

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – 28 June 2020

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Rev MaryAnn Rennie, Minister of the Abbey Church of Dunfermline, for her thoughts on the fourth Sunday after Pentecost.

Our new online music resource is now live: [here](#) you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4). The search function allows you to bring up a list of songs by keyword, tune, theme, author, composer and metre, covering all of the indexes in the hymnbook. The site features Weekly Worship and thematic/seasonal playlists, alternative settings and background information on the hymns.

Introduction	2
Genesis 22:1-14	3
Psalms 13	3
Jeremiah 28:5-9	4
Psalms 89:1-4, 15-18	4
Romans 6:12-23	5
Matthew 10:40-42	5
Sermon ideas	6
Prayers	7
Alternative Material	13
Musical suggestions	16

Introduction

It would be fair to say that I have struggled to focus on the texts for this Sunday, as I struggle with the image of God in at least one of them. In preparing items for worship what became apparent to me is that although I use the lectionary most weeks, this was quite clearly one where I had avoided the texts.

In Scotland, this weekend is around about the beginning of the school summer holidays and so the closing weeks of term for many youth organisations around churches. Some congregations, like my own, use this Sunday as an opportunity to celebrate the year encouraging all-age participation. While the word might be heard, preaching of the word may happen in formats other than a sermon.

Preparing for each Sunday depends on available time for me. I like to prepare three months at a time, taking one day where I plan at least the hymns with rough ideas of which texts I might use each week. This allows me to look at potential themes that are arising, and also to be aware if these texts will fit with any “special” services that might be happening. On a Monday/Tuesday of any week, I can then revisit the hymns and decide on readings – this ensures that the choir should have hymns for their rehearsal. Hopes and plans of course don’t always happen and like everyone else I can find myself running around at the last minute trying to put together an order of service, and only beginning to pick and prepare the hymns, readings and prayers in the week prior to worship.

When it comes to looking at the texts for a Sunday, I visit them on a Monday just to read them. During the week I use spaces to pick up commentaries for ideas. There are some favourite websites I enjoy, like Debie Thomas (Journey with Jesus) and Bruce Epperley (The Adventurous Lectionary). Chatting with friends and colleagues can also be helpful. Sometimes someone else’s eyes notice something you don’t.

The National Weekend of Invitation was due to take place from 26-28 June, and while at the time of writing this, because of Coronavirus/COVID-19 that is unlikely to happen, there is a new opportunity to invite people to explore Christian faith through online resources. Many churches are now moving to digital format to help their own congregations connect to their community, and so there is an opportunity to invite people to view and open conversations.

More information can be found on the National Weekend of Invitation Website:

<https://weekendofinvitation.com>

[Genesis 22:1-14](#)

The passage tells the story of the testing of Abraham through God's request to sacrifice his son, Isaac. It is a story bereft of detail. It is made all the more sinister because of the lack of detail. It is dramatic because there is no drama. John Gibson (The Daily Study Bible – Genesis) describes it as Hebrew story-telling at its best, full of unbearable tension and suspense.

To our ears God's request is outrageous. The logic of requesting a child's life to demonstrate loyalty does not fit with the God of love we encounter in the Gospels. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* comments, "we leave the story relieved that we got out in one piece."

It also suggests that there are two questions that need to be answered in interpreting the story of testing. How is Abraham tested? And where?

In answering the first we discover that Abraham acts on his fear (awe) of God, prepared to follow the divine command even when he could not see the logic. It is a passage where we see Abraham forget self, completely surrendering all possessions, his whole self, to God – trusting solely on grace.

The closing verse of the text tells us where the testing took place; on the mountain of the Lord. This opens the door to understanding the text as being about worship.

We should not ignore the potential sacrifice of Isaac, but we can reframe our focus towards the actions and intentions of Abraham in response to God's request of him. This perhaps opens us up to an understanding of what is expected of us when we are drawn towards worship. We should be prepared to lay aside our most precious possessions, committing our whole being to the presence of God. It is an opportunity to trust and rely on God's grace and intention for us.

[Psalm 13](#)

This is a psalm of lament. The words "How long" evoke an eternal human cry of longing, waiting for solace in the dark moments of life. The writer of the psalm is either ill, fearful of death, or caught in the blackness of depression and anxiety. The words describe feelings of separation from God, of God not being part of the turmoil that the writer feels.

Jeremiah 28:5-9

For understanding this text, it is worthwhile investing a little time and reading from the beginning of chapter 27 to the end of chapter 28. This reading sets what will be heard as a Sunday text in its context.

Briefly, before the text for today, God has told the prophet Jeremiah to make and wear a yoke and to send word to the kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon as well as the king of Judah that they must serve Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. In doing so the people of these nations will be allowed to stay in their own land. The people of these lands were to be told that they should not listen to the words of other prophets. Jeremiah does as he has been commanded.

