

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

Sunday 11 August 2024

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Carolyn Merry, Director of Place for Hope, for her thoughts on the twelfth 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

A life of love in challenging times

In times of conflict and change, there are always moments in which we must choose – do we react out of fear or do we respond out of love. The fate of relationships, communities, indeed lives of whole populations can be determined by how we choose. Sometimes those moments pass so quickly we barely know we have a choice ... we react without pausing, without thinking sometimes, without truly choosing.

Since 2009 [Place for Hope](#) has been accompanying and equipping people and faith communities so that all might reach their potential to be peacemakers who can navigate conflict, change and difference well. We want every community to be a place for hope and reconciliation, where all are able to

- notice brokenness and division
- nurture relationships and community
- navigate conflict with graciousness
- nourish wholeness in themselves and their communities

Place for Hope supports people and communities of faith through mediation, coaching and training to move from reacting out of fear to responding out of love in times of conflict, division and change. We find that it is only when people are responding out of love, that they can find the courage, humility and hope to move from immovable positions to understanding the needs that we all have in common – and as such being able to reconcile across differences, even the most profound.

However, in a world that is ever faster, more polarised and overwhelming for many, how does one find the presence of mind and spirit to always respond out of love? All of today's readings speak to me of how God helps us to do that. From the practical teachings of Jesus and Paul, to the cry of David to connect more deeply with God's own love. Amidst the fear, violence, division, and greed that increasingly defines our times, as people of faith we need to find a different way of being ... living lives fully rooted in God's love.

[2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33](#)

In this reading we see David issuing orders, trying to ensure that whatever happens in the upcoming battle between his supporters and the rebellion led by Absalom, that Absalom is to be spared. Ultimately, today's passage ends with David learning that Absalom had been killed and the King is heartbroken.

Several things strike me in this passage. Firstly, having lived and worked in a number of war zones, it comes as no surprise that despite David's orders, his own men kill Absalom. In 21st century wars, meant to be governed by international humanitarian law, atrocious acts of violence always occur. In my experience war always leads to the breakdown of the unspoken social norms that normally hold communities and societies to decent behaviour with one another. Once these break down, people – everyday people – act in ways that in normal circumstances they might never do (sometimes more courageously and selflessly, but generally more violently and selfishly). So it comes as no surprise that David's order to spare Absalom wasn't carried out, but I think the more interesting question to ponder is why David gave that order in the first place. Absalom was his son who had not only murdered David's eldest son Amnon (following the rape of Tamar) but had set out to overthrow David and become king himself. Still, David's heartbreak on hearing that Absalom was killed was heartfelt ... the ties that bind us can often hold, despite terrible acts of betrayal.

The question that I often ask myself though, is how do we help ourselves and other feel the same sense of love/connection that David felt for Absalom, for everyone, not just those we are bound to by blood or other ties. David did not weep for the lives of the other 20,000 of his subjects that were slain that day, only Absalom. And so we come to the great question of love. How do we love everyone, not just those we feel connected to due to family or other connections? Remember – love your neighbour, love yourself, love your enemy?

How do we move ourselves beyond our family/tribal/national allegiances and see all human beings (and indeed in this age of environmental catastrophe, all creation) as kin – as part of ourselves. God who loves us loves everyone with the same extravagant, unconditional and unending love. How do we love like God (as we are instructed in our Ephesians reading today)?

Surely this is the question that must be answered if we are to turn things around from the violence, injustice, division and fear that our global systems and lives are currently rooted in, and instead live as God intended us to – as one rooted in love.

[Psalm 130](#)

We are living in extraordinary and dangerous times, with hard-won rights under threat, increasing poverty and inequality, decreasing trust in social institutions, leaders and media, environmental destruction, and increasing inequity, divisiveness and violence here in the UK

and around the world. As Director of Place for Hope, I am sometimes asked where my hope lies in such times.

This psalm, attributed generally to David, speaks for many of us now – as it is a psalm seeking hope in times of despair. It is a psalm that starts: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!” and ends, “O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.” (NRSV)

And so we return to love – not just the love that David had for Absalom, wanting him spared while 20,000 others didn’t count, but the expansive love of God for every living being.

