

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

Sunday 21 July 2024

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rae Lind, National Convener and Karen Gillon, General Secretary, of the Church of Scotland Guild, for their thoughts on the ninth Sunday after Pentecost.

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

This material is being written well in advance of the summer Sunday on which it will be used, right in the middle of the summer holiday season. This will naturally impact on congregational attendances, yet we can take heart that we gather to worship our timeless and unchanging God in the joyful knowledge that we join with the whole Church on earth and in heaven – a vast multitude indeed. We are inspired by today's scripture readings, whose respective authors draw us into their experiences and stories of faith.

I would normally start preparing for a service by reading each scripture passage from as many versions of the Bible as possible in order to catch the variety of words used, angles taken and nuances in the turns of phrase. While the NRSV is the standard text used, I have a particular love at Guild Meetings and church services for the freshness, excitement and immediacy of Eugene Peterson's *The Message* paraphrase.

While Lectionary readings do not always seem to tie in noticeably with each other, readers will not fail to notice in today's readings the repetition of the phrases such as "with you/with him/with us". This promise of God's presence in the lives of God's people is often connected in these passages with the designation, "Shepherd".

The Scriptures speak of religious and political leaders as shepherds and of the expectations God has of people in positions of leadership. These shepherds are people whom we can uphold in our prayers today, for they face huge challenges, some of which are admittedly of their own making. Our own Scottish Parliament has recently gone through times of turbulence and a new First Minister has emerged as the result. A long and acrimonious court case in the USA is being played out in public, whereby the accused is currently aspiring to be the next President of that very country. The current Presidents of Russia and Israel respectively are waging war on smaller neighbouring nations. World leaders are doing their best to stave off further escalation. These are all shepherds, whether good or bad. They and their people need our prayers, whether these are for blessing or repentance.

As well as looking for any possible connecting motif or theme in the Scriptures, it is always helpful to check if the Sunday in question has been set aside nationally/internationally for any special reason. This helps give a handle on what appropriately might be woven into the sermon and / or included in the prayers. Today, 21 July, we are spoiled for choice although it is only the last in the following list which might be considered most appropriate to incorporate into our prayers. This is National Ice Cream Day, and, in Australia, National Lamington Day. In the USA it is National Junk Food Day and interestingly, it is National Be

Someone Day, when people are encouraged to take ten seconds to make a difference for good in a child's life.

[2 Samuel 7:1-14a](#)

Here we find David as King of Israel, settled and secure in his house, at rest from all his enemies thanks to the hand of God on his life and the presence of God in his midst. The Ark of the Lord has been returned to Jerusalem among scenes of rejoicing, led by David himself. Life is good. He is grateful and is now conscience-stricken that the Ark of God is in a *tent* while he lives in a palace. David sets his heart on building a house for the presence of God. He sets plans for God; but quickly learns that God has plans for David instead. Enter Nathan the prophet. This is the first mention of a man who is more famous for bursting in on David's life with God's word of condemnation in 2 Samuel 12: "You are the man!" Here in Chapter 7, Nathan tells David that God is with him. This is a truth that David has known in all of life's mountain-top and valley experiences. Nathan spoke to David about the king's plans before he spoke with *God* about them. Both Nathan and David were to find that God's priorities are very different and that the 'house' God purposed to build for David was a permanent dynasty, a dynasty that we know would culminate in the coming of Jesus as King. Both David and Nathan were shepherds in their respective callings, serving therefore as leaders. Each had to learn /re-learn that leaders themselves need to be guided and that there is no greater or wiser guide than God.

In this passage God is setting out the Covenant with David. Unlike previous covenants in the Scriptures, this one does not set conditions. The verbs used in verses 8-13 helped David trace God's hand and to trust God's promises: "*I took you..., I have been with you..., I will make for you..., I will appoint..., I will give you..., I will establish...*"

Are there ways in which those leading worship today might encourage the congregation to trace God's hand on their lives? You could offer a few minutes of silence during the sermon, allowing the congregation to reflect on God's grace in their lives, or better still, ask each to turn to their neighbour and share for a few minutes, in quiet conversation, their experiences of God's intervention, guidance and grace. I have sometimes used this approach in church and at Guild Meetings. While a few folk have found it hard to get the conversations started, it will amaze you how hard it is to then get them to stop talking.

