

Sunday service

from the United Reformed Church



Sunday 12th July 2026
Proper 12 | Ordinary 15
The Revd Jenny Mills



Beyza Yalçın | pexels.com

Opening Music

Diapason

by Alcock (1715-1806), Man IV, Jenny Gill Crawley URC – 2021

Introduction

My name is the Revd Jenny Mills, and I am the Deputy General Secretary for Faith in Action. My team and I oversee the work of Discipleship and Mission in the Offices of the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church. We serve the synods and local churches, seeking to inspire and resource them as they share the love of God through worship, word and action. It is a joy and privilege to be with you to worship. May God bless this time together and may we listen, respond and be inspired to journey on as we follow Jesus.

Call to Worship

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.
Gracious God we come to worship you today.

Accept my offerings of praise, O LORD,
and teach me your ordinances.
We come to give thanks, to learn and grow.
To gather in community and to offer ourselves in service.

Your decrees are my heritage forever;
they are the joy of my heart.
I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end.
We come with joy in our hearts at all you have done for us.
And hope welling up within us of possibilities and promises
of all that is to come.

We come as your people,
human, fallible, broken,
but joined together by your love
and accepted, loved, and enough, in your eyes.
Bless this time service and may we encounter your living Spirit
through our time together.
Let us sing!

Hymn *Great God Your Love Has Called Us Here*

Brian A. Wren, b. 1936 © 1977, 1995 Hope Publishing Company, Carol Stream, IL 60188. All rights reserved. Orchard Enterprises Session Choir OneLicence No. # A-734713

Great God, your love has called us here,
as we, by love for love were made.
Your living likeness still we bear,
though marred, dishonoured, disobeyed.
We come, with all our heart and mind
your call to hear, your love to find.

2 We come with self-inflicted pains
of broken trust and chosen wrong,
half-free, half-bound
by inner chains,
by social forces swept along,
by powers and systems
close confined,
yet seeking hope for humankind.

3 Great God, in Christ
you call our name
and then receive us as your own,
not through some merit,
right or claim,
but by your gracious love alone.
We strain to glimpse
your mercy seat
and find you kneeling
at our feet.

4 Then take the towel,
and break the bread,
and humble us,
and call us friends.
Suffer and serve till all are fed,
and show how grandly love intends
to work till all creation sings,
to fill all worlds,
to crown all things.

5 Great God,
in Christ you set us free
your life to live,
your joy to share.
Give us your Spirit's liberty
to turn from guilt
and dull despair
and offer all that faith can do
while love is making all things new.

Prayers of Approach, Confession and Grace

God of abundance, who loves us beyond our comprehension,
who created the world we see around us,
who sent his Son to live and teach,
and who sacrificed his life to show us your love,
living on in hearts, minds and the whole of creation, we adore you!

God of all creation, who made all that is
and continues to create through seasons and changes,
who blesses us with sights and sounds, smells and tastes,
who calls us to notice the blessings all around us,
reminding us of the beauty of nature
and the wonder of your world, we adore you!

God of power and might,
who calls us to live together in unity and harmony,
who has given us all we need,
who showed us through Jesus how we should live together in peace,
and keeps seeking the good for humanity, we adore you!

We are blessed and loved. We are known and treasured.
We are enough, just as we are.

And yet, your way calls us to live well together.
That living well begins with us being faithful to your way.
Your unconditional love calls us to respond,
to repent, to review how we live
and consider what changes we need to make
so we can truly reflect your love and your glory
to those alongside whom we journey.

But we fall short. We fail to maintain good intentions,
we mess up and get it wrong, we make excuses,
we argue, complain and deny.

Forgive us Lord for the times when we are so narrow minded
that we forget our responsibility to our fellow siblings in Christ;
when our faith is small and selfish;
when we are so busy looking out for ourselves
that we don't understand the importance
of making space to listen to you.
Your love calls us to be bringers of your kingdom here on earth.
Your Son's sacrifice reminds us
that we are your to be your voice, hands and feet in the world.
Forgive us and give us the heart and will
to begin again and turn back to you.

Jesus says, come to me all you who are heavy laden
and I will give you rest.

We claim that rest and the forgiveness of the risen Saviour.
Let us know ourselves, forgiven, loved and free.
May we forgive ourselves, forgive others and go in peace. Amen.

Hymn *God, How Can We Forgive?*

Ruth Duck © 1996 The Pilgrim Press OneLicence No. # A-734713

God, how can we forgive
when bonds of love are torn?
How can we rise and start anew,
our trust reborn?
When human loving fails
and every hope is gone,
your love give strength
beyond our own
to face the dawn.

