**30th July 2023**

[**Call to worship**](javascript:void(0))

We look for God in the dramatic.  
We discover God in the ordinary.  
Invited by God to slow down,  
we freshly open our eyes to slowly see  
God’s life breaking into our awareness, all around.

[**A gathering prayer**](javascript:void(0))

Loving God,  
thank you for the wonder of our interconnected universe,  
sustained and held in being by your love.  
Tiny seeds nurtured by earth, that grow into great scrubs,  
sheltering creatures.  
Barely visible yeast cultures leavening flour for bread.  
Treasures that make life precious and joyful.  
Wisdom handed down to us, freshly understood.  
Your reign breaks in around us in so many ways;  
help us to see and rejoice.  
**Amen.**

[**A prayer of approach**](javascript:void(0))

Lord God, we leave worldly thoughts behind,  
and gather to seek your wisdom.  
Teach us kingdom values, we pray,  
so that we may grow in faith  
this day and always.  
**Amen.**

[**A prayer of adoration**](javascript:void(0))

Father, all time is in your hand, unfolding;  
we see so little of it in a lifetime,  
yet sometimes it is overwhelming.  
God of the kingdom of heaven,  
you are our haven in life’s storms,  
our lifeline in calamity;  
we watch and await your coming in power.  
**Amen.**

[**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**](javascript:void(0))

**A prayer of confession**

Lord, we confess that the concerns of the world weigh us down.  
We worry about our needs, our wants, how others perceive us.  
We are so overwhelmed that we fail to riddle the gold from life’s dross.  
We turn to you, seeking the assurance that your kingdom is with us and among us;  
help us to discern where it lies, so that we may turn our backs on all else.  
Grant us the patience to seek you and your ways  
with the forbearance you show as you wait for us.  
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Almighty God, although we take forever, you have forever –  
you are the God of Eternity.  
We are slow to seek you,  
slow to learn, slow to grow in faith;  
but when we are faltering,  
you wait sure and steady to forgive us;  
when we are lacking in trust,  
you forgive us and persist in working out your ways despite us.  
Thank you, O God of forgiveness and forbearance.  
**Amen.**

[**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**](javascript:void(0))

God, we thank you for teaching us the things that matter,  
the things of true value.  
We praise you that the treasures of your kingdom are hidden beneath the mundanity,  
and sometimes the drama, of everyday life;  
and that they are often there in small ways that,  
if nurtured, grow in abundance.  
Thank you for your pearls of wisdom and your seeds of faith.  
Let your Kingdom grow among us.  
**Amen.**

**All Age**

At the time of Jesus, Pliny the Elder wrote that mustard seeds, with their pungent, fiery taste, were valued for being good for the health – and that they spread like a weed. Once sown, it was difficult to stop them, because the seeds germinated almost at once. What a wonderful image of Jesus planting the tiny seeds of the reign of God, tipping them into the world like a contagious weed.

We might ponder what sort of contagious seeds Jesus was planting. Each story Jesus told, and each story told about Jesus, gives us an image of one of these seeds germinating in the soil and spreading God’s reign. Take the story of Jesus healing blind Bartimaeus. This blind man very persistently wanted to be healed. He trusted Jesus. Jesus stopped to make space to talk to him and healed him. Imagine, in time, all the other seeds that would gradually have been germinated out of this fresh start for Bartimaeus.

RS Thomas, in his poem *The Bright Field*, gives us a meditation on what it means to be slowed down enough, attentive enough to recognise the pearl of great price right beside us, the treasure in the field right here – to know what is most important and precious in our lives.

*I have seen the sun break through*  
*to illuminate a small field*  
*for a while, and gone my way*  
*and forgotten it. But that was the*  
*pearl of great price, the one field that had*  
*treasure in it. I realise now*  
*that I must give all that I have*  
*to possess it. Life is not hurrying*

*on to a receding future, nor hankering after*  
*an imagined past. It is the turning*  
*aside like Moses to the miracle*  
*of the lit bush, to a brightness*  
*that seemed as transitory as your youth*  
*once, but is the eternity that awaits you.*

by R.S. Thomas

[Read the poem.](https://www.mindfulnessassociation.net/words-of-wonder/the-bright-field/)

His insight into the reign of God is that we are often too busy in our minds hankering after an imagined past or worrying about a receding future. Instead, if we can trustfully arrive in this present moment, in not too much of a hurry, with not too much on our to do list, we can recognise the precious treasure of God’s reign already offering itself to us.