[Psalm 89:20-37](#)

Despite the earlier observation that Lectionary readings do not always seem to tie in with each other noticeably, this one most certainly does with the reading from 2 Samuel 7. The author, Ethan the Ezrahite, was clearly inspired by that earlier passage. Ethan had founded one of the Temple choirs. Among the legacies left by David were not only some of the wonderful Psalms which he himself wrote, but the glorious music ministry of the priests. The choirs and instrumentalists numbered 4,000 in all. How stirring it must have been to hear them perform. Hebrew music is rich in theology and moves the heart deeply. The Psalms play out the whole range of human emotion, and any act of worship is enriched by the inclusion of psalms, whether in a traditional or contemporary setting. I always play a Hebrew psalm at home on Holocaust Memorial Day, and once had the joy of being in a choir which performed Bernstein's Chichester Psalms.

If your church has the facilities (and the relevant music licence), you might like to download a Hebrew psalm and play it at some point – possibly just before you offer the Prayers of intercession.

This psalm carefully recounts the faithfulness of God to David, the Shepherd King, and celebrates the Covenant made by God to David. Our section from this psalm is liberally peppered with the phrase “with him” as God’s faithfulness is both recounted and celebrated. The whole psalm is worth reading through as part of your preparations for worship, for there you will read in the latter part, of the sorrow of the writer at his unanswered questions in what he sees of the unravelling of that Covenant with his use of “where?”, “how long?” and “remember”. Yet notwithstanding his sadness and his confusion at what has befallen his people, David ends by blessing the Lord forever, for throughout the psalm, he sees God’s faithfulness as being eternal and unchanging.

[Jeremiah 23:1-6](#)

Here the prophet brings us face to face with God’s anger at the destructiveness and irresponsibility of the leaders, the ‘shepherds’ of his people. The litany of complaints as spoken via Jeremiah is powerfully worded: “scattered”, “driven away”, “not attended” and culminates with the use of the strong word, “evil”. God, the true Shepherd, promises to “take over” (*the Message* Version) and do what these leaders had failed to do themselves: “gather”, “bring back” and “raise up”. With the new shepherds whom God would raise up, the people’s expectations of genuine shepherds would be met, for the promise is that there would be no fear, no dismay and no loss among them.

Just as the readings from 2 Samuel and Psalm 89 have highlighted, we are pointed, in the Jeremiah passage, to God's promise of David's ultimate successor, who will ensure the people will live in justice and in security.

The congregation has a responsibility to practise Jesus' kingdom values within its parish and beyond. Despite the fact that not all are elders (shepherds), many in our congregations and organisations within them have the calling to gather, bring back and raise up people who need to be secure in the love and fellowship of the Church, where there ought to be no fear, no dismay and no loss among them.

On this day, which the USA marks as National Be Someone Day, can we think of ways we can make a lasting impact for good in the life of children in our communities? In many communities the call goes out for volunteers to be befrienders, mentors, school paired readers and sometimes members of the Children's Panel. Might you be able, within the sermon, to talk up the need for that kind of community involvement? If your church has refreshments after worship, maybe a conversation along those lines could be carried into that setting.

[Psalm 23](#)

What a GIFT of a psalm on such a day as this, for in what has been described as Scotland's favourite psalm, we are pointed to Christ the great Shepherd, the true Shepherd who gives peace, grants protection and provides for His flock with all their needs. While peace-filled and reassuring, the psalm does not shrink from the realities of human experience, reminding us that no-one is exempt from the trials of life. Each of us must face the "darkest valley", or as Peterson paraphrases in verse 4: "Death Valley" – yet even in the very valley that humankind fears *most*, the sheep of God's flock need fear no evil, for God's presence is promised throughout life and accompanies our passage into the next.

The hope instilled in the believer's heart by this psalm is powerful and has fed many a soul. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* quotes Hopeful as he encourages his fearful fellow-pilgrim in the journey from this life to the next with the words: "Be of good cheer, my brother; I feel the bottom, and it is good." ... then again "Brother, I see the gate, and men standing by it to receive us."

Peace, protection, provision, freedom from fear and hope are all offered in Psalm 23 by the Good Shepherd.

