

**Call to Worship** (*Ps 92:1-4 & 12-15*)

It is good to give thanks to the LORD,  
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;  
**to declare your steadfast love in the morning,  
and your faithfulness by night,**  
to the music of the lute and the harp,  
to the melody of the lyre.

**For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work;  
at the works of your hands I sing for joy.**

The righteous flourish like the palm tree,  
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.

**They are planted in the house of the LORD;  
they flourish in the courts of our God.**

In old age they still produce fruit;  
they are always green and full of sap,  
**showing that the LORD is upright;  
he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.**

**Hymn:** 56 How good it is to thank you Lord

**Prayer of Approach and Confession and the Lord's Prayer**

Loving God

We praise you for the seed that you have sown in our hearts,  
we praise you for having called us to be your children, your  
people, your church.

We thank you for setting us apart to be the Body of Christ,  
his friends, his disciples.

Once we were strangers to you and one another,  
but now we are members of your kingdom, a holy nation, a royal  
priesthood, chosen by and precious to you.

We praise you for bringing us here together,  
and for breaking down the barriers that keep us apart.  
We thank you for the friendship we find in this church family,  
for the faith that we share, the love that binds us together,  
the support we are able to give and receive,  
and the gifts that are present among us that we can use to grow  
your kingdom of love.

We praise you for the wider church of which we are a part,  
for Christians of different countries and cultures,  
each working out their faith  
in a multitude of different places and situations.  
We thank you for all that we can learn from them,  
for the examples they give of courage and perseverance,  
vision and commitment, mission and service, fellowship and  
worship.

Loving God,  
forgive us when we do not live up to our calling,  
forgive us for not allowing that seed that has been sown in our  
hearts to grow  
forgive us for not sharing and sowing your seed , your good  
news, your love with other people,  
forgive us for all the things that lie heavy on our hearts that we  
bring before you now in the silence...SILENCE

Loving God,  
Let us take hold of your promises of mercy and forgiveness,  
regenerate and nurture your love and seed of faith within us.  
Renew our hearts, deepen our commitment, broaden our vision  
and open our lives to the power of your love  
so that that all we do, all we say, all we think, and all we hope  
will take root in this world and be the source for new expressions  
of your love, of your justice, of your character, of your mission,  
and of your kingdom.  
So may we bear a rich harvest to the glory of your name we ask  
through Jesus Christ our Lord (who taught us to pray saying...  
Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we  
forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver  
us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the  
glory for ever Amen.

## **Bible Readings**

### **Ezekiel 17:22-24 (NRSVA)**

<sup>22</sup> Thus says the Lord GOD:

I myself will take a sprig  
from the lofty top of a cedar;  
I will set it out.  
I will break off a tender one  
from the topmost of its young twigs;  
I myself will plant it  
on a high and lofty mountain.  
<sup>23</sup> On the mountain height of Israel  
I will plant it,  
in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit,  
and become a noble cedar.  
Under it every kind of bird will live;  
in the shade of its branches will nest  
winged creatures of every kind.  
<sup>24</sup> All the trees of the field shall know  
that I am the LORD.  
I bring low the high tree,  
I make high the low tree;  
I dry up the green tree  
and make the dry tree flourish.  
I the LORD have spoken;  
I will accomplish it.

### **Mark 4:26-34 (NIVUK)**

Jesus said,

<sup>26</sup> 'This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. <sup>27</sup> Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. <sup>28</sup> All by itself the soil produces corn – first the stalk, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. <sup>29</sup> As soon as the corn is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.'

<sup>30</sup> Again he said, 'What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? <sup>31</sup> It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. <sup>32</sup> Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.'

<sup>33</sup> With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. <sup>34</sup> He did not say anything to

them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

**For the Word of God in scripture, for the Word of God among us, for the Word of God within us, we bring our thanks and praise. Amen**

### **Offering Prayer**

Loving Lord, God of all creation

From a little acorn grows a mighty oak.

From a tiny seed grows a beautiful flower.

Bless us and bless our offering, we pray

May this small offering of our gifts, given in so many different ways, become great enough to make your kingdom grow. Amen

**Hymn:** 417 Now the green blade riseth from the buried grain

<https://youtu.be/g-5Bi2iM40E>

### **Reflection**

I think we are all very familiar with the story that we heard from Mark's Gospel this morning – both aspects of that story – the one that speaks of how a seed is sown and how it grows and that of how such a small seed as a mustard seed can grow into such a large plant. Both are parables that Jesus used to teach about what the Kingdom of God is like. As Jesus continues to draw large crowds who gather to listen to his teaching, these parables speak about how this teaching is heard and received...and ultimately passed on.

