

worship notes



from the United Reformed Church

Sunday 19th July 2026
Proper 11 | Ordinary 16
The Revd Ruth Armstrong

Gathering Words

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said,
"Surely the LORD is in this place - and I did not know it!"
And he was afraid and said,
**"How awesome is this place!
This is none other than the house of God,
and this is the gate of heaven."**

taken from Genesis 28:16 & 17

Opening Prayers of Praise, Confession, & Assurance

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD,
you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.
Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and night wraps itself around me,"
even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.

See if there is any wicked way in me
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24

Thank you, Lord, that you know each one of us,
that you have called us to this house of God today.
Thank you that you are such a parent who is genuinely interested in our ways,
our lying down, our thoughts and our words.
Thank you that you hem us in on all sides
even though we often don't even realise it, Lord;
also, in doing that that we still have freedom to choose our own paths,
even though they may diverge from yours.

How scary to us are the words that you know our thoughts,
our hearts and that at times there is wickedness in each of us
and yet you still love us and have called us here this day.
Even though you know all this,
we come before you to confess that we have sinned in our thoughts,
in our hearts and in our words – that at times darkness has overcome us
and we have preferred that to the light.
So, we beg you today,
forgive us these attitudes of heart and mind and actions or inactions of body;
take our hands and lead us into the light, into the way everlasting.

(pause)

But God has shown us how much he loves us—
it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us!

Romans 5:8

Thanks be to you Holy One for this great hope and assurance we have in you.
So, we praise You, God of light and hope,
for Your presence that never leaves us,
and for Your love that sees each one of us and holds us gently.
We pray this in the name of the Most High and Holy one, **Amen**.

Prayer for Illumination

God who sees and knows us,
open our ears, hearts, minds, and souls
as the scriptures are read
that we may hear not just with our ears, but with our whole being. Amen.

Readings

Isaiah 44:6-8 | Romans 8:12-25 | St Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

All Age Talk

<https://sermons4kids.com/sermons/jacobs-ladder>

This is a resource Ruth regularly uses; she suggests adapting them to your local situation.

Sermon Notes

Isaiah

In these verses, God declares His sovereignty and uniqueness, stating that there is no other god besides Him. He likens himself to a rock. So, sticking to the gardening image (as portrayed by the wheat and weeds), when one is trying to move a large rock, it is hard work, and if the rock is big enough, perhaps even impossible to move – immovable, or a new word I recently learned moveless. Another image/term that comes to mind is “rock-solid.” When people feel safe and secure, they often feel “rock-solid.” If you have a rock-solid friend, you can rely on them in good times and bad, to be there for help. Again, immovable or moveless. This passage talks about God who has no end and no beginning, no one to compare to, and someone who knows all and is in control of all – sounds pretty “rock-solid” to me.

Romans

“This is the wondrous exchange made by the boundless goodness, having become with us the son of man, Jesus has made us with himself sons of God. Being thus reconciled by the righteousness of Christ, God becomes, instead of a judge, an indulgent father” John Calvin. Under Roman law it was a privilege for a male to be adopted into a more prestigious family. Indeed, many Roman rulers were themselves adopted. Julius Caesar passed on his rule to an adopted son, Caesar Augustus. He, in turn, adopted Tiberius, who was succeeded by two rulers, one of who was an adopted grandson called Caligula. Under Roman law, if you were adopted into a powerful family your life would change dramatically. All former debts were cancelled and the family name conferred on you, along with a share of the inheritance equal to that of a natural-born son. Paul sees that as a perfect analogy for the gospel. By nature, God the father has one eternal son, Jesus Christ. Yet by grace, the divine family is open to destitute orphans like us. The words ‘son’ and ‘sonship’ have always rankled me (as a woman!) and has always smacked a little of patriarchy. However, like almost all the gospel, this is counter-cultural and subversive. In first century culture, the head of the home would have designated the eldest son to be the main heir of the family estate. By contrast, daughters did not have the same rights or

