Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – 27 June 2021

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Rev David McCarthy, former Fresh Expressions Development Worker for his thoughts on the fifth Sunday after Pentecost.

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.

As the restrictions on our ability to meet in groups continue, worship leaders continue to deliver their services both online and offline.

We can help to facilitate participation from the whole congregation by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technology in the service in ways that suit both physical gatherings and video-conference style settings, such as:

- Opening and closing moments of worship that help people mark out a time set apart with God
- Introducing various parts of the worship service to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each one (framing)
- Enabling conversations or prayers in breakout groups
- Holding spaces that allow people to go deeper in worship
- Using the chat function and microphone settings to allow people to actively participate in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord’s Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of ‘holy chaos’
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship

Useful links:
Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found here
Useful tips for creating and leading worship online 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
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Introduction

Life is complex and well beyond our glimpses of comprehension so, rightly, we adopt ways to help us develop our understanding. One helpful strategy is to simplify a situation: to look for what is essential or critical. This simplification then provides a platform for us to engage with further detail so that our understanding becomes more comprehensive. This more developed understanding is still a simplification, but it is one, which in turn allows us to delve even deeper; and so, the cycle continues. When we simplify something, our aim is to enable us to engage with the intricacies of reality; this is the opposite of when we are being simplistic. To be simplistic is to, consciously or unconsciously, deny complexity, to become blinkered and so limit our capacity to face what is real.

The readings for this Sunday face us with, among other things, the complexity of love, suffering, justice, faith, hope, God’s character and human responsibility; our approach will be to simplify: to look at key elements from the passages and allow these to form a base upon which we can, with integrity, further develop our discipleship.

The nature of this resource means that the observations and comments below will, at times, be generic, so each of us must prayerfully relate them to our specific context at this specific time. What you decide to emphasise this week, may be different from what you would focus upon in six months’ time and will be different from what should be addressed in some other communities. Observe, listen, pray, ponder, be open to the Spirit of God and be obedient; take to heart what you ‘discover’ and with gratitude share this with your church community and where appropriate your wider community.

Lamentations 3:22-23

Lamentations is a book of poetry written after the Fall of Jerusalem in 587BC, much of the population of Jerusalem was in exile in Babylon. [1:1-3]

This was a time of suffering, confusion and fear for many; profound questions swirled around the community. Why had they suffered and why were they still suffering? How could Jerusalem fall? Was Yahweh truly the one sovereign God: the creator and sustainer of all; the one who was without equal? What was the relationship between justice, judgement, love and mercy?

It is God who, in justice, has brought judgement upon Judah [although others have taken advantage of this judgement]. They are judged because they were committed to evil. The fall of Jerusalem is not a sign of God’s impotence in the face of the Babylonians and their
gods, but of Yahweh’s uncompromising holiness, power and authority [2:1-17].

However, the justice, judgement and holiness of Yahweh are not abstract and sterile: they are relational, so they are intertwined with love, mercy and faithfulness [3:22-23]. Yahweh takes no delight in the suffering of people, or in issuing judgement [3:33]; with confession and repentance there is hope of restoration [3:31-33; 3:19-26], but there is no presumption [5:16-22].

It is crucial to read verses 3:22-23 in their context and acknowledge the complexity of the writer’s experience and emotion.

Psalm 123

This is one of the fifteen Songs of Ascents in the Book of Psalms: Psalm 120-134. Although it is uncertain what this term means, one possibility is that these are songs of worship sung by pilgrims, perhaps on the way to the temple in Jerusalem.

The beginning of this psalm resonates with Psalm 121:1, where both awe and vulnerability are expressed. In Psalm 121 there is, though not exclusively, a focus on physical danger and God’s watchfulness and protection in this context. Psalm 123 emphasises the vulnerability faced when confronted by the contempt and abuse of others [verses 3,4].

This psalm is expressed in a cultural context significantly different from our own; verse 2 shouldn’t be read as being about the legitimacy of slavery or servanthood, it’s focus is to emphasise a sense of proper proportion and priority i.e., utter dependence upon Yahweh.

