

Introduction to the *Flourish* series Week 1: The grace of God comes first



Introduction

We have just begun a new calendar year and I would like to wish you all a happy and healthy year ahead. Happy New Year!

Today we also begin a series of four services where we will look at God's desire for us to flourish and what that means. These services have been planned by three members of the Wharfedale and Aireborough Circuit Leadership Team and are being followed in most of the churches in our circuit. Along with this service sheet you should have received a prayer card. You should also receive a journal where you can write your thoughts or responses if you wish.

We begin the series and this service by remembering that in all things it is God who makes the first move. Centuries ago a prophet heard a promise at the time when the people of Israel were exiles and felt desolate. This may chime with our feelings of being in a desert as the pandemic continues

Call to worship: Isaiah 35:1 – 2

The desert will rejoice, and flowers will bloom in the wastelands. ²The desert will sing and shout for joy; it will be as beautiful as the Lebanon Mountains and as fertile as the fields of Carmel and Sharon. Everyone will see the Lord's splendour, see his greatness and power. (GNB)

Hymn

O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder
consider all the works thy hand hath made,
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,
thy power throughout the universe displayed :
*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee :
how great thou art, how great thou art !
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee :
how great thou art, how great thou art !*

When through the woods and forest glades I
wander
and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees ;
when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur,
and hear the brook, and feel the gentle breeze :
The sings my soul...

And when I think that God, his Son not sparing,
sent him to die, I scarce can take it in
that on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,
he bled and died to take away my sin :
Then sings my soul...

When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation
and take me home — what joy shall fill my heart ;
then shall I bow in humble adoration,
and there proclaim : my God, how great thou art :
Then sings my soul...

Stuart K. Hine (1899–1989) vv. 1, 2, 4 based on *O store Gud*
1885 by Carl Gustaf Boberg (1859–1940)

Prayer of praise (On the *Flourish* prayer card) based on Isaiah chapter 35

Joyful God, we adore you for the astonishing hope you offer, that even the dry desert shall rejoice and blossom.

We delight in your exuberant and ever-shining glory, which cannot be contained.

We praise you for your extravagant and priceless gifts, gifts of strength, peace and salvation.

We celebrate your merciful and miraculous healing, as eyes are opened and ears unstopped, as the lame leap like deer and the speechless speak.

We sing of your fresh, life-giving water, flowing in the wilderness, transforming each one of us for your glory. As we look to all that you have done and all that you will do, right now, here in this moment, you offer us life in all its fullness, calling us to walk your way of holiness, a road that leads to the flourishing of all creation.

Amen. *Adapted from a prayer by Matt Stone in the URC Prayer Handbook 2019*

Introduction to “Flourishing”

I wonder what comes to your mind when I say the word flourish? You might want to look at the *Flourish* logo at the start of this service sheet and also on the *Flourish* Prayer cards.

When I asked the congregation in Menston they suggested the following came to mind: growing; young people; flowers.

The origin for the word “flourish” is in Latin and comes from the word for flower – and its linked closely to growing and to blossoming. Somewhere along the way it got linked to prosperity too.

But flourishing doesn’t mean wealth and perfect health. It does mean a sense of growth, wholeness and peace, and a sense of purpose and meaning. This is a spiritual sense of flourishing and it applies to everyone no matter how old or young. We are all being grown as souls towards God. I got this idea from George Appleton, who served God in many different parts of the world in the twentieth century and was at one time archbishop of Jerusalem and Middle East. This idea that we are all primarily souls being grown towards God gives a really important alternative view from that in magazines and films about what flourishing looks like. It suggests that flourishing belongs to us all. And why is that? It is because in all humans God has planted the seed of what will make us really us. That will be different for everyone. But God has planted that seed – that soul – into us all. God makes the first move. The grace of God comes first.