privileges and were more vulnerable as a result. Indeed, unwanted girl babies were sometimes 'exposed' or left to die outdoors while male children were adopted into the family. Here's where the subversion comes in - the author of Romans begins by using the male term, which more literal translations rightly render 'son' but then the author switches to a more generic Greek word used to refer to 'children' – whether male or female. By implication, the titles and privileges, which would normally be reserved for sons, now belong to all God's children. To imply that a female slave living in squalid conditions in the worst ghetto of Rome is a 'son' is absolutely revolutionary. Tom Holland (the historian and author, not Spiderman!) concludes that Christianity was like a cuckoo in the Roman nest. All people are equally loved by God. So, we are all children of God, and some are heirs of the kingdom. If an adopted child wanted to know for sure whether their status was truly equal, they might be tempted to look at the family will. Few things are more controversial than the distribution of inheritance among relatives. The author of Romans looks into God's will and sees that we are not just mentioned in passing. We are co-heirs, gifted an equal share of the father's estate. The only difference is that we inherit on our own death, not his. (Andrew Ollerton *Romans: A letter that makes sense of life.*)

St Matthew

In 2024 I had the opportunity to attend the *Church Times Festival of Preaching* in Cambridge at which Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies Dr Amy-Jill Levine spoke about one of her books [*Short Stories by Jesus*](#), dealing with the parables of Jesus and reading them for what they are. Below is what she has to say about the parable of the Mustard Seed. "People in antiquity as well as [us] today would have known that mustard is not just a tiny seed. They knew it was tiny, but they also knew mustard gave us wonderful spice - so, we still use mustard today - that mustard was used for medicine (mustard plants, mustard leaves) - that mustard was used for decorations in gardens. It grows like a weed; it grows somewhat fecundity (fertility), but it's pretty trim. So, you could use it for aesthetic decoration. Now, I'm into medicine, I'm into spices which means I'm into food, I'm into decoration. And all of that is the kingdom of heaven. And now my imagination has free rein. Oh, the kingdom of heaven is a place where everybody has enough to eat and the food is good. Or the kingdom of heaven is a place where everybody can be healed because the kingdom gives me medicine." So how does this translate to weeds and wheat? Starting with the literal; wheat, we know this as a source of food, a staple diet in many poorer nations. It is the second most cultivated crop worldwide (after corn). Interestingly enough, wheat sends down roots which can be as deep as 2m (6ft) which enables plants to still produce even during drought conditions. Wheat is made into flour, which is made into bread – a very basic foodstuff for millions of people worldwide; in John 6:35 Jesus declares himself to be the bread of life. Simply put, a weed is a plant in an undesirable location. The Oxford Dictionary defines it as "a wild plant growing where it is not wanted, especially among crops or garden plants". Interestingly, the term "weed" has no botanical significance. Wild plants growing where they are wanted would not be defined as weeds. On the other hand, wild plants growing in your garden where they are not wanted would be considered weeds. Essentially a weed is determined by the context

in which it is growing (<https://horticulture.co.uk/common-garden-weeds>). In a more spiritual sense, the good seed/wheat (as stated in the parable) are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one. They are allowed to grow side by side demonstrating the coexistence of good and evil in the world. This reflects the reality of life in churches and communities where all kinds of people co-exist (hopefully we are doing more than that!) together. But this growing together also demonstrates God's patience. God allows time for growth and repentance. The delay in judgment shows His mercy, giving people the chance to turn to Him. At the harvest, the weeds are burned (symbolising eternal separation from God), while the wheat is gathered into the barn (eternal life with God). We are not tasked with uprooting weeds early, so as not to harm the wheat. This teaches humility and cautions against judging others before God's appointed time. We live in a world where good and evil co-exist – it is up to us to be pure, grow strong, and be free from pests.

