**Sunday 30th July 2023**

**The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Ordinary 17 | Proper 12**

**The Rev’d Adam Earle**

**Call To Worship**

Come and give praise to the Almighty God, proclaim God’s holy name, let the nations know of all that God has done. Sing out, sing praise, tell of God’s wonderful acts. Let your heart rejoice in God; give glory to the Holy one. Seek and find strength in God’s presence.

*based on Psalm 105:1-4*

**Prayer of Approach**

Welcoming God,

you have sought us and we draw near,

you have called us and we wait here in your presence.

What would we be without you?

What would we do without you?

Through Christ you have pursued us with grace,

forgiven us with mercy and embraced with love.

In Christ, you have poured out your all to bring us,

all people and all creation

back into right relationship,

even submitting to suffering and death

so that we may know healing and life.

In Christ you lead us through death to life

and promise us life in all its fullness,

undeserved and beyond our imaginings.

We come with awe and wonder at the extent of your love,

broader, higher and deeper than we are able to perceive,

and we give you thanks and praise.

Receive our worship,

hear our prayers as incense before your throne

and enable us to submit to you will and way.

Prepare us for the coming days as we grow in you,

transformed by your Spirit and challenged by you calling.

**Confession**

Our God is ever present to us

and yet we are not always present to God,

our attention is diverted,

our will and actions pursuing our own will and not the way of God.

Let us, in this moment,

confess our sins

and empty our hands of the things that are a barrier to our service of God

that we might be free to receive and to serve whole heartedly.

Let us keep silence as we call to mind the things we have done wrong,

and the good that we have failed to do.

*Silence is kept.*

Sovereign God, ruler of our hearts and lives,

we have sought to life for ourselves and ignored your will and purposes.

Lord, have mercy, **Lord, have mercy.**

Loving God, giver of life and grace,

we have sought our own good and ignored the cries of others.

Christ, have mercy, **Christ, have mercy.**

Uniting God, who draws all things together in Christ,

we have sought to maintain division and ignored the challenges of unity.

Lord, have mercy, **Lord, have mercy.**

Gracious God, hear our cry for forgiveness,

set us free to live life in its fulness

in right relationship with you and one another,

through Christ we pray.

**Assurance of Pardon**

The Lord is merciful!

He is kind and patient, and his love never fails.

The Lord won’t always be angry and point out our sins;

he does not punish us as our sins deserve.

How great is God’s love for all who worship him?

Greater than the distance between heaven and earth!

How far has the Lord taken our sins from us?

Farther than the distance from east to west!

Friends, in Christ our sins are forgiven, we are set free!

**Thanks be to God.**

*from Psalm 103: 8-12 CEV*

**Prayer for Illumination**

God of truth,

by the light and transforming power of your Holy Spirit,

open our ears to hear,

our minds to understand

and our hearts to embrace your Word for us today

that through Scripture shared

and through weak human words

we may behold your true and living Word,

Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Reading**

*St**Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52*

**All Age Activities**

*There are several rich seams to mine in today’s reading. Here are three possibilities to choose from or, if you prefer, you could offer all three and folk could choose:*

*HIDDEN TREASURE*

* ***Resources & Preparation****: A series of maps of the church worship area and any easily acceptable adjacent rooms (See below). Could also be outdoors. Mark, with an X, on the first map the location of a hidden second map. In turn then mark the location of a third map on the second etc. with as many repeats as possible. The final map should lead to a box containing a smart copy of the Bible. The box should be sealed and marked with an X. The box may be brough back to the front or middle of the worship area to be opened.*
* ***Introduction****:**Explain the nature of the activity, using the first map to find the next until finally retrieving the hidden treasure. Bring the treasure back. If you wish some of the congregation who may not want or be able to take part in the search could sing “Seek ye first the kingdom of God.” whilst others search.*
* **Message:** Well done to everyone who help with the search for the hidden treasure, and well done to those who waited so patiently for the searchers to return. In the past, before safes were invented, or banks established where people could store their precious possession, people would find a quiet place and bury their treasure in the ground. It would be hidden and safe. Still today people sometimes find treasure that was buried centuries ago whose owners have long since died and the treasure forgotten about.
	+ We now have our treasure box, it’s time to find out what’s inside. *(Open the box and reveal the Bible – hold it up for all to see.)* Oh wow, it’s something very precious – it might look like a book but it contains real treasure – not money, or jewellery, not gold or silver items but it contains truth that can set us and all people free, truth that can lead us to life everlasting with God, to enable us to be part of God’s kingdom which will last for ever.
	+ There is wonderful old hymn, written by Maria Penstone (1859-1910), that tells us about this precious treasure, we could read the words together to celebrate this gift:

