

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

Sunday 16 June 2024

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev Dr Conor Fegan, Minister of Markinch and Thornton Parish Church, for his thoughts on the fourth 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

It can be daunting, no matter how frequently or infrequently one preaches – thankfully, however, there are a wealth of resources available. The back catalogue of the Spill the Beans Resource Group, for instance, now stretches to 50 issues covering the Revised Common Lectionary, the Narrative Lectionary, the Women’s Lectionary and two original lectionaries. Other resources such as Bible commentaries are invaluable, as well as the huge number of websites dedicated to helping those tasked with preaching. Nevertheless, the best place to begin is with the texts for the week. By prayerfully reading them, maybe taking a few notes, we can begin to get an idea of what they are saying into our context and our time.

Ask questions such as:

- What words jump out?
- What themes are clear?
- What have you never noticed before?
- What doesn’t make sense?
- What questions would you ask the writer?
- What is the good news in this story?

If we have answered some of these questions then we will be well on the way to constructing a service which is challenging and comforting, is respectful and engaging, is pleasing to God, and relevant to God’s people.

This week the appointed scripture lessons might be seen as a rallying call to any within the Church of Scotland who have begun to feel bogged down by the competing problems which seem to surround us. We are in the midst of a time of great change and for many the solutions to our crises are not always immediately obvious. For some there is a tendency to retreat into familiar practices, for others wholesale change is the only sensible option. What we read this week, however, might just be a tonic to the extremes on both sides, pointing to a path forward that honours what is and was, while encouraging what will be.

It is my practice to principally preach on one of the lectionary texts with reference to the others, and so I have offered individual reflections below, nevertheless, the theme that runs throughout is God’s ability to reinvigorate and transform that which is seen as old.

[Ezekiel 17:22-24](#)

This week's passage from Ezekiel 17 begins our journey through a series of lessons highlighting creation and God's creative power to bring forth new life from old, to build upon what has come before and renew the life of the world. We are presented with a metaphor of the lofty cedar – the old – from which new growth will be plucked and planted, bringing new life, sustenance, and protection. In this short lesson we are given a glimpse of the power of God in Ezekiel's vision; its hyperbolic language carries us up out of the day-to-day into the lofty mountains of the divine. Reminding all who read and hear that God is to be found, here in the world and always at work. We might see this lofty cedar as the past, the foundation, strong and sturdy, but not static or unchanging. It remains active and alive, and from it green shoots still come. The ensuing growth of branches and the bearing of fruit emphasize the fertility and productivity that result from God's presence. The imagery of birds finding shelter in the shade of its branches suggests that this new life will not only thrive but also provide refuge and sustenance for others.

In this brief passage, we see a glimpse of God's kingdom, encompassing all kinds of people, finding shelter, peace, and abundance under God's care and guidance. These three short verses are something of a transformation within the book of Ezekiel, a brief moment of hope and positivity amongst the distinctly negative narrative of the preceding chapters. They give hope, even during these difficult times of exile and judgment for Ezekiel's contemporaries. For the purpose of preaching on this text we might also view these words as a reminder that, in, with, and through God, change can come, even in the most difficult times.

In this passage, we are reminded of God's ability to bring forth new life from the remnants of the old, to transform despair into hope, and to establish flourishing communities under God's care. In the same way we might look at our old and creaking institution, one that, despite rumours to the contrary, remains capable of growth and new shoots. We might take this lesson from Ezekiel and trust in the power of God to allow our church to be the incubator of new ideas and aspirations, to take the solid foundation, built up, grown over the centuries, and let new life spring forth from them. To trust in God's promises, even in the midst of challenges, knowing that God is the author of new beginnings and the sustainer of life.

[Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15](#)

There is something truly uplifting about the opening verses of Psalm 92, its lyricism is infectious. It carries our spirits up with it, reaching out to touch God, sing God's praises,

worship the one whose hands have worked creation. The final verses continue this uplifting theme by returning us to the image of the cedar, as well as the palm tree. When reading this text, it is little wonder that the psalms are thought of as both the hymn- and prayer-book of the Bible. This reading is a reminder to all who might be wary in these often difficult days, that the chance to join together in worship is a joyous gift, to be celebrated and enjoyed.

