

## Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

### Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 8 October 2023

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev Neil Urquhart, Minister of Fullarton Parish Church, and Lorna and Sandy McFadyean for their thoughts on the nineteenth 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

The resources for the first four Sundays in October have been written by [Priority Area congregations](#) (those in the 5% most deprived parishes). This is a month with a particular focus on tackling poverty. October 2-8 is [Challenge Poverty Week](#); and October 17 is the United Nations' International Day for the Eradication of Poverty.

You will find more resources for Challenge Poverty Week on the [Priority Areas Facebook page](#), including stories about projects tackling poverty in congregations across Scotland. We would encourage you to share these with your congregation as a way of highlighting how the Church is engaging in anti-poverty work at a local level.

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At the end of Challenge Poverty Week, I come to the lectionary passages and themes from within Irvine's Fullarton Parish, one of many underprivileged priority areas in Scotland. Life expectancy in the Fullarton area is one of the lowest recorded in North Ayrshire, in the case of males it is over 12 years less than the North Ayrshire average life expectancy and 24 years less than the highest male life expectancy in the area. How we look out for and treat our neighbours is one of many important checks for us as we seek to be faithful to our calling, in Christ, to love God with our all and love our neighbour as self.

The fruitful vine and its demise are recurring themes in the lectionary passages and raise the question of how we identify, or not, with them. Personally, I recognise increased anxiety and ill health, breakdown of relationships and family dysfunction, and the declining state of our national Church (etc.) as symptomatic of a turning away from God, neglect of God's covenant promises and practices, and an attempt to live without Christ's salvation and transforming power. The prognosis of Isaiah 5 and Matthew 11, the lament of Psalm 80, and antidote and treatment of Philippians 3 are thoroughly relevant to our languishing 'exiled' Church and postmodern, post-Christian (pre-Christian?) society.

My approach has been to read the Bible passages in several versions, in particular the New International Version (NIV) translation and the Message (MSG) paraphrase. I have been drawn to words and themes in these which I further explored with the help of commentaries.

## Isaiah 5:1-7

Three questions are asked by God of Isaiah's hearers in this parable song: 1. How much do I love you? (vv1-2); 2. Why don't you love me? (vv3-4); and 3. What can I do? (vv5-7).

Whether it is sung for a lover or friend, the intention, as with Nathan's approach to King David over his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, is to draw the hearers into an engrossing and emotionally charged story, where their guilt convicts them by siding with the abused, ignored, and unappreciated landlord. God chooses prime land and, with no expense spared, creates all the very best conditions for success in a wonderful fruitful vineyard. Alas, those awarded such a 'gift horse' neglect and let it go to seed, bringing upon the vineyard and themselves no less than they deserve, natural justice.

In verse 7 those whom the song is sung about is spelt out: both northern Israel (Ephraim) and Judah (Jerusalem) have forgotten their identity as God's beloved, redeemed from Egypt and planted in the Promised Land, tragically only to neglect and forget their responsibility to live as God's Covenant People. Leaders have ended up oppressing their people and living for themselves; 'me-myself-I disease' is rampant and riddling to a rotten core. The inevitable will eventually come in the fall of the northern kingdom in 722BC (Assyria) and Judah in 587BC (Babylonians), but themes of redemption and God's continuing love for Israel continue in other parts of Isaiah, fulfilled ultimately in Christ's coming.

In 'The Message' translation I latched on to 'Garbage Grapes' (v3b). I imagine the gallus greenkeepers with their groaning gripes, complaining about the state of their vineyard, without realising that it is on their watch it all has happened, through their own neglect, faithlessness and focus on the wrong things, while ignoring those issues and people in need of their care and attention.

### **It got me asking:**

What of the myriad church buildings no longer fit for purpose and church ruins now overgrown, not even fit for any use? What of the many church families dying out due to no younger Jesus followers coming through?

What have we neglected in our lives, churches, and communities to leave us in the state of exile we find ourselves in Scotland today?

What of the poorer communities and rural areas which do not have the riches and resources other, more wealthy churches have? How are we caring for and sharing with them?

How have we neglected God's covenant commands and promises in Christ?

### **Psalm 80:7-15**

How long will the judgment of God be upon Israel and the sunshine and smile of God's face be withheld from them? The Psalm connects well with Isaiah 5 and Matthew 21 and gives further vent to the lament and cry of a people in a period of spiritual and national depression.