As in Psalm 121, there is an underscoring of both the freedom of and the need for complete honesty as we come to worship. We must not pretend, or try to hide the truth [no matter how uncomfortable] of our life from God or from ourselves. The same is echoed in this Psalm.

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

The church in Corinth was, to say the least, a challenging one for Paul: it held many joys and many concerns for him.

Paul, when writing earlier to the Corinthians [1 Cor. 16:1-4], had instructed them, along with other churches, to set aside, each week, an offering for the needs of the church in
Jerusalem. He now [2Cor. 8:7-15] picks this up.

Paul reminds them that the source of their motivation is God’s love for them and others; this they know through Jesus. Their motivation must be one of love, not arid obedience, so he does not command them, but advises them [verses 8-10]

The Corinthians should finish what they have started; they should not be distracted from doing this. [verses 10, 11].

They should give according to their ability. Paul advocates an even-handedness; one has abundance compared to another, so they should give from this, not with the aim to impoverish themselves but to aid/enrich the other in their need. Someday the ‘shoe might be on the other foot’ [verses 12-14]

Within the World Church there is a mutual cross-cultural responsibility to love and care for one another.

Underscoring this exhortation of Paul’s is the reality that, for all of us, it is God who provides; we are day by day dependent upon this love and faithful provision. Verse 15 picks up the story of God providing manna for Israel during their wandering in the wilderness; each had their need met: no-one received more or less than was necessary.

Mark 5:21-43

A wide range of people recognise Jesus’ ability to heal and have faith in Him: from a leader in the synagogue to a woman seen as unclean within her community [verses 22, 23, 25-28].

Jesus is willing to heal, but not on the terms set by the one making the request: the woman is not healed in secret, Jesus delays in going to Jairus’ home [verses 30-35]. Jesus’ response to the request goes deeper than the one making the request expects, or, perhaps, even wants.

A number of times, in Mark’s gospel account, Jesus tells those whom He has healed not to tell others [1:43,44; 5:43; 7:36], so why does Jesus go out of His way to make the healing of the woman public? It is not to draw attention to Himself or to unnecessarily embarrass the woman [though she no doubt was embarrassed]; it possibly was to do with giving her a deep assurance of her personal preciousness to God and an external verification that she was healed. Further, the public recognition that she was healed and no longer ceremonially ‘unclean’, meant that she now should be fully reintegrated into the community and its
worship.

Both Jairus and the woman were at the point of despair; they both recognised that Jesus could relieve this. As in Psalm 123 we must not pretend as we come to God; for a variety of reasons it may be difficult for us to be honest, but honest we must be.

In verse 30 what is the significance of Jesus being aware that power had gone from Him? The detail we may not be able to know, but what is clear is that Jesus’ ministry had an effect on Him and in Mark 1:32-39 we see, after ministry, Jesus’ need to pray and the ensuing results of this time of prayer.

Sermon ideas

Different themes could be developed from these readings; this outline focuses on our integrity as those who bear the name of Jesus. This theme can be opened out along the following lines and should be thought through in terms of both the individual and the church community [time restraints may mean that you need to select from these suggestions].

1. Each of the readings highlights our utter dependence upon God; Lamentations, Psalm 123 and Mark focus on our times of obvious need, while 2 Corinthians highlights our equal dependency in times of plenty, when we can give to others. It is crucial to recognise this absolute dependence in all circumstances of life; times of ease can foster a false and dangerous sense of self-sufficiency and independence. There is an insidious temptation to rely upon our own skills and experience when in a familiar situation, particularly if it is one that does not seem unusually demanding; it is imperative that we do not fall into this trap.

   • How might this be a temptation to your church community and to individuals within it [give time to working this through as it relates to everyday life]
   • How do you understand prayer: individual/communal, speaking/listening?