[Ephesians 2:11-22](#)

We move from the peace and security of Psalm 23 into this reading from the Epistles, where we find that our peace and security have been bought for us at great price by the Great Shepherd.

God's call to Paul to reach Ephesus was a highly strategic move, causing Paul to spend two years there, shepherding the flock, teaching them the Gospel and taking every opportunity to evangelise within a city where many cultures came together.

In this part of the chapter, we find that Paul has moved from dealing with the salvation of individuals to the reconciliatory aspect of the Gospel, in that two previously hostile religious communities are brought together in Christ. In the earlier part of the chapter, Paul was at pains to show us that as Gentile believers, our being brought into the promises and blessings of God's Covenant people is a precious privilege (and one which cost Christ His very blood, see v13). He opens the curtains of our minds to reveal our state when we were without Christ, aliens, strangers, and having no hope, and being "without God" (v12) – that is, without a true knowledge of Him, as evidenced by their idol worship. But now, we have been brought by Christ to a place of peace and reconciliation and lifted to the status of citizens, saints and members of God's very household. With his grasp of Judaism, a thorough knowledge of God's covenants and the Christian faith, Paul assures us that our faith is founded on the teaching of the Old Testament Prophets and the New Testament Apostles.

Part of the Apostles' work was to live and preach reconciliation to congregations made up of people from hugely diverse cultural, social and religious backgrounds. This would undoubtedly have taxed their shepherding skills. Paul repeatedly uses the motif "union with Christ" as he reminds his congregations of their need for unity and he focuses on Christ's love and sacrifice to bring about that unity.

One contemporary community that knows well the cost of witnessing to a culture which is hostile towards them is the Tent of Nations. Daoud Nassar of this Palestinian Lutheran family – a Bethlehem-based community, has spoken at previous Church of Scotland General Assemblies and the story will be well-known to many. Their organic farm in the hills southwest of Bethlehem has been in the family for over 100 years. They are frequently harassed by settlers who want to be rid of them and to take over their farm. Outside the farm is a powerful message to their hostile neighbours and to the world. It is carved in stone: "We refuse to be enemies". Their commitment to Kingdom of Heaven values of justice, peace and reconciliation is exemplary. You can find their story on the following

YouTube link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=LeZIOiu3Y_0 If your congregation has the facilities, and licence, you might choose to play this four-minute film during the service.

Mark 6:30-34; 53-56

In keeping with the shepherd theme of our readings, my eyes lit on the text (v34): “He saw a great crowd; and He had compassion for them, because *they were like sheep without a shepherd.*”

While in great need of time out with His disciples, Jesus’ heart of compassion drove Him to teach, feed and heal the multitude, which Mark describes as “sheep without a shepherd”.

In a day and age of great anger, impatience, polarisation of beliefs and hostility towards folk who do not share a similar world view, today’s disciples must feel much as those in Mark 6 did – in need of a break. Yet their Master, more driven by compassion than exhaustion, simply could not and would not desert that hungry and desperate crowd. He inspired His disciples to change from their initial reaction, “send them away...” (v36), to one of cooperation and care.

The Church of Scotland Guild has strong links in Malawi, where I have witnessed first-hand the relentlessness with which the poor, hungry and desperate come to the doors of host Guild members for help at all hours of the day and night. None has ever been turned away, despite the levels of exhaustion suffered.

Our congregations are understandably anxious in their attempts to maintain their identity, witness and buildings, yet if we get too caught up in internal issues, it is the “sheep without a shepherd” whose urgent priorities will suffer.

Amid the reorganisation, shrinkages, reductions in resources etc., throughout its many branches, the Guild is managing to maintain its lengthy tradition of support to the victims of poverty, violence, loneliness, misogyny and marginalisation. There are many congregations who will focus their bias towards such people too and it is good to know that in the current climate of change, uncertainty, shrinkage and indeed exhaustion, Jesus’ compassion towards “sheep without a shepherd” inspires our work and witness.

Sermon ideas

The suggested running thread through the sermon is care by shepherds for the sheep.

Various ideas have been woven into the Bible commentaries above, without the need to draft a sermon here, but here are some pointers:

Take as your text: Mark 6:34 “He saw a great crowd; and He had compassion for them, because *they were like sheep without a shepherd*”.