The insight from the merchant that sold everything to possess the pearl of great price is that we have to let go of a lot of unnecessary baggage, outworn attitudes, lesser priorities to recognise and enjoy the immense value of God’s kingdom, already here in front of our noses. The reign of God becomes visible when people find what is most precious and important and live out of that truth. Such joy and love are contagious and healing.

**Sow it begins**

Meditate on the parable of the mustard weed

You will need: a large mustard plant painted onto a sheet of paper (e.g. a piece of wallpaper), or a prayer tree made from branches in a large pot of sand.

* Display the image or draw attention to the prayer tree. Read Matthew 21:31-32. Invite people to close their eyes and imagine the tiniest of mustard seeds sitting in the palm of their hand. This seed is blown by the wind, landing in earth. There is warmth. There is rain. The seed starts to breaks open. It grows…and grows…until it is huge…and flowering…and shedding thousands more seeds into the wind. It is relentless and unstoppable.
* After a few moments to let people follow their imaginations, explain that Jesus gave this as an image of God’s reign of love. Tiny seeds of love germinating all over the place, relentless and unstoppable. What we must do is wait and trust. Open your eyes to see. Keep one eye on the mustard plant (image or prayer tree) as we explore God’s unstoppable kingdom today; we will come back to it shortly.

**Leaven the lump**

Make bread as you reflect on Jesus’ parable.

You will need: mixing bowl(s), jug(s), spoon(s), baking tray(s), plus bread-making ingredients (at its simplest, bread mix and water).

* You could organise this as a demonstration from the front, with perhaps several young people to assist; or you could set up several stations where appropriately sized groups can work together.
* Ask someone to read Matthew 21:32. Then mix the ingredients and make bread as per the instructions you are using. Let them rise for the rest of the time you are together. Invite people to reflect on this process and, given Jesus’ use of it as an example of God’s kingdom, what it tells you about how God works in your community.
* At the end, take the dough home and freeze it; then bake it just in time to bring it back next week. Again, this might be done by one person, or, if in groups, each could be responsible for its own loaf. Or, if you have the facilities, it could all be brought back next week for baking.



**Matthew 13.31-33,44-52**

**Jesus tells parables that seek to convey what the kingdom of heaven is ‘like’ or ‘similar to’. Some are about the way it grows and spreads; others stress its value compared to anything else in life.**

*How can Jesus’ disciples make sense of the kingdom of heaven? Chapter 13 is one of the major teaching blocks of Matthew’s Gospel, and in it Jesus uses parable after parable to help his followers begin to understand. This week’s reading offers five pictures that challenge hearers to see the details of ordinary life in a kingdom perspective.*

*The mustard seed (vv.31-32) is tiny and easy to miss. Even when someone does venture to plant it, it will take time to grow into a tree, big enough to be a home for birds – yet it is still there, growing at its own pace. Matthew may intend a comparison with Old Testament stories about trees, which often act as a metaphor for pride and power (Ezekiel 31:1-13, Israel’s enemy Assyria is a cedar tree that God caused to be cut down).*

*The yeast takes us into the world of baking. This woman is working with a huge amount of flour, and perhaps Matthew wants us to recall the feasts that characterise the kingdom of heaven (e.g 14:18-21). The amount of yeast is tiny, and it disappears into the flour as it is kneaded, and the dough takes time to rise – yet the baker can be confident that she will have bread to share.*

*The parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl focus on the value of the kingdom of heaven and the cost of gaining it. The workman – perhaps a hired day-labourer – risks all he has to profit from his life-changing discovery. The parable of the merchant may depend on a comparison from less to greater. If a merchant, focused on profit, behaves like this, how much more should those who long for the kingdom commit to pursuing it.*

*The final parable suggests that the kingdom is a ‘catch-all’ net, where good and bad coexist – a reflection of the disciples’ lived experience, then as now. It points to a future time when the kingdom will come fully and evil will be wiped out.*

**‘Jackie’ Pullinger**’s classic autobiography *Chasing the Dragon*(Hodder & Stoughton) remains a best-seller among evangelicals, despite being released more than 30 years ago. It tells the story of how a plucky young woman from Croydon boarded a ship with nothing but a £10 note and a prayer that God would show her where to get off. When the boat pulled into Hong Kong in 1966, God ordered her to disembark and Pullinger the missionary obeyed.

I have met Jackie Pullinger and she is formidable and intimidating, in A HOLY WAY. She is consumed with passion for Jesus and his work and is angry and impatient when she sees other Christians who aren’t. When we met I could feel her intensity searing into my soul: What does Jesus want you to do? She asked me. Go and do it!’