Psalm 92 is the only psalm assigned to a specific day – the Sabbath, as seen in the superscription: ‘A song for the Sabbath day.’ That is not to say it was written for the Sabbath, but more likely was later thought to be appropriate for Sabbath worship. It is a hymn of praise that fits with what we aim to do each time we join together in corporate worship; not only encounter God in the reality of the everyday, but raise the everyday up and see the magnificence of God in what we do.

The second part of the appointed text, verses 12-15, turn towards the ones who are praising God and what impact this has on their lives. The Psalmist vividly portrays the image of the righteous flourishing like a palm tree and growing like a cedar. These trees are enduring symbols of strength and longevity. The mention of the palm tree is particularly significant, as it thrives even in harsh conditions, adapting and bearing fruit despite adversity. The righteous, likened to these trees, exemplify resilience and the ability to bear fruit in every season – so long as they remain rooted in God. Even so, we should remember that flourishing with God doesn’t always look the same as worldly flourishing.

The emphasis on bearing fruit in old age reinforces the idea of new life emerging from the old. Instead of withering away, the righteous continue to be vibrant and productive, displaying the ever-renewing work of God in their lives. God continues to work through them, using even that which the world might begin to see as old or unneeded. This is a testament to the faithfulness and the ongoing transformation God brings to those who trust.

Psalm 92 is an opportunity to pause and simply praise God for the world we have, recognizing that God’s love sustains us through every season. We might find within it assurance in the promise of new life and continued growth, trusting that, like the righteous described in this psalm, we too can flourish and bear fruit in the knowledge of God’s unchanging love.

2 Corinthians 5:6-10 (11-13), 14-17

In this time of great change in our churches it is possible that we can sometimes lose sight of our true purpose. The search for the new and successful, in terms of practical congregational organisation and management, may leave us little time to consider our true calling. The lesson today from 2 Corinthians is a reminder that Christ is not the end point of the new life, but the source. It is only through Christ and with Christ and in Christ that we can begin to reinvigorate our lives, our faith, and our Church.

The passage begins with St Paul's explanation of the human condition, drawing together life, death, our earthly existence, and the transforming reality of Jesus' resurrection. Using the imagery of home, both in our bodies, and with the Lord, St Paul explains that our aim is always to please Christ. In this passage, St Paul places God at the centre of our existence, asserting that anyone who is in Christ is a new creation; the old has passed away, and behold, the new has come. This profound transformation is not merely a change in behaviour but a complete renewal of one's identity and purpose. It signifies a departure from the old way of living, and a journey into a new existence marked by reconciliation and intimacy with the Creator.

Paul emphasizes that this reconciliation is possible through Christ, who, out of His great love, took on the sins of humanity, making it possible for us to become the righteousness of God in Christ. The imagery of reconciliation and redemption underscores the idea that through Christ, the old, broken relationship with God is made new, paving the way for a vibrant, new connection.

We are invited, here, to consider the transformative power of faith in Christ. The passage challenges us to view ourselves and others through the lens of this new creation, seeing beyond the limitations of our earthly existence and embracing the hope of a future glory. It calls us to live in alignment with this new identity, allowing the love and grace of Christ to shape our thoughts, actions, and relationships.

In essence, this passage beckons believers to walk in the reality of the new life that Christ has ushered in, continually being transformed by His love and living. It is an encouragement to leave behind the old and embrace the fullness of life offered through faith in Christ.

Mark 4:26-34

Jesus' parables often use simple language and imagery, while conveying an underlying message which is much more complicated. In many respects they are a template for our

faith – we can explain the very basic notion very easily, but the underlying implications, stories, traditions, histories, and attempts to live in a different way are much more complicated, maybe even impenetrable, to those who do not understand. The gospel lesson this week gives us two parables, which despite their familiarity, can be difficult to understand.

In the first parable, the Parable of the Growing Seed, Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a man who scatters seed on the ground, and the seed grows and produces a crop, even though the man doesn't fully understand the process. This might illustrate the sheer power of God to transform creation, with little or no input from humanity: the seeds grow whether the farmer is awake or asleep, tends them or not. We see here the mysterious and transformative power of God's kingdom. It shows how God can take something small and seemingly insignificant (the seed) and bring about something new and abundant (the crop). It shows us that, through faith and with God's help, transformation is not only possible, but may be an inevitability.

