

Fifth Sunday in Lent – Year C

Sunday 6 April 2025

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev David Coleman, Eco Chaplain, EcoCongregation Scotland, for his thoughts on the fifth Sunday in Lent.

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.

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.

Introduction.....	3
Isaiah 43:16-21.....	3
Psalm 126	5
Philippians 3:4b-14.....	6
John 12:1-8	7
Sermon ideas	9
Prayers	10
Musical suggestions	14
Reflecting on our worship practice	15
Useful links	17

Introduction

This collection of bible passages gives a strong and inspiring diversity of resources for the understanding of faithfulness and perseverance as expressed in the willingness to be transformed: from barren to green and fruitful, from neutral or unjust to just, from boringly predictable to thought-provoking.

Beauty and joy are far from irrelevant outcomes and values, which need not to be bullied aside by a narrow 'prudence' which hypocritically measures outcomes in financial terms alone. What currencies other than money can help us express our love and faithfulness to Christ Jesus?

But there's also attention given to Paul's painful experience of misdirected and misinformed faithfulness and conscientiousness; comparable to the sincere suspicion sometimes expressed by those responsible for our assets and finances in relation to fair trade, green churches and of our grounds and gardens.

Our resource for healing is the compassion and cohesion of our church communities, looking for a faithfulness that can embrace change without vengefulness and blame-games. How do we hold on long enough to see the desert blossom, when the thunderclouds gather and seem to threaten?

With signs of our northern springtime well in evidence, the constant natural cycles which transform our own landscapes before our eyes, provide a real way in to placing ourselves within the poetry of Isaiah and the psalm – though with abruptness and a giddy urgency. Opportunities – like Mary's to nurture Jesus – pass us by if they are not seized.

The obedience of non-human fellow creatures to God's will, and the wonderful transformations that really do occur before the eyes of the writers, push home God's will for justice and compassionate living, in which is found the glory of God.

There's plenty here that touches on the whole of the Five Marks of Mission in which no single intent or action can be seen outside its cultural, spiritual and environmental context.

[Isaiah 43:16-21](#)

The Book of Isaiah – especially in these later chapters, which have been ascribed to the second writer to bear the mantle of 'Isaiah' – is a collection of prophetic writings that makes more sense and is better understood when we allow for an extensive literacy with regard to

the natural world. This is the writer who describes the powerful Word of God in the same breath as the Water Cycle (Isaiah 55:10-11). If we want to describe their use of language as metaphor then we have to remember that this is grounded in experienced reality, rather than wishy-washy flights of fancy.

These powerful expressions are more than 'mere' poetry.

Referring back to the Exodus triumph of the seas over the superpower of Egypt, this vibrant song sets all human claims to power in the perspective of God's sovereignty and solidarity with non-human Creation. That said, even to put it that way also risks falling into the trap of a disconnect between human and non-human life, which is foreign to the Old Testament and one that I've seen churches, globally, beginning to repent from.

For Isaiah, the personalities of fellow creatures are not reduced to mere property or inanimate objects. Indeed, the observed – and therefore not merely figurative – gratitude of the wildlife puts to shame the brute unresponsiveness of God's especially beloved people to a providence which is to their benefit, as well as that of fellow creatures. Exclusiveness is not, *per se*, an attribute of God's favour. A land blessed is a land blessed for all who find a home there.

The poem also offers, by means of a mild rebuke, a revolutionary encouragement and hope to those whose deeply ingrained experience points to despair as a rational response. Whether for the exiled Israelites, or for ourselves in the midst of stacked-up crises of nature and climate.

Hope is a powerfully "new thing" (v19), and accordingly in God's gift rather than ours. Hope, when things may reasonably seem too late – even successive COP conferences barely edge forward humanity's well-attested need to make fossil fuels a thing of the past – for the good of life on Earth.

And God's "new thing", which Isaiah's audience need reminding they are capable of perceiving, emerges in a transformation of landscapes and habitats that is primarily a transformation of our relationship with what we have been accustomed to see as empty, hostile, and barren.

We may have seen on wildlife documentaries the hyper-charged blossoming of dormant life in desert regions. When finally, the rains do come – the barely believable, but real transformations with which nature defies death and drought, speak prophetically in partnership with Isaiah.

Psalm 126

When have you experienced salvation “by the skin of your teeth” (as in Job 19:20)? And when has the nail-biting improbability of what turned out well after all, made you re-think the possibilities of what may lie ahead?

We’re presented in verse 5 with the natural phenomenon of extreme blossoming when water comes, after a long dry patch, to the real and well-known landscape of the Negev, which seems barren or dead, but which harbours dormant plants and wildlife, waiting for the opportunity of fruitfulness. As with the Isaiah passage, this also informs the wondering exuberance of Psalm 126. The word ‘Negev’ is derived from the Hebrew for ‘dry land’. In the Septuagint (Greek version of the Hebrew Bible), ‘Negev’ is translated generically as ‘desert’, but it’s always worth affirming that the poetry is based on experiential reality, not just made up.

