

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost – 22 October 2023

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev Jim Gemmell, Minister of Glasgow Carnwadric, for his thoughts on the 21st 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.

I am grateful for the invitation to prepare this week's worship material as we focus on Priority Areas and the challenges of living with the obscenity of poverty and the effect it has on individuals and families, both negatively and positively. I have been the minister of a Priority Area Church since June 2020. It has been the most challenging, difficult, but ultimately rewarding period of my ministry. I do have a confession to make before I start, however. I have never used Weekly Worship before, so my offering may be wide of the mark, but hopefully also helpful!

Like all preachers, I start my preparations with the Bible. I immerse myself in the passage and live with it for a couple of days. There are many good Study Bibles on the market, my favourite is the Thomson Chain Reference Bible. It is a mine of information and references. You can easily write a sermon without turning to another book! Although I have my commentaries on the bookshelf!

Context is vital and means we must read around the passage to see what led up our passage. Next, I ask questions of the passage. What does the Biblical writer want us to learn here? What do we learn about God? Who is God speaking to in the passage? Where is Jesus in the story? What is the Holy Spirit doing? How does the passage grow our faith, challenge our sinfulness, and inspire us as the People of God? What does it say about our society? What needs to change, but also what can we change?

I have some overarching themes in mind as I think of a Bible passage. What is the vision of God in the passage? People living with poverty or injustice often cannot see beyond the day. It involves feeding their children, making sure the children get to school and caring for

family members with poor mental health and complex medical conditions. Many do not have the time, energy, or luxury to see beyond the immediate.

In the summer one of the projects running from my church took a group of children and parents to the Ayrshire coast. One child came back 'buzzing' about their experience. It is heartening and sad in equal measure that a simple trip to the coast can have this reaction.

In our preaching, help people to lift their eyes heavenward. In our preparation find ways to help people see a BIG God. One who is big enough to change lives and situations.

I am also looking for the hope in the passage. Hope gets us out of our beds in the morning. Hope helps us to look beyond ourselves. Hope expands our horizon. Without hope there is no reason to live. The Apostle Paul tells us that hope does not disappoint us (Romans 5:5). Surely, this is where we need Jesus Christ in our preaching. Make sure we point to Jesus!

I am also interested in how the passage challenges me. I may not be able to change situations and people around me, but God can challenge me to change. So, what in my life can be changed with God's help? We need the Holy Spirit to reveal this to us. Closely allied to this thought is where is forgiveness in this passage? What in my life needs forgiveness? Who do I need to forgive?

My preaching is conversational in nature. I ask questions that draws upon people's experience and look for people to respond. Hopefully leading to a discussion and an opportunity for us to learn together!

Exodus 33:12-23

The passage before us reveals one of the greatest events in the life of Moses and for the Children of God. God reveals God's glory to Moses (v18 - 23). Moses had spent 40 days with God on Mount Sinai receiving the Law of God. During this time, the people of God rebelled against God and built a Golden Calf. This became their god, whom they worshipped. In response, God would no longer lead them into the Promised Land.

The passage opens with Moses reminding God of God's own words, (v12) "See, you have said to me...."). Moses would lead God's people. God knew him by name. He had found favour with God. But there was a problem, this people were now under judgment. God would no longer go with them on this journey.

In the light of verse 12, Moses asks for more knowledge of God and for more of God's favour. Moses is longing for a deeper relationship with God, however for Moses it is not simply about him and God. He finishes by pleading for God's people, "Consider, too, that this nation is your people" (v13).

In response, God promises to be present with Moses wherever he goes, and that he would be given rest (v14). The 'you' in the passage is singular. God's promise is for Moses alone. God will go with Moses alone and give rest also, to Moses alone. Moses, however, does not give up. He pleads with God, "If your presence will not go, do not bring us up from here" (v15). Moses and the people needed God in the challenges that lay ahead.

It is the presence of God that defines the leadership of Moses and the uniqueness of the people as the People of God (v16). Without it they would be like all the other nations. Moses' persistence is answered (v17). God will not abandon God's people. Prayer works!