2 When we have missed the mark,
and tears of anguish flow,
how can you still release our guilt,
the debt we owe?
The ocean depth of grace
surpasses all our needs.
A priest who shares
our human pain,
Christ intercedes.

3 Who dares to throw the stone to damn another's sin,
when you, while knowing all our past, forgive again?
No more we play the judge, for by your grace we live.
As you, O God, forgive our sin, may we forgive.

Prayer for Illumination

Sow the seed of Your word amongst us, O God,
that as it is read and proclaimed,
we may hear, understand and obey,
that good roots are put down
and you may reap an abundant harvest. Amen.

Reading *St Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23*

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed,

some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 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. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!’ Hear then the parable of the sower. 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. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 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. 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. 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.’

Hymn *I The Lord of Sea and Sky*

Daniel L. Schutte (born 1947) © 1981 Daniel L. Schutte & New Dawn Music OneLicense No. A-734713 Sung by Chris Brunelle and used with his kind permission.

I, the Lord of sea and sky,
I have heard my people cry.
All who dwell in dark and sin my
hand will save.
I who made the stars of night,
I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear my light to them?
Whom shall I send?

*Here I am, Lord.
Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if you lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart.*

2 I, the Lord of snow and rain,
I have borne my people's pain.
I have wept for love of them.
They turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone,
give them hearts for love alone.
I will speak my word to them.
Whom shall I send?

3 I, the Lord of wind and flame,
I will tend the poor and lame.
I will set a feast for them.
My hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide
till their hearts be satisfied.
I will give my life to them.
Whom shall I send?

Sermon

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I love the way this story begins and is so simple and so relatable. Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. (We know this as the Sea of Galilee or Lake Tiberius, a lake that is so vast that it is hard to see across it, as it measures 13 miles long by 8 miles wide). Such a precious image of sitting beside the lake, looking out, revelling in some alone time. For people living near the sea, an everyday occurrence. A normal thing to do. And then, after a simple, solitary moment many, many people arrive, surrounding him. In fact, so many people that Jesus has to get into a boat in order to be able to speak to them and continue his teaching. On the one hand this must have felt really good because he was teaching and preaching, he was inspiring people and they were responding, but on the other hand- he couldn't even get 5 minutes peace!

In this story we begin with practical everyday life, an image of Jesus as the human being, and we move into metaphor as Jesus shares the parable. This is the recurring theme in the Bible. We see everyday life and we hear normal things going on, and trials and joys; then we have stories that are offered to teach and give meaning. In this story Jesus uses the everyday to illustrate what the Kingdom of Heaven is like.

The trouble we have when we encounter texts in the Bible is that the

ordinary is mixed up with the extraordinary, the teaching with normal life, the message specific to context, with happenings and rememberings.

How do we know what to take from these stories? How do we work out whether the writings are to be taken literally or metaphorically?

It is a real challenge and greater minds than mine have done lots of study and comparison to see what might have been part of the eye-witness accounts, especially in the Gospels, and what was written to get a specific message across.

I think that sometimes we can get really wound up trying to decide 'did this really happen as it says?' instead of focusing on questions like: What was the message to the people of Jesus' time and what is the message to us?

What is the author telling us in the reading?

What is God trying to say through these words of Scripture?

The story we have shared today about the sower is one that perhaps we have heard many times and are familiar with. We can imagine the different types of soil and may have even compared ourselves to those soils (I bet we find it easier to think of ourselves as the 'good soil' than the others!) But in the recent past I have had my attention drawn to the sower and his actions. He was not very careful with the seed sowing. How wilfully inconsiderate was he? He didn't even try to keep within the lines of good soil, he threw it randomly and widely. And this prompted me to reflect on what this is saying about God's love. It speaks of God's abundant love. It tells us clearly that God's love is not limited. It is thrown around indiscriminately, with abandon! In the story, the seed fell on different grounds. Not just in the area where the sower knew it would grow. Jesus is giving us a clear message that God's love is for everyone, everywhere.

How does that feel to us, when we think about God's love, God's intent and our response? How do we feel about the fact that God does not just choose

those who are going to respond, those who are 'good enough' or 'fit the mould'.

Do we share God's love like this?

Do we live God's love like this?

Do we emulate God's actions like this?

This throws up real challenges to us about how we share God's love.

Do we share God's abundant love with abandon?