A prayer for our own growth by George Appleton

Give me a candle of the Spirit, O God, as I go down into the deeps of my being. Show me the hidden things, the creatures of my dreams, the storehouse of forgotten memories and hurts. Take me down to the spring of my life, and tell me my nature and my name. Give me freedom to grow; so that I may become that self, the seed of which you planted in me at my making. Out of the deep I cry to you, O God. Amen.

George Appleton (1902-93), adapted by Jim Cotter (b. 1942) Taken from the Church Times online <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2013/30-august/faith/prayer-for-the-week/prayer-for-the-week>

Song

Oh the life of the world is a joy and a treasure,
unfolding in beauty the green-growing tree,
the changing of seasons in mountain and valley,
the stars and the bright restless sea.

Oh the life of the world is a fountain of goodness
overflowing in labour and passion and pain,
in the sound of the city and the silence of wisdom,
in the birth of a child once again.

Oh the life of the world is the source of our

healing.

It rises in laughter and wells up in song ;
it springs from the care of the poor and the
broken
and refreshes where justice is strong.

So give thanks for the life and give love to the
maker,
and rejoice in the gift of the bright risen Son,
and walk in the peace and the power of the Spirit
till the days of our living are done.

Kathy Galloway (b. 1952)

Bible reading: Psalm 92: 12 – 15

The righteous will flourish like palm trees; they will grow like the cedars of Lebanon. ¹³They are like trees planted in the house of the Lord, that flourish in the Temple of our God, ¹⁴that still bear fruit in old age and are always green and strong. ¹⁵This shows that the Lord is just, that there is no wrong in my protector. (GNB)

Comment

This Psalm speaks of how those who follow the ways of God, the righteous, will flourish. This passage also shows that it is still possible to bear fruit in older age.

Think for a moment of those in older age who are still clearing flourishing in faithI have someone in mind who featured prominently on Christmas day: the Queen. In her speech this year, talking about children, she said:

“They teach us all a lesson – just as the Christmas story does – that in the birth of a child, there is a new dawn with endless potential. It is this simplicity of the Christmas story that makes it so universally appealing, simple happenings that formed the starting point of the life of Jesus – a man whose teachings have been handed down from generation to generation, and have been the bedrock of my faith. His birth marked a new beginning.” These words from the Queen, now 95, remind us that from youngest days til oldest years it is possible to flourish in faith and thus in life. In John’s Gospel Jesus talked to his disciples about how to flourish.

Bible passage John chapter 15: 5-10 I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me. ⁶ Those who do not remain in me are thrown out like a branch and dry up; such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire, where they are burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, then you will ask for anything you wish, and you shall have it. ⁸ My Father's glory is shown by your bearing much fruit; and in this way you become my disciples. ⁹ I love you just as the Father loves me; remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love."



Roland Dumke Pexels website Free download

Reflection *Flourishing on the vine*

John 15: 1-10 is often suggested as the gospel passage for a Covenant service. Often the Covenant service takes place early in a new year, when we renew our promises to serve God. It offers both that sense of the importance of committing ourselves to stick closely to Jesus and also the promise of flourishing in fruitfulness.



(Grape things free download Pexels website)

But there is something that comes before that. And it is the vine. The vine is first. The offer from God is that we are joined to the vine. That we dwell in the vine. But it is the vine that comes first. The flourishing that will occur in our life will come out from God and God's grace.

We don't have to do anything to be acceptable to God. Flourishing comes out of the relationship with God through Christ.

It all sounds very good doesn't it. But you might think I am forgetting something. And that is the challenges of our current time. The pandemic. And the frailties of our own bodies, our own family situations. The unpopularity of faith and church these days. Well let us switch for a moment from these luscious pictures to a scene that looks more like a barren moon landing. Let me take you to the Canary Island of Lanzarote!



The two photos above are taken from Trip Advisor: https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/Attraction_Review-g1190072-d4339701-Reviews-Bodega_La_Geria-La_Geria_Lanzarote_Canary_Islands.html#/media-attf/4339701/558964183:p/?albumid=-160&type=0&category=-160

Lanzarote is a volcanic island and the fields are black volcanic ash. You wouldn't expect anything to be able to grow in such a barren place. It is also extremely windy. So in order to grow their vines they have to build these circular wall shields around the plants. And then they do ever so well, producing delicious fruit and wine (so I am told). I think this can speak to our situation as being rooted in God and sheltering his love at this difficult, dry, time.

