

## Sixth Sunday of Easter – Year B

**Sunday 5 May 2024**

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev Tommy MacNeil, Minister of Martin's Memorial Church, Stornoway, and Convener of the Faith Action Programme Leadership Team, for his thoughts on the sixth Sunday of Easter

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.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the Sanctuary First website:  
<https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/daily-worship>

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

When it comes to our experience of church, most people are fairly well established in their own preferences. Someone was asked what their favourite type of church was – the enquirer was thinking of theology and worship style. “Red brick”, was the surprising answer they received! If I were to ask you the same question, what would your response be? And I’m not talking about structure or building or aesthetics.

In our worship this week we are going back to basics. Or to be more precise, we are going back to our priorities. What life and what church should be all about. Salvation for us and for our world; life in and with God; love for God one another and our neighbour; joyful worship including music and a whole life approach to it; and having our faith, hope, and love renewed and revived so we don’t just live for God but we allow God to live through us. When we give priority to these things in worship we won’t just survive the world, we’ll conquer it, and working in partnership with God we’ll see it transformed by God, and often times in surprising ways.

Given that I’m contributing to Weekly Worship as the Convenor of the Faith Action Programme Leadership Team (FAPLT), I’ll bring aspects of my heart and FAPLT’s heart alive in what I share with you. I’ve also asked members of my team to contribute prayers, as we want to exemplify what it looks like to work collaboratively and appeal to and draw on one another’s strengths and gifts.

### [Acts 10:44-48](#)

This week we are being encouraged in our worship to love God, love one another, and love our neighbour. It is important that we live in such a manner as God’s love is perfect and eternal, and is so powerful that nothing can separate us from it. Part of our learning to love as God loves is to allow God to break down and demolish the walls and barriers we erect as to who we think are worthy recipients of God’s love. For Peter the love of God was for the Jews only. God had to stretch Peter’s heart, mind and life so that he would make more room for Gentile believers. Receiving God’s love is wonderful and powerful, but it will also be deeply challenging.

One of the aspects of our work as FAPLT is that we engage in our work with the very real awareness that without God we will fail. It’s not that we doubt or question ourselves or our abilities, but that the task before us is so massive that without God behind us and with us, we won’t get the job done. We’ve been tasked with shifting the focus of our Church away from managing decline (which we’ve done for a generation), to preparing us for future

growth and development. It sounds impossible. It belongs in the realm of the miraculous. It is just as well that a key point of our worship reminds us who our God is and what God can do.

Our work as FAPLT will be shaped by the truth that ‘nothing is impossible with God!’

What we are actually looking for are some holy interruptions and *suddenly moments*. That’s what we see in this passage. I love these verses. As a Presbyterian Church we value and cherish the preaching of God’s word. And yet here we have God interrupting the word by moving people by the Holy Spirit.

Over the years I’ve had a few individuals interrupt my preaching. The last time was a couple of weeks ago. Individuals who are a little worse the wear for drink, and who find themselves coming into God’s house looking for something – or to be more precise, they’re looking for someone. God is certainly looking for them. If I’m honest I welcome such interruptions and I’ve encouraged my church to do the same.

Right throughout the life of our Church we need the Holy Spirit to turn up and astonish us by working in the hearts and lives of people that are a surprise to us. We may be the ones surprised. Then, just like Peter and his friends, our eyes will be open to the fact that the gospel, the good news about God’s love, isn’t just for those of us who are already part of the Church. This love is for everyone. Every time we put a limitation on the gospel, God will show up to shatter it.

For Peter, God was working outside the box by reaching those outside the Church. The box he had made for God was blown apart in a moment. May we all experience the same.

## [Psalm 98](#)

For those of you who are familiar with The Shorter Catechism you’ll know the first question asked: “What is the chief end of man?” To which the answer is, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” It’s a bold statement of the ultimate reason for which we were created and the greatest purpose and potential we have. To know God and to worship God. This is at the very heart of our work as a Church, and as the Faith Action Programme Leadership Team.

Our vision as a Church is stated in this powerful mission statement: “The Church of Scotland seeks to inspire the people of Scotland and beyond with the Good News of Jesus Christ through enthusiastic worshipping, witnessing, nurturing and serving communities.”