When I sat and reflected on this, I became painfully aware of my own prejudices, inbuilt bias, and of some of the stuff I am not so aware of in my unconscious, which occasionally raises its head. And I feel humbled.

I don't think any story in the Bible seeks to make us feel bad or shamed (I think we do that ourselves!) but I do think that the stories offer us challenge, hold a mirror up to our actions and give us food for thought and an impetus and inspiration to grow and change. This is part of our discipleship journey- where we are called to learn, to grow, to develop, to be active participants in God's kingdom and co-creators with God.

So maybe you would like to reflect in the coming days on the challenge the sower story offered me: Do you share God's abundant love with abandon?

The story goes on to show us that our world is increasingly full of different responses to such life-giving news as contained in the Gospel message of love. The different soils represent different responses. We could surmise who Jesus was talking about at the time, in reference to the different soils and landing places for the seeds. And I am sure we all have thoughts on who in our current world would fit which soil type, but if we are honest, it could be most people at different times in their lives, it could be different groups at different times in history. And the problem with working out who 'they' might be is that it stops us from having to think about how Jesus' word is speaking to us today- as individuals, as churches, as communities, and as members of the whole people of God. We can deflect onto others instead of considering our place in the story. Maybe we stop judging others

and focus on the wonder of God's abundance in sowing and our part in this endeavour?

It is easy to externalise the teachings of Bible stories when the words are there to offer us both challenge and hope. I find the Good Samaritan such a story, do we ever think of ourselves as the Priest or the Levite or even the robbers?

The issue is that we are surrounded by a world of blame, accusation, judgment and power and it is easier to get sucked into this way of acting and being. It is easier to hear the story, pat ourselves on the back because we are the 'good ones' or at least not the ones Jesus warns against, and we can be tempted to look outwards at 'those' and consider ourselves superior.

But Jesus calls us. Jesus calls us to follow him.

And following Jesus means just that- following his way and his teachings. The radical nature of Jesus' love calls us to act differently. It calls us to welcome the stranger, to love our neighbour, to look out for the least and the lost, and to bless those who curse us.

How can we love abundantly and with radical generosity?

I have become a fan of the occasional random act of kindness. I tried it out: in a little café I paid for someone's meal, I paid for the car behind me in McDonalds (watch out, it cost £27!?). Locally we have a 'Knitting Nana' who creates amazing knitted creations which she leaves around the town with a little note, for people to find. Another family whose child died when he was small leave Memories of Seb randomly on park benches on his birthday- chocolates and small gifts.

What I find is that random acts of kindness confuse. Generosity bewilders. One day a lady in the supermarket didn't have enough money and was going to put back some items, I offered to pay for them and she was

overwhelmed. I said to her to pass it on one day if ever she's able, because we are all in this together.

I realise that I am fortunate to be able to offer small financial gifts, but it doesn't need to be money. A church member cut someone's grass when they were poorly. I am sure we can all think of ways of living our God's love through acts of kindness and generosity.

There are more ways to reach out - find your way.

Sometimes, I fear, we are so busy living our own lives that we fail to think about the little things that could make a difference. Yet we are called to be disciples. To follow Jesus. To scatter the seed of God's love with abandon!

And when that seed falls on fertile ground, and people ask us why we are living like this and sharing God's love, are we ready to start the conversation with them? Invite them into knowing more? Share with them the Jesus Way? How are we, as individuals and churches preparing the space for the seeds to grow? What can we do, in our churches, to help people to encounter the love of the living God?

We can invite them to church, we can make sure our church is ready to welcome them, we can have discipleship sessions running to help people learn more, we can do shared meals and so many other things. And in many ways we are already doing this. But it never hurts to review what our church may feel like to people asking questions or turning up to an event or worship. We can be like the sower in his wild scattering but like the one who came along later and reaped the harvest, too.

And back to the Jesus sat by the sea.....he did ordinary stuff as well as extraordinary stuff, he made time to just 'be'. He reminded us that, before we let things be taken over in the busyness, there is value in the special moments, the alone times, the everyday. 'The little moments, the little things, they are not little'. Amen.

Hymn *Jesus Calls Us O'er The Tumult*

From Cecil F Alexander (1818–1895) Public Domain sung by the choir of the Church of the Advocate, Boulder, Colorado to the American Tune Restoration

Jesus call us!—in the tumult
of our life's wild restless sea;
day by day his clear voice soundeth
saying, 'Christian, follow me!'

2 As of old, Saint Andrew heard it
by the Galilean lake,
turned from home
and toil and kindred,
leaving all for his dear sake.