But this is a song for our dry patch, building hope on what may perhaps be a somewhat romanticised memory, though that doesn’t invalidate the inspiration.

Looking back can be a hindrance or a help: the grumpy-old-codger syndrome which offers only negative and undermining comments on a completely different situation, or, as here, gaining strength and encouragement from the transforming gratitude which is known to have shaped both our identity and our relationship with God.

A study of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah might lead scholars to conclude that the return from Exile to Jerusalem wasn’t quite as unambiguously glorious as the singer might have wanted, but nonetheless, and against all odds, it really did happen. The Lord really has “done great things for us” (v3).

It’s in character for the Psalmist also to attend to that aspect of (national) self-esteem which is concerned with reputation. The longing for a dignity that justifies holding our head high. This, of course, comes from God, who rightly takes the credit. Perhaps this informed Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, that His followers might “let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). Keeping quiet about good things is not a great approach to mission.

The poem concludes with the heartfelt contrast of sowing in misery, reaping in joy. But to sow at all – or perhaps to plant trees – is always a sign of faith and hope beyond the grim horizons that may confront us in a world beset by crises of nature and climate.

This might remind us of the words of the American Gospel song: *“Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves; we shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.”*

Philippians 3:4b-14

If the Psalmist was not shy of a legitimate boasting in today’s psalm, then neither was Paul. Perhaps this is part of his challenge for many ‘quieter’ Scottish churches to shun any aversion toward speaking out loud something of our vulnerabilities in our journeys of faith, as if this were necessarily poor taste, or an expression of unacceptable arrogance. Does the reliance on Christ, offloading the credit onto Him, get the ‘boastful’ preacher off the hook?

In Paul’s case, this journey involved some extreme and existential changes of direction, which were ultimately a repurposing, rather than a trashing of his deep faith in the God of his Hebrew ancestors. “So, you want to serve me?” says God, effectively: “Well listen to me, for a change!”

At no time was Paul hypocritical, but the Damascus Road experience was devastating to his sense of piety and propriety. I don’t think it diminishes the description of his functional blindness (Acts 9:9) to compare it with that experienced by shell-shocked soldiers in the trenches. In order to remain himself – or to recycle/repurpose himself – he had to embrace radical changes of heart and mind. And by the grace of God, he was not abandoned to that process, but found a therapeutic community to help him through, in the beginnings of the Church.

What paths do churches need to take, to remain themselves as we discover more and more about what a right relationship with the Earth and fellow creatures might entail?

Maybe in an age of single-use and non-recyclable products, the unduly genteel translations rendering Paul’s view of what he left behind (v8) as “rubbish” (KJV gives “dung”) gets us further off track. But without going so naively far as to point out the uses of manure as fertiliser, what we do with our own ‘garbage’ says a lot.

I think, as Eco Chaplain, observing and sometimes being part of conversations in which conscientious and devoted Christians confront the need to change – such as the movement to switch investment from fossil fuels – this is a stage when to hear the testimony of someone else’s struggles and vulnerabilities can be helpful rather than intimidating.

So, to some extent, take the vulgar bluster of this letter with a pinch of salt. Perhaps following something like the experience of a young man dropping off and falling out of a

window (Acts 20:7-12), Paul was mindful of the need for his speech and writing to be stimulating and thought-provoking. And yet that's certainly not all that is going on here.

Paul really is describing the struggle to redefine his own identity in the light of his encounter with Christ; the letting go, as a healing – of things he thought he had to do and say, people he thought he had to admire, or persecute. Perhaps also letting go of opinions he considered naive and ill-informed. I've heard of how environmentalists were ridiculed even a decade ago.

What things 'that they think they have to do' could your church let go of?

But Paul is also inviting the hearer to join him in this process of healing and redefinition. Can your local church offer that sort of unconditional solidarity?

And as a current example: While this is something our whole culture needs to embrace - how can we offer support (with a loving space for healing) for those who struggle the most with the transition from fossil fuel to a more just means?

John 12:1-8

This is a passage which can easily be twisted, or evaded, for fear that Jesus Himself might be undermined by accusations of justifying extravagance. Instead, let's face it head-on, especially with the doubts and discomfort it might occasion. Real life-giving change might require extravagance. What opportunities might we be passing up by passing off destructive hesitancy as wise and prudent caution?

The balance of beauty and utility requires great sensitivity and maturity in discernment, and certainly an openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And there certainly are times when Judas' objection would be valid, but, over and above the specious neutrality of facts, do we underestimate the significance of Judas' hypocrisy to the outcome of the story? And the sincerity of Mary?