God has given us a book full of stories,

Which was made for His people of old,

It begins with the tale of a garden,

And ends with the city of gold.

But the best is the story of Jesus,

Of the babe with the ox in the stall,

Of the song that was sung by the angels,

The most beautiful story of all.

There are stories for parents and children,

For the old who are ready to rest,

But for all who can read them or listen,

The story of Jesus is best.

For it tells how He came from the Father,

His far-away children to call,

To bring the lost sheep to their Shepherd-

The most beautiful story of all.

* In the gospels we often find Jesus using stories to help teach people about God. Today our reading includes some of these short stories, known as parables, which Jesus is using to help folk understand about God’s kingdom.
* **A LITTLE YEAST**
* ***Resources & Preparation:*** *Two small loaves of bread both using identical ingredients apart from one contains yeast and the other does not. It would also be good to have a small backet of yeast to show. Place the two loaves side by side on a table, covered with a cloth ready to be revealed.*
* **Message:** Have any of ever played a game of spot the difference, you know the sort of thing *(N.B. you could have an example printed on the pew sheet or displayed on the screen.)* you have two pictures that, at first glance, appear to be identical but when you look closely there are some small differences to find.

Today I have a version of “Spot the Difference” for us to engage in. I have two small loaves of bread, they are almost identical in that they contain the same ingredients, in the same amounts, but there is one thing different, see if you can work out what. *(Reveal the two loaves)*

One loaf seems larger than the other. Let’s cut them through so we can see what’s inside. *(Do so – one will have the typical airy crumb texture, the other won’t)* So what’s the different. What does one loaf have that the other does not? Yeast!

*(Show the contents of the packet of yeast)* Here is some yeast, the sort that was placed in the mix for the bigger, fluffier loaf. These tiny little grains, a living thing, which when mixed with warm water and the other ingredients in the recipe work through the whole of the dough mix and produce these little bubbles that make the bread light and airy.

In our reading today we will hear how Jesus talks of the Kingdom of God as being like yeast, starting small but growing and spreading throughout the world. When we serve God by sharing the Good news with others we can help to grow the kingdom and make God’s love known. There may not be all that many of us, but with God’s help we can see God’s kingdom grow.

* **PLANTING SEEDS**
* ***Resources & Preparation:*** *You will need a packet of black mustard seeds (or similar), small pots with soil. If possible, have “one you prepared earlier” to show the seedlings that have grown, alternatively buy a small tray of cress from a green-grocer.*
* **Message:** Have you ever grown mustard cress at home or perhaps at school? If you have you may remember sprinkling the seeds on a piece of damp tissue or blotting paper in a tray. After only a few days the begin to sprout and produce tasty little green shoots.

The seeds are very small *(Show them)* and yet stored inside that tiny seed are the wonderful things that are needed to grow a plant. *(You could at this point encourage folk to plant some seeds on the surface of some soil or do so later when setting the challenge).*

Jesus uses the mustard seed to teach about God’s kingdom in our reading today. He talks about the tiniest of seeds being planted and yet it grows into a large bush big enough for birds to perch in. If you remember growing mustard cress you might remember seeing the little seedlings *(Show example)* and perhaps wondering how such a small plant, which we then harvest and eat, could grow to be big enough for birds to settle in.

Here's a challenge for today. The seeds we have planted, lets care for them, give them a little water, warmth and light so they can grow and let’s see just how big a plant we can grow from them. If you manage to grow a big plant perhaps you could bring it along to show or take a picture if it gets really big.

