

# Salford Methodist Circuit



Spiritual Growth - 13th June 2021  
Anita Shepherd

Good morning and a warm welcome to friends old and new to today's online worship from the Salford Methodist Circuit, where our theme will be spiritual growth. Let us begin with a few words from Psalm 92.

*The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the Lord, they flourish in the courts of our God.*

## **Hymn: When Morning Gilds The Skies**

*When morning gilds the skies,  
my heart awaking cries:  
"May Jesus Christ be praised!"  
Alike at work and prayer  
to Jesus I repair:  
"May Jesus Christ be praised!"*

*Does sadness fill my mind?  
A solace here I find:  
"May Jesus Christ be praised!"  
When evil thoughts are near,  
these words will calm my fear:  
"May Jesus Christ be praised!"*

*To God, the Word on high  
the hosts of angels cry:  
"May Jesus Christ be praised!"  
Let mortals, too, upraise  
their voice in hymns of praise:  
"May Jesus Christ be praised!"*

*Let earth's wide circle round  
in joyful notes resound:  
"May Jesus Christ be praised!"  
Let air, and sea, and sky,  
from depth to height reply:  
"May Jesus Christ be praised!"*

*Be this while life is mine  
my song of love divine:  
"May Jesus Christ be praised!"  
Be this the eternal song,  
through all the ages long:*

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*"May Jesus Christ be praised!"*

## Prayers of Adoration

*Creator God,  
We bring you all that is growing within us:  
**for you to bless and nurture.***

*We bring our prayers for the spread of your kingdom:  
**for you to bless and nurture.***

*We bring the initiatives for justice multiplying among nations:  
**for you to bless and nurture.***

*We bring the hopes and dreams, tiny and big,  
of all your children around the world:  
**for you to bless and nurture.***

God of mystery,  
Sower, Saviour, Spirit,  
we worship you:  
and we ask you to give us:  
eyes to notice where the seeds of your kingdom are growing,  
courage to show them to others,  
faith enough to help nurture them,  
and a heart that delights in their harvest.  
In Jesus' name. **Amen**

## Prayer of confession

God of all,  
  
you do not force growth but nurture it.  
**Forgive us when we want too much too soon.**

You do not start big but start small.  
**Forgive us when we want too much too soon.**

You do not sow greedily but graciously.  
**Forgive us when we want too much too soon.**

You do not hurry the harvest but hallow it.  
**Forgive us when we want too much too soon.**

Forgive us and accept the work of our hands,  
In Jesus' name **Amen.**



From a mustard seed to a tree, from I to we,  
in you we grow. **Amen.**

In the mystery of the unseen, from brown field to green,  
in you we grow. **Amen**

By faith and not by sight, by day and by night,  
in you we grow. **Amen**

Forgiven and freed, through word and deed,  
in you we grow. **Amen**

As we sow and reap, as we laugh and weep,  
in you we grow. **Amen**

May your kingdom come, Father, Spirit, Son,  
as in you we grow. **Amen.**

## **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.*

## **Bible Reading: Ezekiel 17: 22 - 23**

*"And the Sovereign Lord says: I will take a tender shoot from the top of a tall cedar, and I will plant it on the top of Israel's highest mountain.*

*It will become a noble cedar, sending forth its branches and producing seed. Birds of every sort will nest in it, finding shelter beneath its branches.*



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

*Jesus also said, "Here is another illustration of what the Kingdom of God is like: a farmer planted seeds in a field, and then he went on with his other activities. As the days went by, the seeds sprouted and grew without the farmer's help, because the earth produces crops on its own. First a leaf blade pushes through, then the heads of wheat are formed, and finally the grain ripens. And as soon as the grain is ready, the farmer comes and harvests it with a sickle."*

*Jesus asked, "How can I describe the kingdom of God? What story should I use to illustrate it? It is like a tiny mustard seed. Though this is one of the smallest of seeds, it grows to become one of the largest of plants, with long branches where birds can come and find shelter."*

*He used many such stories and illustrations to teach the people as much as they were able to understand. In fact in his public teaching he taught only with parables, but afterwards when he was alone with his disciples, he explained the meaning to them.*

## **Hymn: Great is Thy Faithfulness**

*Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father,  
there is no shadow of turning with thee;  
thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not;  
as thou hast been thou forever wilt be:*

*Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!  
Morning by morning new mercies I see;  
all I have needed thy hand hath provided.  
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.*

*Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,  
sun, moon and stars in their courses above,  
join with all nature in manifold witness  
to thy great faithfulness, mercy and love:  
Great is thy faithfulness...*

*Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,  
thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;  
strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,  
blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!  
Great is thy faithfulness...*



## **Bible Reading: Ephesians 3: 14 - 21**

*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fulness of God.*

*Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.*

The theme of our service today was initially inspired by St Paul's prayer for spiritual empowerment that we've just heard especially verse 17 where it says, "and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in God's love".

The second part of this verse brought images of great, majestic trees, such as Giant Redwoods, Wellingtonias and Cedar of Lebanon, immediately to mind with their well-developed root systems which go deep into the soil getting the food and moisture they require to sustain their growth and give them strength. I'm sure we've all seen trees similar to these in gardens and arboretums. You may also have seen trees that have been uprooted and seen for yourself the roots which were once the means of getting nourishment to the rest of the tree.

