did, whatever John the Baptist did, there would be those that weren't happy. Sometimes I'm sure they were the same people who weren't happy about John as weren't happy about Jesus.

In other words it's a 'no win situation'.

It reminds me of the well known saying, written by the monk John Lydgate who, among other things, served at the court of kings Henry IV and V:

'You can satisfy some of the people all of the time.  
You can satisfy all of the people some of the time.  
But you can't satisfy all of the people all of the time'

*(John Lydgate, Monk and Poet, 1370 - 1451)*

Those of us involved in reopening church buildings know all about that. What is going to happen isn't going to be popular with everyone. But it is necessary. Although we haven't set a date for reopening we are working towards one. This week I set some chairs out. We're going to use 2 metre distancing, because the building isn't well ventilated. Including the pianist or organist (for any non-singing music), the sound desk operator, and someone leading worship we can accommodate about 30. That's all. And it's bleak. What are we going to do? Should we ask people to book in advance? Are we going to turn people away at the door once we have 30 inside? Yes we can add a few chairs for 'households' but that means removing other chairs to preserve distancing. We're not going to be able to please all people all of the time. Those involved in planning, and all who'd like to return to worship in the building, need wisdom.

**Reading:** Matthew 11 .25-27

25 At that time Jesus said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; 26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 27 All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the

Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

As we work together through the next few weeks towards a reopening we all need to have the sort of openness and honesty that Jesus here ascribes to a child. Yes, as earlier in the passage children have tantrums, and we'll have disagreements. But this passage calls us to remember that this isn't a paper exercise merely to comply with the rules that the Government and our churches have imposed on us. It's about ensuring that ourselves, and others who visit our building, are safe.

It's also about us discerning where God is in all this, and reflecting God's nature in what we do. Jesus reminds us that no one can know God the Father without knowing God the Son - and, as our opening prayer said, it is in risking vulnerable love that we will find Christ in each other as we journey through the challenges that lie ahead.

Thinking back to the images of the inside of our church building it may be that we want to continue online activity. Maybe even extend it. Some people have found that worship services on the Zoom conferencing facility work surprisingly well. That platform has the added advantage that those without internet can phone in and listen. In many cases new people, or people who hadn't attended for years, have logged on or phoned in. Could we do that - monthly if not weekly? It's part of the conversation we need to have. But if we are starting new things, what is it of the old things that we are prepared to give up? In showing, and receiving, vulnerable love we also will encounter the need to sacrifice things we have, perhaps, in the past held dear.

As the saying goes, we're not all going to be happy all of the time. But, in the love of Christ, we can find strength to bear disappointment and sacrifice.

All this is more than a little stressful. If we are there for each other, sharing the load, we'll get through it. The final verses from today's set Gospel are words of comfort and reassurance for us. God is here, granting us rest and lifting the burdens that we carry at this time and always.

**Reading:** Matthew 11 .28-30

28 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

Back at Easter I spoke about empty church buildings and empty tombs. Resurrection is present in many ways in the life of the churches. Throughout lock down churches have worked and served in many ways. Surprisingly worship too has found new life online. Now that new life has to be nurtured through the next stage. The Cotteridge Church will be different but that will be ok. Because Resurrection isn't resuscitation. It isn't about bringing the old things back to life. It's about the birth into a glorious new existence. And God is at the midst of it.

Let us pray:

### **Closing Prayer**

God of our past,  
our present and our future.  
As we seek your will for our future,  
help us to love one another with vulnerable love.  
Help us to be prepared  
to let go of what we have held dear.  
Help us to give birth  
to new ideas and to nurture new starts.  
May your steadfast love be in our worship  
and in our service of others  
in the name of Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

Amen.

The following has been recorded

### **Closing remarks**

If you'd like to read through the reflection we've shared this morning, you'll find a printable version on the resource site as always. There are links there to live worship too.

Let us proclaim our faith in the days that lie ahead and let us pray that we may discern where God wants us to be, where God wants us to go, and what God wants us to do.

Take care, stay safe.

The best of all is that God is with us!