Jesus uses the idea of the tiny seed growing into the big plant as a way of thinking about God’s kingdom. It starts small but grows big with room for everyone to be part of it. We are part of God’s kingdom and continue to work with God to see the Kingdom of God grow and include more and more people.

**Sermon Notes**

**Introduction:** There are some powerful truths within the teaching of today’s Gospel reading. We are presented with five short parables which all focus on the Kingdom of God. Each brings a slightly different emphasis. It is useful to remember that parables are not really allegories, designed to mimic aspects of the reality of God’s kingdom but are teaching tools designed to make the listen both then and now, think and lead us into truth.

**A Kingdom requires a Sovereign:** Before diving into the parables it may be valuable to explore the idea that when we talk of “kingdom” we therefore indicate and acknowledge that there is a “king”. Our modern view of the monarch as we find it in the UK, is more a figurehead than a ruler as we might encounter in scripture. We see monarchs of different aptitude and wisdom in scripture from those who are painted as evil such as the Pharoah in Egypt or Nebuchadnezzar the tyrant of Babylon. We might note the rulers of Israel, God’s chosen people, a mixed bunch to, many a total disaster of selfish, idolatrous infidelity, and even the good ones had their flaws. Scripture reminds us that God is ultimately our sovereign, all powerful. There are numerous references in the Psalms e.g. Psalm 99, and Jesus alludes to his own kingship in the face of Pilates questioning, John 18:36. God is the ultimate and perfect, just, compassionate monarch (you could have fun thinking of all those attributes that make God the best of the best, the King of kings).

**The Nature of the Kingdom**

**The Kingdom grows:** We may feel, in our often small and even declining contexts that the Kingdom of God as we see it represented in our churches, is on the way out. Of course, that is far from the truth. The Christian Faith is growing still and fast. Between 1910 and 2010 the number had increased by about 600 million.

The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast both point to the reality that God’s kingdom is ultimately about increase not decline. With the parable of the mustard seed this is evident in particular. We see the plant grow to accommodate any number and all kinds of birds – we can celebrate in this the fact that there is room for many and many more folk in God’s kingdom.

We can also take from this a warning, by reflecting back of the parable of the sower found earlier in the Matthew 13 – we can see that birds can also behave in negative ways just as God’s people can be exclusive and fail to embrace the kingdom value of welcome and accommodation for all. We might reflect on the idea of a bird table – we might delight in certain types of birds paying a visit but have quite the opposite response to others e.g. the pigeon, the gull or the starling. Welcome and inclusion are not easy and require care and consideration especially as they might also demand change.

**The Value and Cost of the Kingdom:** The parables of the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great price both point us to think of the priceless value of accepting the gift of God, through Christ, of a place in the kingdom. We could never afford to pay for or earn such an honour but this is made available to us.

However we are also called to invest our all in the kingdom and its kingdom values, to give all and live for God in Christ. Both “buyers” in the parables sell everything to invest in the “prize”, we are challenged to invest our all in God.

**Judgement and the Kingdom:** The final parable in the set begins with a relatively familiar and comfortable fishing analogy, but like a ray caught up in the catch, there’s a sting in the tail (and indeed the tale). The action of judgement in separating Good from Bad. All were caught up in the kingdom net yet some are picked out for Good, others discarded as bad.

The key point for us here is that the decision as to who is in and who is out is not up to us, not up to the fish. Judgement and ultimate justice are God’s domain to be exercised in whatever way God chooses. Our role is to assist in the catch, to cast the net again and again to see more folk embraced by the kingdom and finding faith in God.

The warning of the parable is not to scare people into relationship with God but to give the people of God incentive to fulfil our calling so that none may be lost.

**Offertory**

In light of the grace and generosity of our God we recognise that we could never repay what he has done for us and given to us, yet we our gifts as a symbol of our gratitude, to invest in the kingdom. Freely you have received, freely give.

Blessed are you Lord God

our all-powerful King,

through your goodness and that alone

we have these gifts to offer

and with then our lives.