Moses was now moved to seek further blessing, "Please show me Your glory." (v18).

In response to Moses' audacious request, God replies, "I will make all my goodness pass before you..." (v19). To protect Moses, God places him in the cleft of a rock and covers his eyes as the glory of God passes by. Only when God moves away is Moses allowed to see God's goodness, mercy, compassion and to hear the Lord's name, "YHWH".

This is the climax of a wonderful story. In judgment there is forgiveness and mercy. Moses foreshadows the greater Moses – our Lord Jesus Christ (Hebrews 3:3-4). He pleads with the Father for the souls of men and women. He reveals the Glory of God.

I want to help my congregation see the glory, but what stops us from seeing it? How do we understand Exodus 33:11 in the light of verse 20? Preincarnate meeting with Jesus Christ or as a metaphor of greater intimacy with God? Where did we last see the glory of God? Faith is both personal but also in community. What distinguishes us from the world?

[Psalm 99](#)

Earlier this summer, the nation was in the grip of royal hysteria as preparations were made for the coronation of King Charles III. It was a lavish affair and the great and the good from around the world gathered to be part of the spectacle.

During the coronation service Charles declared that he was a king, but that there was One who was the King of kings to whom he owned fealty, Jesus Christ.

In Psalm 99 the Psalmist brings us into the throne room of the LORD, the King.

The psalm can be divided into three parts, with the refrain, “he is holy”, in verses 3 and 5, and “the Lord our God is holy” (v9). There is something different and distinct about the Kingship of God, who does not misuse power and who will not be compromised.

In the first section we have an awe-inspiring vision of God, who reigns overall. The nations are to tremble before God, but who is also God to be worshipped.

In the second section, we see that God is a God of justice and equity, who rules and acts according to God’s own character, who does what is right. There will be no miscarriages of justice in the Kingdom of God, nor will there be foodbanks or poverty! This leads the people to worship God.

In the third section we learn that God raised up Moses, Aaron and Samuel to serve and intercede for the people. Countless men and women have been raised up by the forgiving God, to hold the people of God to a high standard.

Questions I would ask around this text would be: How big is God to you? Does it really matter? How has God used you to serve? What do you need to take to the Lord? What societal structures need to change to allow God’s Kingdom to come and how do we effect change?

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

The Apostle Paul established the Church in Thessalonica and had a great passion for its members (vv2-3). The opening verses are Trinitarian in nature. The foundation of this fellowship was faith, love and hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. They had also been chosen by God and had experienced the power of the Holy Spirit (vv4-5).

Paul then makes an astonishing claim: “you became imitators of us and of the Lord” (v6). What did Paul mean? What does it mean to imitate the Lord? How do our congregations imitate Jesus Christ?

The theme of sacrifice is important. They received the word in affliction (v6). Being a Christian is often tough. We may experience pain and hardship. The Thessalonians also gave up their idols to serve God (v9). What has God asked you to give up? The Golden Calf hindered the people of God in Exodus 33 – what idols are hindering you?

Is this partly why Paul writes that they had become an example to all the believers (v7) and that reports about their faith had gone everywhere (v8)?

One inspiring act of sacrifice in my own church was when a 14-year-old donated £3,000 to our Helping Hands Community Foodbank, after she won a young enterprise award in 2021. The money helped get our foodbank established and allowed us to do a lot of good. It has allowed us to connect with people and provided opportunities to share the love of God. What opportunities can you see in your parish?

Hope is a significant theme in this passage. In every verse you feel the hope that the Thessalonians had. Their hope was in Christ (v3). They waited with expectation at the return of Christ (v10).

There was also the hope of deliverance from judgment. Without hope there is no future, no reason to live. Some people can barely get out of bed in the morning, but they often do when they know there are people who care and are ready to listen to them. This is one of the great strengths of our churches. We care! How might we do so more?

[Matthew 22:15-22](#)

We have all had that experience I imagine, where someone asks us a seemingly innocent question, but something tells us that there is more to the question than meets the eye.