Pullinger graduated from the [Royal College of Music](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_College_of_Music) in London having specialized in the [oboe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oboe). She came to a living faith during this time.

**She grew up in a nominal Christian family. They** went to church at Easter and Christmas. We all thought we were Christians because we’d been born in England she wrote.

Well, I hadn’t actually met people who looked as if they liked God until I was a music student in London. I had met Christians that backed me into a corner and asked me if I was saved, or washed with the blood, or something. I had no idea what they were talking about and I just wanted to disappear. But towards the end of my time at the Royal College, I met some people who invited me to a coffee party and said they held Bible studies.

Some of the talks were very similar to the Alpha talks. I listened to what was going on in those talks because the people actually looked happy. I hadn’t met anybody that looked happy knowing God before then, so that made the difference, I think.

I decided either Jesus was mad or mistaken, or he really was who he said he was: the only way to the Father. So, I said to him: “Well, I don’t like that you say you’re the only way because I’d rather be broad, but I’ll accept that.” And my life really did change.

At the age of 22 she wanted to be a missionary, so she wrote to various missionary organizations. Unable to find support from missionary organizations, she then sought advice from Richard Thomson, her church [minister](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minister_(Christianity)). At first she wanted to go to Africa, but then she had a dream that impressed upon her the idea of going to [Hong Kong](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hong_Kong).[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jackie_Pullinger#cite_note-Chasing-4): 28 She asked her vicar whether she should go. The vicar said, if God is telling you to go – you had better go.

How can I – I don’t know where to. All my applications have been rejected.’

‘Well if God is still telling you to go, you had better get on the move’, he said ‘If you had a job, a ticket, accommodation, a sick fund, a pension, you wouldn’t need to trust him. Anyone can go that way whether they are a Christian or not. If I were you, I would buy a ticket for a boat going on the longest journey you can find and pray to know where to get off’. You can’t lose if you put yourself completely in God’s hands. If God doesn’t want you to get on that ship he is quite able to stop you.’

She followed the vicar's advice and went to Hong Kong by boat in 1966. However, when she arrived she knew no one there and had only $10 in hand.[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jackie_Pullinger#cite_note-Chasing-4): 22 The only reason the immigration officers allowed her in was because her mother's [godson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Godson) was a [police officer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hong_Kong_Police) there.[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jackie_Pullinger#cite_note-Chasing-4): 33 She found work as a primary school teacher in the [Kowloon Walled City](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kowloon_Walled_City).

Having landed in Hong Kong, then came the question: **NOW WHAT?**

Pullinger writes: All I wanted to do – and still want – was to find those who were longing to know God’s love, whether they were aware of their longing or not. And so I walked the streets full of hungry old beggars and the homeless.

Overwhelmed by the multitudes and needs, I asked God to show me which bit was mine.

**MY BIT was the WALLED CITY**

A famous place, known as ‘Darkness’, this was a lawless relic of a 19th century Sino-British agreement and was officially off limits to police. However, corruption was rampant, young girls were sold to brothels, triad gangs ruled and there were over 40 opium and heroin dens. One toilet for up to 100,000 people in 6 acres, outside which they piled the dead addicts at one time*.*

The second time I went into the Walled City I just felt this incredible joy and I thought, why am I feeling like this? You know, nobody’s given me flowers or said I look beautiful, it’s not my birthday. But it was that kind of feeling. I found whenever I was in there that’s how I felt. Of course, I was going to find out about the little girls that had been sold, the old women that were guarding them, and the young triads. And the fights and the opium addicts and the misery, but still I really loved the place.

***‘It would be worth my whole life if you would use me to save just one,’*** I told the Lord after walking over the legs of men lying in the narrow streets, straddling the open sewers. I soon found that nobody was listening to my preaching, but they were watching my life, so I began to practise what I call, ‘ordinary gospel’, sharing rice with a hungry old lady, taking a gangster to hospital after a fight, queueing overnight to register a young girl for school, paying someone’s rent, going to court with a triad who claimed to be framed.

**THE YOUTH CLUB**

I started a Youth Club in a tiny room in Walled City to give a place for ping pong and darts. I ran outside camps and weekly excursions since most young people never saw the light of day and had had no opportunity to play at school, even if they could attend. No free education then and the HK $4 monthly fee too much for many. Lots of young teenagers had also joined gangs, which led to fighting, living off prostitution and drugs. I prayed,

***‘Dear Lord, please give me something of your Spirit that will help me to make you real.’***

One boy came to Jesus, then one more, then one more. I thought that was what evangelists did, look for one more and send the others to ‘church’. That did not work – the church was afraid of gangsters, their clothes, and their haircuts!