In the second parable, Jesus uses the image of the mustard seed, which was seen as one of the smallest seeds, but when planted, grows into one of the largest plants. This parable emphasizes the contrast between the seemingly small beginnings of God's Kingdom and what it truly is. It reminds us that those who first followed Jesus were not the great and the good, indeed they were often the kinds of people to be avoided in polite society. It reminds us that from its inception, faith in Christ didn't (or at least shouldn't have) come with worldly power, privilege, influences, or riches. It reminds us today that after two thousand years of history God still takes what is small and insignificant, what is seen to be dead or dormant, insignificant, or forgettable, and uses it for good, uses it to transform, uses it to show the way to God's kingdom.

In both parables, there's a theme of transformation and growth, illustrating how God can take what is old or small and bring about something new and abundant.

Sermon ideas

Each week I search for some linking theme between the appointed readings. There is no doubt that some weeks that is no easy task. This week, however, I found no such problem. As with any attempt to comment on the scriptures, we are naturally influenced by our own biases and experiences. Nevertheless, they are living documents, speaking into the lives we live now, as much as they are historic stories of a time and place. This week then, I have suggested a theme of God's creative power, and more specifically, to create new life from old, to take what is dying or dried out and bring forth fresh, new, and vibrant life. This is a

theme which speaks not only to the texts, but to the situation we each find ourselves in, searching for new ways to enliven and be the Church in a time of apparent decay and dryness. With God's help there is always the possibility of growth and renewal, to build upon what we have, and let it develop into what it can be. There is a message in these passages to the Church of Scotland and the many Churches facing the same problems we are. We have the sturdy tree, the resilient tree, the dormant seed, we don't need to create new ones, but we do need to take what we have and with God's help, see what it can and must become.

Ezekiel 17:22-24

There is something majestic in the final words of this passage. A comfort to all of us toiling in mission fields of contemporary Scotland. We are not alone. We stand firm on the shoulders of those and that which came before. As we step forward into an unknown and unknowable future, the same God who brought forth new life from old is walking with us, guiding us, holding us, transforming us into the people who will take this message of divine husbandry into a world sorely in need of care.

Psalms 92:1-4, 12-15

In keeping with the theme that, with God, new life can be brought forth from old, that strong foundations, traditions, and cherished practices need not be abandoned in the search for growth and renewal, Psalm 92 shows us that God is working through all things. Even when the tree has become old, with God's help it can produce new fruit. I can think of no better metaphor for the Church of Scotland. In our journey of faith, let us echo the Psalmist's joy and praise,

2 Corinthians 5:6-17

Again, this is a wonderful example of the creative power of God to take our old bones, our old lives, and transform them, nourish them, grow them into something new and vibrant. We need not lose ourselves entirely but realise that Christ is the foundation and source and through Him we have the opportunity to look once again at the world we inhabit and influence and make change in the name of Jesus' love.

Mark 4:26-34

This week's gospel lesson reflects God's ability to bring about renewal and transformation in our lives and in the world, creating something new from what already exists. It also highlights the mystery and power of God's kingdom, which operates in ways that are often beyond our understanding, reminding us of the lesson we need now as much as ever; we must first trust in God.

Prayers

Scripture Sentence (Romans 8:10)

“If Christ is in you, the Spirit is your life.”

Call to worship (using Psalm 92)

Why do we come?

We come to worship God Almighty.

Why do we worship?

**Because it is good to give thanks to God,
to sing praises to the Most High.**

How will we worship?

**We will proclaim God’s love in the morning,
and God’s faithfulness by night.**

We will exalt God’s name forever.

Then let us raise our minds and our souls,
our bodies and our voices
as we worship Almighty God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Prayer of adoration

God of constant love,
God of unending grace,
God of the outcast and the prisoner,
God of the powerful and powerless,
God of all:
we join in worship this day,
(in this building and in our homes)
giving thanks for Your presence
in our lives and for all that You have done,
and what You have made us to be.

God who supports,
God who challenges,
God who sees our whole selves,

not just that which others see,
speak to us today,
shine the light of Your
wisdom into our lives
and guide us towards service of You,
each other, and the whole world.

God in the good times,
God in the bad times,
God in every pain and
in every triumph,
we present ourselves before You,
just as we are,
tired and broken,
dried out and struggling,
searching and seeking.
Take us and transform us
in the way only You can,
through our Lord Jesus Christ,
Amen.

