

Second Sunday after Christmas – Year C

Sunday 5 January 2025

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Becky May, Founder of The Resources Cupboard, for her thoughts on the second Sunday after Christmas.

<https://www.theresourcescupboard.co.uk/>

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

There is a great sense that the words of these readings cut like a knife, as I sit down to read them side by side. If I were to turn the news channel on right now, I would hear stories of anxiety about finance and provision, fears about border protection, tyrannical leadership and deep, deep trouble in the Holy Land. Has nothing changed since Jeremiah shared his word from God?

Of course, we live in the 'now and not yet.' Our long-promised rescuer has long since come, but God is still at work in our frail and fragile world where human beings still walk in darkness, and fail to accept Him – is this a day of doom and despair? Is this a season of anxiety?

We do not belittle the pain and anguish people are suffering across the globe, but we do live in the sure and certain hope that we have in Christ.

This sense of light in the darkness – hope in the midst of despair, is not just a 'nice thought' for a dull and dreary January morning as the Christmas celebrations begin to fade, and thoughts turn, perhaps, to 'how long before pay day?', or 'what is happening in the world right now?' – this is everything and it is the hope that our world needs to hear, the light that our world needs to see.

As we prepare for this Sunday, perhaps we need to take some time to hold these two conflicting realities side by side and to remember where our hope comes from.

[Jeremiah 31:7-14](#)

These well-known prophetic words of Jeremiah bring comfort to people waiting in conflict to be rescued, but it is important that we acknowledge two key factors here, rooted in understanding the context of this passage.

Firstly, we live with the benefit of hindsight. We can hold the Bible in our hands and read the whole story; from what happened before, what was happening when this scripture was written, through to how these prophecies were fulfilled and beyond, to what God has promised about the ultimate conclusion of this story.

Secondly, thinking more acutely about this book, we must understand the context of this passage. Looking back to early Jeremiah, we discover what had led to Israel's need for rescue; their own walk away from God, which they were cautioned against. The promises in

the seven verses of today's passage are not simply nice words to a suffering people; they are the unfathomable gift of God's mercy and grace, going after and bringing home the people who walked themselves away and into danger.

And so it is against this backdrop that we can read these words; an illustration of the promise of our faithful God, who promises to bring back God's children – not only back to their homeland, but ultimately back to Godself, through Jesus Christ.

Psalm 147:13-21

Reading some of the words of this psalm without an understanding of the context explored above, can feel uncomfortably political, particularly when read in today's context: "Strengthening the bars of your gates", "Peace within your borders"?...

As with the passage above, we must first understand the context of this psalm. It is believed to have been written after the return of Israel to Jerusalem. It is a song of praise for all that God has done; for how God's promises have been fulfilled in restoring God's people.

Borders and gates do two things: they keep people inside and outside and allow for safe movement. If we only understand them as prohibitive or defensive, we miss an insight into God's character. God has gathered the people back to their homeland and now holds and surrounds them with peace and strength. When we understand that the borders were destroyed because of Israel's wilful rejection of God it makes this restoration all the more praiseworthy. It illustrates again the breaking down of the relationship between humankind and God, and the restoration of this relationship by God.

In verse 20, there is also a hint of the change in God's people themselves. Israel had been decimated as a result of them losing sight and understanding of God's law. Here, they acknowledge their position as the people who know the law; the relationship is restored.

Ephesians 1:3-14

There is a beautiful continuity between this passage and those we have already explored. Writing back to the believers in Ephesus, Paul echoes the words, phrases and tone of the Psalms, in poetic praise for all that God is and has done.

There is another continuity here: the continual gathering of people by God, back to God, "destined for adoption as his children" (v5). But there is a step change here; this is more

than the recovery of Israel to the physical city of Jerusalem; this is about the total recovery of God's people; the adoption through Jesus Christ and the "redemption through his blood" (v7).

There is also a step change with regard to who this is for. Paul begins by writing about 'us,' God's covenant people; Israel. But now this is also for 'you,' for all who hear and believe – God's plan for redemption and forgiveness is open to the whole of humanity. This is the extension and fulfilment of His promise and Paul explicitly expresses how this offer has been opened wide. Paul continues in his letter to teach the Church about this; acknowledging the differences in heritage but celebrating the shared status as adopted children in the family of God and what it means to live as God's children.

