

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

Sunday 25 August 2024

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Joanna Love, Resource Worker for the Wild Goose Resource Group, for the use of her archive material from 2021 for the fourteenth 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

I followed one of my usual 'ways in' to preparing this week's worship material; a very simple method I've found helpful, as follows:

I look up the passages on the Bible Gateway website, usually opting for the NRSV translation, and sometimes The Message too. I copy and paste the passages into a Word doc, and then take out all the chapter and verse numbers, laying them on the page with plenty of space, breaking up dialogue from narrative, and I print them out. I definitely do my best thinking with pen on paper! I read and re-read, underlining bits and scribbling thoughts, asking myself 'what's this passage about?' and 'what's its essence, its gist?' Then I look for any common threads across the four readings. Together, what are they pointing towards or asking or expressing? I re-read many times, trying to notice more and more of what's there.

On a first reading of this Sunday's four scripture passages, the common threads might best be summed up in two words: 'extreme' and 'wholehearted'. What do we have in these four readings? First, the huge drama and occasion of the ark of the covenant being brought to the just-completed Temple of Jerusalem in Solomon's reign. Then a psalm which is an expression of a worshipper's great love for the Temple as a source of joy and blessing. From centuries later, we read a section from the letter to the young church community in Ephesus. Paul (or A.N. Other unknown author!) uses the imagery of military uniform as a call to be 'fully clothed' for combat against all the powers of evil and goes on to set the standard for prayer and spiritual alertness – they must be nothing less than constant. And finally, more extreme and exaggerated language, from Jesus Himself, moving on from talk of bread and manna to use His own flesh as an image for finding life in Him – words which prove so off-putting that many of His disciples decide against following Him any further.

All four readings are largely or wholly direct speech – giving an immediacy to the context. If we can allow ourselves to be drawn in imaginatively to the communities of the first hearers, what impressions are made on us by Solomon's prayer on behalf of his tribal leaders, by the poet's stirring lines, by Paul's urgent dress code challenge, and by Jesus' all too incarnate choice of illustration followed by His questioning of His closest circle as to whether they too want to bail out on Him?

If there's a common response being asked of all who listen, it seems to be 'put your whole self in'. But at the same time, are these extreme words digestible or off-putting??

1 Kings 8:(1,6,10-11), 22-30, 41-43

The ceremony recounted here comes after seven years of building – a vast and costly project detailed in all its lavish scale and ornamentation in previous chapters. History will primarily remember Solomon for the completion of the Temple. This passage paints the occasion in an unqualified positive light. Like many a grand plan at the stage of accomplishment, this no doubt felt like a point of arrival – “we’ve made it”. The great cloud which fills the house surely depicts God’s endorsement of events. This is as it should be, since many years before, God promised David that through his son, a house and kingdom would be established forever. Nothing more is recalled now of God’s less favourable message about any buildings ever being needed for the One who was on the move with Israel in all their nomadic years.

So Solomon calls on God to continue being faithful because of that promise God made to his father, David. In addition, Solomon claims that the Israelites are walking wholeheartedly before God. So he builds his argument as to why he can ask for God’s wholehearted commitment from here on.

What do we find familiar, and unfamiliar, in the prayer of Solomon? Is this a good model for how we could or should pray? And what do we make of the centrality of the Temple in all this, as Solomon repeatedly says the prayers of the people will be ‘towards this place’? The Temple, understood as literally the place of God’s dwelling on earth, is no longer how we see our consecrated buildings. Yet, are there some physical places where we find it easier to pray; where God seems more accessible and attentive? Is our praying ever emboldened, or sapped, because of the place in which we pray? What makes that so?

Solomon’s Temple would bring both satisfaction and false confidence to Israel. Prophetic voices would later speak critically about worship that neglected justice. The Temple’s destruction was calamitous and its rebuilding did not bring back what had gone before. Later still, Jesus’ fate was sealed by His protest against the Temple system of His own day. Our relationships with stone and wood can be complicated, as our ongoing wrangles with ‘buildings issues’ show. What, then, is legitimate and wholesome about our need and love for special, sacred places?