Our Father...

Prayer of confession

Living God,
in penitence and the sure knowledge
of Your immeasurable grace,
we come seeking Your healing care.

Forgive us, merciful God
for all that we have done
that we know we shouldn't,
and for all we haven't done
that we know we should.
In Your compassion
take away the guilt
we have held onto for too long
and forgive us all that we bring
to You now in silence:

Silence

**Lord, have mercy,
Christ, have mercy,
Lord, have mercy.**

Silence

In unending love,
grace, and mercy,
God almighty hears your (our) prayers,
forgives you your (us our) sins,
and washes you (us) of your (our) guilt.
(Let us) Accept this gift in peace
and let it transform you (us)
and the world.

Silence

God, guide us today and every day,
as we seek to do Your will in
this ever-changing world.
Open our eyes to the great variety of
of blessings and opportunities that
You have poured out on us.
Make us aware of the potential
in all things through You.
Drive out our sense of helplessness.
and free our minds to love and be loved,
in Jesus' name and for His sake,
we pray,
Amen.

Collect for the day *(from Common Order)*

Almighty God,
without You we are not able to please You.
Mercifully grant that Your Holy Spirit
may in all things direct and rule our hearts;

through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is alive and reigns
with You and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Prayers of thanksgiving and intercession

Loving God,
into the reality of inequality,
pain, fear, hurt and greed,
Your light tries to shine,
piercing dark places,
offering hope and joy
to the lost,
and love to the whole world.

Today we pray for the whole world,
Your entire creation:

Silence

As it continues to face
seemingly insurmountable challenges,
around climate change, war,
inequality, poverty, and disease,
help all of us and all those with
the will, the power and the strength
to do so, to make changes,
large and small, to make the
lives of all better.

As our country and community
continue to be plagued with
problems and struggles,
we pray for all those on the
edges and the margins;
those who face poverty, homelessness,
those who are despised, or excluded,
the grieving and those who have been broken.

Silence

Help each of us to take up Your
challenge of unquenchable love.

We pray for Your Church
in this time of deep uncertainty:

Silence

As we strive to do Your work
in ever-more challenging
environs, we pray that
Your presence will always be felt
and that in all things we will
first strive to serve You.

As we each face our own challenges
in our lives and of those we love,
we each bring to You
those people and things which
lie heavily on our hearts today:

Silence

Merciful God, each of us
gathered here brings our own
weaknesses and pains,
we feel ourselves challenged
by the world and by Your Word,
help us to face these challenges,
and to try always,
to know that through You
transformation is always available.

Eternal God,
sinners find mercy in You and saints find joy.
You hold all souls in life;
the dead as well as the living are in Your care.

We thank You for Your people
of every age and place,
and for those dear to our own hearts,
who kept the faith on earth
and have entered into the joy
of Your heavenly presence.
Inspire us by their example,
encourage us by their fellowship,
and bring us with them at the last
to glory everlasting.
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

(Commemoration of the Faithful Departed, adapted from Common Order)

Offertory prayer

In Your love and in Your grace, O God,
You create all and give all.
Take the offerings we make,
of ourselves, our time,
our talents, and our money,
and transform them, and us,
into green shoots of growth
which show the way to Your Kingdom,
in and through Your Son, our Saviour,
Amen.

Benediction

We came to worship,
we stayed in love and community,
we go in peace and faith;
transformed and made new
in the grace and presence of our Saviour.

Musical suggestions

God Welcomes All – the new supplement to Church Hymnary Fourth Edition launches on 19 May 2024. The book is available to order from

<https://chbookshop.hymnsam.co.uk/books/9781786225573/god-welcomes-all>

This exciting new collection features over 200 hymns and songs in a wide range of styles by writers from Scotland and around the world.

It will be released as full music version and words only books; and in due course digital resources including expansion of the existing Church of Scotland music website; streaming functions and further information on each song; backing tracks; and lyric videos.

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 56 – “How good it is to thank you, Lord” – Psalm 92
- CH4 153 – “Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father”
- CH4 172 – “Sing for God’s glory that colours the dawn of creation”
- CH4 228 – “God who made the earth, declared it good in the beginning”
- CH4 243 – “Touch the earth lightly”
- CH4 349 – “In our lives plant seeds of hope”

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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