

Third Sunday in Lent – Year B

Sunday 3 March 2024

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Church of Scotland minister Rev Dr Martin Johnstone for his thoughts on the third Sunday in Lent. After several local and national roles across the Church over the last 30 years, Martin now spends his time ‘at the edge’ www.atttheedge.co.uk with individuals and organisations struggling against poverty and injustice. He’s regularly involved in supporting worship in a variety of different locations, particularly in his home city of Glasgow.

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

On this third Sunday in Lent, as we continue to journey towards Jerusalem and the cross, we are in the territory of frameworks for living out our faith. This is the case whether it is the Ten Commandments shared with God's people at Sinai (Exodus 20:1-17); the teachings of the Psalmist (Psalm 19); Paul's exhortations to a divided church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:18-25); or Jesus, as he drives traders out of the Temple (John 2:13-22).

In planning for worship, there are several practices which I strive to follow.

- To prepare as part of a community, even if that is as simple as speaking with a few other people who will be part of the worshipping community that coming Sunday about what strikes them about the passages.
- To hold the passages prayerfully over the course of a few days before looking at what others have written about them.
- To strive to make sense of why these passages have been put together in the lectionary, and to reflect on them as a unit.
- To read around the passages – to know what comes before or after them – to make deeper sense of their wider context.

I am also grateful for some regular 'jump off' resources in my preparations for worship. *Weekly Worship* is one. *Spill the Beans* is another. And Gustavo Gutierrez's *Sharing the Word through the Liturgical Year* (Orbis Books, 1997) is a third.

Over the last 25 years, I have been privileged to be a part of two Christian communities. The first has been as part of a local Church of Scotland where ministers (Margaret Whyte and Roy Henderson) and congregation have nurtured, loved, and challenged us as a family.

The second has been as a part of a small Christian community which has met in one another's homes on a Monday evening for worship and the sharing of life for much of the last 45 years. In Bert, we share responsibility for worship week by week as we also strive to share some of our possessions and money. It is a remarkable community which has shaped me. Over the years we have learned that it is not the rules but the relationships that keep us together.

Lent worship has been a significant part of our community in Bert for many years. On each Friday morning during Lent, some members have gathered for early morning worship before sharing breakfast (we haven't managed the whole fasting thing terribly well) and heading off into the rest of the day. I haven't been part of those early Friday mornings as

often as I might have wished, but simply knowing it has been happening has been important.

I understand Christianity as overwhelmingly a community faith where we live out our relationship with God in the company of others. That's one of the reasons why I see worship, and even the planning for worship, as a community activity.

[Exodus 20:1-17](#)

Context matters. And it certainly matters in this passage.

Frequently, people record the Decalogue (literally 'ten words') or Ten Commandments as starting with "you shall have no gods before me" (v3). But that is largely to miss the point and to allow these ten words to operate in a vacuum and to turn them into something that they were not intended to be.

This is the framework for living a faithful life given to God's people as they enter a completely new context. Previously they had been slaves in Egypt. The rules that they had lived by had been imposed upon them by Pharaoh. The Decalogue is provided as a framework for living now that God's people have been set free, not a condition for that freedom. Or, as a friend put it, it's about how to live well after a lifetime in jail.

It is, for example, guidance about not coveting the possessions of others within your community after generations of no-one in your community having any possessions that could not be taken away by a slave owner. Or being able to look after and honour your parents in ways that were unimaginable for a slave.

Separated from this context, the Ten Commandments easily become a set of graceless laws. Indeed, they are the code on which so much of our legal system is based. However, it is worth noting that this is not how they were first given. There weren't punishments included for failure. They were rather, to quote Walter Brueggemann (one of my favourite biblical scholars), "strategies for staying emancipated." And they were given not primarily to individuals but to a community, a people.

Many commentators highlight that the commandments can be divided into two sections: the first four are about our relationship with God and the remaining six about our relationship with one another. However, that is to suggest a dualism that is false. The relationship between worshipping God and caring for one another is a symbiotic one, as Jesus has pointed out (Matthew 22:36-40).

Brueggemann suggests breaking the 'ten words' into three, inter-related elements: honouring God (vv3-7); taking one another seriously (vv12-17); and in the middle, the commandment to keep the Sabbath (vv8-11). In the commitment to Sabbath lies the necessary resource to continue to be shaped by God whilst, at the same time, avoiding imprisonment to power and greed.

