

First Sunday after Christmas – Year C

Sunday 29 December 2024

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Becky May, Founder of The Resources Cupboard, for her thoughts on the first Sunday after Christmas.

<https://www.theresourcescupboard.co.uk/>

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

This material is being written months before the arrival of Christmas, and many miles from the Scottish churches, homes and communities where it will be shared. But, as I sit down to write this, I draw on many happy and special memories with our own family; both to the beautiful places we have visited in Scotland in our summer holidays, and to the Christmas holidays of recent years; days of present-unwrapping, over-eating, family visits and celebrations of the child who came for us all. As we gather together this Christmas, we will once again share stories together; ‘do you remember when we...’; ‘last year we...’; ‘tell me the story of...’

I am drawn to stories, and particularly stories of family; be they handed-down tales of the generations who have gone before us, picture books or well-thumbed novels, or even episodes of a rather well-known, Australian blue dog family. And so, when given these readings to explore, my mind is immediately drawn to the two stories of a young boy in a temple, with their various parallels and distinct differences. Not least, for me, since I have the privilege of sharing Jesus with children, young people and families – and here are the stories of two families, and of two children.

This has shaped the exploration below, with a greater focus on the two ‘story’ readings. There is a risk, however, that we may overlook the other two passages given this week and delve straight into the strong story themes. But there are themes which run through these passages; a drawing together of strands. There are two which stood out most to me, perhaps because of my own background. Firstly, the comparison between the vastness of God, and the smallness of man; a child growing before God, and how in Jesus Himself we wonder once again at how the vastness of God became the smallness of a child. Secondly, in all of these readings we see a glimpse of what it means to be the family of God, or the Church; all generations gathered together, learning from one another, praising God together. Other strands which can be drawn from the various passages will be examined below.

Finally, there is a risk for us all this week that we hurry away from the manger and straight into the hubbub of the ordinary. As we prepare to explore these passages, we may need to be purposeful in setting aside time, not merely to put together our sermons or teaching, but to allow these readings to speak to us, and to wonder once again at ‘God’s splendour over earth and heaven,’ and to truly ‘Praise the Lord.’

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26

There is something about having two lenses to look at this story. Firstly, this passage is both very distant, and incredibly familiar. The very idea that a mother could give her much longed-for child back to God, literally placing him in the care of the Temple, feels very far removed from our own lived experience and is almost unimaginable. And yet, at the same time, in these few verses, we catch a glimpse of a mother lovingly and carefully handcrafting gifts to give to her son; a familiar act continued down the generations and probably repeated once again over the last few days.

Furthermore, we need to acknowledge that viewing this story from a purely human perspective makes no sense whatsoever. The idea that a mother who could place her son in the care of the temple could only make sense when we apply a second lens; the God lens. Hannah revered the authority of God and under this understanding could play her part in the story.

There is something here of the meta narrative and micro reality, another two-lens comparison. In the meta narrative we see God's plan at work; enabling Hannah to give birth to a son to whom God would audibly call into a life of significant service. In the micro we see God's loving care for God's people, in Eli's tender prayer, for 'Elkanah and his wife,' for Hannah, that they would be blessed with more children.

And then we find a final 'double lens,' or in this case, a repetition. For "Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the LORD and with the people." A description later given to describe another boy; Christ Himself. Growing in wisdom and stature and in favour with the Lord and with all people is what we may, perhaps, pray for the children and young people that we know; that they would know God for themselves and that this would shape their lives and growth.

Psalm 148

In our exploration of Samuel's story, we acknowledged Hannah's mindfulness of the authority of God. Here in the psalm we wonder ourselves at God's awesomeness. The Psalms wonderfully express how words are not enough to express the greatness of God. In these verses are lines which articulate just how inexplicable God's power, and authority and might really are; great pictures which express the praise of God from sea creatures in the depths, beyond tall trees and birds of the air, sun moon and stars to the heavens themselves.

The wonder of these verses may also serve as a reminder of the immensity of the God before whom we grow in wisdom and stature. I am reminded of Psalm 8 here and the question, “what are human beings that you think about them?” (v4) and yet we are given access to almighty God, not merely at a distance, but into a close relationship.

In verse 12, we see again the theme of all generations in worship; “old and young together”, a reflection that it is God’s intention that we are in relationship with one another, within our relationship with God. Our walk with God is not in isolation, but within the community of believers.

Colossians 3:12-17

I wonder how Samuel felt when he put on the robe his mother had made for him. Perhaps he stood a little differently, knowing his clothes had been made with the loving care of his mother. Here in this passage, we are reminded that as God’s children, we are to clothe ourselves with the love of our heavenly Father; from where stems compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. How differently do we view these words when seen in this way? Not merely as a set of instructions but an understanding that our actions stem from our very relationship with God and are a natural outworking of that relationship.

There is another thread which we can pull from this passage. In verses 15 and 16, we are reminded that the word of Christ now dwells within us. Unlike Samuel and his family and Jesus and His family, we are no longer required to visit the Temple in order to be in God’s presence, and not only are we able to draw near to God, but Christ Himself dwells within us; enabling us to live out all that we are called to in this passage; to be the people who forgive, who love and who give thanks for all that God has done.

The dual messaging in this passage that Christ abides within us, and that we are to clothe ourselves with the love of God, reminds me of the words of the prayer of Saint Patrick: ‘Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me...’ It is all Christ, as this passage concludes: “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.”