I suppose that like me, you first heard this story when you were a child because it is a story that is easily illustrated by giving children a small seed and helping them plant it and then telling them to watch it grow...and as we tell that story & plant the seed we also plant the seed of God's Kingdom.

The seed of the kingdom begins in a small way with each individual who hears the teaching and stories of Jesus coming to faith and then growing in faith. Part of that growth into faith is sowing our own seeds so that others too come to know the

stories and begin to grow in their own faith too. As each of us grow individually and sow our own seed so the kingdom of God grows and has grown throughout the world. We have seen the small seed of God, first grown in that small band of disciples that followed Jesus, grow to a fantastic size that has spread throughout the world.

There is a similar idea running throughout the reading from Ezekiel as well, only here it is Israel who grows great like a mighty cedar – like a tree that bears fruit and shelters all kinds of birds and wildlife. It reminds me of this picture I recently saw on Facebook – this huge tree giving shelter to so many people.

We – each one of us – are God's seeds it is **us** who grow his kingdom as it is grown in us.

On another note - we realise now that trees are a vitally important part of the ecology of this beautiful world that God has created that is being so sadly affected by climate change.. At the General Assembly 3 weeks ago, climate change was very much on the agenda and we were advised that the national Church is dis-investing from fossil fuels and no longer holds investments in oil and gas companies. We were asked to support the Conference on Climate Change COP26 that will be taking place in Glasgow from 1-11<sup>th</sup> Nov this year and to look at how each church can reduce its carbon footprint..

I wanted to wax lyrical about trees today but as I read the story from Mark's Gospel so soon after the General Assembly it brought so many different thoughts, perhaps the most poignant being the state of our church at the moment. Over the centuries we have seen the church grow and extend all over the world and many people have sheltered in its boughs, many people have been helped by the work that it has done, its shade has extended even further than its physical footprint and in many parts of the world the church continues to grow.

Sadly, the news at our General Assembly about our own national church was not good. Diminishing numbers, diminishing finances

and resources - all exacerbated by the current pandemic - means that the church is having to downsize too.

This would happen naturally to some extent because over the next 5 years 35% of ministers will reach retirement age and there are very few people in training at the moment to replace them. By 2025 there will only be enough money in the coffers for the church to sustain 600 ministry posts and 60 vacancies, a reduction of 200 posts. Presbyteries throughout Scotland have been charged with the task of bringing together new Presbytery Mission Plans to accomplish this reduction by Dec 2022. Until that time any churches falling vacant after June 1<sup>st</sup> will not be able to go forward with their plans to call a minister until the Presbytery plans have been approved. Any church already in the process has to call a Sole Nominee by Dec 31<sup>st</sup> 2021 or they too will be stisted and unable to proceed.

At the General Assembly, Rev Rosie Frew, convener of the Faith Nurture Forum, laid out the stark realities facing the Church. She said there were currently 693 ministers and Ministries Development Staff in post, with 151 locums and 299 vacant charges representing 402 congregations. 36 congregations are also in guardianship which means 335 interim moderators are needed.

“We are draining the resources of our Church – people, morale, finance — just to keep this broken system going,” she said and added, “without a radical treatment plan, the Church of Scotland will not survive.

“Our report offers the whole Church a chance to thrive — to lay down burdens which have been exhausting us all.”

The Very Rev Dr John Chalmers, convener of the Assembly Trustees, said the Church has “pushed back on the truth” of its situation for too long and urged commissioners to trust the path of renewal. The savings we have already made, more than £6 million in the national work of the Church, will be for nothing if we do not also bring the budget for ministry under control,” he added.

“Fewer than 44% of our charges pay the whole cost of a ministry and the level of subsidy involved in supporting the other 56% of charges is, in the now foreseeable future, unsustainable.

“A Church with around 300 vacancies has neglected the business of proper planning for too long – now is the time to act with realism but to do so with hope”.

“We must not approach this round of planning by culling the Church in such a way that it damages the viability of the whole eco-system which is the Church of Scotland.”

The reality is that our national Church will have an £11 million deficit this year. The reality is that Perth Presbytery will have to reduce ministry posts from the present 26 down to 16.5 FTE posts.

On a more positive note - throughout the pandemic we have heard of more and more people accessing the message of Christ through modern technology. The seed of God is still being sown, the kingdom of God is still growing but the institution of the church as we know it, is having to be pruned so that it too can blossom and be more fruitful once again. Our focus is to be on Mission as we go forwards.