The heartfelt cry is for revival and for God to restore both God's people and reputation among the nations, where the people are derided and a laughingstock.

In the face of church decline and a nation that largely ignores or ridicules faith in Christ, this Psalm perhaps gives an expression of much-needed lament and sorrow over our situation, and passionate prayer for forgiveness and restoration. The description of Israel as a well-planted, fruitful vine which ends up 'going to the dogs' chimes with the lament of the Western Church in many situations.

The hymn 'Restore O Lord' (CH4 469) is a helpful heart-cry for God to move by Grace and Mercy (cf. Psalm 80:3, 14, & 19): <https://grahamkendrick.co.uk/restore-o-lord/>

I find The Message's paraphrase of Psalm 80:18b-19 a helpful prayer to echo and repeat regularly: "Breathe life into our lungs so we can shout your name! God, God-of-the-Angel-Armies, come back! Smile your blessing smile: That will be our salvation."

### **Philippians 3:4b-14**

Here, for me, is where the 'rubber hits the road', Paul exhorting us to ditch the letters after our name, proud achievements, sense of deserving, establishment, and fame, to focus upon the 'pearl of great price', and 'field of treasure', worth selling everything for. Paul had lots to leave behind in his pre-Christian life but seems also to be saying that all the good he has done, since then, is to be released too; that no failures, pride, success, or 'resting on laurels' might hold him back from giving God his all, towards heaven's finishing line.

Imagine Sir Chris Hoy, Sir Andy Murray, and Annie Lennox publicly placing all their gold medals and awards in a bin as a symbol of how an intimate, personal, life-transforming encounter with Christ eclipses all their achievements. A sports chaplain told me of a Bible study where an athlete took the gold medal around her neck and threw it in the bin to

illustrate how her Olympic medal was like garbage compared to the supreme superlative of knowing Jesus Christ. But, for many in our pews, and maybe some of us ministers, is there a dryness and distance between us and God, where a fresh revelation and experience of Jesus's love is required?

Daily, Paul is growing up into his baptism in Christ, dying to self and rising in Christ, burying selfishness, and raising others up with the Good News, faith, hope, and love of Christ. It is not a 'lather of enthusiasm' he works up from human drivenness, rather it is rooted in God's grace and love found in Jesus Christ. And so, Paul is ready to join Jesus in sacrifice, service, suffering and death. When Paul grows up, he wants to be like Jesus!

I find this truly inspiring. Nothing compares to knowing Jesus Christ as my Saviour, Lord, God, elder brother, captain, coach, and friend. All successes and triumphs are like dung, compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus as Saviour and Lord. Please do not take this the wrong way, I do not mean to apply my situation to yours, but I have about five years (God willing) till I retire. Shortly, along with local colleagues, we face the challenge / opportunity of sharing ministry in a union of at least five Irvine congregations. I have had moments when early retirement looked very attractive, but this passage's inspirational truth spurs me on. I am way out of my depth but take comfort and courage from the first beatitude that at the end of my rope there is more of God (The Message, Matt 5:3), and that if, as God's People, we can truly get our eyes and hearts set on Jesus and proving Jesus' resurrection power and risen presence, then good (even great) things can happen.

### **[Matthew 21:33-46](#)**

This is the second of three parables, set within a hostile confrontation with the powers that be. If the first parable exposed Israel's disobedience to God, here is highlighted their lack of loyalty to God, who gifted them such a privileged position as stewards of Israel.

As in Isaiah 5, the landowner is God, the vineyard Israel, and the tenants Israel's religious leaders. The messengers are past prophets and lastly, God sends God's Son, whom they also disregard and murder. The chief priests and pharisees know that they are Jesus' target in this parable and determine to fulfil its prophecy by ridding themselves of His threat. They recognise the son of Joseph, but not the Son of God. They want to maintain and retain their own human purpose and power at the expense of God's Kingdom. They construe Christ as a boulder blocking the way to constructing their Christless kingdom; but in rejecting Jesus, they eject the very capstone, corner stone and foundation of God's ultimate Kingdom. In addition, their rejection means an even greater opening for the Gentile world to get in on the new life Christ offers.

St Paul, a thoroughly educated religious Jew and pharisee of note, before meeting Jesus on the Damascus road, was entrenched in violent opposition to Christ and His followers. Interestingly, in Romans 10:2-5 (NIV) Paul passionately writes, “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship, and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.” He further predicts in Romans 11:11-12 (NIV) “Again I ask: Did Israel stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring!” Paul describes a major ingrafting of Jewish branches into Christ’s olive tree, which in turn will open fresh floodgates for Gentile convincing and entry into God’s Kingdom of light and life.