Psalm 84

There is both unanswered and answered longing in this poetry. They feel like words sung on the way to the Temple, and words proclaimed on arrival and in attendance there. They testify to a shared jubilation and gratitude at the existence of the Temple in all its splendour

and more importantly, that this is the place of God's residing. There are notes of unselfconscious humility, firstly as the poet notices the nesting birds, presumably in the courts, which are open to the sky, and secondly in saying they'd rather do door duty at the Temple than live at ease in a tent of wickedness.

Further to the thoughts and questions about the story from 1 Kings, is this a prayer we identify with? Thinking of this week's UN Day of Commemoration on 22 August (see *Prayer of Intercession*) the psalm could be a focus for thinking about those who have been murdered because of their faith. Who has been unable to sing for joy and go from strength to strength and spend time in adoration of God within a house of worship? We could pray the psalm on their behalf, as a cry for a better future.

[Ephesians 6:10-20](#)

This is probably a sufficiently well-known passage that you could have some fun reinterpreting it in contemporary fashion! What qualities and attributes do we wish we could be clothed with, so as to be spiritually stronger and better equipped to live as God wants us to live? What are the particular challenges we face, and what resources do we feel the need of? The socks of patience, perhaps, or the boots of stamina? The glasses of insight or the necklace of cheerfulness? Invite people to come up with individual outfits of various garments – would they be different for different company and contexts?

More seriously, what are the forces we are up against? What ideologies need to be critiqued and challenged? What is the collective wardrobe that the Church body needs to put on?

Another interesting question may be to ask what are the items we habitually wear that we need to take off and stop donning.

[John 6:56-69](#)

From clothing and what to wear as imagery, now it's food and what to eat. This is not palatable teaching! We might do well to sit with the shock and discomfort it caused. Is this exaggerated language intended to challenge how much people really want the life Jesus offers? Is our desire even greater than the love people had for the Temple in Solomon's day? Jesus says He lives because of the Father. Jesus is immersed in God; soaked through and through in the life of God; motivated by a complete devotion to God. Jesus lives and acts as one with God. Do we want the same? Jesus is saying He will satisfy our true hunger.

Do we recognise that hunger and do we trust the source of its satisfaction? There is no taming the strangeness of Jesus' words. Get right into Him. Feast on Him and live. Eat this bread that far surpasses the miraculous manna of the past. Enter the dwelling-place of God, not a Temple of stone and wood, but the Spirit-filled life we embody in our own selves when we commit ourselves to God.

The reactions of those present are portrayed as all or nothing. Some leave for good. The Twelve declare their trust and stay. For us as disciples now, our experience may be more of a mix of allegiance one day and abandonment the next. When our hearts are not with God, where are they? What have we found too hard about Jesus' teaching? Why have we stayed nonetheless?

Sermon ideas

As is suggested in the reflections on the readings, there's lots of scope for an exploration of 'put your whole self in'. Wouldn't it be amazing to hear each other's honest stories of times when we've given God a wholehearted yes. And equally honestly, how much of us has God got on any given day? When have we knowingly 'turned back' or had sympathy with someone else who lost faith for a while or permanently?

Here are just two possible ways into a time of conversation: If God is the ocean, are we in there swimming out of our depth, or paddling at the water's edge, or waist deep and summoning our breath for the full plunge, or standing on dry land, or, where are we? Or, if Jesus' stark 'drink my blood' invitation could be seen as a kind of spiritual transfusion, then how many pints of our body's average ten, has He infiltrated?

The wearying year* and more of Covid disrupting our lives, has not left unaffected our spiritual wellbeing. We may often have felt incapable of being wholehearted about anything, including God. Talking about that honestly might reveal what kinds of 'clothing' and 'food' would be of most help right now, to us and to other people whose predicaments we know of. People might come up with reflections that sit in tension with the biblical content. That's OK! Scripture is there to be our robust partner in debate.

**This material was written during the Covid-19 pandemic: how might these sentiments still hold true during these times of challenge and change?*

Every blessing in your discerning where to go with today's readings. Trust what comes to you. Always ask, where is the good news in this for the folks you know and love? In the past year in the congregation I belong to, we've had deeper, riskier God-blethers than ever

before, sharing real life experiences not usually aired at your typical Sunday gathering. What if 'Story Sunday' became part of our pattern, and a sermon did not always feature? Maybe you're ahead of us of course!