The inspiring, the enthusiasm, the witnessing, the nurturing and serving, are all words that sum up our role as a team as we look to give leadership to our Church during these trying times. This is where Psalm 98 and our other readings this week are to helpful for us.

One of the most important aspects of the worship we bring to God is our sung worship. I'm sure that, like me, this is one of your favourite ways of engaging in worship, especially when we do so by gathering with others. Most of the psalms were written by the greatest worshipper who ever lived – David. This was so much so that God described him as 'a man after God's own heart!' That's who we're invited to be when we gather for worship. We are people after God's own heart.

Here the Psalmist invites us to sing to the Lord a new song for the marvellous things God has done. This immediately brings alive a crucial aspect of worship: it should never be static, it should evolve as God is always at work. This is why we worship with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. At the same time, the Psalmist wants to bring alive the fact that God who is eternal and unchanging is ALWAYS worthy of our worship. There are times when we need to come before God in worship simply for who God is and not just for what we want God to do for us. Take a moment and reflect on who God already is, and has already done for you. As you do this, your natural response will be to offer worship.

This psalm focuses on the victories God has secured, showing God's people what salvation looks like. In the same way, we can reveal God's nature to others by the way we live. God desires that all the earth should see the salvation we have experienced. And how our world needs salvation in our day! The Psalmist knew that when we know God's salvation our natural response will be to worship.

What should our response be to God's salvation? Not just by singing a new song, but ensuring that it is full of joy and music. We are to shout for joy before the Lord the King. Our heart in FAPLT is to encourage every person to grow in their worship of God. When we do this by giving God our time, our talents and our energy we'll make God's love and life more visible. This will lead us and those we engage with to bring a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.

The beauty of such worship is that when we bring it, our worship will call to creation itself to join with us, in bringing a symphony of sounds of worship to our Creator God. The sea will resound, rivers will clap their hands, the very mountains will sing, and all of this will happen before God comes to judge the world. So let us respond to the call to worship God with all we are and have. When we do, we will by default issue a call to worship to creation and all whom God has created.

## [1 John 5:1-6](#)

We've been on quite a journey in our worship this week. It's been full of worship, joy, music, love, *sudden moments* and surprises. We're reminded of how amazing our God is, how amazing God's love is, and how exciting it should be for us to know, love, serve and worship God.

John brings us full circle. This passage holds a similar truth to John 15. It is all about abiding in Christ, flourishing for Christ, and as we know His love for us, we show His love to others.

FAPLT members believe our nation is full of men and women, young people, and children of all ages who are miracles just waiting to happen. What we're longing for – and this is the reason why our work is so important – is that under God's leading we need to find new and creative ways of getting the message of God's love out far and wide to our communities. This is important because, as we share Jesus and people encounter His love, not only do they then come fully alive to God and God's love for them, but they become fully alive to who they are – the person God has created them to be; children of God whose joy is to love God in return.

Putting it simply, when we know who Christ is, we know who we are, who we were created to be. Then we live as children of God, and we live by God's commands. This is not a burden or a chore, but a choice as we realise it is God's best for us and all who live around us.

I once heard in a sermon that most Christians just want to try and survive the world, and look forward to when they'll be liberated from it. This is not God's best for us. When we live with an awareness of Christ's love for us and who we are in Him, it is then we live by faith, and it is then we live the life of more than a conqueror. Then we do not just think about surviving the world, but in and with Christ, we begin to transform the world. For this to happen we need the Holy Spirit's help to establish our identity as children of God and we need the Holy Spirit's help to restore our confidence in the gospel.

Many in this nation and within our Church are pessimistic about our future as a Church. The statistics and forecasts give ample reason for this. What people aren't giving space to is the 'God element' and what can happen when God shows up and starts to do what only God can do.

As FAPLT we are confident that there are better and brighter days ahead of the Church. We need our faith to be strengthened, our hope renewed, and our love for God, one another, and our neighbour revived. The Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit, wants to do that for us all.

## [John 15:9-17](#)

As we reflect on the worship we bring to God, we must never move far from the principle that true worship is simply an expression of our love to the One who first loved us. Just as Father God loved and loves Jesus, so God has loved and loves you and me. If we live in this love, worship will never be far from our hearts and thoughts. With that, by abiding in God's love for us, keeping these commandments will never be burdensome; it's part of the expression of our love.