3 Jesus calls us from the worship
of the vain world's golden store,

from each idol that would claim us,
saying, 'Christian, love me more!'

4 In our joys and in our sorrows,
days of toil and hours of ease,
still he calls, in cares and pleasures,
'Christian, love me
more than these!'

5 Jesus calls us! By thy mercies,
Saviour, may we hear Thy call,
give our heart's to Thine obedience,
serve and love Thee best of all.

Prayers of Intercession

Loving God, You have given us so much and loved us so completely,
We come to give you thanks.

For family and friends, for roles and responsibilities,
for opportunities and possibilities, for each day,
and for things that inspire, amaze, dazzle, strengthen and uphold us.
Thank you, God.

In this time of quiet, we give thanks.

Silence

God of hope, we live each day surrounded by your presence,
your love, and your creation.

Even on our toughest days we are never alone.

As we live, we seek to be people who respond to your love
through our thoughts, words, and actions.

Today we come aware of the abundance of your love,
But aware that in our world,
there are people in places who are living with desperation, conflict,
sadness, prejudice, isolation, rejection, hunger, scarcity and poverty.
Where each day is a struggle
and the overflowing sense of hope is quashed
by uncertainty, doubt, pain, and a feeling of never ending.
We pray for the helpers, the light-bringers, the peacemakers,
the joy-finders, the solution-offerers, the difference-makers.
Loving God, help all those who make this world a better place.

Silence

We hold before you now the places around our world
where power corrupts,
where leaders behave badly,
where war is ongoing,
where discrimination is felt,
and where money and personal gain is prioritised over people.
Loving God, challenge those who make this world
a hard and difficult place to live in.

Silence

We think of all those known to us who are struggling with life.
For whatever reason. For those feeling betrayed, unloved, hopeless,
overwhelmed, depressed, anxious, fearful, or sad.
Help us to find ways to talk, care, share, and show compassion.
We bring to you those who feel that life is hard
and we ask that they may find peace, possibility, and potential.
And may we find ways to be your voice,
hands and feet in your world.
Loving God, lift up the cast down and uphold the ground down.

Silence

And finally we pray for ourselves.
May we be like the sower,
scattering seeds of your love randomly and wildly.
Not confining our sharing to those we like or are the same as,
but with abandon and with generosity.
Hold us, help us and bless us as we live your way.
Each and every day.
Loving God, be with us.

Silence

All this we offer in the name of the wandering Galilean who turned the world upside down with his radical ways. Amen.

Offertory Prayer

Loving God,
we give thanks for all we have
and all we are
and all that is to come.
We give thanks for your love in our lives and for the blessings this brings.
In response we offer what we have to you:
our time, talents, energy, prayers, worship, and financial giving.
Receive our gifts given freely and with love.
Take them and us, help us to make a difference.
To be kingdom-bringers, hope- holders and peace-makers.
Each and every day. Amen.

Hymn *We Cannot Own The Sunlit Sky*

Marty Haugen (born 1952) © 1992 GIA Publications Inc., 7404 S. Mason Avenue, Chicago, IL60638, USA OneLicence No. A-734713 Sung by members of Payson Park Church, Belmont, MA

We cannot own the sunlit sky,
the moon, the wild flow'rs growing,
for we are part of all that is
within life's river flowing.
With open hands receive and share
the gifts of God's creation,
that all may have abundant life
in ev'ry earthly nation.

2 When bodies shiver in the night
and weary, wait for morning,
when children have no bread but tears,
and war horns sound their warning,
God calls humanity to wake,
to join in common labour,
that all may have abundant life
in oneness with their neighbour.

Blessing

As receivers of God's abundant love,
freely sown in our lives and our world,
may we find ways to share the blessings, joys, peace and hope we know,
this week and on into the future.

And may God Creator, Son and Spirit,
bless us, those we love and those we struggle to love,
as we strive to live God's way,
now and forever, Amen.

Closing Music *Komm Gott Schöpfer Heiliger Geist ("Come God, creator Holy Ghost")*

by Johann Sebastian Bach (organ of Basilica Santa Maria Dei Assunta, Montecatini Terme, Italy – 2016)

Sources

All liturgical material by Jenny Mills

Thanks

Thanks to Christopher Whitehead, Bob Rabagliati, Dorothy Courtis, Morag Donaldson, and Hilary Everleigh for recording various spoken parts of the service.

Copyright

Where copyright, material has been produced in accordance with the terms of OneLicence No # A-734713