Weaving The Threads Together

Whether we are sons or children, or wheat or weeds, we are all children of God created in His image. During Advent (when I am writing this), our Advent study was the latest York Course entitled "Who am I?" a serious issue to discuss in just 4 weeks! The final sentence of the study simply states, "being human ultimately means being like Jesus...being Jesus for those among whom we live and to whom we belong." We live in a world where good and evil co-exist, we believe in and worship a God who knows us inside and out, who discerns our every action and from whom there is no hiding, no matter whether we go to the end of the earth or depths of the ocean. We are also in a relationship with a God who has adopted us not just as 'sons' but has used each and every one of us to subvert society by adopting us as 'children'. A God who has no end and no beginning, no one to compare to, and someone who knows all and is in control of all – someone who is "rock-solid". Our task as children of this radical Jesus is to be fully immersed in society to be sharing the Gospel (Good News) to be fully present to those around us, living out our vocation as called children, setting aside our certainties and opening ourselves up to new possibilities, but in doing this relying on the movelessness of God. Again, quoting Nick Baines from "Who am I?", "if we are to be truly human and truly Christian (I {Ruth} prefer the term Christ-follower), we must look something like the Jesus we read about in the gospels." This is our challenge as 'wheat' and 'sons.'

Prayers of Intercession

Lord, we have just heard from the scriptures that evil and good co-exist – they did whilst you walked the earth,
and they are ever evident as we walk the earth today.
So, as we now turn to think about those around us,
as we still have the words of the Psalm ringing in our ears
that you know us and we cannot hide from you,
we lift up to you to world and communities in which we live.

There is so much happening around us in the world – war and violence are ever present.

So, we beg that you will be with those who are caught up in such situations; those who don't have the means to leave and those who have been forced to leave, those who have chosen to stay and those who have been forced to fight. May they know your hand of protection on them...

For those working towards peace – give them grace and discernment; may they know when to speak and not speak, when to act or not act. Grant them wisdom and guide them that the good of the people they steward may be at the forefront of their minds in all they do.

As we move closer to home, we lift up to you our own local villages/town/cities. Lord, you regularly interacted with people as you went about your daily activities, bring them healing and wholeness. As we go about our daily lives of working, shopping, schooling and being, may we bring about healing and wholeness to those we encounter, whether it be by a simple word, action or gesture, knowing that all we do is a witness and testimony to the fact that we are all created in your image and are all your children.

We lift up to you too Lord, those in our own church communities. Be with those who are not well in body, mind, soul or spirit – may they know your presence, and may we be that presence too Lord. Again, with the words of the Psalm ringing in our ears, “even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

May your light shine in our lives and may we be a light to everyone around us. We pray these things in your holy name as we say/sing the Lord's prayer together.

Offertory

Our offerings are seeds of hope. Through them, God's love is shared in word and deed. As we give, we join in His work of healing, welcoming, and renewing the world.

You have searched us Lord and you know us, and so we thank you for all that you have given to us, and the reassurance that you with us always; as an acknowledgement of all you have done us for,

we give back to you a portion of what is already yours
and ask that you be with all those who administer it
for the greater good of your Kingdom. Amen.

Blessing

As we go our separate ways,
may we seek to be good seed,
to send out strong roots and walk humbly with you Lord,
while thriving in our various communities
and leaving the judgement up to God.

We go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.

Hymn Suggestions				
	RS	CH4	StF	MP
Spirit of truth and grace		608		
We have come into his house				729
Jesu tawa pano / Jesus we are here		773	27	
O God, you search me and you know me <u>or</u>		97	728	1343
You are before me, God, you are behind <u>or</u>	732	96		
Search me O God and know my heart today				587
Come, ye thankful people, come	40	233	123	106
The reign of God, like farmer's field		343		
Spirit of the living God	308	619	395	613
Gracious Spirit, hear our pleading		613		
Holy Spirit, living breath of God				1183
Behold the amazing gift of love	587	478		
Christ is coming! Let creation		475		
O God of Bethel! by whose hand	71	268	475	907
O love that wilt not let me go	511	557	636	515
Better is one day (in your courts)				1287
Abba Father let me be			439	3
Who is on the Lord's side				769
God of grace and God of glory	344		682	192
Guide me O thou great Jehovah.	345	167	465	201

RS – Rejoice & Sing | CH4 – Church Hymnary 4 | StF – Singing the Faith | MP – Mission Praise