



# The Methodist Church

United Stockport Circuit (Manchester and Stockport District)

Dear Friends,

23<sup>rd</sup> July 2020

Grace and peace to you all in the name of our friend, brother and cousin Jesus Christ.

Come September 2020, I will complete three years of my ministry here at Stockport, and I should say it has been quite a learning experience working in the circuit and particularly with my three local churches I have pastoral charge of. The first question the then circuit steward asked me as I was thinking of Methodist church was, “where is the hand of God in my joining the Methodist Church in UK?” After three years, all I can say and testify is that God’s hand has always been upon us and we have consistently experienced the grace of God in this journey of life. I therefore take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude on behalf of my family to all you for receiving us generously and for supporting us with your friendship and love, for which we are ever grateful to you. I thank you for accepting us as we are, for coping with my accent, my theology and with the style of my ministry. I thank all my colleagues, lay and ordained, for their friendship and constant encouragement and to all the members of the congregations in the circuit for your graciousness in receiving us, I wholeheartedly thank you. Don’t get me wrong, this is not a farewell letter I am writing to the circuit. But since I am given this opportunity to write this pastoral letter to the circuit, I thought I should take this opportunity to place on record my gratitude to each of you for your prayers and love to us as a family.

Now, as the churches are beginning to re-open as the lockdown is easing out, with their risk assessments done, making plans for public worship, the real question that comes to the fore is, are we as churches going to get back to the same kind of being and doing church? Though we will begin to gather in our church buildings, there are still lots of restrictions in place, like we are not allowed to sing, no hymn books, no coffee and tea after the service, people sitting in social distancing, track and trace records, can’t have large gatherings, short services, no shaking hands and hugs, one way to enter and another way to exit, hand sanitization and cleanings. Will our church worship services be like what we have always known? Will our church buildings be like what we have known? When we return, it will be a different normal, perhaps we are stepping into an abnormal normal, which according to me is ‘beyond’ normal, especially in the case of church.

Jesus spoke to his disciples in at least seven parables about the mysteries of the kingdom of God in Matthew 13, and in 31-33 verses, Jesus shared the parable of the mustard seed. Over the years many have interpreted this parable in terms of size, that mustard seed is a small seed and grows to become a big tree, and so is it with the Christian faith. But if we get the facts right, we know that mustard seed is not the smallest of the seeds for there are many other seeds smaller than mustard seed. Also, mustard seed grows to become a shrub and it

never grows to be a tree, leave alone to be the greatest tree. Why then does Jesus shares this parable? Yes, I know many will then argue that parables are allegorical and are told to share a message, and any literal reading of seeking facts might undermine the essence of a parable. As I re-read this parable for our times today, I find that Jesus was sharing this parable with a certain degree of abnormality in mind, that the mustard seed will grow to be a greatest tree nesting many birds on its branches. However, through that abnormality, Jesus is conveying a message of critique and a message of hope to his audience then and now, which is a message that the kingdom of God is 'beyond' normal.

### **1. The abnormal as a critique against the norm of empire:**

The parable of the mustard seed is recorded in all the four gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and also in the gospel of Thomas as a parable shared by Jesus about the Kingdom of God. The audience of these gospels were well aware of the first century Jewish kingdom narratives, particularly the metaphorical usage of trees representing the rulers and the empires. In the Old Testament, Assyria and Nebuchadnezzar are depicted as large trees providing shelter to many birds on their branches in Ezekiel 31:6 and Daniel 4:12. In both these instances Assyria as an empire provided shelter to many other neighbouring nations and Nebuchadnezzar as a king provided shelter to his people in his kingdom. When Jesus said that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed which grows to be the greatest tree in the field nesting birds on its branches, though it was not normal for the mustard seed to grow that way, Jesus picked that abnormality to critique the norm of empire by warning the colonial powers that such an abnormal will be the 'new' normal. The kingdom of God grows in an (ab)normal way, defying the norm of an empire, not in the normal way of growing to be a shrub but in a subversive way of growing to be a tree from a tiny pungent mustard seed. The norm of the empire is that the powerful becomes the tree and under the patronage of the powers and principalities, the rest of the nations and ethnicities seek their shelter. But the norm of the kingdom of God is that out of powerlessness, out of smallness the mustard seed grows to become an (ab)normally greatest tree so that the birds of the air can nest on its branches. The parable of the mustard seed becomes a lens to understand that Jesus' kingdom of God is abnormal to the known empires of Assyria or Rome, yet in that (ab)normality those that are different from mustard seeds find their shelter. Jesus shared this parable of the mustard seed as a critique to the norms and normalisations of the empires.

