

# Sunday service



from the United Reformed Church

Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> June 2026  
Proper 7 | Ordinary 12  
The Revd Ruth Whitehead



Josh Willink | Pexels.com

## Opening Music

### *Verset*

by Guillaume-Gabriel Nivers (1632 - 1714), Man III, Jenny Gill Crawley  
URC - 2021

## Introduction

Welcome. Croeso. My name is Ruth Whitehead and I'm a minister of the United Reformed Church in the Landsker pastorate in Pembrokeshire, in the far West of Wales. Today is Father's Day, and whether you usually celebrate that or not, our readings speak of the care of God as our heavenly father. Let us worship God

## Call to Worship

We turn to you, O Lord, for your love is kind. **In your great compassion,**

**turn to us.** Be swift and answer us, for we are in distress. **Draw near to us and redeem us.**

**Hymn**     *Dear Lord And Father Of Mankind*

John Greenleaf Whittier (1807–1892) Public Domain, sung by St. Bartholomew's, Manhattan, Choir, Paolo Bordignon, Organist and Choirmaster

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,  
forgive our foolish ways;  
re clothe us in our rightful mind;  
in purer lives thy service find,  
in deeper reverence, praise.

2 In simple trust  
like theirs who heard  
beside the Syrian sea  
the gracious calling of the Lord,  
let us, like them, without a word  
rise up and follow thee.

3 Drop Thy still dews of quietness,  
till all our strivings cease;  
take from our souls  
the strain and stress,  
and let our ordered lives confess  
the beauty of Thy peace.

4 Breathe through the heats  
of our desire  
Thy coolness and Thy balm;  
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;  
speak through  
the earthquake, wind and fire,  
O still small voice of calm!

**Prayers of Approach & Confession**

With the psalmist, let us pray: **‘Answer me, O Lord, for your love is kind; in your great compassion, turn to me’.** We come to you, God of every generation – of our fathers and our fathers’ fathers. We worship you for your kindness, your compassion and your love. We find you waiting here for us, ready to listen to our prayers, to heal our wounds, to come near to our hearts.

**‘Hide not your face from your servant; be swift and answer me, for I am in distress.’** We come to hear your word for us, and seek a better knowledge of you, our God, the one Jesus calls “our heavenly father”. As we worship, help us to follow Jesus. Receive our prayers and set our feet on right paths. Hear us, in our need and distress.

**‘Draw near to me and redeem me, because of my enemies deliver me’.**  
We confess to you, loving God, that we need your health and redemption  
We wander far from you, and fall and fail. Forgive us, we pray, and by your  
Spirit make us new.

### **Declaration of Forgiveness**

God is faithful and just, ever-loving and ever-gracious.  
To each of God’s children this promise is made: Your sins are forgiven  
In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

As forgiven children of God we pray together the Lord’s Prayer...

### **Prayer of Illumination**

God who comes to us in the Word made flesh,  
As we open Scripture open our ears to hear  
and our hearts to understand, that we may open our lives to you. Amen

### **Readings**

We hear one of Jeremiah’s laments to God. In the face of suffering  
Jeremiah does not turn his back on God, but trusts God enough to be  
entirely honest about his hardships. Jeremiah’s faith stands up to the  
testing times, and he ends with a song of praise to God.

### **Jeremiah 20:7-13**

O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed;  
you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed.  
I have become a laughing-stock all day long; everyone mocks me.  
For whenever I speak, I must cry out,  
I must shout, ‘Violence and destruction!’  
For the word of the Lord has become for me  
a reproach and derision all day long.

If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name',  
then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones;  
I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.  
For I hear many whispering: 'Terror is all around!  
Denounce him! Let us denounce him!'  
All my close friends are watching for me to stumble.  
'Perhaps he can be enticed, and we can prevail against him,  
and take our revenge on him.'  
But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior;  
therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail.  
They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed.  
Their eternal dishonour will never be forgotten.  
O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous,  
you see the heart and the mind;  
let me see your retribution upon them,  
for to you I have committed my cause.  
Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord!  
For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers.

**Reading** *St Matthew 10:24-39*

Jesus said: 'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! 'So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. 'Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny

before my Father in heaven. 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

**Hymn**     *Eternal God Your Love's Tremendous Glory*

Alan Gaunt (1935-2023) © 1991 Stainer & Bell Ltd OneLicence No. # A-734713  
choir for Rejoice and Sing demo tape.

Eternal God,  
your love's tremendous glory  
cascades through life  
in overflowing grace,  
to tell creation's  
meaning in the story  
of love evolving love  
from time and space.