Our text suggests a passage of a few months between Jeremiah's initial prophesy and this prophesy that Hananiah brings. Hananiah brings his news that the yoke of the king of Babylon is to be broken and that the exiles can return to Judah from Babylon. Jeremiah welcomes this news, although cautions that Hananiah's peaceful words will only be welcomed if they happen.

What follows is that Hananiah breaks the yoke around Jeremiah's neck, symbolising the freedom of the people from Babylon. However Jeremiah is then given a further message by God, that Hananiah has not been correct. He will now wear an iron yoke, and the people will continue to serve the king of Babylon.

It is a story of prophetic showdown within the Temple: a sign of the conflict that takes place at the heart of faith.

Psalms 89:1-4, 15-18

This is a psalm of praise and lament. The part that is used today speaks of God's love and faithfulness. We hear of the provisions that God makes for those who follow. The close of the psalm is lamenting, speaking of feeling abandoned by God.

It is important to mention that only part of the psalm is being heard or used, because otherwise there is a false assumption that living by faith is cheerful, easily managed. The idea that those of deep faith never grumble, never rail against God for feelings of hardship or abandonment. Using the whole psalm captures a real vision of living. We can venture from the highs of the knowledge of all that God has given us to the lows of feeling bereft and distant from God's presence.

Romans 6:12-23

If you are planning to use this passage it would be worth including verse 11, as it reads better and gives a better explanation of what then follows.

Using the image of slavery, Paul contrasts life lived under sin and life lived under Christ. He describes two strands for living. Living as those following Christ means stepping away from the path of sin, and walking the path of life and grace. There is a death of our old selves, enabling us to embrace our new selves. Notice the image of obedience over death in verse 16, where unexpectedly the listener is invited to “obey...obedience”. Obedience in this context is life invested in Christ.

The language of slavery feels uncomfortable in our world, but it is worth noting that Paul is equally uncomfortable with the expression. In verse 19 he apologises for the use of human terminology to explore the two paths in life. In exploring the metaphor he sees the route of sin as being involuntary, just like slavery. Choosing Christ involves response and consent, and a willingness to allow Christ to lead our lives.

The language of sin leading to death is fascinating. It makes very clear that in not noticing Christ, we close off the path of hope, opportunity and love. It's a route through life that does not notice others, but feasts on selfishness. Choosing Christ, recognising our need for relationship, enables us to discover the fullness of life.

Matthew 10:40-42

I feel I have spent a lot of my ministry encouraging people to read the whole of a chapter, rather than just the few verses we have heard on a Sunday morning. This is an example of the need to have an awareness of all that has gone before the instructions given within the three verses set aside for today's reading.

Chapter 10 is the mission of the twelve disciples during Jesus's life. In contrast to Mark's Gospel, Jesus places the disciples in pairs. They are given instruction on the message that they are to take to the communities. It's not an easy message, but they are also offered the gifts that will allow them to bring healing within communities. Jesus encourages them to embrace the places where they are made welcome, and to shake the dust from their feet where they are not welcome.

The world Jesus sends them to with the message is not an easy world. It's a world where people wage war against one another, and their encounters will sometimes have them

fleeing for refuge. There is no equipment for the task, other than the clothes they wear, for they are to rely on the kindness of others.

This last section of the chapter moves from being addressed to the disciples, and instead is an instruction for those who might welcome disciples. Those who arrive at the door, or into our lives, bringing the presence of Christ are to be offered hospitality. Offering hospitality brings us into the community of Christ, allowing us to become prophet and disciple, and inviting us to participate in the mission.

Sermon ideas

Psalm 13/Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18 (or both)

These could be used for a sermon on lamenting. They are a good opportunity to explore what lament is. Within the Scottish tradition, we hear lament as music that speaks of the aching soul of longing: a longing to be acknowledged in our grief, loneliness, isolation, or ill health; a longing to be loved.

Genesis 22:1-14/Jeremiah 28:5-9 & Romans 6:12-23

In my opening paragraph, I made it very clear that I have struggled with at least one of these texts. So much so, that for quite a long time I avoided committing anything to paper. The idea of child sacrifice is abhorrent, and does not fit in a world where we are encouraging our communities to remember the humanity of children and allowing their voices to be heard. However I think that within a sermon it is correct to highlight the challenges that Scripture passages might bring to our understanding of the world.

What we hear from all of these passages is an invitation to obedience. Abraham is unwavering in his commitment to following what is asked of him by God, even if it risks losing something that he cherishes. Jeremiah is relentless in his obedience, prepared to physically shoulder the yoke of suffering for the people. Paul calls the new community of Jesus' followers to be obedient, placing Christ above selfish desire and sin.