Knowing God's love for us and growing in love for God in return leads us to our deepest sense of joy. This then overflows in our hearts and lives, leading us to love others. Loving God, loving one another and our neighbour is our greatest purpose and potential and will lead us to experience life as God intended. It will literally be a taste of heaven on earth.

Jesus has exemplified this greater love by laying down His life for us. This teaches us that it will be costly to truly love God and others, and will often result in us having to make sacrifices. We don't always make it easy for God to love us, but God never stops. God sets the example and asks us to follow it. If we are struggling to love others, it is likely we have drifted from God's first love for us.

When we live so close to and focused on God's love for us, we will live with the continual awareness that we are God's children. We will then choose the way of love in our lives, leading us to live fruitful lives that reveal the heart and love of God to others. Our interaction with people will always be meaningful and our lives will be fruitful. Lives that truly do bring glory to God and lives that truly are a blessing to others.

St Augustine got into trouble in his day by encouraging people to 'love God and then live as you please!' People thought he was encouraging selfishness and even promiscuity. Augustine was able to clarify that when we prioritise our love for God we will only concern ourselves with things that are pleasing to God and that are on God's heart. This is why Jesus can encourage us with such confidence – "The Father will give you whatever you ask in my name." What a promise!

## **Sermon ideas**

### **Focus on Acts 10:44-48**

- The surprising work of the Holy Spirit. This remarkable account is preceded by Cornelius having a vision and an angelic encounter, and Peter having a dream that forever changed him and forever changed the Church. We are always in danger of limiting God and the

ways God can work. We need to lay such limitations down and to be open to God's working in various ways through revelation.

- The *suddenly moments* God can orchestrate by showing up in unexpected places, in unexpected ways, and for unexpected people. As a result of what happens here the gospel was shared with gentiles. As a gentile Church, we exist as a direct result of what happens here. Our *suddenly moments* can shape history for us, for others, for our communities, for our nation.
- Salvation is now a free gift for the whole world. Peter and his companions were surprised that these gentile "unclean" people were filled with the Spirit and gave evidence that they had come to faith. Peter would actually get into trouble for this and would be asked to give an account of his actions. We too need to be prepared that when we take the good news of Christ outside of the walls of the church to different people and places, not everyone inside the church will be happy.
- The fruit of what God had done in Cornelius and his family was seen and heard in their speech. Peter was sharing the gospel, then as God's Holy Spirit came, the new gentile believers were obviously transformed as they worshipped God and spoke in tongues. For us and all who come to faith, what we say and how we say it can and will have a big influence on the world around us. Especially as we worship and speak of who Christ is and what He's done.

### **Focus on Psalm 98 – the power of song and salvation:**

**Verse 1:** We sing, and are ready to sing new songs to bring to life the wonderful ways God works.

**Verses 2-3:** We sing about salvation, and having had God's salvation made known to us, we make it known to the ends of the earth through song and our lives.

**Verses 4-5:** We surprise people by making sure our singing/worship is joyful. An important part of such joy is maximising the use of any and all musical instruments and the skilled musicians who play them.

**Verses 7-9:** We then look and listen on in wonder as our singing for God's salvation, freely received, invites creation to join in with us as we worship God. We see creation through God's eyes and we begin to listen for the sound it makes and the worship it brings. The sea and all life within it can make resounding songs before God, the rivers can clap, mountains can sing. Listen for God at work in creation, and listen as creation responds in worship.



### **Focus on 1 John 5:1-6**

We should never tire of the wonder of being a child of God, and being loved by God. To believe in Jesus is not ordinary, routine, or mundane, it's supernatural. Indeed to be a believer, we experience God's greatest power and it is God's greatest miracle.

To believe in Jesus means we love His children, those whom God loves. We don't have a choice in this. As God's children we're called to keep the commandments. The most basic and elementary one is to love God and love all who God loves. Loving others is not optional.

To believe in Jesus means living by the commands that we have been given. We realise that these commands are not a burden, but they are God's ideal for us and others, and so are a blessing.

To believe in Jesus, with all life coming from God, means we're called to live the life of more than a conqueror. We don't live that life by trying harder, we live it by faith.