I'm reminded of a presentation in the Science Pavilion at COP26 in Glasgow, expounding the extreme environmental value of the great whales. Part of the talk was couched in the language of commerce. We've already learned to attach value to trees because of their carbon-capturing abilities, and that helps money-minded folk put their money where their mouth is. In that particular talk, it was pointed out that one whale, in their lifetime, captures as much carbon as several thousand trees, to say nothing of the other benefits

accruing, through the life of the whales, to the whole marine ecosystem on which, of course, we also depend.

Many of us will have been sympathetic to the conservation of whales or other wildlife, moved by their wonder and beauty, but that love and delight is still vulnerable to the intimidating pressure to set feelings aside in the alleged cause of the greater measurable good.

Ethical investment and expenditure, as well as the moral imperative behind the strengthening of our mission and public witness when we insist on fairly-traded products in the life of the church, all of these well-meaning intentions do still have to be subject to an understanding of the 'fiduciary duty' to which Judas was alluding, even as he was also transgressing it by robbing the common purse.

This discipline and obligation aims to ensure that those who manage a community's assets act according to the aims and objectives of that community, rather than serving their own interests. Ideally this now encompasses not only money, but social, environmental – and for churches – spiritual values.

As a URC minister following the environmental policy of the church, travel for work, including in mainland Europe, should be "by default, by train." Perhaps the hungry could be fed with the difference between that and a cut-price air fare (as Judas would argue) – except that far more harm is done, and costs imposed 'out of sight, out of mind' on sisters and brothers in creation by flying. In a dire mirror-universe image of Mary's perfume pervading the whole house, environmental harm ultimately pervades and damages the whole of our common home, the Earth.

But the danger remains that what seems merely beautiful is still expendable – or even immoral – according to what masquerades as conscience. Is it ironic that it's science, that raft of disciplines pursuing objectivity, that is leading us into the wisdom and knowledge that finds, in so much of what we thought merely beautiful, the things on which our life most depend?

A final note: In the UK, The Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) has mandated climate-related financial disclosures for many UK registered companies. This aims to help investors understand how climate change impacts businesses, encouraging firms to disclose information on their climate-related risks and opportunities. Industries – and churches – that claim to benefit society, won't live up to that aspiration if they profit by the destruction of the 'natural communities' we need for life.

Sermon ideas

Isaiah and Psalm

- How can we evoke our congregations' lived experience of perhaps terrifying transformations of life and/or landscape that not only turned out 'all right' but brought new hope, life, and joy? For example, spring flowers in a meadow; wildlife in the parks and gardens. When are they just weeds, just vermin? Who decides, and how?
- Reading these Bible passages requires deeper engagement than merely tweaking and tinkering. In doing so, can we dream of real possibilities inspired by the life around us?

Look at the Five Marks of Mission (points 4 and 5):

"To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation."

"To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth."

The prophet, and the poetry of creation, shows the way!

Philippians and John

- What are the oppressive, or even hateful things we think we ought to do, but might not be essential to our life, work and prayer?
- Have we ever felt vulnerable to accusations like those of Judas, that what we do out of love or faithfulness is no more than self-serving and foolish extravagance? How, if that's unjust, would we stand up to such accusations?
- What difference does attitude make – Mary's love and Judas' hypocrisy?
- Where does the real power lie in your community (if you can dare to ask that question) and to what authority do folk appeal to get their own way?
- We see Mary exemplifying point 3 of the Five Marks of Mission: *"To respond to human need by loving service."* How is this different from responding, as does Judas, to human need by hypocrisy? If 'the poor' benefit, how much does it matter whether this is through sacrificial love or self-serving conspicuous generosity?
- Is there such a thing as 'dirty money' when supporting charities? If so, why? Would the story of Judas be useful in discussing the priorities of church finances?

Prayers

Gathering prayer / Call to worship

Opening responses (optional)

God of love and beauty

God of rain and flowers

Honoured by wildlife

Praised by the Seasons

Turning tides of injustice

And tables of oppression

God, with all the Earth, we praise You

Sing with tongues of love and hope!

Prayer of approach/Gathering prayer

Sustaining God, what a difference a day makes!

Or a week, or a month, or a year, or a lifetime!

Whatever time it takes for the shoots and the blossom to burst.

So, as life breathes in and out –

we emerge from the rest of last night.

And as the birds have already greeted the dawn –

so, it is our turn to gather,

in delight and in beauty,

with Christ:

lifting the needs of the world,

which are also our own.

Prayer of Confession / Repentance/Pardon

Dear Christ,

we have chosen to harm:

ourselves,

others,

the Earth.

We have chosen and acted in our own authority and opportunity,

we have gone along with it and kept quiet.