Further application: Learning to say “Yes” to Jesus involves saying “No” to lesser gods as well as obvious wrongs – e.g., we devote resources (time, money and people) to blessing ourselves, when Jesus is often beyond our walls, traditions and routines, calling us to join Jesus in service, sacrifice, and sharing the Good News; to learn from and bless the ‘poor in spirit’, ‘mourners’, ‘peace seekers’, the ‘victimised’, those ‘hungry for wrongs to be righted’. These are the people Jesus lived, died, rose, and ascended for, and continues come alongside by His Spirit. As someone said, “People will care (about Jesus) when they see how much we care for them.” What does loyalty to God look like in your, and my, locale and backyard?

## Sermon ideas

Within each of the lectionary passage sections I have given suggestions and pointers for possible avenues down which to apply these passages. The OT passages link well with Matthew 11 to expose the faithlessness and neglect of God’s people, and in particular the nation’s leadership. Bringing things up to date, I do not find it hard to identify with the ‘Exocet missile’ target of Scripture’s judgment. Psalm 80 is the type of prayerful lament appropriate for us today in the Western Church, and in Philippians 3 St Paul gives us an encouraging, challenging and inspirational example of the type of faithful commitment to Christ’s way that is a fitting response to God’s amazing love shown to us in, and through, the Father’s love, the Son’s sacrifice, and the Holy Spirit’s persistence in bringing home to us the loving forgiveness and life-giving power of God’s love shown to us through Jesus Christ.



If the 'What?' of the sermon / study is an exposure of our faithlessness and God's faithfulness, what is the 'So What?' What is the sharp end and edge? What are we to do in response – Lament? Repent? Return? Consider what tending and taking care of God's vineyard (Kingdom purposes) might look like where we live, love, and are beloved.

God's two greatest commandments and summary of the 'Law and the prophets' are: "Love God with your all, and your neighbour as yourself." Can you think of down-to-earth examples where you are of what obedience to these commands will look like, to illustrate what it means to grow up into your baptism in Christ and press on towards the 'goal for which God has called you heavenwards in Christ Jesus'?

## Prayers

In these prayers, we gather to reflect on God's loving care and guidance as the shepherd of our souls and the vineyard keeper. We confess our shortcomings and seek God's forgiveness, expressing gratitude for unfailing love and hope in knowing Christ. Our intercessions reach out to those in need, seeking healing and comfort. As we conclude, we seek God's blessing and guidance to press forward in faith, carrying the hope of God's redemption into the world.

### Gathering prayer / Call to worship

Eternal God, shepherd of our souls, and keeper of the vineyard,  
As we gather in Your presence today, we come with hearts filled with gratitude and awe.  
We acknowledge that You, O Lord, are the loving vineyard keeper  
who tenderly cares for Your people.

Throughout history, You have nurtured us with Your providence and guidance,  
calling us into covenant relationship.

In this sacred space, we want to know You more deeply,  
to understand the path of righteousness and justice that You lay before us.

We recognise that You are the Good Shepherd,  
and we, Your sheep, yearn to follow Your voice and walk in Your ways.

As we stand together before You,  
may our worship be an offering of praise and thanksgiving,  
recognising Your loving care and the hope we find in Christ Jesus.

We humbly submit our lives to Your loving guidance, that we may be a fruitful vineyard,  
reflecting Your glory to the world around us.

In the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Redeemer,



we gather and worship. Amen.

### **Confession / Repentance**

Merciful God, who calls us to turn from our ways and seek Your face,  
we come before You with humble hearts, acknowledging our shortcomings and failures.  
We recognise that, as Your beloved vineyard,  
we have not always borne the fruits of righteousness and justice as we ought.  
Forgive us, O Lord, for the times we have turned away from Your guidance and pursued our  
own desires.

We have often been distracted by worldly concerns, neglecting the weightier matters of  
justice, mercy, and compassion.

Help us to turn back to You, seeking Your grace and transforming power.

May Your Spirit work within us,  
shaping our hearts to reflect Your love and compassion in all our thoughts, words, and  
actions.