The passage from John's gospel speaks about remaining in God's love – or dwelling in that love. That love is there – the potential to flourish as souls is in every one of us. The question is will we find a way to dwell in it and to flourish even when the situation is difficult? Will we shelter that love and build in time into our lives for the nourishment God offers to feed us?

What would flourishing look like for us? Well it might be as simple as a new sense of contentment, or trust. It might be hope, it might be a deepening of our prayer life or a commitment to pray for another. Remember grapes are very small but just think of all the wonderful things they create – Christmas cake and pudding, bread and butter pudding, Scones, Fat Rascals, wine, grape juice, I could go on.....

I want to mention one last example of committed flourishing in faith that again is of an older person who has come into focus again with his death on Boxing day.



Archbishop Desmond Tutu was too poor to afford to train in medicine as he wished so he became a teacher in South Africa instead. Then when he was called to the church he worked tirelessly to bring God's justice in the oppressive regime of apartheid. He flourished in his life and ministry. He is almost always pictured laughing and smiling, joking and often dancing. And all this while he was living with prostate cancer over the last 25 years. At his funeral the Rev Justin Welby, the archbishop of Canterbury, said that Tutu "lit up the world". "He never failed to bring light, and his light did not fade but grew brighter."

Today we recognise that it is the grace of God that inspires such brightness. Over the next 3 weeks we will be thinking in your worship about different ways in which we may flourish – even when situations are difficult.

(Photo by Kristen Opalinski/LUCSA) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:TutuCOP17.JPG>

Our response in prayer: A meditation

Jesus says: I am the vine. I am your origin, your nutrients, your mainstay. Root yourself in me. Let yourself be fed. Let yourself grow...closer and deeper.

And in the growing, allow the pruning. Allow me to prune, to trim, to cut away your broken branches, your fruitless parts, your strivings, branches that are going to seed.

And watch and wait.

Wait for the new shoots. Wait for the new fruits to bud slowly and open gently. Turn to my warmth, and let your fruits open in my glory.

We say: Lord, you are The Vine, We, the branches, who grow with the eager expectancy or cautious deliberation of our varied natures, spreading from your source, to reach our own patch of earth.

Nurture us; as young feeble shoots. May we feed from your unfailing supply. May the essence of your being flow into our veins and make us Yours.

Protect us, when bad weather, tears at us and saps our energy, leaving us with heads hanging low.

Then may we know, the unending depth of your root and draw on the vital wealth of your spirit. May the fruit we bear display the true life of the vine and proclaim without doubt that we are yours. Amen (Adapted from Roots on the web)

Prayers for others

We pray today for all who feel rootless – and pray they may find safe anchorage in you

We pray for all who are unwell and pray you will bring them to wholeness and a sense of well-being

We pray for those who are worried or afraid and pray your steadying presence

We pray for our leaders that they may be concerned for the health of all at home and abroad. We pray for our church that we may live in your love and love one another. In the name of Jesus our vine. Amen.

Hymn

Lord, you call us to your service,
each in our own way.

Some to caring, loving, healing ;
some to preach, or pray ;
some to work with quiet learning,
truth discerning,
day by day.

Life for us is always changing
in the work we share.
Christian love adds new dimensions
to the way we care.
For we know that you could lead us,
as you need us,
anywhere.
Seeing life from your perspective

makes your challenge plain,
as your heart is grieving over
those who live in pain.
Teach us how, by our compassion,
you may fashion
hope again.

Lord, we set our human limits
on the work we do.
Send us your directing Spirit,
pour your power through,
that we may be free in living
and in giving
all for you.
Marjorie Dobson (b. 1940)

Blessing

The blessing of God, maker, redeemer and friend, be with you and all who you love, this day and for ever more

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