

Seventh Sunday of Easter – Year B

Sunday 12 May 2024

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rt Rev Sally Foster-Fulton, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, for her thoughts on the seventh Sunday of Easter.

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 prayer I use before the beginning of the reflection/sermon summarises the approach that best helps me focus: ‘Throw open every window and every door by which Your word might reach us. Open our hearts and our minds and our spirits to whatever You might have to say to us today.’

Using the Lectio Divina method of reading the text

<https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/253799/1-What-is-Lectio-Divina.pdf> is a way to take you deeper into a reflective space that lets new and ‘of the time’ insights emerge. In summary, you read the text three times:

- First, to listen – is there a word or phrase that catches your attention?
- Then, to ponder – what could that word or phrase be saying to you today?
- Finally, to pray – what is this insight asking you to do, let go of or take on?

Giving the texts the space to unpack themselves like this often sets the direction of travel for the sermon. I also like to take the pondering and prayer insights for a walk or a coffee, let them stretch into that part of my brain and heart where the wrestling and questions come into their own. I find that a change of scenery lets something loose, but you’ll know what works for you. Give yourself and your listeners the gift of that contemplation time.

Preaching never happens in a vacuum, but speaks into the present day and reflects how our faith intersects with the challenges, joys and fears facing us; so intentionally bringing scripture and those issues into a conversation with each other is a powerful way to hear the texts speak today. What is on the minds and hearts of those who will hear you this week? How do those lived experiences sit with what our faith calls us to do, say, be? Look for both the comfort and the challenge.

[Acts 1:15-17, 21-26](#)

The opening of our passage immediately sent me back to the beginning of this opening chapter of Acts. “In those days”, it says – what days? Rather than glide past that, it calls the preacher to explore the backdrop. ‘Those days’ were the days immediately following the story of Christ’s resurrection and ascension, they came on the heels of that iconic statement from two messengers in white robes who stood beside the disciples as they watched Jesus ascending into heaven, as they stared in vain while a cloud took Him out of their sight – “Why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into

heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” The feeling of being suddenly cut loose, your guide gone from sight, your template taken out of your hands, resonates in the beginning of Acts, and the new reality continues to unpack itself in our text for today.

Peter argues that there needs to be a replacement for Judas, a continuity from within the group of long-time followers. We could look to the symbolism of twelve disciples mirroring the twelve tribes of Israel, but one striking thing is they are making this up as they go along. They are finding their way together. Another interesting conundrum is the casting of lots. They propose two candidates, but there is no vote or complex discernment process – it is decided on the throw of the dice.

Oftentimes, when building something new, there is no established protocol, no settled set of instructions, and you have to do your best with what you know ... a good question for a preacher is, how and where are we called to embrace that spirit of comfort and challenge? As we ‘build together’ (the Moderator Designate’s theme for the coming year), we will encounter times when we need to seek the Spirit, follow the footsteps of Jesus and create a new thing that honours the call to be His body today.

[Psalm 1](#)

Again, we encounter this thread of grappling with what is the right, love and justice-directed path. The one who is blessed meditates day and night with the law of the Lord, and in this context, it is much more than a list of rules and regulations (oh, were it that straightforward!) God’s law is God’s whole aim for human life, a creation born of love, joy, trust and peace. Happy are those, blessed are those brave enough to search diligently and determinedly for that wisdom. A good question to ask ourselves as we grapple with this psalm is where do we see examples of the times it is tempting to follow the advice of the ‘wicked’, walk the path sinners tread, sit in the seat of scoffers? What do we even mean by that?

Oftentimes in the Hebrew Bible, the ‘wicked’ are identified as those who have gained wealth by abusing the system. They have ‘arrived’ and they use whatever loophole or advantage they can find to stay in their exclusive neighbourhood. Placing current political and societal issues alongside this psalm invites us to consider whose advice we are following individually when we make choices about our money and time; and whose advice we are following when the government makes decisions on infrastructure and benefits for the most vulnerable, or defence and tax breaks. It calls us to question the path we are on and, possibly the most challenging invitation, how do we move away from the temptation

to sit on the side-lines and scoff rather than be solution-focused when action is desperately needed?

Finally, the powerful imagery here of “trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper” (v3). The healthiest, most productive plants are those that constantly draw nourishment from the source. How can we encourage, support and offer the space for that deep reflection? How can we use this homily to help people make connections in their lives with the images of the flourishing tree or the withering chaff? Where can we support, encourage and call for change?