In the name of Jesus Christ, who bore our sins on the cross, we repent and seek renewal.  
Grant us the courage to follow You faithfully, turning away from the paths of selfishness  
and unrighteousness,  
and embracing the ways of love and mercy.  
In Your mercy, Lord, hear our prayer. Amen.

### **Thanksgiving / Gratitude**

Gracious God, the source of all blessings and the provider of every good thing,  
With hearts full of gratitude, we lift our voices in thanksgiving for Your unfailing love and  
patient care.

You are the shepherd of our souls, leading us through the challenges of life and providing  
for our every need.

As we look back on our journey, we are grateful for the surpassing value of knowing Christ,  
the one who embodies Your grace and truth.

Through faith in Christ, we find righteousness and hope for the world.  
In times of trial and uncertainty, Your love sustains us, and Your promises give us strength.  
We thank You for Your faithfulness throughout generations,  
guiding Your people, the vineyard of the Lord, with Your steady hand.

As we share in this gathering, may our lives be living testimonies of Your redeeming love.  
In the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour, and the reason for our thanksgiving,  
we offer our praise.

May our hearts overflow with gratitude,  
and may our lives bear the fruits of gratitude, love, and kindness.  
In Your grace, Lord, hear our prayer. Amen.

### **Prayer for others / Intercession**

Loving God, the comforter of the afflicted and hope of the hurting,  
We lift up people in need of Your healing touch and comforting presence.  
In the face of pain and suffering,  
we find hope in Your promises and the assurance that You are with us.

Hear our prayers for the broken-hearted, the sick, and the suffering.  
We lift up those who are burdened with physical ailments, emotional distress, and spiritual uncertainties.  
May they experience the hope and restoration that come from knowing You.

We pray for the lonely, the oppressed, and the marginalised,  
that they may find solace in Your love and find justice and equity in our society.  
May Your Church be a beacon of hope,  
reaching out to those in need with compassion and practical support.

We pray for our community and nation,  
for all who are facing hardships and challenges.  
Be with those who are seeking righteousness and guidance,  
that they may find realisation of their hope in You.  
Strengthen the bonds of love and fellowship among us,  
that we may be a united witness to Your grace.

We also remember those who have not yet fully embraced Your invitation.  
Softening their hearts and drawing them nearer to You,  
that they may experience the fullness of Your love and grace.  
May they come to know the hope found in Christ, our Saviour.

In the name of Jesus Christ, who intercedes for us before the Father, we lift our prayers.  
May our intercession be a fragrance of love and mercy before Your throne.  
In Your compassion, Lord, hear our prayer. Amen

### **Blessing / Closing prayer**

Heavenly Father, the cornerstone of our faith and the source of all strength,  
as we prepare to depart from this gathering,  
we carry with us the hope and assurance of Your redemption.  
May the peace of Christ dwell in our hearts and guide us in all that we do.

As we press forward in faith,  
may we forget what lies behind and embrace the call You have set before us.  
May our lives bear the fruits of righteousness,  
as we seek to live out Your mission in this world.  
May we be instruments of Your peace,  
spreading love, grace, and justice wherever we go.

As we go forth from this place, may we be salt and light,  
bringing hope and transformation to the world in need.  
Strengthen us to love one another, to care for those around us,  
and to serve the common good.

Grant us wisdom and discernment as we navigate the challenges of our time,  
and may our actions bring glory to Your name.

In the name of Jesus Christ, the cornerstone of our faith,  
we go forth with Your blessing.  
May Your Spirit guide us,  
and may Your love compel us to love and serve others with humility and grace.  
May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father,  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and forevermore.  
In Your love, Lord, hear our prayer. Amen.

### **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 469 – “Restore O Lord, the honour of your name!”
- CH4 506 – “All I once held dear” (Knowing You)

#### Songs of God’s People

- SOGP 51 – “In a byre near Bethlehem” – Sung to Wild Mountain Thyme. The chorus of this song can act as a helpful recurring echo sung throughout the service and/or in response to the prayers of approach and thanksgiving.
- SOGP 102 – “The Spirit lives to set us free” (Walk in the light)
- SOGP 113 – “We lay our broken world in sorrow at your feet”
- Song – “You are welcome here, come as you are” (Chris Muglia, 2017).  
<https://www.ocp.org/en-us/songs/89194/you-are-welcome-here>
- Song – “Jesus of the scars” (Graham Kendrick in Partnership with Kintsugi Hope).  
CCLI number 7218323 <https://grahamkendrick.co.uk/jesus-of-the-scars/>

## 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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