

Sunday service

from the United Reformed Church



Sunday 16th August 2026
Proper 15 | Ordinary 20
The Revd Dr Susan Durber



Manuel Gamboa | pexels.com

Opening Music *Duo du troisieme ton*

by Jacques Boyvin (1650 - 1706), Man IV, Jenny Gill Crawley URC - 2021

Introduction

Hello! I am Susan Durber, a minister now living in Pembrokeshire, in West Wales, and serving as the World Council of Churches President from Europe. I usually worship in a group of five small chapels, where people offer faithful prayer and praise, but also often travel to pray with Christians from many traditions and places in the varied communities of the world Church. Welcome to worship!

Call to Worship

Come, people of God, whoever you are.
Come, regulars or visitors, convinced or wondering.
Join in the fellowship of the world-wide Church;
Share in the communion of all the saints in heaven.
For God is good, and God's love is everlasting.

Hymn *He Came Down That We May Have Love*

Anonymous Cameroon © Copyright Control Sung by Chris Brunelle and friends and used with his kind permission.

He came down
that we may have love;
he came down
that we may have love;
he came down
that we may have love;
hallelujah for evermore.

2 He came down
that we may have hope;
he came down
that we may have hope;
he came down
that we may have hope;
hallelujah for evermore.

3 He came down that
we may have peace;
he came down
that we may have peace;
he came down
that we may have peace;
hallelujah for evermore.

4 He came down
that we may have joy;
he came down
that we may have joy;
he came down
that we may have joy;
hallelujah for evermore.

Prayers of Approach and Confession

Let us be silent and know that God is here...

Let us be silent and offer our praise to Christ...

Let us be silent and call on the Holy Spirit...

God, who knows and sees each one,
who forms us daily from your love,
we take a moment within our worship
to imagine what you see in our hearts and lives.

We remember how Jesus hated hypocrisy,
how he called out those dishonest with themselves.
We recall his words about letting go of possessions,
his command to love even our enemies.
And we know ourselves judged.

But we know that we are judged by Jesus,
the one who brought a gospel of forgiveness,
of outrageous and unconditional love,
of healing, renewal and resurrection.
Our deepest shame is tempered by his mercy.
The open wounds of our gravest guilt can be healed.
The daily failures of every human life are not eternal.

So, God of mercy,
let judgement not condemn but improve us.
May we grow into the humanity we see in Jesus,
wounded and risen, yet each day marked by mercy and joy. Amen.

Words of Forgiveness

Praise be to the God of all grace,
who, in Jesus, preached forgiveness
and whose Holy Spirit comes to renew us.
You are forgiven. We are forgiven.
Thanks be to God.

The Lord's Prayer

As our Saviour taught us, so we pray, Our Father...

Hymn

Gloria In Excelsis Deo

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sung by Schola Cantorum of St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church

Gloria, gloria, in excelsis Deo!

Gloria, gloria, alleluia, alleluia!

Glory to God, glory to God, glory in the highest!

Glory to God, glory to God, alleluia, alleluia!

Prayer for Illumination

God, we may have heard these readings before,
and think we know what they say.

Our attention is not always full
and we are distracted by many things.

Give us ears to hear the readings,
as though for the first time,
and so to hear your Word for us today, Amen.

Reading *Isaiah 56:1, 6-8*

Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come and my deliverance be revealed. And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant -these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel: I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

Reading *St Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28*

Then Jesus called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and

understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile." Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed from that moment.

Sermon

In one of the Star Wars movies - two Jedi knights arrive at a distant planet on the edges of the universe. They have come with a particular purpose, to get help and to find some spare parts for their spaceship. They meet a mother and a child, both of them enslaved. They are surprised that slavery still exists on this planet because it had been abolished in their world. The child pleads with the Jedi to rescue them. The mother pleads that her child, her little boy, should be set free. But one of the Jedi knights says, regretfully, 'I have not come to release the slaves'.

Jesus said to the Canaanite woman pleading for her child, 'I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel and to them alone'.