The line made me think about and reflect on the growth of faith in God and growing spiritually both as individuals and as church communities and the more I considered it the other passages I've used this morning came to mind as well as part of the bigger picture if you like – we can only be rooted in God's love if the seed of his love for us and the seed of us loving him as our heavenly Father has been planted first.

Throughout the Bible, but especially in the New Testament there are many references to seeds and plants being sown and nurtured to help them grow. Both Jesus and St Paul use these images as illustrations of what the Kingdom of God are, how it will grow and what it will be like because the growing of crops and plants is something that their listeners are familiar with and can relate to and understand. It's something that's familiar to us too, even though we live in a built-up area, because many of you will be keen gardeners. Even those of us who aren't, and I include myself here, I'm sure we've all tried our hand at trying to grow something at some time in our lives, even if it's just trying to keep alive a plant we were given as a present.



When I was at primary school there was an annual schools plant show. We had the opportunity earlier in the year to buy small cuttings of various plants, I always seemed to end up with Spider Plants. We took them home and looked after for several months over the summer until September when the time of the school plant show took place. I managed to keep mine alive – to the point where they had “babies” but they never won anything at the shows. However, the experience did teach me how to look after plants of a certain type. But I have to admit here that our house plants at home have to thrive on neglect because they never get more than a weekly watering!

Signs of growth in our gardens bring hope for the future, in February and March we start to see the first signs of new life which we expect to develop into the spring. The bringing of hope for the future was God’s intention in the verses we heard from Ezekiel. These verses follow Ezekiel’s prophecy of judgement and offer the Israelites hope for the future if they put their trust in God. The reference to the tender sprig God said he would plant is a reference to the coming of the Messiah and the Cedar tree is a symbol for how big the Kingdom of God would be – encompassing all who believed in him, a prophecy that was fulfilled with the coming of Jesus.

Our own faith and love of God follows the growth pattern of a plant or tree. God’s love for us and the beginnings of our love for and faith in him are planted in us, usually by our close family and friends when we are very small and they have small beginnings – just like the mustard seed we heard about. That seed of love and faith is then nurtured by them and others, our teachers at school and Sunday School and other people in our church family. As we get older and are able to read and understand the Bible for ourselves along with the help of ministers and fellow Christians, our love of God and our faith in him grows and deepens as time goes on until we feel that our roots are deep in the love of God as is Paul’s hope for us in the passage from Ephesians. We then find that we are constantly being sustained and strengthened by the words of the bible which we hear in worship and read ourselves during our daily quiet time.

The same was true for the fledgling communities of new Christians and the beginnings of the Church in the first century AD. In 1 Corinthians chapter 3 verse 6 St Paul tells us that he was the one who sowed the seed of love for and faith in God in the new Christians, Apollos watered it and looked after it but they were working as servants of God, who was the one who made the tiny seed of love and faith grow. He goes on to say that this is still pertinent to us today – whenever we plant the seed of faith in either an individual person or a small group of people through our words or actions, we are working with God. We may plant the seed or do the nurturing but God will be the one who makes it grow and develop and we may not see the final outcome, someone else may witness that.



Think of your own faith journeys for a moment and maybe the faith journey of your church family – how did you come to faith, who and how many people, have influenced your love of God and your growth in faith? Who helped you to become more “rooted” in God’s love? Throughout our whole lives we come across people who inspire us and influence our faith journey in some way even though we may not be aware of it at the time.

Let’s just take a moment to think of those people now and give thanks for their lives and influence on us and our church family as we listen to this meditation by Ian Reid of the Iona Community.

*Let us give thanks for those examples we know  
where God has given great growth  
from small beginnings in church and society.*

*Let us pray that good life in church and society  
which appears to be small  
now may have big growth.*

*“I will cut down the tall trees  
and make the small trees grow.”*

*Let us give thanks for those examples we know  
where the small and powerless  
have been enabled to grow.*

*Let us pray for those whom we know  
in church and society who are small and powerless  
that they may grow.*

*“Birds of every kind will live there.”*

*Let us give thanks for all the examples we know  
in church and society,  
where humans of every kind  
have found a welcome and shelter together.*

*Let us pray that wherever in church and society  
humans of diverse kinds do not find a welcome  
that they may do so.*

*“I, The Lord have spoken.  
I will do what I have said I would do.”*

*Let us rejoice and receive strength from this promise of God.*

As I mentioned earlier our reading from Ephesians is one of Paul’s many prayers for new Christians and fledgling churches in Ephesus and across the Mediterranean region during his years as a missionary and his time in prison. It’s also a prayer for us too as we continue to live a life of faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



Paul prays that they and we too, may know God's love for us and that we become rooted and grounded in that love, allowing Christ to dwell in us through faith. The more we become rooted in the love of God the more we grow spiritually and over time our faith in and love for God deepens. Paul wants us to know the fullness of God's love – its height, depth and breadth – God's love is bigger than we can imagine and encompasses the whole of creation. It's his love which sustains and strengthens us through our daily lives whatever situations we may find ourselves in as well as empowering us to do work in his name growing his kingdom here on earth.