### **2. The abnormal as a hopeful aspiration 'beyond' normal:**

Who would have thought that the mustard seed would grow, become a plant, become a shrub and then turn to be a big tree, greatest of the shrubs? Jesus by sharing this parable was explaining that the kingdom of God begins as a small seed and then grows (ab)normally beyond normal. This parable expresses a hopeful aspiration of the kingdom of God, for it grows (ab)normally, beyond the expectations of the sower, beyond the expectations of the mustard seed, beyond the expectation of the field in which it grows, beyond the expectation of all the hearers and audience of this parable. As is the normal, the kingdom of God which is like a mustard seed growing up, the expectation is to grow as a plant and a shrub. But that edge or notion of growing into a tree and into a greatest tree conveys the eschatological vision of the kingdom of God, which is not limited to the normal, which is not limited to the expected, but which transcends and outgrows the normal. By sharing about the (ab)normal

growth of the kingdom of God like a mustard seed, Jesus is conveying that the kingdom of God is not what we think as normal where business is as usual, but kingdom of God is 'beyond' normal, with unexpectedness, with surprises, with some shocks, and with no limitations. In that (ab)normality, the kingdom of God provides a hope for the mustard seed to become a greatest tree, which was unthinkable and unimaginable. Hope is not knowing the future, but trusting in the God of the future, for God will lead from the known normal to 'beyond' normal, into the (ab)normal walking and working with us.

### **3. The abnormal as an opportune space for a different purpose:**

What would be the ultimate purpose of an apple tree? To be fruitful and yield a great harvest of apples. Similarly, what would be the purpose of a mustard tree? To grow mustard seeds and yield a great harvest of mustard seeds. These understanding of the purposes of the trees is a very human-centred view of the trees, where we selfishly think that trees grow fruits for the benefit of humankind. But when Jesus narrated this parable, he said that the mustard seed will grow to be a greatest tree, and never mentions about the harvest of the mustard seeds, but Jesus said "so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." Jesus presents an ecological vision of the kingdom of God, where the mustard seed grows into a tree to nest the birds of the air. The (ab)normality of this parable grows to a greater height when Jesus narrates that the mustard seed not only outgrows from a shrub to a tree, but also outgrows to nest the birds of the air. The (ab)normal growth of the mustard seed to become a hopeful greatest tree is not to enjoy the privilege of being the greatest and biggest tree yielding a great harvest, but to be a space of shelter for a variety of birds of the air to nest on its branches. The (ab)normal comes with an ecological vision of trees being grown not to meet the selfish desires of human beings, but to become a space to nest the birds on its branches. With the trees being cut down because of human greed, we can understand how much it affects the housing of the birds.

So, seeking a relevance of this parable today, as we prepare for a re-turn to our churches, the call for us is to engage in a spirituality of the (ab)normal growth of the kingdom of God. Such an engagement requires not to re-turn uncritically to the things we have always done, but to re-envision what God wants us to do at a moment like this. In the present context I see the church as a mustard seed, and the kingdom of God is where the church grows (ab)normally to be a tree nesting the birds of the air as its ecological missional calling. No one would expect the church to grow into a tree, but if we want to be part of the kingdom of God that Jesus inaugurated, it might look (ab)normal, but it is the need of the hour, to become a tree to shelter birds, save them from extinction and save the planet.