But, of course, the little boy in the Star Wars story *is* rescued from his slavery. And the daughter of the Canaanite woman *is* set free from her torment. Sometimes our plans, our strongest assumptions, have to be set aside in the cause of another good. Jedi knights, mythical heroes, and even Jesus himself - change their minds – and we will sometimes need to as well. Because when a new perspective opens up and a different take on the world emerges, in our humanity we change.

The story of this Canaanite woman is extraordinary. It's amazing, for a start, that it ever made it into the Gospels! It shows Jesus changing his mind. And, however convinced most of us are that Jesus was fully human, we still find it disconcerting to have his humanity so bluntly displayed. But it is a real part of being human to find yourself needing to re-think and re-frame... It's also amazing that the Gospel writers record this story that might be seen as a *criticism* of Jesus - as though he didn't yet understand the will of God. It's amazing because it is a story in which a woman speaks first and in which she *wins* the argument. There are very few stories like it in the whole of the ancient world. If a teacher loses a debate, it's always a debate with another teacher and not with a disciple - and certainly not with a woman! But in this story, Jesus' understanding of himself is changed by a woman, and a foreign woman too, and nothing was ever the same again. It's also an amazing and precious story because it very likely does reflect an actual historical incident, something that really did happen. It's hard to think why anyone would have invented it. There wasn't controversy in the early Church about whether or not Gentiles were to be included in the Church - though there was debate about the terms of their inclusion. And it's hard to think why any faithful disciple would have invented such an unflattering story. So, it must be then, that Jesus, having thought of his ministry as only to the lost of Israel, found himself responding to the needs of a much wider community.

Most of us know about the Canaanites from those Old Testament stories

when the Canaanite people were ... slaughtered. Joshua burnt their cities and put their men, women and even their children to the sword. The Jews of Jesus' day maybe still thought of Canaanites as 'the enemy'. But here is Jesus, healing a Canaanite woman's child, overturning all of that.

It is a very human thing to believe that the world you have known and grown up with, the ideals that were passed on to you, the ways and traditions you were taught - that all of these are how the world ought to be and ever will be. We all have unexamined assumptions, unconscious bias, built into us. When we look back at how people thought in the past we are astonished and wonder how they could possibly have had such ideas. We can't understand now how William Wilberforce actually had to struggle to argue for the abolition of slavery, and often especially with Church people. We find it hard now to imagine how people once believed that women shouldn't have the vote - people we often respect too, like Churchill and Lloyd George. And it's only a few years since people would have said that football was not a women's game.... It is now really hard to imagine – and yet these things were believed by very ordinary, and even very good, people. Isn't it bizarre that once people could sing that verse of *all things bright and beautiful* that goes,

‘The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate.
God made them high and lowly and ordered their estate.’

It's astonishing too that people have taken so long to recognise that human-made climate change is real.. Astonishing that people have thought God would only save those who belonged to their particular faith... or even denomination. And, of course, it seems astonishing to us, who are Gentiles, that Jesus could ever have thought that his mission was only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But it was from such an amazing change of perspective that our salvation and inclusion was begun. We, who are Gentiles, have so much for which to thank that Canaanite woman.

Matthew tells us that Jesus had withdrawn to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

He was in bad need of some time off. He was tired of talking to those who only listened so that they could twist his words and use them against him. He was finding the disciples trying sometimes, when they were being so slow to understand what he had to say and forever worrying that the Pharisees were being offended. He was impatient with those who thought it more important to wash your hands at the right time than to feed the poor or love your neighbour. So, he left for a bit, went off to Tyre and Sidon, where he could expect a bit of peace – because his own people wouldn't be there. And perhaps some watched him go with a kind of satisfaction, as though they had beaten him for a while.