How do we live lives of love in the face of threat, despair, scarcity and challenge? This psalm points us to the answer of rooting ourselves so deeply in the knowledge and experience of God’s love, regardless of all our individual and collective foibles and failings, that we cannot but extend that love in the same openhanded way that God does with us.

This love though isn’t a soft, wishy-washy type of love that accepts all behaviour or injustice at large. Rather, it is a strong, proactive love that speaks and acts with unarmed truth with regard to violence, injustice and greed, but still shows disarming love to the person themselves. Some may see these words as naïve in the world in which we live, but the world’s hope now is in the lives embodying that sort of God’s love, just as it was 2,000 years ago. Jesus’s words back then might have been considered naïve, but in fact they were seen for what they actually were – dangerous. Dangerous to the status quo of violence, fear and division of those in power then, as they are now.

[Ephesians 4:25-5:2](#)

And so we come to Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, speaking into the issues that we all face: how to be faithful followers of Jesus in a world where it feels so difficult to live out our beliefs – in our individual relationships at home, work, school, church, or working on bigger issues of injustice and violence in our world.

In the NSRV this reading is titled ‘Rules for the New Life’ and Paul addresses all sorts of everyday behaviours that we may have strayed into: lying, staying angry, stealing, bitterness, slander etc. and he directs the faithful in Ephesus instead to speak the truth, let go of anger, work to give to the needy, use our words to build up others, to be kind, tender-hearted and forgiving.

And Paul sums up his teaching with the closing sentence: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Paul is instructing the followers in Ephesus to give up their old lives that were mired in unloving behaviours and start a new life of loving – imitating our loving God all the way. But we are not meant to make this transformation through positive thinking and rule-following alone – but rather through the experience of God’s love. Before exhorting the Ephesians to take up the new life, Paul ended Chapter 3 (vv16-19) with a profound teaching: “I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” (NRSV)

For me The Message version brings these familiar verses an extra depth: “And I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you’ll be able to take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ’s love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God.” (Eph 3:17-19, The Message.)

In time of fear or conflict or change, we often feel the need to defend ourselves and what we have. Often our identity is tied to how we react or respond. As Paul states, if we are secure in our identity as beloved children of God, then we can pause in those moments and choose to respond out of love, just as God has done so many times with us.

“If we are absolutely grounded in *the absolute love of God that protects us from nothing even as it sustains us in all things*, then we can face all things with courage and tenderness and touch the hurting places in others and in ourselves with love.” (James Finley, *Intimacy: The Divine Ambush* (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2013))

[John 6:35, 41-51](#)

In this reading, John uses one of the many metaphors spread across John’s gospel to explain the identity of Jesus – the Bread of Life.

As someone who loves bread, and the fresher the better, this description of Jesus's identity and purpose resonates deeply, and would have done so even more in the society of John's day, where bread was daily made and was a fundamental element of people's diets.

And so, in a way we see the culmination of our readings today. What started with David's heartbreak and despair has pointed us again and again to God's love being our foundation stone in troubled times through the ages. Now John reminds us that to be able to live these lives of love we are called to, we need to stay very close to Jesus. To take scriptures, prayer and our walk with Jesus on a day by day basis; constantly taking in the nourishment of Jesus' extravagant love, as Paul described it, and love-based wisdom to help us address the daily challenges that will constantly arise for us and force us to make a choice. Will we choose to react out of fear (of loss of face/respect/standing, position, possessions, loved ones, health, life), or will we choose to be nourished enough by Jesus in our everyday life that we can truly be imitators of God and live in love?

I don't know about you, but it is easy for me to go off track in taking in Jesus as my daily bread. The rush of deadlines, workloads, concerns for family and friends – and myself. How easy it is to not take the time to dwell in God's presence and be nourished and restored by God's love. And when that happens, how easy it is to react out of tiredness, defensiveness, anger, fear. And oh, how different it is when I have taken those daily opportunities to be fully in God's presence, and how differently I respond!