You could then start with the congregational conversation suggested above – introduce a few minutes of silence, allowing the congregation to reflect on God’s grace in their lives or better still, ask each to turn to their neighbour and share for a few minutes, in quiet conversation, their experiences of God’s intervention, guidance and grace.

Then point to how each passage today reflects the image of God as Shepherd and how God expects the leaders in any community, be it church or state, to show compassion, selflessness, integrity and responsibility in carrying out their roles.

Your sermon need not be lecture-based, though that might well be the norm and so you could then expound one or more of the above Bible passages to underpin the point made in the paragraph above.

Or you might have a couple of (well-rehearsed) people enact/read a sketch making some of the points concerning the theme. If you have access to the Iona Community’s Sketch book: “Jesus and Peter Off-the Record Conversations”, you will be spoiled for choice. There are also sketch resources on the Internet, e.g. www.richmondparkchurch.org.uk/drama-scripts.html

Or you could show a film clip e.g., the Tent of Nations film featured above or the following YouTube clip from CAP (Christians Against Poverty): www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwNXc4_xJyc&t=8s

Then wrap things up by throwing out the challenge to follow the Christ of compassion as we serve Him in Church and community.

Prayers

Some of the prayers that follow have been adapted and edited from the prayers which the Guild’s National Convener has posted each month on the [Guild’s Facebook page](#).

Call to worship (Psalm 33:20-22)

“We wait in hope for the Lord; He is our help and our shield. In Him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in His holy Name. May Your unfailing love be with us, Lord, even as we put our hope in You.”

Approach/ Confession / Repentance:

Gracious God, our loving Father,
it is with the same joy as the Psalmist that we approach Your altar today,
bringing our offering of praise,
seeking Your mind in scripture and making our prayers at Your throne of grace.

We give thanks for Your invitation to be bold in these approaches,
for it is at Your very throne where we find grace.

We find it too at every encounter we have with Christ our Lord:
first at Bethlehem in the birth of a babe who would save His people.
We find Your grace along the shores of Galilee where our Lord prayed, taught, healed and preached and served.
We find Your grace supremely at the Cross,
where our Saviour shed His very life-blood, that our sins might be atoned for and our souls washed pure from their sin and guilt.
We find it at the entrance to the empty tomb, as Jesus appears to His own and assures them of His victory over death and hell – truly the Resurrection and the Life.

Keep us ever mindful of the great cost of our redemption and ever grateful to the One who paid the price.
Keep alive in our hearts the hope He has placed there of life eternal, we pray.

Hear us now, as we unburden ourselves of all the failures and sins of this past week – all that has sullied our union with Christ and our fellowship with each other.
In a time of silent reflection, help us to open our hearts to You, O God,
and examine them for all the burdens we have placed upon ourselves and upon others;
and the grief we have caused Your Holy Spirit. Hear us now in the silence of this moment.

[Hold a time of silence]

May Almighty God, who forgives all who truly repent, have mercy upon us,
pardon and deliver us from all our sins, confirm and strengthen us in all goodness,
and keep us in life eternal.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with You,
Father and Holy Spirit,
be all praise and glory world without end.

Hear us now as we pray after the manner Christ taught His disciples, saying together

Our Father ...

Thanksgiving / Gratitude

“Your hand Oh God has guided Your flock from age to age.”

Almighty God, You have never left Yourself without a witness on earth.

Your Church has been at various points in her history both fearless and frail, strong and weak, faith-filled and frightened. Throughout all of her history, You have raised up people who have been prophetic, bold and faithful in their witness for You.

We thank You for those who have carried Your truth as a shining lamp in the darkest of days.

For those of Your Church today whose voices have been silenced in different parts of the world
by oppression, persecution and imprisonment,
we pray that Your grace might sustain them.
By Your Holy Spirit’s presence, be to them their rock and refuge, their shield and strength.

In our prayers we give thanks for the heroes of the faith, without whose examples Your Church today would be the poorer.

Give us the courage to answer Your call to follow, like Abraham,
to be honest in our prayer, like Hannah,
and faithful, like Ruth.

Give us the strength to stand up for what is right, like Daniel,
to be courageous in our response to God, like Mary,
and to trust You completely, like Joseph.

Give us the conviction to be bold like Peter,
and confident, like Paul, as we spread the Good News.