1 John 5:9-13

Firstly, this is quite a dense text, and I found myself reading it more than the three times! It is key that we pay attention to the context and backdrop of 1 John – a time when the early Church was experiencing pressure within and without, a time of teething pains in the community as they grappled with new ideas vs orthodoxy (an orthodoxy still in its infancy!). The nature of the divinity of Christ, His incarnation, whether He suffered and died, were all being questioned, explored and reframed by some followers. In this letter, the author is countering those claims. It is meant for a specific place, situation and time and we need to respect that. There are, however, some gems to lift out and examine.

The word “testimony” is best translated as ‘witness’ and “heart” is also identified as ‘guts’. If you believe, then your response comes from the guts – it is an instinctive, visceral response.

I think this helps us navigate this text and steers us away from the temptation to use the words as weapons to ‘other’ others. How tempting to become the oppressor by taking this out of context and turning it into a judgement that puts some on the inside and some out; but, if in your guts is love, peace and the radical welcome of Christ, you will bring and build that same love and peace wherever you find yourself.

John 17:6-19

This is a rich, deep text. Set in the dismissal discourses, Jesus prays for His disciples, followers, friends, preparing them for His departure. It is a powerful point that Jesus is praying for them specifically in their hearing. It is an intimate moment, and this should be unpacked a bit for your listeners.

There is also a strong interplay with the understanding of ‘the world’ and ‘the word’. ‘The world’ or κόσμῳς (cosmos) is referred to eleven times. The term can be interpreted in different ways:

- The created order
- All of humanity
- Humanity not in right relationship with God

Grappling with what the author means by ‘cosmos’, offers insight into the real conundrum we face as people of faith. In the beginning of the beginning, God loved the world into being and called it good. God’s Spirit breathed into the human creature and gave us life. God became one of us, walked with us – lived, loved, taught, fed, healed, forgave us and called us to do the same. And now, as Jesus prepares the disciples for the time they will be in the world without Him, Jesus prays this prayer for them – that they go into the world and take Him with them wherever they go.

The word, the logos (λόγος) is deeply provocative. Logos is used in the first chapter of John to introduce Christ’s presence in the very beginning of ‘the world’. In the beginning was ‘the word’/‘logos’. This **Word, this Wisdom**, was there, calling us into being, crafting and creating and calling the world good. By highlighting this nuance in the original language, the worship leader lifts out this synergy of purpose. The Word is in us in the world God created, the world Christ loves and the world the Spirit moves in. In verse 14, when Jesus says, “I have given them your word”, He uses ‘logos’ (λόγον) specifically, echoing the first chapter of John, taking us back to the very beginning of creation. A challenge to us is to not only embrace the world God created, but to be part of its transformation! There will be times when other agendas will hate (turn against/turn away from) us because the ‘wisdom’ we share threatens their power or position. That tension is part of what we are called to when ‘love, forgiveness, peace, justice and radical welcome’ is what we are intent on building.

Sermon ideas

Build around the concept of ‘These days’

- How do we build together for the future in these days?
- What/who do we need to be considering first?
- What do we need to clear out of the way?

Focus on Psalm 1 and the tree imagery

- Where should we plant ourselves?
- What nourishes our souls, the spirit of our communities and fuels social justice?
- How can we be the 'streams of water' that feed others so they can flourish?

Focus on the text from John 17 and its powerful call to transform the world God loves

- How do we live fully in the world, transforming it rather than conforming to conventional wisdom – wisdom that worships power, money, success, stuff? Psalm 1:1-2 speaks into this well, so unpack the temptation to sit on the side-lines and heckle rather than roll up your sleeves and find a solution.
- Focus on the interplay between 'world' and 'word'. The 'Word' was in the 'world' from the very beginning, and is the creative imagination that crafted it to be good.

The theme for my year as Moderator was 'Ubuntu', a Zulu phrase meaning 'I am because you are' or 'I am because we are.' We cannot be fully human by ourselves, but are created to be in community, to live and learn and love from and with each other. How do these texts embody 'ubuntu'? How do we 'build together? The Church of Scotland is facing huge challenges as we restructure our Presbyteries, lean into our mission plans, let go of or reimagine long-loved spaces and move into new ones that need our home-making skills. The hymn, 'Let us build a house where love can dwell' (CH4 198) is a solid base to build a reflection on. Take the imagery in the verses and marry them with what is happening in your church, your community and our world.