Prayers

Preparing prayers for public worship is always a matter of sweat and toil, I find! Yet, having already had a long soak in scripture, and several grappling conversations with God, while doing the Bible bits, some kind of 'hook' or way in tends to arise. Creative challenges of recent years have persuaded me of the importance of varying the ways we address God, always remembering that even the word 'God' is just one metaphor for an uncontainable, undefinable Mystery! I always test what I've written by reading it aloud – what works on the page can be different in the mouth.

Approach to God

Ancient of Days,
Holy Mystery,
El Shaddai...

God, we call on You
by the names we have,
taking on our lips
words that cannot contain You.

You are always more
and as we turn to You,
You have already turned to us
and called on us:
My people!
My beloved!

To wait before You
and meditate on You –
this is what restores us.
To know again
that You are the Living God –
this is what reawakens our hope.

So we gather in Your presence

and offer You our love and thanks
for keeping the world turning,
for infusing all that exists with the breath of Your Spirit,
for looking on us with warmth and pride
because we are Yours.

We pray in the names
of Your Community of Love –
Source, Saviour, Sustainer.
Amen

Thanksgiving and intercession

In our prayers for others today, we remember the United Nation's International Day earlier this week (22 August), commemorating the victims of acts of violence based on religion and belief

Multi-talented, Multi-tasking God!
It is from You
that we derive our creative instincts.
We are makers and crafters,
designers and builders
of relationships and social systems,
of ideas and projects,
of agreements and policies,
of tools and artworks.

Thank You that our lives are the better
for what has been made by hands and minds
in our own generation and those older and younger.

Thank You for those whose skill and faith, time and money
have brought into being houses of prayer; sanctuaries of worship.

Thank You for all the ways that cathedrals, temples, monasteries
have served Your purposes,
making visible a glimpse of Your glory and grandeur;
moving people into an encounter with You;
speaking of the longer story we are part of.

Today we pray for our brothers and sisters across the world
who long for the freedoms we take for granted –
to worship together in a dedicated building, or anywhere.

Bring Your comfort and protection to those who have lost loved ones
and are themselves at risk of injury, torture or death
because of objections and opposition to the faith they profess and practise.

We cry out to You for a world able to live and let live;
a world able to celebrate the diverse strands of belief and ritual,
affirming our common ground of treating others as we wish them to treat us.

Give us a curiosity for other ways of understanding You.
Surprise us with the insights of other paths to You.
You are Mystery,
You are Intimacy,
give Yourself to us
that we may give ourselves to You,
and bring alive Your kindness and compassion
in all we do.

These and all the concerns we carry in our hearts today,
we bring in Jesus' name.
Amen

Confession

Gracious God,
You know us well.
We are not always at our best.

Sometimes we get weary,
our smiles fade,
our energy runs low,
and in a depleted state
we become bad company.

Sometimes we fail to look after ourselves
and blame others for our unmet needs.

Sometimes we despair
that our good work
does not count for much
and we retreat into paralysis.

Hear our sorrow
and untangle us, good Lord.

You do not condemn;
You forgive.
You do not create lost causes
but human beings in Your own beautiful likeness.
Recreate us today
for Your love's sake.
Amen

Blessing/Closing prayer

As we go from here,
may God go with us
**Keeping us close,
keeping us connected,
keeping us a community of faith.**

May God bless us in the days ahead,
**Deepening our trust,
encouraging our hope,
amplifying our love.**
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 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.

- CH4 52 – “How lovely is thy dwelling-place” – a traditional setting of Psalm 84.
- CH4 195 – “Here to the house of God we come” – a song making important links between the place of worship and the needs of the world.
- CH4 196 – “Come, now is the time to worship” – a short song inviting us to come openly to God.
- CH4 199 – “One thing I ask” – a song based also on Psalm 84 in contemporary lyrics.
- CH4 263 – “God of freedom, God of justice” – intercessory words to connect with the UN Commemoration Day.
- CH4 489 – “Come down, O love divine” – a hymn of love and longing with a penitent tone.
- CH4 500 – “Lord of creation, to you be all praise!” – an expression of our full self-giving to God.
- CH4 506 – “All I once held dear” – a song recognising the incomparable gift of knowing Jesus.
- CH4 622 – “We sing a love that sets all people free” – a song affirming the work of the Holy Spirit and our desire to have her love fill us.
- CH4 767 – “Hallelujah, hallelujah” – if there is any sharing of stories, this could be sung after each one in gratitude.

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

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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