Lord in Your mercy

Hear our prayer.

Prayer for others / Intercession

“Your heralds brought glad tidings to greatest and to least.”

The written Word, pointing to the Living Word, has brought life to many.

Especially we think of those who work for Bible Societies and those involved in translation of the Scriptures.

We also ask Your blessing on all who spread Your Good News through radio, television and social media.

We give thanks for the freedom we have to proclaim Your Good News in our own land and for the many exciting opportunities being taken to reach every generation and culture for Christ, whether in church buildings, community centres, sports halls, soup kitchens, or prisons.

May the way we live our lives match our words,
all the time rejoicing in the opportunities You have offered us since the Church was born.

Lord in Your mercy

Hear our prayer.

“Your mercy will not fail us nor leave your Work undone.”

Gracious God, give us the vision to see the need of the world around.

Make us channels of Your blessing, that we might joyfully share Your divine love and mercy. Embolden us with fresh resolve to use the gifts given to each one so that no work of Yours will be left undone.

We praise You for Your continued blessing on the Church, raising up people who are willing to serve.

We look to You for guidance and for grace to keep our focus on Jesus, knowing that Your mercy will not fail us.

We acknowledge that our Church faces change and challenges and so we pray for guidance, wisdom, unity and grace on us all.

We rejoice that we belong to one Church, one faith, one Lord.

Lord in Your mercy

Hear our prayer.

In our rejoicing,
we bring to You our sorrow and concern over the various wars and conflicts afflicting the world which You made, and love, and declared “good”.
The greed, violence and horror which we inflict upon Your good world weighs heavily on our hearts.

We cry to You for the humble poor of Israel/Palestine and Gaza amid the grief, pain and privation which they face.
We ask that You will move the hearts of people in power to seek ways of reconciliation and peace, compassion and respect.

We think with horror of the ways in which the Russian invasion of Ukraine has deprived so many of life and livelihoods, homes and hospitals.
We pray that You will remove from power the regime in Russia and let the voices of truth and righteousness be heard and followed. Bring a lasting and just peace and spare us from the awfulness of nuclear war in our time.

Hear us too, as we ask for peace in countries like Myanmar, Sudan, Nigeria, Yemen.

Lord in Your mercy
Hear our prayer.

And now, watch, dear Lord, with those who wake, or watch,
or weep today, and let Your angels protect those who sleep.
Tend the sick. Refresh the weary. Sustain the dying.
Calm the suffering. Pity the distressed.

Hear us now in the silence as we name those who struggle today ...

[Hold a time of silence]

We ask this in the strong name of Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Blessing / Closing prayer

Now may the God of peace,
who through the blood of the eternal covenant
brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus,
that great Shepherd of the sheep,
equip you with everything good for doing God’s will,

and may the Holy Spirit work in us what is pleasing to God,
through Jesus Christ,
to whom be glory for ever and ever.

Amen.

Musical suggestions

God Welcomes All 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.

- CH4 14, 15 or 16 – all are versions of Psalm 23 (see also CH4 462)
- CH4 53 – “Oh, greatly blessed the people are” – a paraphrase of part of Psalm 89
- CH4 116 – “Loving Creator” – Trinitarian in focus, inviting the Church to unite, per the Ephesians reading
- CH4 133 – “Source and Sovereign, Rock and Cloud” – this wonderful Hymn of Approach includes many titles and descriptions of Christ, including “Shepherd”, our theme today
- CH4 247 – “Moved by the Gospel, let us move” – a closing hymn to spur us on to mission
- CH4 252 – “As a fire is meant for burning” – a reminder of the purpose of the Church
- CH4 461 – “How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds” – it includes the title “Shepherd”
- CH4 462 – “The King of Love my Shepherd is” – a paraphrase of Psalm 23

- CH4 484 – “Great God, your love has called us here” – in response to the sermon and preparing us for the Intercessory Prayers
- MP 119 – “El Shaddai” – This has a Hebrew “ring” to it, using a Hebrew name of God. If you choose to play a Hebrew Psalm as suggested in the notes above, the congregation might welcome the chance to sing this lovely minor key song.
- MP 1127 – “When I was lost” (There is a new song) – This would fit very well after the reading from Ephesians 2

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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