But a woman from over the border had heard about a rabbi who could heal the sick and who did not ask for gold in return. She had heard that he angered the holy men of his own kind and that he was coming here. So, she went and asked him to heal her daughter. And he, like one turning away any unwanted caller at the front door, said that he hadn't come to anyone but Israelites... He said he couldn't give the children's bread to the dogs, a common word for Jews to use of Gentiles. But she replied, quick as a flash, that even the dogs (who let's face it are often rather loved if they are under the table) can eat the crumbs. She shouldn't have been speaking to him at all in public, let alone arguing with him. But she had nothing to lose, and she was desperate for her daughter... And Jesus, listening to her properly at last, congratulated her on her faith. Jesus would have known, from his reading of the Scriptures, that God has blessings aplenty for all the people. Jesus knew that the borders we make, the boundaries we assume are tight fast, that all of these are human creations, that God sees none of them - and welcomes and includes all people. But, like all of us, like all human beings, he had moments when a broader world was opened up.

Jesus went back to Galilee, back the way he had come, back along the road that leads through the hill and down to the lake. Once again crowds began to gather - people of many races, languages and faiths, and Jesus spoke to them all and healed any who came for healing. The promise once wrested from him by a foreign woman was shared freely with the crowd. The borders of God's promise were open, and would never again be closed.

The Kingdom of God is a broad haven. And we, here, who are Gentiles like that Canaanite woman, might not be here but for her.

All of us have assumptions about the world that we may not even recognise. All of us have things that we do just because they have always been done, or things that we think because we always have thought them. Of course, many will be fine and important and worth holding onto, some will be based on good intentions but now deserve a rethink, others are ripe to be overthrown. Discerning which are which takes some doing. But if faith is about drawing closer to God, going deeper into wisdom, expanding our hearts, then a broader view is one of the things that Christian faith gives us. Faith is not a narrow thing, clinging to what we've always thought, but an invitation to a broader space, to a wider vision, to the world through the looking glass or the wardrobe, to a world we could not have imagined. Faith shows us the wideness of God's mercy, the love of God that is broad like beach and meadow – it opens up whatever is closed in us, in you, and lets in the light.

We also have to thank those people who do make the world, or let the world, change its mind; William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson, changing hearts and minds about slavery, or the Pankhursts changing minds about women's suffrage, or perhaps even our King, or Greta Thunberg, changing minds about climate change... In this story it is Jesus who changes his mind. He shows us that it is a godly thing to change your mind, to broaden your horizons, to step over the boundaries people create.

Not long ago there was a huge gathering of churches in Germany – the World Council of Churches Assembly. The Archbishop of Canterbury was there... the Pope sent a Cardinal with a message... but I remember one speech in particular. A woman spoke. A Muslim. She asked, 'Do you think that Jesus came only for Christians?' 'Don't you believe that he came to save the whole world?' 'If you believe that, then he is for me too...' 'I think my world got a bit bigger at that moment. Jesus did not come only for Jews... or only for Christians... or only for those who can say the Creed and

mean every word. He came because God loves the whole world. And if Christ is the one who is not always the same, but who grows ever closer into the depth and breadth of God, I who am called to follow him should dare to risk changes in myself too. The world is an extraordinary place and our God is even more so. Faith heals and changes us. What wondrous grace! May it be so for you, for me, and for all the world. Amen.

Hymn *There's A Wideness In God's Mercy*

Frederick William Faber (1814-1863) Public Domain BBC Songs of Praise

There's a wideness
in God's mercy
like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in his justice
which is more than liberty.
There is no place
where earth's sorrows
are more felt than up in heaven;
there is no place
where earth's failings
have such kindly
judgements given.

2 For the love of God is broader
than the measures of our mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.
But we make his love too narrow

by false limits of our own;
and we magnify his strictness
with a zeal he will not own.

3 There is plentiful redemption
in the blood that has been shed;
there is joy for all the members
in the sorrows of the head.
There is grace
enough for thousands
of new worlds as great as this;
there is room for fresh creations
in that upper home of bliss.

*4 If our love were but more simple
we would take him at his word;
and our lives would be all gladness
in the joy of Christ our Lord.*

Affirmation of Faith

The Nicene statement of faith is the one that is honoured, said and prayed by the widest number of Christians around the world today. Its origins go back to the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE. Originally written in Greek, it is said and sung today in many different languages all over the world. And it has been so since the 4th century. It reminds us of our shared faith across

time and around the globe.