Secondly the (ab)normal growth of the church like the kingdom of God happens as a critique of the empire which comes to us in the forms of capitalist understanding of growth for whom numbers and profits are all that matter. The (ab)normal growth as a church is recognised not in the yield of the mustard seed harvest, but in providing shelter to many people who do not have shelter, becoming a space of hospitality to all those who are on the move, crossing boundaries and oceans, and by offering to be a Christian presence of sharing love, peace and justice with people in our communities. These outcomes certainly sound abnormal to many people for whom church is all about filling the pews, but the parable of the mustard seed

speaks to us to think of the kingdom of God growing (ab)normally to be a tree addressing housing issues for birds, for people and to all those that are in need of shelter.

In recent news this week, the churches across the denominations in Southampton, UK are working to break down the barriers to housing preventing homelessness by supporting Southampton Churches Rent Deposit Scheme, which has till now funded 79 rental deposits in a year of which 14 were people who were sleeping rough. This for me serves as an example of how the church can grow (ab)normally by supporting housing issues for the needy among us. This is an inspiring model for us as churches in other places to take on board and strive to address the issues of housing.

Thirdly, the (ab)normal growth of the church as the kingdom of God happens in the unknown, the unexpected and the unimagined ways of doing church. The mustard seed growing to be a shrub was a normal phenomenon, but growing to be a tree, and to be a housing tree is that extra edge that Jesus was pushing the boundaries, which is but the very meaning of the kingdom of God. We cannot follow Jesus without following this 'edginess.' As churches today the calling for us is to allow God to push our boundaries to do things that are different from what we have always done, and to be prepared as churches to grow (ab)normally, 'beyond' normal, so that we become relevant for our times today.

Allow me to reiterate, for Jesus, the growth of the mustard seed is in it growing to be a greatest tree by sheltering the birds of the air, and so it is for the church in the design of the kingdom of God. Jesus elsewhere in Matthew 17: 20 said that if we have a faith like a grain of mustard seed, we can do the impossible. May God grant us such a faith like the grain of mustard seed so that we can grow as a church (ab)normally by sheltering those needy people in our spaces. May this parable of the mustard seed inspire us as a church in our reimagining to (ab)normally grow as a church being a church with an ecological vision, and with a communitarian vision with a preference to those on the margins. Perhaps in growing (ab)normally we as a church will find our relevance today. Post-lockdown is an opportune time for us to discover and explore our (ab)normal ways of being a church.

Let me conclude with the words of Pope Francis,

*"Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the 'peripheries,' in need of the light of the gospel."*

Rev. Dr. Raj Bharat Patta

23<sup>rd</sup> July 2020

## NOTICES

### Worship

***Forthcoming weekly circuit services on Zoom are:***

**Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> July and 2<sup>nd</sup> Aug 3pm**

You can join all the above services via Zoom with a video link and see and hear everything and everyone else who is participating, or you can join just with audio, *or you can telephone in.*

Login details for *all forthcoming services* are as follows:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87212246881?pwd=VXpyMzRYV21UZ1ZoYlkc2R4dmV1QT09>

**Meeting ID: 872 1224 6881 Password: 974333**

**Mid-week Service on 30<sup>th</sup> July and 13<sup>th</sup> August at 7pm and the zoom details are the same as above**

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### Circuit Prayer

In addition, every **Sunday morning at 11am** – when we would all normally be in worship in church – we are encouraged to pray the following prayer. This way we stay connected in a very really and tangible way. This week I have added some specific information and prayer points for each of the churches. You can also read more about each church on the Circuit Website [www.stockportcircuit.org.uk](http://www.stockportcircuit.org.uk)

**God of Love and Life,**

**We pray to you this morning for the life the United Stockport Methodist Circuit, for our sisters and brothers who belong to:**

*(pausing briefly to reflect after e[ach name])*

**Christ Church Methodist /URC** [*A URC/Methodist LEP in a URC building. Please pray for the small congregation who are divided into a mature congregation who have worshipped and supported the church very faithfully for many years and younger folk and children who form Sunday Fun and meet downstairs. Many members of the church belong to the Green Group, a drama group whose performances go a long way to support the church*]