Matthew 10:40-42

You might want to use all of this chapter, rather than three verses, and delve into the expectations of discipleship. Notice that discipleship is two-way. There is an expectation that there is a telling of the Christian story, an opportunity to bring healing and peace in building relationships with others. But being a recipient of these gifts is also discipleship, it invites us to offer hospitality.

At the start of the summer holidays, perhaps this offers an opportunity to explore pilgrimage and encourage people to engage in journeys of faith. As I write this at the end of March, confined in a house, I suspect there may not be much heading out and about to be done this year. But what kind of pilgrimages of faith can we make from our armchairs?

Chartres Cathedral offers the opportunity to explore an online pilgrimage of their labyrinth.

Some resources you may find helpful:

- Amy Oden – And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity. Abingdon Press, 2001.
- Richard Frazer – Travels with a Stick: A Pilgrim's Journey to Santiago de Compostela. Berlin Ltd, 2019.
- Scottish Pilgrim Routes Forum: <https://www.sprf.org.uk/routes.html>

Prayers

When writing prayers, I write with the texts for the week open beside me, looking for words and themes that should be voiced in prayer. I hope my prayers are written within the context of congregational life as well, relating to the experiences that might have been shared with individuals or groups during the week.

Call to worship (based on Psalm 13)

Trust in the unfailing love of God

Let our hearts rejoice in God's calling of us.

God does not abandon us

though we wrestle with doubt and sorrow.

God does not turn away and hide

instead God's light shines in the darkness.

God shields us from all threat

and lifts us when we fall.

Trust in the unfailing love of God

Let our hearts rejoice in God's calling of us.

Let us sing to God
for God is good.

Approach

God of Abraham,
God of Isaac,
God present of Jesus,
God present in the activity of Your people,
You are the God of invitation.

Your invitation given to Abraham
called him to follow
trusting in the promises
that You offered.
Promises of a relationship
that would build a community
willing to share in the care of Your creation.

Jesus is your invitation.
An invitation
into a relationship with You,
where we recognise the value
of those we share the world with;
where we see You
and greet You,
in the hands and voices of others.
The Good News fills our imaginations
with the hope of living
as You would have us live,
welcoming the stranger,
caring for the outcast,
healing those who struggle with life,
bring new life
where the dust of devastation has led to death.

Through the Holy Spirit,
Your invitation sounds
in least expected moments
and in the ordinary tasks of our days.

We are Your creation,
and in our turning to You
we trust You with our lives,
believing that with Your presence
our world can be transformed
to offer signs of the kingdom of heaven.
Amen

Thanksgiving

God of salvation,
we are surprised to discover
Your desire to have us as Your people;
we are surprised by the freedoms
You have bestowed upon us;
and from our surprise
we turn in thankfulness
to praise You
for Your trust in the choices we will make.

We are thankful for
our freedom;
the people who inspire us
with the story of faith they tell;
the gift of living
as a fellowship offering love
to the community.

Through Your grace,
may we be inspired
to live as those
who choose Your path of light
that the darkness of our fears and doubts
may be dispelled
by Christ's presence.
Amen

Confession

Comforter draw near,
for You have waited and watched,
as we have stumbled
through the tasks of life.

Our ears have not been open
to the sound of Your gentleness,
and so with frustration and anger
we have turned on those
we love and cherish,
and brought hurt and division to life.

Our eyes have not noticed
the beauty of our surroundings,
and in resentment of being restrained from living,
we have played our part
in the changing pattern of creation,
forgetting to steward all You have made.

In prayer
we remember You invite us
to choose between the path of darkness
and the path of light,
and laying our sorrow and failure on the ground
we long for Your forgiveness to call us
towards life with You.

We wait to be reshaped
by the fire of Your Holy Spirit,
as new vigour spurs us
to walk with You.

Silence

God's gift of eternal life has been given in Jesus Christ,
who offers us forgiveness from our sins,
and welcomes us to the way of holiness.
Amen

Prayers of the people

If we are back in our worship spaces (and depending on the size of congregation and the space available), it might be good to make a pilgrimage around the building, offering a prayer pilgrimage. If not back in the church, perhaps there are ways of sharing pictures of the spaces or items that speak of the pilgrimage of faith in your community.

As an example, these are places we would visit in our building with prayers that encourage us to think about the world of which we are part.

Font

In the beginning
You, Creator of the world,
pushed aside the water
to bring forth life.

We remember all those this day
who will bring new life to our world.

We pray for those giving birth,
and sorrow with those for whom the gift of a child is a deep held longing.

We give thanks for those birthing new inventions
that will change the patterns of our world
and understanding.

We long for the birthing of respect
that creates a world
where all are valued,
no matter creed, or gender, or age, or ability,
and loved because You loved us first.

Communion table

Gathered round a table
with those You were closest to,
You, Friend of the world,
pushed aside tradition
to allow God's presence
to be seen in the ordinary, everyday act of living.