**We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.**

**We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate,
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead
and his kingdom will have no end.**

**We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father,
who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.**

We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

**We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.**

Hymn We Are Marching In The Light of God

Traditional South African, verse 1 translated by Anders Nyberg; verses 2 and 3 by Andrew Maries. © 1987 verse 1 WGRG, c/o Iona Community, 21 Carlton Court, Glasgow, G5 9JP, Scotland. www.wildgoose.scot OneLicence No. # A-734713 Sung by the University Presbyterian Church Choir, Austin, USA.

We are marching
in the light of God,
we are marching
in the light of God.

We are marching
in the light of God,
we are marching
in the light of God.

We are marching,
marching, marching,
we are marching
in the light of God.

We are marching,
marching, marching,
we are marching
in the light of God.

2 Siyahamb' ekukhanyen'
kwenkhos',
siyahamb' ekukha kwenkhos.

Siyahamb' ekukhanyen'
kwenkhos',
siyahamb' ekukha
kwenkhos nyen' kwenkhos'

Siya' hamba hamba,
siyahamba,
hamba siyahamb'
ekukhanyen'
kwenkhos'.

Siya' hamba hamba,
siyahamba,
hamba siyahamb'
ekukhanyen' kwenkhos'.

3: We are singing in the light of God...

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Thank you God, that your heart is so big, so full of love and mercy.
Thank you that we are all welcome in your world,
and never excluded from your embrace.

Fill us all with hope for better, kinder times,

when in our families and communities all will find acceptance, joy and love.

We pray for those close to us,
in our family and among our friends
who we know are struggling with illness or anxiety
with worries about money or the future,
or with broken relationships...

We entrust them to your embrace.

We pray for the communities in which we live,
for an end to division, prejudice and resentment.
Wherever people speak threats or encourage hatred,
let there be voices that speak welcome,
and offer hope for a shared and joyful future,
where all can live without fear
and neighbours live together in peace.

We pray for the nations and peoples of this world.
Where now we see war and invasion,
bombs falling on civilians,
populations driven out or killed,
may there be peace.
Where now refugees live in tents
amid the ruins of homes,
may there be rebuilding.
Where children now hunger and sicken,
may there be food and care.
We long for a world where everyone
can sleep peacefully and unafraid,
where all may receive more than crumbs from the rich,
but dignity, rights and fullness of life.

O God, who loves us all,

every child, every adult, every creature,
show us how to share this world
with joyful, peaceful, generosity.
Give us loving hearts and open minds,
that the world may be different
and the future filled with hope.

We make these prayers
through the name of Jesus,
and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Offering

We bring our offerings of money, as symbols of the offering of our lives
and of our commitment to following Christ.

Into your hands, O God, we place all that we are and all that we have.
We offer to you the worship and service of this church and these people.
We give our whole life long in your service
so that all people may one day rejoice in the Kingdom of God. Amen.

Hymn *In Christ There Is No East Or West*

William Arthur Dunkerley (John Oxenham) (1852-1941) Public Domain Sung by Chris Brunelle
and used with his kind permission.

In Christ there is no east or west,
in him no south or north;
but one great fam'ly
bound by faith
throughout the whole wide earth

3 Join hands, disciples in the faith
what e'er your race may be!
Who serve each other
in Christ's love
are surely kin to me

2 In him shall true
hearts everywhere
their high communion find;
His service is the golden cord
close binding humankind

4 In Christ now meet both
east and west,
in him meet south and north;
all Christly souls are one in him,
throughout the whole wide earth

Blessing

May God, our Creator, bless you.

May Christ, our Saviour, inspire you.

May the Holy Spirit comfort you.

this day and always, Amen.

Closing Music

*An arrangement of **Brightest and Best***

by Epiphany Hymn and How brightly shines the morning star by Wie schoen leuchtet, performed by Kingston upon Thames URC 2022

Sources

Affirmation of Faith the Nicene Creed. All other liturgical material by Susan Durber.

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