Throughout His ministry Jesus had been discussing and debating with many people. Most people came to Jesus with sincere questions as they wrestled with the issues of life and faith, such as the Rich Young Ruler (Luke 18:18 -34). Jesus, however, also had to contend with religious leaders who felt threatened by His teaching.

In Matthew 22, we are looking at the first of three questions directed at Jesus: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” (v17). It is a simple question but the answer had huge ramifications. Not just for Jesus, but also for you and me!

At this time Israel was occupied by the Romans, who demanded taxes from the Jews. The imposition of these taxes had caused great unrest in the country and the rise of the Zealots as a result. The Pharisees were against these taxes as this was an indignity to God. The Herodians on the other hand were the government party. For them paying taxes was a good thing.

If Jesus said the tax should be paid, the Pharisees would accuse Jesus of siding with the Romans and would discredit Him with the people. If, however Jesus said the people should not pay the tax, the Herodians would accuse Him of sedition against the Romans.

Taking a Roman coin, Jesus asked them whose portrait and inscription it bore. His question could not have been simpler. You can imagine that they answered without really thinking about their answer. “Caesar”, of course! “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (v21).

Jesus was on the horns of a dilemma but, as He often did, amazed people with the simplicity of His reply. The real issue is one that has exercised Christians for generations. How do we reconcile our duty to the state and our duty to God? This is especially so when we disagree with the actions of state power.

The state has legitimate responsibilities and is to be supported. When state power is used well it is a force for good and can promote a just and equitable society. State power is limited, however. We don’t give the state what is rightly God’s. We have obligations to God. As Christians we hold dual citizenship.

In what ways can Christians legitimately challenge the state? How can Christians disagree without being disagreeable?

Sermon ideas

There are questions within each passage of exegesis that you can consider as you prepare your sermon. Not all gatherings include a sermon; people engage with scripture in different ways so these questions could also be used to frame a conversation in groups, Q&As, or other ways to approach scripture and share learning.

Prayers

Call to worship

O come, let us sing to the Lord;

let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;

let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

For the Lord is a great God

and a great King above all gods. (Psalm 95:1-3,NRSV)

Prayer of approach and confession

Glorious is our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Lord, You robe Yourself in light and splendour.
The heavens declare Your majesty, power and might.
Nothing is comparable to You, O Lord.
You possess a beauty that is unmatched in time and eternity.

Lord God, You invite us to gather in Your presence to worship You.
Open our lips, that we may offer fitting praise and worship to You, our great God.
Enhance our senses that we may perceive You with greater clarity and understanding.
Increase our faith that we may trust and love You more.

The Bible tells us that we love You because You first loved us.
We bless You that Jesus Christ opened the way to a closer,
more intimate relationship with You.
Help us not to be fearful or timid as You draw us to Yourself.
Give us a holy boldness as we approach Your throne of grace.

Lord Jesus, we bless You for Your salvation work on the Cross.
As we look to You, show us the wonder of the Cross.
Without You we would be lost and without hope.
Help us hurry to You. Leaving behind our sin and fears and doubts.

Holy Spirit, empower us today with a fresh anointing of divine power.
Give us renewed zeal for God and the glory of Your great name.
As You brooded over the waters of creation, brood over us, Your people.
Awaken us to the new life You bring.

All this we pray in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayer of thanksgiving

Lord God, we thank You for the many blessings You have given us.
We thank You for our families, friends, neighbours,
and colleagues who support us and care for us.
We thank You that you called us to serve You and the mission of the Church.
We present these our offerings to You.
Help us to use them carefully and wisely
and through them Your Kingdom may grow and increase.

Prayers of intercession

In Scripture, prayer often has a physicality: standing, kneeling etc. We are also encouraged to lift holy hands in prayer (1 Timothy 2:8). The prayer of intercession is a good opportunity to get the congregation to participate in prayer by using their hands. I have often used it in family services. Children really like it! Simply encourage the congregation to use their hands as described below.