To believe in Jesus means that our destiny is not to survive the world, but we're to conquer it, and by loving God and loving who God loves, we then transform the world through Christ.

To believe in Jesus means we are constantly mindful and aware that He was the Word who became human, God incarnate. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, testifies to the reality of this and wants to fill our hearts and lives.

### **Focus on John 15:9-17**

These are some of the most powerful verses about God's love and the joy of loving others.

**Verse 9:** Jesus loves us with the same love the Father has for Him. We need to remain in this love.

**Verse 10:** The way we remain in God's love is by being obedient to the commands of God. Simple!

**Verse 11:** Many mistakenly think that to know God and to obey the commandments somehow limits life and our enjoyment of it. The opposite is true – to live like this is to be fully alive and so we know true and lasting joy!!

**Verse 12:** God takes real joy in loving us and so, as ones who have been created in God's image, we will know real life and joy in loving like God does.

**Verse 13:** Jesus reminds us that to love in this way will often involve sacrifice. Especially the sacrificing of ourselves and our own wants and desires. We're most like Jesus when we love sacrificially.

**Verse 14:** Jesus is looking for friends – those who do as He did.

**Verse 15:** Part of Jesus' expression of friendship was by sharing His whole life with us. Living as God intended is community life, where we share all of who we are with others.

**Verse 16:** The love of Jesus is seen in its purest form – He died for us. But His choosing us is every bit as remarkable. He did not have to choose us. Love made Jesus choose us. Who might you be led by love to choose and share your life with? Living in this way will be fruitful, just like Jesus' was. When we live as Jesus' friends, and love as He loved, we can have confidence in our prayers.

**Verse 17:** And so to make sure we don't forget, Jesus reiterates the most basic and fundamental call to His followers, to love each other. I take encouragement from this as a preacher of the gospel who has the tendency every now and then to repeat the main point of my sermon. If it was good enough for Jesus. It's good enough for me.

## Prayers

*Written by some of the members of the Faith Action Programme Leadership Team*

### Call to worship

In the embrace of faith, let love be our call.

**Together, we'll lift our praise of grace and compassion.**

A symphony of souls, embracing God's love in unison.

Let the spirit bind us as sisters and brothers, where love unites us all

**For in our worship, and in our lives, we are called to love one another.**

*Rev Alastair Cumming*

### Confession / Repentance

Lord of Salvation, we are privileged to be called Your friends,  
even Your children.

The rivers, the seas, and all creation testify to Your power,  
and it does our hearts good to join that chorus.

We confess, though, that we resist Your call  
and turn away from Your command.

We choose to align ourselves with some people while neglecting others,  
as if Your love were not meant for all.

We allow tradition to order us  
rather than opening ourselves to Your law of Love  
and the new work You are doing.

Our faith is fleeting, and our lives do not bear lasting fruit.

In Your new-every-morning mercy, forgive us, we pray,  
that as free people we might joyfully follow Your Spirit's leading.  
Amen

*Rev Aaron Stevens*

### **Thanksgiving / Gratitude**

*The following may be offered as a prayer on behalf of the congregation. The following response may be used:*

May gratitude for Your amazing grace  
**Transform every aspect of our being.**

Gracious God,  
Enliven our senses to recognise that everything is a gift of Your grace  
and so enable us to perceive all of creation with wonder and gratitude.  
Gazing upon Jesus, we are confronted with grace beyond our wildest dreams.  
May His willingness to grant eternal life,  
even while we were dead in our sins,  
be the engine of our faithful response to Jesus' new command,  
that we love one another.

May gratitude for Your amazing grace  
**Transform every aspect of our being.**

Scripture dazzles us with how Your love and Your grace  
explode across human barriers until they fill the whole world.  
Hallelujah!

And so we give thanks:

For all the spiritual gifts, which we inherit through faith in Jesus.

For the Holy Spirit, who is alive, living and reigning within us.

For the world and all its resources, help us to tread lightly and share generously.

For our work and our hobbies, which add purpose and colour to our lives.

For our families and friends, may we never take them for granted.

For those neighbours and colleagues we have yet to meet.

For those we find hard to love and for those who struggle to love us.

