

Fifth Sunday of Easter – Year A

Fifth Sunday of Easter – 7 May 2023

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Rev Dr Scott Shackleton for his introduction to the vision of the Faith Action Programme, prayer and discussion questions. Our thanks also go to Christian Aid Scotland's writing collective for the use of their archive material from 2020.

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.

At the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 2022, the Faith Nurture Forum were asked to: *Call the Church to pray, and instruct the Forum to produce prayer resources to encourage and equip people to pray for the future well-being, peace and revival of the Church.*

We have asked people from across the Church to write prayers to help us respond to this call. Their prayers reflect the range of different voices across the Church of Scotland, and offer a variety of prayer styles that can be used in public worship, church gatherings and meetings, or in your own personal prayer rhythm.

[These prayers can be found](#) along with the rest of the May Weekly Worship materials.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the [Sanctuary First website](#).

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 to the Faith Action Programme

The Faith Action Plan is the outcome of both the Radical Action Plan and Special Commission Report to the General Assembly in 2019 and will be presented to this year's General Assembly for sign-off. The responsibilities of the four former Councils are moving across to the presbyteries, supported from the National Office by the new Faith Action Programme Leadership Team (FAPLT).

The leadership team will include commissioners from each of the new presbyteries and representatives from the Theological Forum and Ecumenical Relations. It will delegate responsibility to small, five-person Programme Groups focused on the specialist areas of People and Training, Mission Support (including presbytery planning and international work), Public Life and Social Justice, and Resource and Presence (looking after our various business entities). The former Council and Forum staff are in supporting roles within this new, slimline structure.

These changes within the National Office have been running in parallel with the Presbytery Mission Planning process to rationalise our ministries and buildings. The overall programme of change touches the length and breadth of our Church. It is indeed a form of reformation for the 21st century.

The Faith Action Programme is the doing part of the Faith Action Plan. It aims to inspire the people of Scotland and beyond with the Good News of Jesus Christ through enthusiastic worshipping, witness, nurturing and serving communities, underpinned by the Five Marks of Mission:

- Enthusiastic Communities: to proclaim the good news of the kingdom
- Nurturing communities: to teach, baptise, and nurture new believers
- Serving Communities: to respond to human need by loving service
- Witnessing Communities: to seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
- Worshipping Communities: to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

As with all times of reformation (which in Scotland seem to occur every 500 years), deep change and the transformation of institutions such as the Kirk are very challenging and we see this reflected in conversations about change across the presbyteries and within the national offices.

All of this is occurring against the backdrop of the financial reality of a Church which for years has been running an operational deficit that is using up reserves, and a ministry recruitment gap that challenges our ability to fill vacant charges.

We are addressing these last two issues through the Programme's objectives, laid out in detail in our strategic plan running from GA23-GA28, with a review by the Assembly Trustees in 2025 and annual reporting to the General Assembly.

The prayers of the whole Church are needed at this time of challenge and opportunity.

O God our Father,
who sent saints throughout the land on many occasions
to encourage and proclaim the gospel,
grant, we pray, a like spirit today in Your people in this generation.

May our programme of change, be Your programme of change.
May we all be conscious of our responsibilities,
to travel through this time of change together
under the spirit of Your guidance
as the Israelites did in their time in the desert.
We are similarly pilgrims on a journey,
so, strengthen us as we go forward
and may we too glimpse Your presence
behind and before us, leading us on.

May the manna of Your spirit feed us and sustain us,
as we hope and dream of a renewed Church
in the new and unfolding landscape of this century.
Equip us to faithfully proclaim Your kingdom
in this nation of Scotland and beyond.
We make this prayer together, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Rev Dr Scott Shackleton [Head, Faith Action Programme]

Embodying the Faith Action Plan

The lectionary-based archive material from Christian Aid this week offers a wealth of ideas around our response to God's call (and Jesus' reminder to the disciples) to 'go and do'.

As we build strategies in response to this call to serve, it is helpful to spend time reflecting not only on what we do, but why we do it, and to begin to understand our part in all of this.

The Five Marks of Mission and the Faith Action Plan are part of the Church's response to God's call and we hope that resources such as Weekly Worship can help us to weave the realities of modern life through our worship and that as we pray and learn together we might be further empowered, as people equipped to live out the mission of God.

The following questions, linked to the lectionary passages, look more closely at how we are embodying the Faith Action Plan. They may help to guide your sermon preparation, act as conversation starters during a worship gathering, or be used in home groups, bible studies, etc.