Sermon ideas

As discussed in the introduction, the predominant theme that emerged for me in this week's readings was our call to live lives of love. Indeed, in these Kairos times in which we live, the imperative to live lives of extraordinary love in imitation of God has never been needed more. That love is at the very heart of the reconciling power of God: to love the Lord, our God, to love our neighbour, to love ourselves and to love our enemies. This is the way God saves – us (individually and collectively) and all creation.

In times of conflict and division, we experience many emotions, including fear, confusion, anxiety, doubt, anger, disappointment, helplessness, frustration, sadness, despair, being overwhelmed, lonely or impatient. Our readings today – and indeed the whole of the Bible and human history – tells us story after story of people reacting out of these emotions. David's despair lies in the actions that flow from reacting out of such emotions. Reacting out of those emotions tends to escalate conflicts and add to the pain and division that stands in the way of reconciliation.

Jesus came through as God incarnate – not imitating, but embodying God and God’s extravagant love, showing us a radical new way not only of getting along with those we live with and are connected to, but with those we fundamentally disagree with or even hate or despise.

Love the Lord your God. Love your Neighbour. Love Yourself. Love your Enemy. On the surface, these are lovely words and sentiments that many of us would agree with ... mostly. However, the living out of such love is far from easy. Jesus knew that. Paul knew that, and every follower of Jesus since has known that.

These readings, and so many more, indicate some key points to help us move from our more common reactions in the face of challenge, threat, difference and change – from fear to responding from love.

- Remember where to look for hope: It is so easy in today’s world to feel despair. Every day, if not moment, we are connected to news from around the world that speaks of a world where love is replaced by violence, greed, exclusion. To keep any sense of hope, we need to look at how much our eyes are fixed on these realities and how much we turn our eyes towards God instead – and what a difference that can make.
- We need to root ourselves in the love of God – Paul’s exhortation to the followers of Jesus to be imitators of God was because he knew we couldn’t live lives of love without first experiencing what it is to be a beloved child of God, and understanding that in God’s eyes every living being is also beloved. It is a lot easier to respond out of love when we recognise God (no matter how blurred that image may be) in the ‘other’.
- *Doing* involves a daily discipline of drawing nourishment from God – Jesus recognises how frail we are as human beings and how easily we can go off track when left to our own devices. The Bread of Life that is Jesus is a gift that needs to be taken every day to nourish us as beloved children of God – a daily reminder of who we truly are and what a difference such unconditional love can make in our lives.
- When we are secure in our identity as a beloved child of God, we humbly recognise this as a free gift from God and so know that God’s love extends to everyone, not just us. From that secure identity, we can risk responding out of love – not by accepting harmful behaviour, but addressing the behaviour and yet still loving the person in front of us.

- So when we find ourselves in the midst of conflict, change and tension, where we might feel ourselves misunderstood, challenged, demeaned or worse – take a pause, and remind ourselves of who we are – beloved children of God, and so is the other person – and choose your response based in that truth. That may mean walking away for safety’s sake, with questions that may discover what is truly going on for the other, seeking support to work through the issues, or a myriad of other options. Options rooted in love – for yourself, for the other, possibly even for your enemy – that will imitate God and keep the door for reconciliation open.

We need to experience the presence of Christ now more than ever – in the context of the cost-of-living crisis, environmental emergency, war, nuclear threat, widespread changes to our daily and communal life, including in our churches. The promise of God’s extravagant love not only becomes more important, but foundational to our health and wellbeing – individually and globally, including our planet.

Ultimately, by drawing on God’s love, accepting our identity as a beloved child of God, and recognising that God loves everyone, even in the worst of circumstances, peace and reconciliation are always possible. Imitating God and living lives of radical love can bring not only a profound sense of hope but also a deep reconciliation within ourselves, with God and with one another – even those we consider enemies.