For the precious inheritance of culture and language,

help us to cherish these in order to bless our local communities

and, ultimately, so we may contribute our voice to the praise of all nations in Heaven.

May gratitude for Your amazing grace  
**Transform every aspect of our being.**

May our gratitude fuel the enthusiasm with which we respond to Jesus' call  
to become disciple-making disciples,  
baptising all who will receive His overture of grace  
and teaching them to believe all that He has commanded

May gratitude for Your amazing grace  
**Transform every aspect of our being.**

*Rev Rory MacLeod*

### **Prayer For Others**

God of love,  
in whom we abide in love,  
with whom we serve in love,  
by whom we love one another,  
we bring our prayers for others,  
for our world, for our nation, for our neighbours,  
in solidarity and hope.

We pray for those around the world  
affected by the great challenges of our time:  
injustice, climate change, conflict and division.  
May Your love overcome fear and distrust,  
nurturing partnerships of hospitality and welcome,  
seeking to build a world of peace and hope,  
of sustainability and harmony.

We pray for communities  
ravaged by injustice – economic and social,  
that the work of those promoting justice for all  
would bear fruit, bringing new hope,  
that all might sing a new song to the Lord  
and rejoice together.

We pray for leaders,  
those given responsibility to make decisions on our behalf,

in councils and parliaments, boards and trusts,  
that decisions would be made  
through the lens of love and care, compassion and thoughtfulness,  
seeking the benefit of all, not just the few.

We pray for Your Church,  
in parishes and presbyteries,  
that all would seek to live out their faith with authenticity and grace,  
letting the love of God, expressed in action and kindness,  
be our witness, without fear or worry.

We pray for families  
whose lives have been overturned:  
by conflict, seeking refuge and asylum,  
that they would find welcome, support and a new start;  
by poverty, seeking to feed and warm their families,  
that they would retain their dignity;  
by ill health,  
seeking healing and restoration amidst an overstretched health system.

We pray, God of love,  
in one breath lamenting situations that seem out of our control,  
and with the next breath in joyful hope  
for You lead us, a resurrection people, into the future,  
abiding in Your love.  
May we, in whatever way we can, inspired by Your love for us,  
be Your hands and Your feet transforming the world about us,  
one act of faithful service at a time.  
Amen.

*Rev Peter Johnston*

### **Blessing / Closing prayer**

Children of God,  
as we go from here to grow the kingdom of God,  
may we do so in love.  
As we go from here to share the love of God  
with all whom we meet,  
may we do so, knowing that God loved us first,  
God loves us still, and God always will...

May you feel the love of God in your heart,  
may you know Jesus' commandment to love in your mind,  
and may the Holy Spirit guide and inspire your mouths,  
hands and feet along that journey.  
Amen.

*Rev Jonathan Fleming*

## **Musical suggestions**

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.

- CH4 14 – “The Lord’s my shepherd, I’ll not want”
  - CH4 124 – “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation”
  - CH4 129 – “The Lord is King!”
  - CH4 130 – “Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim”
  - CH4 137 – “All things bright and beautiful”
  - CH4 147 – “All creatures of our God and King”
  - CH4 154 – “O Lord my God!”
  - CH4 160 – “Praise, my soul, the King of heaven”
  - CH4 186 – “Father God, I wonder”
  - CH4 443 – “He is Lord, he is Lord”
  - CH4 448 – “Lord, the love of your light is shining”
  - CH4 500 – “Lord of creation, to you be all praise!”
  - CH4 519 – “Love divine, all loves excelling
  - CH4 531 – “My Jesus, my Saviour”
- 
- “Good, good, Father” (Anthony Brown and Pat Barret) – CCLI song #7036612
- 
- MP 3 Abba, Father
  - MP 54 Bind us together
  - MP 142, Father, we love you

- MP 225 He's got the whole wide world
- MP 295 I serve a risen saviour
- MP 367 Jesus is Lord, creation's voice proclaims it
- MP 411 Let there be love
- MP 651 The kingdom of God
- MP 821 Down the mountain
- MP 1000 King of kings
- MP 1006 Over the mountains
- MP 1036 Blessed be your name
- MP 1039 Colours of day
- MP 1089 God of wonders (Lord of all creation)

## 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

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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