Acts 7:55-60

In this passage we meet Stephen, who was a new leader in the fledgling community of the early church. The passage speaks of the challenges of sustaining/feeding everyone in the community.

- What are the challenges that your church/community are facing at the moment?
- How are people being empowered and equipped to meet these challenges?
- How is the Church responding to the opportunities that these challenges?

Psalm 31 :1-5, 15-16

In Psalm 31 we see God described as "a rock of refuge for me"; and "a strong fortress to save me". There is a mix of lament and declaring trust in God. As we reshape our Presbyteries we face real challenges but we worship a God that is faithful. How might we express this in our worship and prayers?

- How are you discerning God's guidance in amongst the change?
- What changes are you lamenting in this situation?
- What changes are you embracing and celebrating?

1 Peter 2:2-10

In this passage, Peter uses the imagery of living stones. Stones are shaped by weather and their environment, and can be used for building. "Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house."

- Share a story of something significant that has shaped your worshipping community
- What are the cornerstones or foundations of your community?
- How is your congregation being shaped for mission?

John 14:1-14

In this passage Jesus says “Do not let your hearts be troubled”; “I go to prepare a place for you”; “You will do greater works than these.”

- What are the fears you wish God to dispel?
- What does it look like when we get to the place prepared for us?
- What is your dream for your community?

Archive material – Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year A

Introduction

Christian Aid’s archive material was written in May 2020, mindful of their mission to end poverty and holding to their value that – “We believe that everyone is equal in the sight of God. Yet we live in a world where poverty still persists. Poverty is an outrage against humanity. It robs people of their dignity and lets injustice thrive.”

‘There was a time when... the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.’ Martin Luther King Jr.

This week’s lectionary readings are all written by or to people in distress. They are written for people who need the promise of a refuge, who need to know that help is near. The Psalmist appeals for God to reach out God’s hand. Luke remembers how Stephen suffered at the hands of the religious elite. John observes the disciples wrestling with anxiety and loss. Peter reminds his little flock who and whose they are.

[Act 7:55-60](#)

Deep imagery wraps itself around timeless messages in this sad, violent story in Acts 7:55-60. The lectionary text offers only the end of Stephen’s story, but lessons buried in the background of this account will help the story resonate.

‘Followers of the Way’ (referring to the first followers of the resurrected Jesus) were still very much part of the synagogue, but their teaching was not wholly welcome and there was internal tension. Stephen was a new leader, chosen by the fledgling ‘Christian’ community and commissioned by the Twelve. As follower numbers grew, sharing became more challenging, so Stephen and six others were responsible for the fair distribution of food.

In the Acts account, Stephen's outspoken vision and passion challenged the teachings of the traditional religious leaders, who accused him of blasphemy. Brought before the Council and the High Priest, Stephen defended himself; but, his defence proved to be his downfall. Following the line of prophets, naming Abraham, Joseph, Moses and David, he argued that obedience to God called those prophets to change and journey, to push against established norms. 'Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute?' (Acts 7:52), he asks, and that challenge infuriated the Establishment. They drove him out and stoned him.

It is worth emphasising that those stoning Stephen were not hooligans or Roman soldiers but the leaders in the synagogue, elders and priests. As Matt Skinner notes, "[...] they are important people who possess a lot of leverage in religious discourse; political discourse, too".

A young man named Saul has a cameo role in this passage. The passage is unclear about whether Saul (later Paul) participates in the stoning. But we read in verse 58 that he is a bystander, a facilitator, a coat-holder.

The imagery of the stoning reaches across generations and asks hard questions: What violence do we dress up in official channels and 'business as usual'? When 'powers that be' begin the onslaught, does it become easier to join in? Whose coats are we holding and what do we reveal when we take off the cloak of business, lifestyle, profit and power?

'History does not repeat itself, but it rhymes' (attributed to Mark Twain). What messages do we hear echoing?

[Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16](#)

Psalm 31 might be described as an individual lament. A guttural howl calling for help, trusting that help is at hand and a vow to never give up praising God. At the end of the psalm, the Psalmist stops navel gazing and looks over to their neighbour. 'Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord.' (31:24)

The Psalmist cries out in a time of deep distress, and the first four verses paint a troubled portrait in a turbulent landscape. Despite their distress, the Psalmist is certain that their refuge is in a righteous God. This is the same God with whom Abraham argues to save the righteous of Sodom. The Psalmist seeks shelter in YHWH who is above all things righteous, and more than fair.