How do we become firmly rooted in God's love I hear you ask? Through hearing and reading the Bible and meditating on the truths it contains, through regular prayer either individually or as part of a group of fellow Christians and by attending bible study groups where we can not only learn from the bible but through discussion with others.

Once we are "rooted and grounded" in God's love and our faith is on a firm foundation we can have the confidence to speak to others about our faith and tell them the good news of the gospel – planting that seed I mentioned earlier.

Since the gradual re-opening of the country in April, Frank & I have been having regular visits up to Martin Mere Wetlands Centre, passing through some of Lancashire's farming area on our journey – we've seen them being prepared for planting and now there are some green shoots beginning to appear although we don't always see anyone tending the crops. This reminded me of the first part of our reading from Mark's Gospel where we learn that whilst the farmer sows the seeds the earth produces the crops without the farmer's help – he just needs to harvest the crop when it's ripe. The growing of all things, whether it's crops, creatures or faith is God's handiwork he may use some of us to plant seeds of crops or faith, others to water those seeds and yet others to harvest the final crop as we heard earlier but ultimately the work is God's – part of his plan to grow his Kingdom here on earth. We are just part of his plan to expand the Kingdom of God in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and as churches are slowly beginning to re-open we will start to grow back together as church and a circuit community in readiness to start planting new seeds of faith and hope, gently nurturing those whose faith may have been seeded during the last 15 months whilst we have been kept apart, and some of us, may even witness the harvest but we can't do his work unless we ourselves are "rooted and grounded in God's love".

As we re-emerge from our long period of enforced isolation it's my prayer that in the weeks and months to come that as both individuals and church communities we root ourselves in God's love and thus strengthened we have the courage to step out of our comfort zones and plant and nurture the seeds of faith in others giving them encouragement and space to become "rooted and grounded" in God's love and have Jesus dwelling in their hearts. Let us plant and nurture and



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let God do the growing as he has done down the millennia from the time of St Paul to us here today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Amen.

## Hymn: Breathe On Me Breath Of God

*Breathe on me, Breath of God:  
fill me with life anew,  
that I may love what thou dost love,  
and do what thou wouldst do.*

*Breathe on me, Breath of God,  
until my heart is pure,  
until with thee I will one will,  
to do and to endure.*

*Breathe on me, Breath of God,  
till I am wholly thine,  
until this earthly part of me  
glows with thy fire divine.*

*Breathe on me, Breath of God;  
so shall I never die,  
but live with thee the perfect life  
of thine eternity.*

Let us come before our Lord in prayer.

Loving and living God,  
we rejoice that this is your world,  
created by your hand,  
sustained by your power,  
guided by your purpose.  
So now we bring it to you,  
seeking your blessing on all its affairs.  
In mercy, hear us:  
**in love, respond.**

We pray for peace,  
that the leaders of all nations may work to reduce weaponry  
and promote dialogue.  
We pray for justice,  
that the abundance of this earth's resources  
may be distributed more evenly.  
We pray for liberty,  
that moves towards greater democracy and freedom may prosper.  
We pray for harmony,

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that everyone, irrespective of sex, race or creed,  
may be valued for what they are.

In mercy, hear us:

**in love, respond.**

We do not just pray for the big things in life but also the little,  
rejoicing that all situations are important to you,  
all people matter in your sight.

So we bring the business of each day,  
small in the eyes of the world, but important to us:  
the responsibilities of family life and parenthood;  
the cost of buying and running a home;  
the problems of earning a living and making ends meet;  
the joys and sorrows of marriage and relationships;  
the well-being of our loved ones;  
our places of work and recreation, worship and relaxation.  
We put these in your hands,  
knowing that they matter to you as much as they matter to us.

In mercy, hear us:

**in love, respond.**

Loving and living God,  
we rejoice that you are involved in our world,  
and involved in our lives,  
not distant or remote,  
but seeking the good of everything you have made.  
Gratefully we put our trust in you.

In mercy, hear us:

**in love, respond.**

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

## **Hymn - Spirit of God Unseen As The Wind**

*Spirit of God, unseen as the wind,  
gentle as is the dove,  
teach us the truth and help us to live,  
show us the Saviour's love.*

*You spoke to us long, long ago,  
gave us the living word;  
we read it still, need it's truth,  
through it God's voice is heard.  
Spirit of God...*

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*Without your help we fail our Lord,  
We cannot live his way;  
We need your power, we need your strength,  
Following Christ each day.  
Spirit of God...*

May you grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.  
To him be glory both now and for ever! Amen

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When Morning Gilds The Skies - German Hymn  
early form in Katholische Gesangbuch, Wurzburg, 1828 translated by Edward Caswall (1814-1878)

Great Is Thy Faithfulness - Thomas O. Chisholm  
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Breath On Me, Breath Of God - Edwin Hatch  
Performed by Preston Methodist Voices

Spirit Of God, Unseen As The Wind - Margaret V Old  
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