Psalm 19

C S Lewis refers to Psalm 19 as "the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world." (*Reflections on the Psalms*)

According to many commentators, this psalm was originally two (or perhaps three) separate hymns: celebrating God's presence in nature (vv1-6); celebrating God's presence in the law (vv7-10); and the prayerful response of the servant (vv11-14). Indeed, the second and third parts of the psalm reappear at another juncture within the lectionary cycle (on the 19th Sunday after Pentecost).

Regardless of the origins of these passages they fit well together as a cohesive unit.

The first section is a glorious narration, seeking to put into words that which cannot be captured in prose (or even poetry) – the wonder of God's creation ("the heavens are telling of the glory of God", v1) and of God in creation ("their voice goes through all the earth and their words to the end of the world", v4).

The second section relates to teaching instructions for humanity – about how we might live our lives in relation to God. By comparison to the earlier verses, there is a clear framework. They are all about different ways in which the law is being expressed. It is worth noting that, once again, punishment for a failure to keep the law is not present. Rather, the Psalmist writes: "the ordinances of the Lord are true ... more to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold, sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb", vv9b-10). This is law that does not carry the threat of punishment so much as the offer of joy.

The third section returns us to the expansive language of the early verses of the psalm, trying to put into words – into a prayer – that which cannot ever fully be expressed. It ends with the familiar verse: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer" (v14). These are words which many preachers use as a prayer to begin their reflection on God's Word. Even if that is not your normal pattern, and it isn't mine, you might want to consider it for this week's worship.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Having spent a time in the city of Corinth, Paul has moved on to Ephesus. The painful news that relationships within the church he had planted in Corinth had become increasingly fractured reaches him. His letters to the Christian community in Corinth, including this passage, are part of his response.

Perhaps division was an inevitability. Corinth was a crossroads city; the first century equivalent of an international hub city. The church in Corinth doubtless reflected that diversity. There were those way of understanding was influenced by Greek culture. Others were influenced by Jewish tradition. And others by a Roman way of understanding the world. Here Paul is trying to encourage the church to have a framework rooted in none of those but rather in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

To some, the idea that the Messiah might be killed (even give Himself up to be killed) is a scandal and disgrace. To others, the notion that belief is based on anything other than rational thinking is unimaginable. Even to those whose tradition meant that they perceived the possibility of the death of a god (one of the gods), it was incomprehensible that that could be anything other than a heroic death.

Writing to the fractured Christian community Paul, picking up the language of the prophet Isaiah – “the wisdom of their wise shall perish, and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden” (Isaiah 29:14) – suggests that they are all looking for the wrong things and in the wrong places.

Paul is trying to navigate his way through, and to point instead to a very different framework. This is the framework of the cross. The idea of God on a cross makes no sense until you believe and accept it. And then, nothing could possibly make more sense.

John 2:13-22

If each of our lectionary readings is putting forward a framework for living in relationship with God and one another, this is certainly the case for our gospel reading. Here the framework is the body of Christ, crucified, buried, and risen.

The first thing worth noticing is that this episode – Jesus’ encounter with the traders in the Temple, occurs in a different location from the other gospels. For Matthew, Mark and Luke this incident takes place near the start of Holy Week, just after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, whereas for John it comes near the beginning of the Gospel, straight after the

wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. Like that event, it marks a turning of the tables, of the ushering in of a way to relate to God which take us beyond traditional laws, customs and frameworks.

We shouldn't get over concerned about the differences with the synoptic writers, far less try to smooth these differences out. John's purpose in writing is significantly different from that of the other gospel writers, and his account is being constructed at a time when the synoptic narratives were already in circulation in the early Church. If these differences didn't matter to Christians in the first and second centuries, they shouldn't be a big issue for us.

When it comes to the purpose of this passage, there is a little marker in verse 13 if we know to look for it. Throughout his gospel when John refers to the Passover ("the Passover of the Jews was near", v3), it is a signal that this passage is about the passion of Christ. As becomes evident later in the passage, from v19ff, John's primary concern here is about what (or who) the Temple is.

