

## Fourth Sunday in Lent – Year C

**Sunday 30 March 2025**

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Sally Fraser, a student at New College, Edinburgh, for her thoughts on the fourth Sunday in Lent.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

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## Introduction

The readings this week have a theme of forgiveness and reconciliation, although some of the ideas may feel uncomfortable now: we don't tend to use the language of shame any more, and the Joshua reading comes from what will become a violent narrative. It is also Mothering Sunday. This is now understood to be something that can be difficult for lots of people; something more nuanced is required than handing out daffodils, as we understand that many people have painful issues around motherhood. In my reflections and prayers, I have named Mothering Sunday; and hopefully in such a way that still honours those who feel positive about their mothers or being mothers, but which hopefully also is inclusive to those for whom this day is a challenge.

As someone who trained in pastoral ministry first, and is now studying biblical studies and theology afterwards, I tend to base my approach in the pastoral and emotional responses of listeners first, and then see if I have any additional knowledge which might help them explore this. This is particularly helpful with the story of the Prodigal Son, as there is much scope for people to see echoes in their own lives of various parts of the story. I am reminded of a gentleman telling me he had found faith because he read the story of the prodigal in a Bible he was given in solitary confinement: he identified powerfully with the Prodigal Son echoing his own life. I believe it is a story which invites this kind of connection, and so for the sermon suggestions I give ideas as to how to explore this.

## [Joshua 5:9-12](#)

Joshua's context is the beginning of what is commonly understood as the Deuteronomistic History: the telling of the stories of the people of Israel between the exodus from Egypt up until the exile under the Babylonians, failing to follow the Law set down for them, which would ultimately mean punishment from God in the form of exile. Joshua is concerned with the formation of the tribes and the conquering of lands, and contains theological and ethical problems, as there is a powerful instruction to total violence. In these verses we see the relationship between people and God develop as not only are they able to conquer enemies, but they are told their shame has been rolled away, this is a theological transformation as well as a period of victory. They are also provided for, with fertile land. Early depictions of God have a lot to do with fertility and nature, as people were influenced by the gods of neighbouring communities, which were often Nature and Fertility gods. It is perhaps significant for today's service that people are fed. The God who feeds can be seen as a sign of God's maternal or feminine side, which of course is even more evident with Jesus, who feeds us from His own body, as a mother does.

## [Psalm 32](#)

Psalm 32 echoes the theme of a people restored and forgiven in the Joshua text, the releasing of shame. There is also an emphasis on protection, God as a hiding place, and overcoming of enemies, God as deliverer. This is one of the oldest psalms, with early psalms being some of the oldest texts of the Old Testament, showing us how central the idea of being in a forgiving relationship with God has always been. It is interesting to note too that this forgiveness causes joy and happiness. Sometimes we perhaps fail to think of the joyfulness of forgiving and being forgiven, but as we will see in the Prodigal Son story, forgiveness can be a something to be celebrated and rejoiced in.

## [Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32](#)

The themes of this passage are explored in the Sermon Ideas section.

## [2 Corinthians 5:16-21](#)

This passage takes the idea of forgiveness one step further. Not only are we released from shame through forgiveness, as in the Joshua passage, and are joyfully forgiven as in the psalm, we should then mirror this forgiveness to our fellow humans. Forgiveness is no longer vertical, between us and God, but horizontal, between all of us. This is what is required to live vulnerably, in loving relationships and healthy communities. It is also what is required to live justly and work for peace: if we are focused on being right with our neighbour as well as God. Reconciliation is often understood to come from the Latin word for eyelashes. For us to be reconciled means to be so close we can feel each other's eyelashes on our skin. This is a powerful, intimate idea, showing the strength of the relationships we are called to have with God, and, in this passage, one another.

## **Sermon ideas**

### **Based on [Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32](#)**

If you are familiar with it, I would suggest that Henri Nouwen's book, [The return of the Prodigal Son](#), is an excellent way into the idea of how we can be different characters in the story at different times in our lives.

The book draws on the Rembrandt painting of the Prodigal Son, and even if you are not familiar with Nouwen's work I would suggest if possible, it would be good to use the

painting, which is available publicly on Wikimedia commons:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rembrandt\\_Harmensz\\_van\\_Rijn\\_-\\_Return\\_of\\_the\\_Prodigal\\_Son\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rembrandt_Harmensz_van_Rijn_-_Return_of_the_Prodigal_Son_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)



You can ask people then to look at each character in turn and ask themselves, when have I been the resentful older brother? Rejecting grace, annoyed that God is merciful, feeling like I deserve more recognition? Have I at times been the prodigal, have I turned my back and squandered gifts, and if so, did I have the confidence in God's love to return? Can I accept not only the embrace, but the celebration of the Father? Or am I able to be the father? Have I been gracious, or forgiving, and able to lavish love? And in which of these roles have I felt closest to God?