Luke 2:41-52

We have already noted the parallels between this passage and 1 Samuel, the boy in the Temple who “increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favour.” But of course, Jesus had not been left in the care of the Temple by His mother, but had somehow

made His own way into the presence of the teachers. And Mary and Joseph had not come to the Temple for a snatched visit with their son, but rather had hurried back to Jerusalem in search of the son that had been left behind.

This passage has always thrown up so many questions for me; what events exactly led to Jesus being left behind? Had Mary, Joseph and Jesus talked before about who Jesus was? What had those conversations been like? How did they feel to hear Him call the Temple His Father's house? What questions did He ask the teachers? What did He say that so surprised them? What did the rest of Jesus' childhood look like? The Bible is, full of bits that are left unsaid, and this for me, is one of them.

As with the passage in 1 Samuel; there is the sense of a dual narrative here: Jesus, Immanuel, God, who became fully man and reduced Himself to an infant boy who lived a fully human experience with family trips, an intergenerational community and a mother who observed and stored moments in her heart; and at the same time, Jesus, Immanuel, very God, who even at this point was teaching His people, revealing more of the kingdom of God, who knew His father and who grew "in divine and human favour."

Sermon ideas

Throughout the unpicking of the passages above, I have noted some strands or themes that tie them together; the sense of looking at a passage through different lenses, or how different lenses reveal different elements. The two tales of two boys greeted by their family in the Temple and the parallels and differences between them is one, for example, and another is the comparison between the smallness of man and the mightiness of God. I was also drawn to the sense of a dual narrative; the big picture plan of God and the intimate working in relationship with human beings.

Many times I have started the year with a focus on the Luke 2 passage – the Jesus we just hurried to the stable to meet is now a 12-year-old boy. This is a brilliant passage to explore, particularly in an intergenerational context, imagining together the family dynamics, the life of Jesus the 12-year-old, and comparing Jesus the infant with Jesus the pre-teen. I have done this creatively in gatherings such as Messy Church, drawing around a 12-year-old, looking at photos of members of our church community when they were 12 and creating a 'big questions about God' wall graffiti. There is huge potential to explore these themes in a context where we may have no children present; highlighting the needs and opportunities in our community that exist where we could be meeting with young people and providing a space to explore their God questions. Indeed, your 'sermon' today could simply be the presentation of a space to wonder at the big questions of God!

This time, however, I was drawn to the theme of being with God; or God with us. Over the last few days we have celebrated 'Immanuel,' the coming of God into our world as a helpless babe, and today's passages give us the opportunity to dwell a little longer in this theme. I wonder how many of our churches have truly moved from an understanding that we meet with God in the 'temple' (church) to an understanding that God dwells in us and is with us? However we may present our teaching, be it through discussion, creative activity or in a more traditional form; breaking down this barrier and giving space for our community to meet with God themselves could be a key point both today, and into the week, as we encourage our congregation to acknowledge God's walking with them day by day.

Prayers

Gathering prayer / Call to worship

As you come together for worship today; invite people to enter into a time of silence to draw close to the presence of God.

Prayer of confession / Repentance

For the times when we do not draw close to You

Father, forgive us

For the times when we do not see You at work in our lives

Father, forgive us

For the times when we fail to acknowledge Your sovereign authority

Father, forgive us

For the times when we place ourselves at the centre

Father, forgive us.

Prayer of thanksgiving / Gratitude

Immanuel; God with us.

We thank You for Your presence in our lives

For walking with us in the everyday

For standing with us in times of pain and loneliness

For celebrating with us; the times of joy

Amen

Prayer for others / Intercession

Take the opportunity today to pray for children and young people, as is appropriate to your context. This may be for children within your church community; for those connected; grandchildren and neighbours; or for those children and young people within your local community who your church can reach out to and serve.

Blessing / Closing prayer

As you close today, you could invite a child to pray the blessing over your congregation.

The Lord Bless you and keep you;
the Lord make His face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn His face toward you
and give you peace.

Alternatively, you could use The Blessing (kids) available here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uiWZXLsdE9w> (also found in *God Welcomes All* #87)

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.

- GWA 87 – “The Lord bless you and keep you” – a version of the closing prayer

- GWA 99 – “Joy has dawned upon the world” – a song of praise for Christmas
- GWA 100 – “You stepped down from heaven” – a Christmas song of adoration
- GWA 101 – “There is no child so small” – a challenge to us to think more deeply
- GWA 106 – “God incarnate, living presence” – perfect for this time of year
- CH4 316 – “Love came down at Christmas” – This song tells of the coming of Jesus into our world
- CH4 320 – “Joy to the World” – This song celebrates the coming of our Lord
- CH4 356 – “Meekness and Majesty” – This song speaks of God incarnate
- “Immanuel” (Andy Flanagan) – This song reflects on what Immanuel means to us in our everyday context. CCLI song #7157501
<https://licc.org.uk/resources/immanuel/?src=yt>
- “Every Step” (Nick and Becky Drake) – This song celebrates God’s presence with us in our everyday lives; suitable for all ages. CCLI song #7122275
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZBhKp5_HwE
- A suggested [playlist of songs from CH4](#) throughout Christmas 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 emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.

- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord's Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of 'holy chaos'.
- If singing in our congregations is restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?
Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different "Spiritual Styles"?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?
Did it function well as a whole?
How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?
Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/
community?
How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?
How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?
- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

Useful links

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

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

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