The Temple throughout the Hebrew scriptures is a place where people encounter God. John is highlighting that, in Jesus, the location of that encounter has shifted. It is no longer the physical Temple, which by the time that John was compiling his gospel already lay in ruins, but the person of Jesus. "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up" (v19).

Another difference between John's account and that of the synoptic writers is less obvious but, nonetheless, significant. Whereas their focus is on how the Temple has been turned into a "den of robbers" (Mark 11:17), John's concern is more nuanced: "He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!'" (v16).

John is less concerned about the illegality, or otherwise, of what is happening in the Temple courtyards and more about how what has developed as regulation and law now obscures the Temple's foundational purpose – to be a place of encounter with God.

For John, it is not simply the sheep, cattle, doves and money changers who are being driven out, but the capacity to relate to God.

Sermon ideas

With such richness in each of these passages, it is almost impossible to suggest specific tacks for a reflection. In addition, as I have sought to reflect on the wider context of our

different lectionary readings, the context(s) in which these readings are preached upon is also significant.

Over the years I have found it very hard, if not impossible, to preach into a vacuum. I like to know the people I am speaking with; and the joys and struggles that are on their hearts. I also want to be able to allow the Word of God to relate to what is happening socially, politically, economically and environmentally; to speak into and out of that context.

Nonetheless, some broad themes do emerge:

- It is important to get in behind what's going on. We have seen that as we have prodded these different passages, and the same is true as we reflect on the times in which we are living. There is an opportunity here to go beyond surface readings, whether it is of Scripture or the church, of the community or world we are a part of. If you are brave enough you might like to reflect on UK immigration policy in the light of the Ten Commandments, ten words given to a people as they left slavery behind and entered into the freedom of a new relationship with God and a new nation. Or to reflect on how we, in the light of Psalm 19, create a framework for climate justice recognising that creation is both a gift from God and something that reveals God. Or to consider how our buildings, in the light of what we know of the Temple traders, can obscure, or illuminate the gospel. (Good luck with that one!)
- Alternatively, you could try to keep the passages together – always my preference – allowing them to interact and relate to one another and to the context which you, with the weighty responsibility of making sense of the Word of God for the people of God, find yourself. I have tried to suggest a common strand that runs through them. How do we live out, and deepen, our relationship with God and one another (including wider creation) without pretending that there are easy and logical answers to complex challenges.

Whatever route we go down, let our prayer be that we will share good news about the God who brought the people out of slavery in the land of Egypt; and whose message of love and challenge is embodied in Jesus Christ.

Prayers

Over the years, I have come to realise that prayers are often the bits of services that people engage with far more deeply than sermons, perhaps because in prayers people join in

rather than just listen. The use of PowerPoint in an increasing number of worship settings gives the opportunity for people to engage with more participatory liturgies.

I have also come to recognise the importance of silence, perhaps particularly in smaller worship settings; and of the use of a chant (or refrain), particularly in intercessory prayers. And to pick up phrases and verses from the Bible readings (or hymns that we sing) that help them to become more familiar in all elements of the worship.

Call to worship

Leader: God speaks these words:

All: I have called you out of slavery.

Leader: God speaks these words:

All: I have called you into freedom.

Leader: God,
as we gather,
we come together in Your love,
part of Your body,
to worship You;

**All: to worship You,
together,
in love.
Amen**

Prayers of adoration and confession

God,
who made the earth,
the heavens proclaim Your glory,
day by day,
and night by night.
You are more desired than gold,
sweeter than honey.
And so,
with all creation,
we offer You our worship,
and our praise.

God,
who came among us,

companion on the road,
the living temple of our faith.
With all Your Church,
in this place and every place,
in this time and every time,
we offer You our worship,
and our praise.

God,
who dwells alongside us,
even within us,
Your breath gives life;
Your wisdom gives faith;
Your weakness brings strength.
Together,
we seek Your Spirit,
and give thanks for Your indwelling.

God who made us,
God who is one with us,
God who guides us,
we confess that –
we have not loved Your creation as we ought;
we have not followed You as You have asked us to;
we have not been open to Your guidance.

In silence,
we ask and seek
Your forgiveness.

Silence

Thank You,
God,
for grace and love.
In receiving them,
may we never take them for granted.