Prayers

Gathering prayer/Call to worship (*Beth Merrill Neel*)

A love that never ceases,

A creativity that designed the universe,

A hope that cannot be quenched,

A pursuit of reconciliation no matter the cost:

These are the things that are of God,

Then let us worship God.

Confession/Repentance

Dear Lord,

So often I want to react out of fear, or anger, or hatred, or just simple irritation.

Please forgive me for the many times I do so.

Help me to be an imitator of You –

Remind me that I am Your beloved child and so is everyone else.
Help me to pause and dwell in Your love long enough –
to let go of my fear, anger, hatred or irritation.

May the nourishment of Jesus every day help me instead to respond out of love:
choosing words that challenge and change injustice,
choosing words that bless others,
choosing acts of love to heal relationships and lives.
Choosing to live a life of love.

Amen

Thanksgiving/Gratitude

Loving God,
Eternal Christ,
Reconciling Spirit,
we give thanks for the myriad ways in which You are present with us,
in times of joy, wholeness, love and hope,
as well as in times of fear, despair, longing, and brokenness.

We give thanks for what Your presence brings to our lives.
For the peace, grace, hope and reconciliation that can occur
when we respond out of love
and not out of the fears inherent in our current circumstances.

Thank You, Loving God,
Eternal Christ,
Reconciling Spirit,
for the transformative power of love,
in our individual lives and in our world.

Amen

Prayers for others/Intercession

O God with us,
We pray today for all in our congregation and community who are ill, who are afraid, who
are in despair.
May the daily nourishment of Jesus, His peace and reconciliation – be experienced in every
life.

Lord in Your mercy,

Hear our prayer

O God with us,
We pray for all in leadership – in our church, in our country and across the world.
May our leaders keep their eyes on Jesus and increase in compassion, wisdom and love.
May they use their power for the good of all, particularly those on the margins, for whom
Jesus had a special love
and for the wellbeing and restoration of this planet.

Lord in Your mercy,
Hear our prayer

O God with us,
We pray for our world, so in need of the peace, healing and reconciliation that Your
presence brings.
May we each have the courage to be people of hope in these troubled times –
may we walk into conflict, may we walk into fear, may we walk into despair,
and bring Your spirit of peace, hope and love.

Lord in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Blessing/Closing prayer *(Richard Rohr)*

God For Us, we call You Father,
God Alongside Us, we call You Jesus,
God Within Us, we call You Holy Spirit.
You are the Eternal Mystery
that enables, enfolds, and enlivens all things,
even us and even me.
Every name falls short of Your
goodness and greatness.
We can only see who You are in what is.
We ask for such perfect seeing.
As it was in the beginning, is now,
and ever shall be. Amen.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

Musical suggestions

God Welcomes All (GWA) is the new supplement to Church Hymnary Fourth Edition. This exciting new collection features over 200 hymns and songs in a wide range of styles by writers from Scotland and around the world.

The full music version is now available; and the words-only book, digital resources including the expansion of the existing Church of Scotland music website, will be published in due course, with streaming functions and further information on each song; backing tracks; and lyric videos. *God Welcomes All* is available to order from

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

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.

The suggested items below may help incorporate some of the themes outlined above.

- CH4 253 – “Inspired by love and anger”
- CH4 359 – “He came down that we may have love”
- CH4 528 – “Make me a channel of your peace”
- CH4 721 – “We lay our broken world at your feet”
- CH4 765 – “God’s love is for everybody”
- GWA 70 – “As once you served a waiting crowd (Bread) – this song from the new hymnary supplement ties in well with the passage from John.
- “Be still for the presence of the Lord” (David Evans). CCLI song # 120824
You Tube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZugvUQ4m90U>
Encourage all whilst singing this song to think about a situation of conflict that they are concerned about (it may be one they are personally involved in or one they are

aware of) – just think on the conflict and those involved and place them before God and ask what does choosing love in this situation look like).

- “You Say” (Lauren Daigle) – this song speaks to our identity as a beloved child of God. CCLI song #7071357 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slaT8Jl2zpl>

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

God Welcomes All can be ordered from [Hymns Ancient & Modern](#)

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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