Prayers

The Moderator and Moderator Designate have collaborated with the prayers for the seventh Sunday of Easter and Pentecost. Sally and Shaw hope that you might use/adapt these as suits your own setting.

Gathering prayer / Call to worship

God of the journey, Christ of the Way, Spirit who comforts and chides and challenges and moves us;

we work out how to walk Your path.

We gather as Your children, ready to listen and learn.

Speak into our today.

Let us worship, wonder and walk together.

Beloved, settle here and prepare to be unsettled.

Repetitive/Responsive prayer for use at different points throughout the service.

This prayer could work particularly well if spoken by different people in different languages each time it is used, or spoken by the congregation together. This would symbolise the oneness and togetherness of the children of God. The prayer could also be recorded in different languages in advance, if there are no different language speakers in your congregation. If you do not have anyone in the congregation who speaks another language why not involve the local school modern language department and ask if they would be willing to record the prayer which you can play during your service.

Keep us true to who we are.

Enable us to use the gifts you have given.

Bless us with Your Spirit, that we might build upon the foundations of Christ as we seek to be Your Church at work in the world.

Confession / Repentance

‘Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers’.

Forgive us when we sit on the side-lines and heckle rather than roll up our sleeves and seek a solution.

Forgive us for following the path of least resistance, even when it is littered with injustice.

When we weave away from Your wisdom because it calls us to travel to new and unfamiliar places, to embrace siblings we struggle with and strangers who raise our suspicions, when it calls us to slow our pace in our race to the top or to pick it up,

when we drag our heels when asked to heal relationships, forgive and forge new ways into our narrow world view.

Loving Creator, create us in Your image.

Prayer of thanksgiving and intercession

Template, instruction manual, sat nav, flatpack DIY step-by-step directions – if only!

God of the journey,

Christ of the Way,

Spirit who comforts and chides and challenges and moves us;

go with us as we walk Your path.

When we leave this place, pray we do not leave You here.
Teach and talk to our every moment.
Speak into our today.
Settle in and unsettle us until Your will be done.

Thank You for those who walk the journey with us,
who plant themselves beside us, offering shade and safety,
whose roots go deep.
Thank You for those who grow fruit and share it without measure.
Thank You for those who pick up their tools
and build love into the bricks and mortar,
making space for love to fill every corner.

God of the journey,
Christ of the Way,
Spirit who comforts and chides and challenges and moves us;
move us into the world You love.

[Offer prayers for your church, your community, our world – base these prayers on what is happening now – the places we need to build together. Use the concept of Ubuntu]

When we leave this place, pray we do not leave You here.
Teach and talk to our every moment.
Speak into our today.
Settle in and unsettle us until Your will be done.
Amen.

Gathering prayer before the sermon

Template, instruction manual, sat nav, flatpack DIY step-by-step directions – if only!

God of the journey,
Christ of the Way,
Spirit who comforts and chides and challenges and moves us;
we work out how to walk Your path.
We gather as Your children, ready to listen and learn.
Speak into our today.
Let us worship, wonder and walk together.
Beloved, settle here and prepare to be unsettled.

Blessing / Closing prayer

God of the journey, Christ of the Way, Spirit who comforts and chides and challenges and moves us;

go with us as we walk Your path.

As we leave this place, pray we not leave You here.

Teach and talk to our every moment.

Speak into our today.

Settle in and unsettle us until Your will be done.

Amen.

Christian Aid Week

Today also marks the start of Christian Aid Week and is the perfect time for your church to come together in celebration and reflection.

Pray this Christian Aid Week that people pushed to the brink by poverty find the strength and opportunity to push back harder and fulfil their hopes and ambitions.

Follow the link to find all the resources you'll need to prepare for your church service and collection to support Christian Aid Week.

<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/appeals/key-appeals/christian-aid-week/worship>

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 198 – “Let us build a house where love can dwell”

The following songs are widely available online now included in “God Welcomes All”, the new Hymnary Supplement for CH4 that is being launched at the General Assembly on 19 May 2024.

- “As the wind song through the trees” – (Shirley Erena Murray and Lim Swee Hong) CCLI song # 5327773
- <https://youtu.be/JCgB10uzYVU?feature=shared>
- “Build your kingdom here” (Come set your rule and reign) – CCLI song # 6186078
<https://youtu.be/sbdJXKqVgtg?feature=shared>

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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Scottish Charity Number: SC011353

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