Hand raised (praying to God)

Father God,
we lift to You our hands and our voices as we bring to You our prayers.
We thank You that You hear us.
Help us today to pray according to Your will
and to listen to You as much as You listen to us.
You are our hope in the challenges of life.
Hear us now as we pray.

Hand pointed out to the street (prayer for our society/world)

Lord,
we thank You for the beauty we see all around us.
The beauty of the world with its great richness and abundance.
Forgive us Lord, when we have not cared for the earth as You desired.
Nor do we care for each other as we should.

Lord, help us to create a society where there is no need for foodbanks or food pantries.
Where hunger and want is an unknown reality.
Help us to ensure there is enough to enable human flourishing.
Encourage our politicians and those in public life
to act with integrity, honesty, and compassion.
May we all be afforded dignity because of our common humanity
and as image bearers of God.

Hands forming a heart (prayer for the broken-hearted)

Lord of Compassion,
we remember all who have experienced bereavement, recently or in years past.
The wounds of sorrow have not healed for so many.
Please touch hearts that are full of pain and grief.
We pray also for those who are isolated and lonely.
By Your Holy Spirit reveal Yourself to them.
Help us to be a good neighbour or friend to someone known to us.

We pray also for those suffering from poor mental health and physical health problems.
Touch them Lord God with Your divine healing.

Hand placed on someone's shoulder (pray for them)

Lord,
we don't always know the burdens our friends and neighbours are carrying.
We thank You that You know this child of God intimately.
We lift them up to You in prayer.
Touch them Lord where their need is greatest.
Encourage them if they are downcast.
Carry them if they are weak.
Lead them if they have lost their way.
In the silence we sit together holding each other's burdens.

[Hold a moment of silence]

Right hand placed over our heart (prayer for ourselves)

Lord God,
I pray for myself.
You know me better than I know myself.
Help me to be totally open with You and with myself.
My greatest need is to know You better and to love You more.
May Jesus be a living reality to me.
May I be filled with the Holy Spirit.
I pray for my family and friends.
For their love and care.
Help me to return that love and care in my actions.

[Hold a moment of silence]

Hand pointing into the sanctuary (prayer for the Church)

Lord,
we thank You for the Church
and for the way we have found love, care, and faith within the Bride of Christ.
Forgive us Lord, where we have not lived out our calling
and have damaged people and hurt them for our own gratification.
We pray for own congregation as we face continuing challenges.
Challenges also bring new opportunities to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.
Help us to see the opportunities that You open us for us.

We pray for the Church of Scotland as we painfully navigate towards a new way of being Church.

Help us Lord, not to lose sight of You in our decision-making.

Blessing

O Lord, You met with us this morning.

Our souls have been filled with the treasures of heaven.

The hope of Jesus Christ has infused us, and the Holy Spirit has challenged us.

In this You have prepared Your saints for the week that lies ahead.

Now send us away in the sure and certain knowledge that You go with us.

And the blessing of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be with you all. 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.

Some obvious choices include

- CH4 124 – “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation”
- CH4 132 – “Immortal, invisible, God only wise”
- CH4 143 – “Who put the colours in the rainbow?”
- CH4 465 – “Be thou my Vision”
- CH4 466 – “Before the throne of God above”

There are also a lot of great YouTube videos out there with fine Christian worship. You cannot go wrong with Stuart Townend or the Gettys. More recently an Australian group, [CityAlight](#), have produced some beautiful hymns that are biblically and theologically rich, musically refreshing. Check out:

- “Only a Holy God”
- “It was finished upon that Cross”
- “Grace”
- “Jesus, Strong and kind” – a great one for children

St Ebbes – An Anglican Church in Oxford shares some lovely hymns, both traditional and modern. Check out [their website](#) or Emu Music on YouTube:

- “Hymn of the Saviour”
- “1,2,3,4,5 Jesus is now alive” – another one suited to children

Thanks to Iain McLarty, who introduced Priority Area Churches to “Hear the song of our Lament” on [Resound Music](#). A lovely song that helps us to include a time of lament in our worship.

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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