We remember all those ordinary people
who have allowed us to meet God
alive within them.

People who have inspired us with their storytelling;
their care in the times when life is rough;
their healing balm that has healed our wounds.

May we allow You
to challenge our traditions
so that You may be met
in the ordinary acts of kindness and hospitality You invite us to.

A stained glass window

From a hilltop,
You wove the beauty of God
through the ears of those who were listening.

Our world aches and groans with our carelessness,
and the beauty of all You have made
can be lost in the fog of human noise
and manufacturing.

Reawaken our senses
with the light, colour and sound of creation.

Show us the selfishness
of wastefulness,
as it eats away not just at the natural world
but at the human world.

Change our patterns
so that hunger, drought and famine
become ancient stories
rather than daily news.

The door

On the day of Pentecost,
You, Holy Spirit,
blazed through the disciples,
calling them to new tasks
and expecting them
to bring the challenge of Christ's presence to the world.

When we burst through these doors this morning,
give us the words
that challenge governments and community leaders
with the truth or responsibility;
give us the language
that allows people of all ages
to hear You speak to them;
strengthen our resolve
to live as Your people,
in Christ's name.
Amen

Alternative Material

This material has been supplied by kind permission of **Spill the Beans** and allows you to explore the readings or theme of the service in creative ways that include everyone gathering for worship.

New material from Spill the Beans is provided in the latest issues available from their [website](#).

Through the Season

On Trinity Sunday the focus was on Genesis 1:1-2:4a, the whole of Creation in one Sunday. Genesis gave us six days, how could it all be covered in one?

It's too much for us really, a bit mind blowing, so we suggest that you do something a little different each week and set up stations around the church so that the congregation can spend a little time at one, a few or all of the stations and reflect on Creation and the Trinitarian Creator of it all. The seven stations follow the Genesis pattern of seven days. A suggestion is that you then use the seven stations to spread the story over each Sunday for the following weeks.

You could start on 14 June with a single station or installation and then add each station as suggested on a later Sunday. In as many of the stations as possible, it is suggested that the simplest way is to build on what you already have in the church, for example the “water” station should be laid out around the font, where people are familiar with the sign of water. Each station has a small installation and an action. Remind people that there is no hurry and they can take their time to do the action, reflect and pray. Give lots of time for this during the service. If possible it would be good to have someone at each station to assist those who want to use the station.

Day 2 – Water and Sky

Keywords: water, clean, thirst, drink, rain

Situation: Around the font which should be filled with water.

Installation: Arrange an area with as many glass bowls, glass jugs as you can gather, filled with cold water and clear plastic cups full of drinking water. You will need towels for people to dry their hands.

Action: Invite people to dip their hands in the bowls and let the water run off their fingers, listen to the sound, feel the flow. Sip from the cups, look at the light, reflection and refraction and rejoice because of the gift of water.

Prayers

Call to worship

This is a place of welcome,
a place where all may find solace,
where all may celebrate,
where all are valued,
where all are loved,
where all find refreshment on offer.
God welcomes you here.
Let's come to God in worship.

Responses

Leader: Welcome.

All: It is God's welcome.

Leader: You are valued and loved.

All: It is God's welcome.

Leader: We offer you some refreshment.

All: It is God's welcome.

Leader: Stay a while in this place.

All: It is God's welcome.

Reflection

This is a place of welcome,
a place where all may find solace,
where all may celebrate,
where all are valued,
where all are loved,
where all find refreshment on offer.
God welcomes you here.
Let's come to God in worship.

Sending

This is a place of welcome,
a place where all may find solace,
where all may celebrate,
where all are valued,
where all are loved,
where all find refreshment on offer.
God welcomes you here.
Let's come to God in worship.

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Musical suggestions

You can hear samples of these suggestions in the 'Weekly Worship' section of <https://music.churchofscotland.org.uk/>. This new online music resource will allow you to listen to and search the breadth of music available in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4).

You will find hidden gems and alternative arrangements to familiar songs that will inspire creativity and spark fresh curiosity about how we best use music in worship.

- CH4 126 – “Let’s sing to the Lord” – a nice, bright start to worship that allows little people to join in easily
- CH4 184 – “Sing to the Lord a joyful song” – a more traditional start to worship, that captures some of the themes from Psalm 89
- CH4 516 – “We are marching” – good if you choose to go with the theme of pilgrimage. It offers an opportunity to move around the building, if you have people who will march with you
- CH4 694 – “Brother, sister, let me serve you” – Picks up the themes from the Gospel reading
- CH4 748 – “Through saints we glimpse the light of Christ” – although more usually sung at All Saints’, this offers an opportunity to notice those who have chosen a path of obedience, living out Christ’s presence in their daily living

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