Hear us now,

as we join,
as one body,
the body of Christ,
and say together:

Our Father

Prayers for others (incorporating *Goodness Is Stronger Than Evil* from Love and Anger, Wild Goose Publications)

God,
we live in a world,
Your beautiful, fragile world,
where creation feels under threat,
where the rule of law seems fractured,
where arrogant leaders cause havoc,
and the poor are crushed under foot.

Despite it all,
this we believe:

*Goodness is stronger than evil;
love is stronger than hate;
light is stronger than darkness;
life is stronger than death.
Victory is ours, victory is ours
through Him who loved us.*

God,
we bring our prayers,
for justice for the poor,
for food for the hungry,
for an end to war,
for the breaking down of walls,
and the building up of love.

For,
despite it all,
this we believe:

Goodness is stronger than evil ...

God,
we bring our prayers,
for the governments of our land,
for the nations of the world,
for those who hold positions of leadership.
May they govern wisely,
in the interests of others,
in the service of the planet,
to Your eternal glory,
and for Your everlasting purposes.

For,
despite it all,
this we believe:

Goodness is stronger than evil ...

God,
we pray for the Church,
in this place,
and throughout the world;
praying especially for those for whom worship represents risk,
who are persecuted for loving You,
and loving Your Gospel.
May we know
that even if Your Church is torn down,
in three days it will rise again.

We pray for one another,
for friends and family,
for those for whom we have specific concerns:

[hold a space for people to name, or bring to mind those they wish to pray for. There may also be others known to the community that you might mention]

God,
the days are coming,
and are already here,
when Your kingdom comes.

For,
despite it all,
this we believe:

Goodness is stronger than evil ...

In Jesus' name we pray,
Amen.

Closing prayer and blessing

Leader: God has spoken these words:

All: I have called you out of slavery.

Leader: God has spoken these words:

All: I have called you into freedom.

Leader: God,
as we leave this place
may we leave knowing
we have met with the living God.

**All: Thanks be to God,
and thanks be for one another.**

Leader: And the blessing of God,
Creator,
Redeemer,
and Friend,
go with us.

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.

A suggested playlist of [songs from CH4 for use during Lent](#) can be found on the Church of Scotland website.

As someone privileged to support worship in many different locations – and someone who does not have a musical bone in my body (believe me, that is not false modesty) – any suggestions for music should be taken with a pinch of salt.

Nonetheless, there is at least one principle that I try to hold onto. Try to include at least one hymn from the World Church, particularly the Global South. We need to remember that we are part of something bigger. In this regard, the work of the Wild Goose Resource Group (and Wild Goose Publications) has been so important to me over many years.

I would also encourage, where possible and appropriate, to use more inclusive language.

- CH4 20 – “The stars declare his glory” (Psalm 19) – Although I tend not to include the psalm within the readings, it is always good – if possible – to include it as one of the hymns.
- CH4 396 – “And can it be that I should gain” – One of Charles Wesley’s great hymns. Particularly apposite if focusing on the Epistle but worth including anyway. It articulates, in a traditional way, how the cross reframes our relationship with God.
- CH4 405 – “We sing the praise of him who died – A good choice if you want focus on the passage from Corinthians (or even if you don’t).
- CH4 485 – “Dear Lord and Father of mankind” – If you are using this wonderful hymn, it is certainly worth having a bit of a go at making the language more gender inclusive.
- CH4 757 – “Come all you people” – From Zimbabwe and a great way to start any service, perhaps particularly with a small informal group. I have a young friend who when he is fed up waiting for family worship to begin just starts singing.

- CH4 771 – “If you believe, and I believe” – Another short refrain from Zimbabwe, which can be used either as a hymn or as part of a prayer. A good choice if you are looking to focus on the reading from Exodus.
- “Don’t tell me of a faith that fears” – A hymn from the Iona Community (*Love and Anger*, Wild Goose Publications) and one that encapsulates several of the themes in the lectionary readings.
- “Goodness is stronger than evil” – I’ve used this short refrain (from *Love and Anger*, Wild Goose Publications) as part of the prayers of intercession. Although written in Scotland, it reflects words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and was penned during a visit he made there.
- “When to the Temple” – A good hymn from the Iona Community (*Heaven Shall Not Wait*, Wild Goose Publications), particularly if you are focusing on the gospel passage from John. More straightforward tunes are available if you need them.

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

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found [here](#)

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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