Take both and use all to your glory

and for the purposes of your glorious kingdom, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Prayers of Intercession**

Let us approach the throne of grace with confidence in the love of God who, through Christ, invites us to be part of the Kingdom and to share in its purposes. We bring our prayers.

God of life and love, we thank you that you give us the privilege of prayer as a means of sharing in the kingdom purposes. Help us and all your people to recognise both the wonder and the responsibility of your calling and join with you, in whatever way you lead us, in spreading your Gospel and living out our faith in you.

Sovereign God, w**e bow before your throne.**

We pray for the people of this world in their rich diversity, teach us to see difference and variety not as something to be viewed with suspicion or fear but to celebrate that all people are expressions of your creativity, made in your image. Remind us that we will never look into the eyes of another person who is not loved completely by you. May we welcome the stranger, make room for and seek to adapt to include the unfamiliar and share you love with all.

Sovereign God, **we bow before your throne.**

God of peace, we bring before you those places in our world where there is no peace, where conflict rages on, where lives are shattered by war and people driven from their homes. Give courage to all who work for peace and hope to those who face the terrifying reality of the moment that they may know your love and hold tight to your promises. Show us how we can offer help and support and speak truth to power in the face of injustice.

Sovereign God, **we bow before your throne.**

We pray for those whose lives are consumed by poverty, the hardship of natural disaster or the consequences of climate change beyond their fault and control. May those who lead the nations exercise power in light of your sovereign rule, guided by your example of grace and love, to make wise decisions for the good of all. Teach us to play our part in supporting those who face such life limiting situations through prayer and action as you enable us.

Sovereign God, **we bow before your throne.**

King of kings, we pray for our nation as many folk struggle with the cost of living crisis, with the fear of not knowing what tomorrow will bring. We pray for our government that they too may be guided by your wisdom and compassion. May we do all we can to live out your kingdom values as we serve those around us and put our faith into action.

Sovereign God, **we bow before your throne.**

God our healer, we bring to you all those who are suffering from sickness of body, mind or spirit, those in pain and those weakened by the struggle. Give clarity, wisdom and strength to all who work to care for and provide medical support for others that they may also be embraced by your love and care.

Sovereign God, **we bow before your throne.**

God of life and hope we hold before you those who are nearing the end of this earthly life that they may look ahead with confidence in your saving grace and rest into the joy of your promises of the kingdom to come. Be with those who mourn and enable them to find comfort in your presence and the hope you have given in Christ.

Sovereign God, **we bow before your throne.**

Our sovereign God knows the cry of our hearts, let us then, in a moment of silence, offer in prayer those things that rest on our hearts today…

*Silence is kept.*

Sovereign God, **we bow before your throne.**

Merciful God we bring our prayers in faith, knowing that you will hear and answer us as your will directs. Help us to trust that you know what is right and what is best. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ your Son, our Saviour. Amen.

**Blessing**

Let us live in the light of God’s sovereignty,

proclaiming the Good News

 through word and deed

and working with God

to see the bounds of the Kingdom grow.

And the blessing of God almighty,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit

be upon us and all for whom we pray,

both now and for ever. Amen.

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| **HYMN SUGGESTIONS** |
|  | *R&S* | *CH4* | *StF* | *CMP* |
| At the name of Jesus | 261 | 458 | 317 | 41 |
| Be thou my vision | 489 | 465 | 545 | 51 |
| Go forth and tell! O Church of God, awake | 574 |  |  | 178 |
| God of mercy, God of grace | 575 |  |  |  |
| It only takes a spark (Pass it on) |  |  |  | 348 |
| Lord, You are more precious than silver |  |  |  | 447 |
| Seek ye first the kingdom of God | 512 | 641 | 254 | 590 |
| The Church is wherever God’s people are praising | 583 | 522 |  |  |
| The kingdom of God is justice and joy | 200 |  | 255 | 651 |
| The reign of God, like farmer’s field |  | 343 |  |  |
| There’s a wideness in God’s mercy | 353 | 187 | 416 | 683 |

RS – *Rejoice and Sing* | CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* | *StF – Singing the Faith* | CMP – *Combined Mission Praise*