The Rembrandt painting is also a particularly significant way to look at this story on Mothering Sunday, as one of the hands of the father is often interpreted as being more feminine, showing God our Mother as well as our Father. It might be worth reflecting on

how we feel about God as mother, looking at the various examples from scripture of where God is depicted as a mother, or how that is manifest in our own lives. Does this affect how we feel about forgiveness perhaps? If we have absorbed ideas of a powerful, disciplinarian Father God figure, how does the mothering, nurturing God who longs for us to return, sit with us? Is that something challenging, or a natural part of how we relate to God? And how good are we at being nurturing and compassionate with ourselves? Perhaps, as we welcome all the parts in the story we might have played over the years, we could also welcome all the parts of ourselves, with nurturing and forgiveness.

## Prayers

For these prayers I have focused on the themes of reconciliation, with the image of embrace from the Rembrandt picture being at the forefront of my mind while writing them.

### Opening Prayer

Loving God, You run towards us, eager to be close to us

**Help us to draw near to You with confidence.**

Loving Father, You desire to forgive us and lavish us with love and mercy

**Help us to accept and find joy in Your forgiveness.**

Mothering God, You hold us in our frailty, and love us unconditionally

**Help us to open our hearts to Your empowering love.**

### Confession

Loving God, even as we wander far from You,

You plant in our hearts the reminder that we can return.

Help us to bring You all our faults and failings,

and open our eyes to the ways we have failed to work with You,

and turned our back on Your desires and designs for our happiness and flourishing.

For the times we have walked or run away,

for the times we have refused to come home,

and for the times we have resented others' homecomings,

we are sorry, and we humbly ask for Your forgiveness now.

### Thanksgiving

We thank You God,

for being a God who provides and forgives,

who rolls away shame and feeds with good things,  
and who not only accepts us in our failings,  
but comes to meet us, and celebrates and delights our return to Your embrace.

### **Prayers of intercession**

We pray today for mothers,  
we thank God for them,  
and we are grateful that God, who is our mother as well as father, holds us all in love.

We pray for all those in nurturing and caring roles in our society,  
whether professionally or at home,  
may they be strengthened and upheld.

We pray to be a people who recognises and values these roles,  
supporting people and treating them justly and respectfully.  
We pray for those who have lost their mothers,  
or whose relationship with their mothers is painful.  
May they be consoled and healed.

We pray for mothers who have lost children, at whatever stage,  
may they know of God's tenderness in their grief.

We pray for those who yearned to be mothers but could not be, for whatever reason.  
May they be comforted and know that God sees them in their pain.

We pray for the mothering parts of ourselves, and the parts that need mothering.  
May we all, through drawing close to God, find wholeness and peace.

### **Prayer of sending and blessing**

Go out into the world, knowing that you are forgiven and empowered by God's love for you,  
and share the blessings that have been lavished on you with those you encounter this week.  
With the strength and nurture of the Father and Mother,  
the humility of the Son,  
and the joy of the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

## Musical suggestions

*God Welcomes All* (GWA) is the new supplement to Church Hymnary Fourth Edition. This exciting new collection features over 200 hymns and songs in a wide range of styles by writers from Scotland and around the world.

The full music and words-only versions are now available; and digital resources, including the expansion of the existing Church of Scotland music website, will be published in due course, with streaming functions and further information on each song; backing tracks; and lyric videos. *God Welcomes All* is available to order from

<https://chbookshop.hymnsam.co.uk/books/9781786225573/god-welcomes-all>

Our [online music resource](#) is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

- GWA 47 – “Come, all you wounded and weary” – a song of gathering that ties to the Corinthians passage.
- GWA 152 – “The mind of God is forever changing” – ties to the Corinthians passage.
- GWA 112 – “Today we bring our thankful hearts” – a Mothering Sunday song that sensitively deals with some of the more challenging aspects/themes.
- GWA 113 – “God, we praise you for the women” – another thoughtful Mothering Sunday song celebrating women of the Bible who were courageous and faithful in their mothering nature.
- CH4 117 – “Mothering God” – another thoughtful choice, based on the beautiful text by Julian of Norwich, which can be sung to a number of different tunes depending on what is most familiar in your church.
- CH4 555 – “Amazing Grace” – a classic and familiar choice to open with.
- Glory and Praise 411 – “Come back to me, with all your heart” – a more reflective hymn which, though based on lines from Hosea rather than the Luke text, really captures the idea of the Father’s longing for us to return.



- Singing the Faith 424 – “Freely, Freely” - an uplifting sending out song, with a reminder to share the forgiveness we have received.  
<https://songselect.ccli.com/songs/13209/freely-freely> CCLI song #13209
- “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child” – Depending on the style of music you like at your church, you could also think about the traditional spiritual. This is a traditional song, so there are various version of the sheet music online without copyright, or via [Hymnary.org](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXg9UFUXFXU). You can hear a recording here:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXg9UFUXFXU>
- A suggested [playlist of songs from CH4 throughout Lent](#) can be found on the Church of Scotland website.

## Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.
- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord’s Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of ‘holy chaos’.
- If singing in our congregations is restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?  
Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/  
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different “Spiritual Styles”?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?  
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?  
Did it function well as a whole?  
How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?  
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?  
Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/  
community?  
How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?  
How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?
- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

## Useful links

*God Welcomes All* can be ordered from [Hymns Ancient & Modern](#)

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

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