**Her first convert** was somebody who was about to join the triads. His name was Christopher and he met Jesus, but after that he avoided Jackie for quite a long time. She said ‘ I trapped him some months later by a sewer. I said: “Why have you been avoiding me?” He said: “Well, I came to know Jesus but you gave me a library.” I’d given him all these follow-up books. All the things that, in my culture, I thought would help. And it terrified him because they very much elevate learning in Hong Kong and Chinese culture, and so if you failed at school you couldn’t be a Christian because they think being a Christian is all to do with studying and being good enough. And his worst fears were confirmed.

So, I thought, whoops, it’s the wrong way around. I’d better learn how Jesus would do it.

I think the word of God is terribly important but it depends how you access that. Nowadays when people come to know Jesus, we pray with them for the gift of tongues immediately. It’s not an optional extra, we say, by the way he’ll give you a new language to help you talk to him. So they do, and several times it has happened that within a few days they’re prophesying. And one man prophesied half of [Philippians 2](https://www.esv.org/verses/Philippians%202/), which he’d never read and couldn’t read anyway, four days after he came to know Christ, and he was still on drugs.

**ADDICTS**

When one addict came into the Youth Club and began praising God in tongues, he came off opium physically in 30 minutes. No withdrawal pains.

***Good. All I have to do, is walk into drug dens, pray for the power of the Holy Spirit and they’ll be set free.’***

That did not work. It turned out that the gangster/addict who had quit drugs was simultaneously living in an opium den! Not a good place to start a new life.

So, I invited him into my home which I shared with another woman.

**THE DOOR KNOCKING STARTED…**

One after another, more men arrived at my door. ‘If Ah Seun got off drugs through believing in Jesus – then I’ll believe in Jesus. And I’ll live in your house, too.’ They did and they did. Full house!

**WORD OF MOUTH**

That’s how our ‘houses’ started in the seventies and have continued in the same way, with the same wonderful miracle of painless withdrawal from drugs as we pray in the Spirit. We did not advertise but by word of mouth, one man in prison told another, ‘You can go to Jackie’s (Poon’s place) and start a new life.’ Hardly a street sleeper who had not heard, ‘There is a place you can go to.’

**THE HOUSES GREW**

More and more overseas helpers joined the adventure. Former addicts got jobs and helped in their spare time, some working full time with us. We started homes for teenagers, English speaking addicts, then women and girls. Over the years, we’ve borrowed or rented over 287 places to house the poor, recovering addicts and those with life-threatening problems. Some of these were given on a temporary basis by the Hong Kong Government and several in outlying areas.

**HANG FOOK CAMP**

In 1985 Hong Kong Government offered us Hang Fook Camp in urban Kowloon, a disused tin hut area (THA) where many people of all kinds, including the poor and elderly, gathered to worship and eat with us. I had a friend who went out to serve in the camp during the summer of 1987 it was a life changing experience.

We began training all of them to heal the sick and share their food with the hungry. It became famous as a place for Christmas feasts, miracles and sodden, baking hot meetings!

I had worked with the first boatloads of those who’d fled Vietnam and helped in several camps before, so knew the challenges, and loved the people. This had resulted in us opening a special house for Vietnamese-speaking addicts. After visiting Hang Fook Camp in 1994 U.N.H.C.R. officials invited St. Stephen’s Society to manage and run a Vietnamese Refugee Camp for them. It was the last remaining camp - only a few thousand people were left. We saw many drug-free and resettled before the refugee crisis was over and the U.N. withdrew from HK.

She quotes scripture - a scripture we need to hear in our ongoing debates over refugees: ‘The alien living with you must be treated as your native born. Love him as yourself, for you yourselves were aliens.’

She set up the St Stephens Society which continues its work today

Why Stephen?

He was chosen, in the very early church, to be a table server. He was chosen because he was full of the Spirit. He ended up doing miracles and preaching an amazing sermon, which had him killed, one of the first people to die for Jesus. We believe that the minimum qualification for working in the kitchen is to be filled with the Holy Spirit. We believe that all jobs in the community are equally important and expect all to serve quietly and humbly. We do not assign leadership to those with platform personalities or obvious giftings but watch to see who looks like Jesus and gets on with the job whilst developing character and performing miracles from time to time.

My message is always the same; it’s how to get us sure enough of God’s love, so we can go out and share it with the lost.

Having tasted of his love all I wanted to do was share it until I died.

This was an adventure and I was going to go wherever God took me and share Jesus along the way. And that’s really the adventure I’m still on.