We've become stuck in our rut, as you might say, the church that we know and love has less appeal to the younger people of today. We have to change to bring growth... and there is money set aside for new church initiatives, new expressions of church, pioneer ministries and Mission churches and even a fund to apply to for upgrading to modern technology. Ministers at the moment are overburdened trying to support too many charges, cope with the additional burden of modern technology and on it goes ...and our elders are being asked to do more and more. We need to free things up so we can be inventive and creative, so we can respond to the needs of today so we can see where the spirit is blowing us, where Christ is leading us ...and follow... for just as there is the mystery of the growth of the seed that depends on Gods power and direction so we and the church and the kingdom depend on that power and direction too.

The mustard seed is in effect a weed and like most weeds will grow and flourish anywhere and everywhere and like most weeds is very difficult to eradicate. The mustard seed will flourish in the hardest of conditions and in every place. The Kingdom of God will flourish and grow, as each seed of Christ roots and becomes well established and flourishes and grows in each believers heart and life. Thomas Merton said: 'A tree gives glory to God by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be it is obeying Him... The more a tree is like itself it is like Him. This particular tree will give glory to God by spreading out its roots in the earth and raising its branches into the air and the light in a way no other tree before or after it ever did or will do.' Thanks be to God Amen.

<https://youtu.be/yU-1zqUo80U> Nigel Kennedy: The Lark Ascending (Vaughan Williams)

### **Prayers for Others:**

Loving Heavenly Father, we would grow with you:  
New shoots reaching out, hands stretched upward  
like leaves newly formed, soaking up your light and warmth  
Father, we would grow with you

Loving Lord, we would grow with you and in you  
In sunshine and rain, in darkness and light  
In cold days and summer days, from Springtime to Winter  
Lord, we would grow with you

Holy Spirit, we would grow with you  
bending and changing and moving  
to the rhythm of your winds breath.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit  
we would grow with you and grow your kingdom for you  
and bring forth fruit that is pleasing to you  
Fed by your living water, giving sustenance to others  
Lord, we would grow with you.

Lord, we pray for the growth of your kingdom

for the witness of your church and the sowing of your seed by all your followers.

We pray for the future of our national church and all its leaders, bend us, break us, mould us, prune us and inspire us to be the church you long for us to be.

As our Queen celebrates her 95<sup>th</sup> birthday we pray for your blessing upon her, we give thanks for her long reign and pray for your blessing upon all her family.

Thank you for gathering into the spacious branches of your heavenly Kingdom all the redeemed who have gone before us, especially those we love and miss the most.

We bring our thanks for the life of Robert Meiklum and we pray for your presence with his family and friends at this sad and difficult time. We pray that your love would surround them, your strength support them and your spirit guide them.

Grant that we may always find refreshment in your Word, blessing in your Sacraments, guidance in your Spirit, and forgiveness in your Son, so that, with all your people, we may be gathered into the welcoming shelter of your embrace and may abide there in joy forever.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer, we ask it in the name of Jesus Christ our Saviour Amen.

## **I Go Among Trees**

by Wendell Berry (from Sabbaths)

I go among trees and sit still.  
All my stirring becomes quiet  
around me like circles on water.  
My tasks lie in their places  
where I left them, asleep like cattle.

Then what is afraid of me comes  
and lives a while in my sight.  
What it fears in me leaves me,

and the fear of me leaves it.  
It sings, and I hear its song.

Then what I am afraid of comes.  
I live for a while in its sight.  
What I fear in it leaves it,  
and the fear of it leaves me.  
It sings, and I hear its song.

After days of labour,  
mute in my consternations,  
I hear my song at last,  
and I sing it. As we sing,  
the day turns, the trees move.

**Hymn:** 500 Lord of creation  
<https://youtu.be/mXPn78k6JOo>

### **Prayer**

Just a tiny seed, Lord, but with such a hope of life,  
energy and possibility crammed into a tiny shell,  
waiting for warmth and moisture to unlock all its potential.  
God our creator,  
bestower of our life, giver of our gifts,  
plant us in the warm earth of your love,  
shower us with grace,  
so that we are awake to the possibilities of change  
and alive to our potential to work for your kingdom.

### **Benediction**

Now go nurturing the seed of God within you and sowing it  
wherever you can and the blessing of God almighty, Father Son  
and Holy Spirit rest upon and remain with each one of you this  
day and forevermore. Amen