**Dialstone Lane Methodist Church** [*Please pray for the church's ongoing commitment to promoting a Good Society through its connections with local politicians. Also pray for the church coming out of lockdown, having lost several long-standing members and friends over the last few months, and for the church's pastoral worker Gill who has been so busy keeping everyone in touch with each other.*]

**Davenport Methodist Church** [*A smaller church with a medium congregation including 1 family. Please pray for them as they have a lot of ideas to reach out into the community,*

*including local schools and as they seek to embrace different styles of worship. This congregation also has strong links with the Rainbows, Brownies, Guides and Rainbows.]*

**Edgeley Community Church** *[A URC/Methodist LEP in a Methodist building. Please pray for their Church Development Worker who co-ordinates many activities including Messy Church, Baby and Toddler Group and Make it, Bake it, and goes out into Care Homes and Schools. The congregation is of mixed age, including 1 family with small children. This congregation has links with the Brownies.]*

**Hazel Grove Methodist Church** *[please pray for the uniformed organisations closely associated with the church, for their leaders who are trying to keep things going with the young people online during lockdown. Give thanks for a committed team of people who have worked hard to keep in touch with people during lockdown.]*

**Heaton Mersey Methodist Church** *[please pray for the family church at ten, for Sunday club, for Who let the Dad's out group, for the schools work, for their commitments to cafe worship in different styles of worship, for Lite church, for the mission engagements of the church.]*

**Heaton Moor United Church** *[please pray for the Dementia drop in, for the Super Sunday and cafe worships, for messy church group, for the community outreach, their engagements for social justice, for women's fellowship and men's fellowship .]*

**St. Johns Methodist Church, Cheadle Heath** *[please pray for the future of the church and for the directions we'll take as there are issues with the building here. For all the members of the congregation and for their ongoing fellowship.]*

**Tiviot Dale Methodist Church, centre of Stockport** *[Please pray for the newly formed Tiviot Dale management group who are helping the circuit to think through how we might develop new mission and ministry in the centre of Stockport, and for Revd Caroline Ryder who has been working with the church over the last few months and is now moving on to a new appointment in Bradford].*

**Trinity Methodist Church, Bramhall Lane** *[This is a large church building with a large car park and gardens, a Guide building in the grounds and a successful cricket club, the grounds of which are owned by the church. Please pray for the Sunday Club, even though very few children come now. The congregation is generally quite traditional in its worship style but does have links with the Rainbows, Brownies, Guides and Rangers and they have different styles of worship on Parade Sundays.]*

**Windlehurst Methodist Church, High Lane** *[Please pray for all the members of Active, the church's flagship project working to promote health and well-being and friendship, who are longing to return to their weekly meeting]*

**In this time of isolation and separation may we feel the unity of your spirit in the bonds of peace and love which connect us to one another. We worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory. We ask that this time of crisis might pass and that those who suffer might find comfort and strength within the knowledge of your grace, revealed through the kindness and compassion of the people of God. Eternal God, though the self-offering of your Son you have filled our lives with your presence. Help us in our sufferings**

and trials. Fill us with hope and strengthen us in our weakness. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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### Moving into the Future

- A Monthly Circuit Service

Before Covid-19 and the lock down hit, the Circuit Leadership Team had begun to talk about the possibility of starting a monthly Circuit Service at Tiviot Dale. Over the last few weeks, this idea has gained strength as we have enjoyed worshipping together as a Circuit on Zoom. Obviously, we cannot yet plan to hold this service, and it may be some time before we can. No decision has been taken about when the service will be – it could be a Sunday evening or a weekday evening for example – or about what sort of service it will be, but we hope it will be something a bit different and we to want to be prepared. ***If you would be interested in being part of a group to help organise a monthly circuit service, and/or if you have musical ability and would like to be part of a circuit worship band, then please let Revd Cathy Bird know so that as soon as we can gather again, we have something in place!***

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