My concern is that scripture has told us clearly that we are all to be going, and the reason the Lord left us behind is to do the job he told us to do. So we’d better get equipped to do it, instead of living this life as if this life is it. It’s not, this is a very short life. And eternal life is forever. We’re going to feel stupid for eternity if we wasted this one.

**She was asked ‘Is it that view of eternity that drives you’?**

No, I’m not driven. I’m led. She said.

**What’s the difference?**

Addicts are driven. Satan drives. The Holy Spirit leads. So, I’m not even purpose-driven, hopefully I’m Spirit-led.

She is now 80 years old. When asked about her legacy she said ‘All I care about is that there are some people walking by foot from village to village sharing their bread, praying for the sick, leaving one page of the Bible or a song and walking on to the next village.’

* What stories of significant change from humble beginnings can you think of? They could be stories of people you know personally, Church stories or stories from business, sport, science or art.
* You only need a small mustard seed (or acorn) to grow a tree. What resources do you have that might in God’s hands grow into something significant? And remember don’t worry about what you don’t have!
* Is the mood in your Church pre or post Pentecost when it comes to possibilities? If the former, reflect on what makes the difference.

[**Prayers of intercession**](javascript:void(0))

Almighty God we are but one minute speck in your created order, but you care for each speck that you have made, for each of us and for all those who we bring our prayers for now.

For those who feel they do not belong in the place in which they live, house, town or country, feeling isolated, unsettled, unwanted or unloved. Feeling adrift from others and maybe from themselves, seeking and searching for answers and somewhere that feels like home.

Bless all those for whom we pray with your presence.  
**Bless them Lord, bless them.**

Bless those surrounded by war, violence and upheaval, living in now derelict and destroyed areas that were once comfortable places to live. Bless them in their distress, in their pain, in their loss and confusion. Bless them in their searching for new ways, new hopes, new dreams, new homes. Bless them in their search to make sense of life and love.

Bless all those for whom we pray with your presence.  
**Bless them Lord, bless them.**

Bless those Who live with divisions between race, religion, ethnicity. Those who are segregated for their faith, tortured for their faith, cast adrift because of their faith. Unfairly treated because of their faith. Those who stand out from the crowd and are discriminated against because of their ethnicity. Especially remembering this week Israel and the Holy Land and all its strife.

Bless all those for whom we pray with your presence.  
**Bless them Lord, bless them.**

Bless those families who will struggle to cope during the summer school holidays, those struggling to feed their families without extra school support, those who struggle with lack of indoor space and precious little, if any, outdoor space to healthily wear out the children before bedtime. Bless those who have had poor experience of being parented and who now repeat the same with their own children.

Bless all those for whom we pray with your presence.  
**Bless them Lord, bless them.**

Bless those living in the midst of immediately visible effects of climate change, excessive heat and flooded grounds, wildfires, landslides, parched ground. Remembering especially the people of Rhodes and the ongoing difficulties due to loss of tourist visits. May we all seek to find a way to live more fairly and sustainably for this generation and the generations to come. May we all be prepared to sacrifice something for the good of future generations.

Bless all those for whom we pray with your presence.  
**Bless them Lord, bless them.**

Bless those in pain and anguish, physical and mental. Bless those who seek to care for them. Bless those who teeter on the edge of life, those who feel their lives are pointless and those for who life draws to an end, give them peace, security and comfort.

Bless all those for whom we pray with your presence.  
**Bless them Lord, bless them.**

For these and all your people, Lord we pray.  
**Amen.**

[**A prayer for all ages together**](javascript:void(0))

*For this body prayer, invite people to sit comfortably,  
feet on the floor, hands in their laps.*  
*Pause for a few moments after each line.*  
*The optional actions, where given, may be helpful for younger people.*  
  
Feel a sense of your body. *(wiggle your bottom)*  
Your feet on the floor. *(tap your toes gently)*  
Become aware of your breathing. *(listen to your breath)*  
As you breathe in, imagine it is God breathing life into you.  
Hold that breath and remember who you are – a child of God.  
As you breathe out, imagine it is God’s love flowing from you to those around you.  
Remember your hands, feet and love are useful to God.  
**Amen.**



[**A sending out prayer**](javascript:void(0))

Loving God,  
thank you for your reign breaking in, all around, for those with eyes to see.  
May the light of your love be focused within us.  
May we create space in our hearts to treasure it.  
And may we be of service to your love, now and always.  
**Amen.**

<https://www.ststephenssociety.com/about-us>

<https://www.premierchristianity.com/home/jackie-pullinger-were-going-to-feel-stupid-for-eternity-if-we-waste-this-life/1488.article>