2 Eternal Son of God,  
uniquely precious,  
in you, deserted,  
scorned and crucified,  
God's love has fathomed  
sin and death's deep darkness,  
and flawed humanity is glorified.

3 Eternal Spirit,  
with us like a mother,  
embracing us in love  
serene and pure:  
You nurture strength

to follow Christ our brother,  
as full-grown children,  
confident and sure.

4 Love's trinity,  
self-perfect, self-sustaining;  
love which commands,  
enables and obeys:  
You give yourself,  
in boundless joy, creating  
one vast increasing  
harmony of praise.

5 We ask you now,  
complete your image in us;  
this love of yours,  
our source and guide and goal.  
may love in us,  
seek love and serve love's purpose,  
till we ascend with Christ  
and find love whole.

## Sermon

How you feel about today's celebrations of Father's Day might depend on things like what kind of father you had, or whether you knew your father, or whether you have been a father yourself. And all that might colour how you feel when Jesus calls God 'Father', which he does very often in the gospel accounts.

What sort of Father does Jesus declare God to be – how can we better understand what Jesus means when he refers to God as 'your heavenly father'? One Easter holiday I was visiting a National Trust property. It was a lovely, sunny day, children were running around doing some kind of trail, I'd just had a cup of tea and I was about to go around the interesting, historic house. Then I noticed a small puddle in the path just ahead of me, and in the puddle a single sparrow, washing itself in the water, getting its head right in and showering the water over its fluttering wings.

It seemed oblivious to the crowds around it and was thoroughly enjoying that moment and that puddle. I got my phone out, quickly, to video this simple moment, thinking, as I did, of Jesus' words that 'not one sparrow falls to the ground, but your heavenly father knows it'.

While I still had my phone in my hand, it started vibrating with an incoming call. Seeing that it was a friend, I answered it with a cheerful 'hello, how are you?'. Not good, as it turned out – in fact my friend had just been diagnosed with leukaemia, and though neither of us knew it at the time was about to enter 18 months of gruelling treatment. When we'd finished talking and I put my phone away I was shaken by the total contrast between the moment of warm fuzzy feeling as I watched the sparrow and the moment of desolation as I struggled to find words to support my friend. I couldn't help wondering what sort of heavenly father it is, who knows the tiny sparrow in the puddle but would not, or could not keep my friend free from a life-threatening disease?

Perhaps you can relate to that question today "what sort of heavenly

father is this?“. As you come to worship you may be burdened with anxieties of all kinds – for yourself, for those you love, for the world at large. Worries about health, the future, money, conflict, a hundred-and-one things can weigh us down and can make Jesus’ words about God’s care for the sparrow seem empty and trite. It all might make you might want to lament, as Jeremiah did.

And yet, hearing today the **context** of what Jesus says about the sparrow in Matthew’s gospel might help us. Jesus is offering help for his disciples precisely when life feels at its most perilous and difficult. Jesus wants his disciples to face difficulty, not to deny the existence of suffering altogether. Jesus is clear that his disciples will suffer, and yet he wants them to know God’s care throughout all the terrible things they suffer. He speaks of God as the father who cares for even a single sparrow.

There will be times of suffering, says Jesus to his disciples, but this should not make them afraid to speak out the truth of their belonging to him. He even warns them *‘whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me’*. Jesus is preparing his followers for the time when Jesus himself will take up a literal, physical cross and be tortured to death on it. And he warns them that the forces which seek to kill him will torment them, too. Yet, despite all this honesty about suffering, Jesus tells his followers three times not to feel fear, as they follow him: *‘have no fear of them...do not fear...do not be afraid’*.

Our fears may be about our discipleship of Jesus, like persecution or ridicule, but more likely they are the everyday kind of fears which can be no less crushing. The good news of Jesus for us today is a promise of that same release from fear. You may feel as small and helpless as a sparrow – but your heavenly father knows, sees, cares, loves, says Jesus. The friend, whose bad news interrupted my reverie about the sparrow I saw, endured her 18 months of radical treatment, but would often say that throughout it all she never doubted the presence of God’s grace – whether it was carrying her back into this life or on into the next. She returned to health more grateful than ever for God’s care. My friend often re-read this poem

by an American woman, Annie Johnson Flint:

*God hath not promised  
Skies always blue,  
Flower-strewn pathways  
All our lives through;  
God hath not promised  
Sun without rain  
Joy without sorrow,  
Peace without pain.  
But God hath promised  
Strength for the day,  
Rest for the labour,  
Light for the way,  
Grace for the trials,  
Help from above,  
Unfailing sympathy,  
Undying love.*

You might wonder whether Annie Johnson Flint knew anything about the suffering she refers to in this poem, knew anything about sorrow and pain. She did: she lost both her parents in early childhood, she started experiencing severe arthritis in the second year of her teaching career, she lived with chronic pain, and died at the age of just 66. She knew what suffering means, and yet she wrote about her certainty in God's promise of undying love. Annie Johnson Flint is not offering us a rose-tinted view of life and discipleship, anymore than Jesus is when he talks of suffering to his followers. But in the pain, through the suffering, even when life seems to be offering only a muddy puddle, our heavenly father sees us, loves us and grants us the grace to endure.