We have left healing and peace-making to others.
We have thrown away, where we might have repurposed
and treated Creation as single-use and expendable.

We have done what looked like good,
and acted with what looked like prudence,
without a scent of love.

We know that You know,
and thank God for that!
So, set us free from that self-deception,
from the harm we think we have to do.

With You, things change, for life.

Make us beautiful with Your forgiveness -
make us as lights that shine and show the way,
make us as water in the desert,
make us as bright threads in life's web
to receive with joy what we also need as partners with Creation.
To Your glory, Amen

Prayer of Thanksgiving / Gratitude

Sustaining God,
help us to call to mind what has kept us going to this day, to this time –
the gifts of food and drink and air,
the work of the trees and bees,
the human key workers who labour out of sight, out of mind,
the love of Christ, who rules by loving service.

And we say, thank You.

Thank You.

God of all that has been,
may we delight in the heritage of the churches,
the inspiration of the arts,
the ingenuity of science,
the resources we're given to build us up
and that as we use them, may we not hoard or hide.

And we say, thank You.

Thank You.

God of all the days to come;
Christ with us to the end of the Age,
we thank You for every opportunity for fruitfulness,
yes, even for the possibility to get things wrong.
We receive the reassurance of Your forgiveness
as the sun once more has risen this day,
to light our way ahead in company with You.

we take a moment to recall whatever small or marvellous thing
has made us smile this past week...

[Hold a time of silence]

We say, thank You.

Thank You. Amen.

Prayer for others / Intercession

Let us open hearts to change
and call the Holy Spirit in,
that change may be for good.

God, who in Christ affirms the beauty of compassion,
who accepts and blesses what is offered in love;
we bring and offer the best things from our hearts,
the treasures of our affections and concerns
for the world's healing, which is also our own.

We pray that we may be strengthened for the good of all,
to make known, in warnings and in songs of love,
Your Good News:
God, at work for justice, renewing the life of Earth, in whom You delight.

We consider the ugliness of wars and conflicts continuing without concern for life and
beauty.

The corners people have felt backed into,
responding so desperately with violence.

Help us to re-examine what we have thought would make for peace.

We consider *[name some issues arising from this week]*

We consider the blessing that is the world-wide Church –
divided, preoccupied, fallible, but still Your people, called.

Help us to be what Church needs to be –
called to love extravagantly in our response to need,
our pursuit of peace, and our love of the Earth.

We consider *[name some issues arising from this week]*

And pour over the hurts
of our own immediate lives and communities,
may the precious oil you have saved for this day, this church, this life be the balm.

Guide us in prayer for those we haven't loved,
for those dealing with decisions and anniversaries
and show us how Your grace can make what we do offer -
a blessing for Your beloved world.

Amen

Closing Responses and Blessing

The green shoots spring up
And the landscape shouts beauty.

The cycles of nature, of water, of life
Show God's Word of renewal, of change and of hope.

And with faith and with love
may the blessing
of God, Beloved, and Wild Wind,
Father, Son and Spirit,
enfold and empower you
through all that does lie ahead.

Amen

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 and words-only versions are now available; and 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.

- GWA 157 – “As rivers flow from a distant spring” – picks up the transformation of spiritual and actual landscape in Isaiah and Psalm 126.
- GWA 159 – “Earth is full of wit and wisdom” – a light touch, easy to sing, but profound, and wonderful for including midgies in a hymn. Churches may want to introduce this before children go to their further departments.
- GWA 162 – “The Garden of the World” – thoughtful hymn on responsibility for environmental harm, linked with injustice to the poor.
- CH4 155 – “Think of a world without any flowers” – Beauty and the participation of nature in our lives.
- CH4 159 – “Lord for the years” – an affirmation of what has been, which looks forward to fulfilment and a better world.
- CH4 259 – “Beauty for brokenness” – Again, the importance of beauty in God’s healing work, and the enormous challenge of healing change.
- CH4 506 – “All I once held dear” – particularly in connection with Paul’s denigration of what he has left behind.

- CH4 706 – “For the healing of the nations” – emphasising the value of our own small part in God’s work of global healing.
- Singing the Faith 353 (Complete Mission Praise 367) – “Jesus is Lord, Creation’s voice proclaims it” – fits well with Isaiah and Psalm 126.
- A suggested [playlist of songs from CH4 throughout Lent](#) can be found on the Church of Scotland website.

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 have 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](#)

You are free to download, project, print and circulate multiple copies of any of this material for use in worship services, bible studies, parish magazines, etc. If you would like to reproduce this material for commercial purposes, please contact the copyright holders, the Faith Action Programme, for permission: faithaction@churchofscotland.org.uk

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

©Faith Action Programme

Scottish Charity Number: SC011353

www.churchofscotland.org.uk