To be shamed was to be in exile, cut off from community and opportunity. It strikes a much deeper chord than our current definition and the preacher needs to unpack the emotion and visceral cry. This is rich thought-fodder and not to be rushed past.

This passage does not shy away from the power dynamics, using the word 'hand' to signify God's oversight and the power of the enemy (vv.31: 8 and 15). And while the Psalmist is assured that God will provide a refuge, "The bad news is that the power of the opposition to the Psalmist (and to God's will for life) is real and must be endured", according to [J. Clinton McCann](#).

Psalm 31 contains one of the "seven last words from the cross" and it is possible that Jesus recited the entire psalm or at least longer parts of it. Luke only reports one verse (v.5). In the midst of powerful and pervasive opposition, Jesus steadfastly resisted the evil forces arrayed against Him. And while Jesus did not resist violently, neither did Jesus resist quietly.

1 Peter 2:2-10

The letter of First Peter was written to several churches located in Asia Minor: modern-day Turkey. These churches made up a small community of faith, scattered across the Roman Empire and viewed with suspicion and hostility. What they needed most, alongside messages of hope and encouragement, was a sense of identity.

And so, Peter takes them through their growing: from babies desperate for mother's milk to people and communities with a strong sense of self. In verses 4-10, Peter encourages these new believers to know who and whose they are. Peter doesn't want simply to tell them what to do – how to *act* as people of faith – but to reshape their identity. He encourages them to see themselves as the community-based, living incarnation of a stone-built temple following the example of Jesus, the cornerstone.

Although the cornerstone was rejected, the final word drawn from the Old Testament Scriptures about Jesus is not 'rejected' but 'valuable' and 'chosen' (v.6). And while the readers of the letter feel maligned and shamed by their unbelieving neighbours, Peter reminds them that they have been chosen. They are a movement of people: God's people chosen to proclaim mighty acts.

The last two verses of our text (vv.9-10) focus on what commentators have called the four pillars of self-esteem: that we are acceptable, valuable, capable and forgivable. Peter was keen to energise these small bands of believers, to empower them to change the world one community at a time. And to do that, Peter knew, as Jesus knew, that our identity needs a

rock-solid foundation. We must love ourselves in order to love our neighbours down the road and across the world.

[John 14:1-14](#)

The disciples are in the upper room. Their feet are clean, they've eaten together and Judas has left. The atmosphere is intimate enough that these hardened fishermen, these risk-takers and way-changers can share their fears for the future. Jesus urges them not to be troubled: that He is going to prepare a place in His Father's house for them; that Jesus will come back for them and that, in any case, they know the way.

David Coleman from Eco-Congregation Scotland notes that the house-of-multiple-occupation [Oikia] described here needs to be shaken free of its setting in funerals and its post-mortem resonance in our culture. He muses that this is a passage that might have inspired Christian Aid's vintage strapline *We believe in life before death*, with 'life in all its fullness' (John 10:10) added in for good measure.

But it's all too much for Thomas. He doesn't need the talking in riddles; he needs a plan and a map. Instead Jesus offers him a burning bush statement: I AM. "I am the way, the truth and the life." Jesus is encouraging Thomas into a future that is wholly dependent upon a relationship with Him and God. If you know me, Jesus says, you will know my Father. Philip, perhaps trying to smooth the way, says that once they are introduced to the Father, things are going to get right back on track. Philip is treated to a clear explanation about how he has already seen the Father. The intimate atmosphere grows thick with confusion.

The mystery of faith is not in the esoteric, but in the here and now. It is in the disciples' relationship and work with Jesus and by extension, with the Father. Jesus' imperative is to remind the disciples that, with the help of the Holy Spirit, they can handle His mission from here. It is in their hands to feed the hungry, heal the sick, welcome the stranger, clothe those who have been stripped bare and sit with those who are imprisoned. (Matthew 25:35-45)

"Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it" (14:12-14).

Sermon ideas

Stones

In the lectionary readings, we see how stones can be used to build up or to tear down. They can inspire and destroy. You might want to bring your congregation into these scriptures by giving each one a stone. How will they use their stone in the world? To build a dam, a refuge for resilient global communities? Or will they hold on to their stone, blocking out the world around and hold on to their power and privilege?

Your congregation might wish to build a cairn with their stones, remembering that together we can help communities adapt to climate change. Together, we can push politicians and pull economic levers, moving us away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy. Together we can stop this climate crisis.

Shame

We have seen in Psalm 31 that to be shamed was to be in exile, cut off from community and opportunity. It is not difficult to imagine how women like Rose who are not able to provide food and water for their families might feel ashamed. But sometimes our own shame gets in the way of our impulse to act.