The father who will raise Jesus from death, when his agonies are over, offers abundant life to each of us. Whatever your feelings about earthly fathers, I pray that today you will experience the care of your heavenly father, and know his wonderful grace, wherever you are. Amen.

## Hymn *Father We Praise You*

Attributed to Gregory the Great (545-604) tr Percy Dearmer (1867-1936) Public Domain. Sung by Chris Brunelle and used with his kind permission.

Father, we praise you  
now the night is over;  
active and watchful,  
stand we all before you;  
singing, we offer  
pray'r and meditation:  
thus we adore you.

2 Maker of all things,  
fit us for your mansions;  
banish our weakness,  
health and wholeness sending;  
bring us to heaven,  
where your saints united  
joy without ending.

3 All holy Father, Son and equal Spirit,  
Trinity blessed, send us your salvation;  
Yours is the glory gleaming and resounding through all creation.

## Affirmation of faith

Let us affirm our faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God.

**Though he was divine,**

**he did not cling to equality with God,  
but made himself nothing.**

**Taking the form of a slave,**

**he was born in human likeness.**

**He humbled himself**

**And was obedient to death, even the death of the cross.**

**Therefore God has raised him on high,**

**and given him the name above every name:**

**that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,**

**and every voice proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord,**

**to the glory of God the Father. Amen.**

## Offertory

In gratitude to God for all God's gifts of grace, we offer our gifts of money as a token of all our thanks and praise.

Eternal God, receive our gifts, enrich our lives,  
and build your kingdom, we pray. Amen.

## **Prayers of Intercession**

God of all mercy, our loving heavenly Father,  
we bring our prayers to you.

Father, hear us: **You alone can help and save us.**

We pray for those who feels their life is lost  
in deep water and great darkness.

For victims of natural disaster.

For those trapped in debt or addiction.

We pray for all who love and serve those who feel lost.

Father, hear us: **You alone can help and save us.**

We pray for those who fear the deep will swallow them up.

For those facing bullying or oppression

For those undergoing medical tests or treatment.

We pray for those who speak out for justice and kindness.

Father, hear us: **You alone can help and save us.**

We pray for those whose distress leads them to feel  
that your face is turned against them.

For those struggling with lack of self-worth.

For those with poor mental health.

We pray for all who support and encourage vulnerable people.

Father, hear us: **You alone can help and save us.**

We pray for those who need to know that you,  
Loving God, draw near to them.

For those whose lives have just begun,

or whose lives have changed dramatically.  
For those nearing death

We pray for all those who accompany others and bring hope.  
Father, hear us: **You alone can help and save us.**

Loving God, save us, lift us up, hear us, draw near to us.  
That our prayers may be heard and answered, and we and all your  
children know your love more deeply.

Father, hear us: **You alone can help and save us.**

We pray in Jesus name and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**Hymn**     *Do Not Be Afraid For I Have Redeemed You*

Gerard Markland (born 1953) © 1978 Kevin Mayhew Ltd. One Licence No. # A-734713 sung by  
Justin Stretch of St Lawrence Church, Chorley and used with his kind permission.

*Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you.  
I have called you by your name; you are mine.*

1 When you walk through the  
waters I'll be with you.  
You will never sink  
beneath the waves.

2 When the fire is burning  
all around you,  
you will never be consumed  
by the flames.

3 When the fear of loneliness  
is looming,

then remember  
I am at your side.

4 When you dwell in the exile  
of the stranger,  
remember you are precious  
in my eyes.

5 You are mine, O my child;  
I am your Father,  
and I love you with a perfect love.

## **Blessing**

May the love of the God whom Jesus called Father  
care for you in each challenge  
and carry you through each pain  
and may the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord  
and the strength of the Holy Spirit  
be with you today and always, Amen

## **Closing Music**

### *Procession*

by Arthur Wills (organ of Santa Maria dei Miracoli, Venice, Italy –  
2014)

## **Sources**

All liturgical material by Ruth Whitehead

## **Thanks**

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