[John 1:\(1-9\) 10-18](#)

It is highly likely that our congregations and communities will have heard or read these words over the last few days and weeks. Together with the narrative gospel readings of the Christmas story, this passage reveals 'what was really going on'; the story behind the story; how God is at work.

It is this passage which provides a link in the chain from Jeremiah, to Psalm 147, to this reading in John, and through to Ephesians. It tells us how the redemption of God's people moved from one nation to all people, and from a place to the whole kingdom of God. In these verses, we read how the tiny baby born in extraordinary circumstances came as the promised Messiah, the light of the world, the rescuer who would bring people back to God.

Here, John introduces the idea, which Paul picks up on in Ephesians: "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (vv11-12). The idea firstly is that God's own people did not recognise God at work once again; Jesus was rejected by His people. And secondly, that the adoption into God's family and the inclusion within the safety of those boundaries is now an invitation offered to all of humanity.

There is a slight difference between what John writes here, and how Paul later explains this to the Ephesians. Whilst Paul describes the process of this being first for 'us' and then for 'you', John summarises that Jesus was first rejected by His own, before broadening the invitation. We must remember that not every person rejected the God that came to rescue them, and that God's plan was always to bring all people to Himself.

Sermon ideas

We have already seen in the passages above a clear narrative thread that reveals God's big story and plan to draw people back to their God. The reading from John provides a strong hook, which can be a firm basis to explore this, with the familiarity of this reading from the last few weeks and the opportunity to put the narrative of the Christmas story into the context of the meta-narrative. And so it may be that today we choose to focus on the passage from John, drawing on the other readings as appropriate.

There are other details we may choose to focus on, within this: questions of faithfulness; humanity's failings and God's consistency; what it means to be adopted into the family of God; and the question of whether we see Jesus for who He is and choose for ourselves to respond to Jesus, or whether we have chosen to leave the baby in the manger and move into the new year away from the boundaries of safety that God has set around us.

There are many ways we could explore these themes with our congregations. It would be an interesting exercise to provide copies of each of the passages and invite people to see what cross references they can discover and explore together what they mean to us. You may also choose to creatively explore the idea of the immediate story of Christmas and how this fits within God's meta-narrative, or you may choose simply to focus on one of the themes above, e.g., faithfulness, or adoption into God's family, in your preaching today.

Prayers

Gathering prayer / Call to worship

Almighty God, creator of heavens and earth

We gather together today to worship You.

Father God, who loves us with an everlasting love

We gather together today to worship You.

Lord Jesus, light of the world who came down into the darkness of the world

We gather together today to worship You.

Holy Spirit, who abides in and with us until the completion of God's great story

We gather together today to worship You. Amen

Confession / Repentance

Almighty God, You have called us to Yourself,

paid the price for our unfaithfulness and made a way for us to be with You again,
and yet,
day by day, we do not walk with You.
Forgive us for the times we walk away.
Forgive us for the times we live outside of Your plans for us.
Forgive us for the times we reject You, we pray.
Amen.

Thanksgiving / Gratitude

Invite your congregation to bring their own prayers of thanksgiving or gratitude today. You could perhaps invite them to write out their prayers, gathering them together in a basket, or you could simply have a short time of open prayer, when people can speak out loud the things that they are grateful for today.

Prayer for others / Intercession

In your intercessions today, remember all those across the world who are in difficult situations. You may choose to focus on international situations; perhaps for those now living in the Holy Land; for those who have been harmed by the sinful actions of others; or for those whose lives feel more difficult or challenging – that they would see and experience the light of Christ.

Blessing / Closing prayer

As you draw your time together, provide small candles or tealights, inviting the congregation to light them and pass on the light to those around them, before taking the light out with them, remembering that Jesus, the light of the world, goes with us.

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 version is now available; and the words-only book, 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 101 – “There is no child so small”
- GWA 105 – “Christe, lux mundi”
- GWA 137 – “In the darkness, we were waiting”

- CH4 186 – “Father God, I wonder”
- CH4 448 – “Lord the light of Your love is shining” (Shine Jesus Shine)
- CH4 543 – “Longing for light, we wait in darkness”
- CH4 559 – “There is a Redeemer”
- “Palaces and Playgrounds” – (Nathan Jess, Donna Akodu, Jemimah Paine, Tim Yearsley) CCLI song # 7247450
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2Pm7PHliGc>

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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