Many of us hold shame for what we regard as the hypocrisy of luxurious lifestyles in the face of the climate crisis. We may feel too dependent on our cars, or enjoy our annual overseas trip too much to speak out against systemic contributions to the climate emergency such as investment in fossil fuels. Our shame silences our calls for justice.

You might want to acknowledge before God that we are acceptable, valuable, capable and forgivable. You might want to pray with the congregation that we will be delivered from the silence of shame or the avoidance of our complicity. In acknowledging our part, may we do all we can to bring about the deep and necessary changes needed so all might know climate justice and fullness of life.

Do not let your hearts be troubled

John 14 starts with verses of deep comfort: 'do not let your hearts be troubled' (v.1). These words, first spoken into a context of tension, doubt and lurking despair, are much needed for those who are feeling overwhelmed by this climate crisis.

In the account of the stoning of Stephen in Acts (7:57) the crowd cover their ears, blocking out what they don't want to hear, shouting and rushing to silence an inconvenient truth. Today, our sisters and brothers living on the sharp edge of this climate crisis have a

different message to share. Will we listen? Will we magnify their voices or rush ahead, refusing to hear?

Prayers

God of all the earth,
as climate chaos
wreaks havoc on homes
livelihoods and hopes
we raise our voices
and call for justice
for those who suffer the most
but are least responsible,
who have had enough
of empty promises,
perpetual relief packages
and failed carbon reduction commitments.
We pray for wise and courageous action
for all of creation at this critical hour.
In the name of Jesus and for Your Glory, we pray,
Amen

A prayer based on the hymn, *How Great Thou Art*

Our souls sing out a joyful song,
Our souls sing out how great Thou art.
We consider the works You have made
The stars of the night, the leaves of the trees
The birds of the air the oceans and streams.

Our souls sing out a mournful song,
Our souls grieve before our God.
We consider the works our hands have made;
The warming of the planet, the rising of seas
The wilting of the harvest, devastating communities.

Our souls sing out a contrite song
Our souls bow down low.
We regret the works our hands have made
The impact on the poorest, the livelihoods lost

The deepening of poverty, the environmental and human cost.

Our souls sing out a penitent song,
Our souls turn back to what is right.
We consider the good works our hands can make;
The words of justice we can speak, the acts of love we can give
The hand of solidarity we can extend, for others to fully live.

Our souls sing out a hopeful song
Our souls look to the Lord, where our hope comes from
We consider the works you call us to;
The love of our neighbour, the stewardship of the earth
The flourishing of all creation, the wonder of its worth.

Prayer

Creator God who has made the earth
The oceans and the rivers teeming with life
The heartbeats of creatures large and small
We thank you for giving us this wondrous ecosystem

Creator God who calls us as stewards
We confess that we have neglected our duty
That human choices are robbing the planet of its life
That climate breakdown has been at our hands.

Lord of justice who longs for equality on the earth
We stand with earth defenders and climate strikers
Around the world we join their call for climate justice
May our actions and our words speak life in all its fullness
Amen

Climate emergency prayer

God of justice and love,
help us listen to our sisters and brothers
who are living with the reality of the climate emergency.

We pray for people who are hungry
because of failed harvests and dry river beds.
For people who are homeless

because of unpredictable and extreme weather,
for people who are struggling to make a living
in ever more challenging circumstances.

We pray alongside people everywhere
who show that another world is possible
through their words and actions.
We stand in solidarity with all those who are suffering.

Give us the strength we need
to play our part in restoring Your world
to act justly and to walk humbly.
May our love for our neighbours,
even for those far from us,
make known our love for You.

In the name of Christ, Amen

Blessing

May God bless us with wonder at creation's glory.
May God bless us with fury at creation's spoiling.
May God bless us with courage at this critical hour.
And may the blessing of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
rest upon us and on all creation,
this day and for the future to come.
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.
- CH4 154 – “Oh Lord my God!” (How great thou art)

- CH4 172 – “Sing for God’s glory that colours the dawn of creation”
- CH4 238 – “Lord, bring the day to pass”
- CH4 243 – “Touch the earth lightly”
- CH4 245 – “It’s a world of sunshine, a world of rain”
- CH4 543 – “Longing for light, we wait in darkness”
- Wild Goose Resource Group Almighty God (Love and Anger 1997)
- Wild Goose Resource Group – We will not take what is not ours (Love and Anger 1997)

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’.
- While singing in our congregations is still 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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