2. As we worship God, we must be honest about our failings, weaknesses, vulnerabilities and challenges [both in the moment-by-moment worship of daily living and in the special times of individual or communal worship]. This can be embarrassing, painful and at times unwanted. Often, we will need the insight and help of others to recognise our need; sometimes our confession will be private, at other times we [individual or community] will publicly declare our need.
• In practice how open are we [individual and community] to be shown our failings, weaknesses and vulnerabilities?
• How open are we to others so that they may show us these areas of our life?
• How do we react to challenges: do we want to back off and retreat to familiar paths or do we bring them to God so that we may live through them and so bear witness to God’s love in Christ in new circumstances?

3. Faith is called for as we trust God. However, again we must be honest: we should not pretend that we have faith when we don’t. The great freedom we have in Jesus is to come to God as we are, with whatever faith and doubts we may have; we trust in God’s love to enable us to take the next step.

• What strengthens your faith in God; what weakens it?
• Do you find it easy to be honest about your doubts?
• Do you feel guilty when you doubt?
• How do find help in working through your doubts?
• How as a church community do you help one another engage with doubts and develop faith?

4. In 2 Corinthians 8:8,9 Paul underscores the core motivation for our actions: love - God’s love for us and from this our love for others. To live with integrity: to live a life which reflects our faith is not a matter of carrying out noble acts with indifference, or for show [c.f. Is. 58; Mic. 6:6-8; Mt. 5:43-6:18; Mt. 23:1-36; Lk. 21:1-4], but out of love and wanting the best for the other.

• How deeply do we allow ourselves to experience God’s love: is it more often than not largely intellectual assent; how relational and personal is it?
• To what extent are we influenced, or even dominated by appearance: the appearances of others, or how we want others to perceive us?
• What would change, in our personal and communal life, if we were truly motivated by love [having allowed ourselves to be captivated and overwhelmed by the experience of God’s love]?

5. In 2 Corinthians 8:13 Paul speaks of a fair balance.

• When you think of your local community, nation and the world what is a fair balance?
• What does it mean for us as individuals, church community and nation to give from our means [verse 11] to help realise this fair balance?
• What might be the social, economic and political implications of this as well as the personal implications?

6. ‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is there your heart will be also’ Mt. 6:19-21.

• During the Covid-19 pandemic and now as we develop a new social, economic, political and relational dynamic [locally, nationally and internationally] how have we, as individuals and as a church community, reflected these words of Jesus and how are we reflecting them now?

• What do our actions show about where our treasure is?

Prayers

When we are leading worship it is important that our prayers are not just our prayers as an individual, but the prayers of the community that has gathered around Jesus. So put the following suggestions for prayer into the words of your community and in a way that is appropriate for the age range represented [N.B. be very careful not to disenfranchise children with the words, sentences and length of prayer e.g., rather than say ‘Let’s now pray a prayer of confession …’ you could say, ‘Now we want to say “Sorry to God” ….’.

Approach to God/Call to worship.

• Adapted from Psalm 121
  We lift up our eyes to the hills – from where does our help come?
  It comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth:
  the One who neither sleeps nor slumbers and who keeps us from all evil.

• We come with honesty and with trust for we have seen God’s love, authority and glory in Jesus.

Confession

• 1 John 1:9, 10: ‘If we confess our sins, He who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar, and His word is not in us.’
• Ask people, in silence, to reflect upon their week. About what do they need to say ‘Sorry’ to God and to others and what must they now do? Acknowledge the encouragement that John gives us to do this.

• Lead a prayer which allows people to confess the wrong that they have done, said or thought and the good which they have failed to do, say or think. Acknowledge the forgiveness which we have in Jesus and the freedom that this gives us and which John emphasises.

Praise and thanksgiving
• Adapted from Psalm 8 –
  O Lord, our sovereign
  how majestic is Your name in all the earth.
  You have set you glory above the heavens.
  We praise You that in love, You have created this wonderful universe
  and that in love You have given us life
  so that we may know Your love and care for Your creation.

• Encourage people to again think over their week and recognise one person, relationship, conversation, situation or action for which they are particularly thankful.

• Lead a prayer which reflects Psalm 8 in giving praise and thanks to God, which gives space for folk to give their personal thanks for what they have recalled and which also expresses your communal gratitude for something that has happened this week.

Intercession
• Adapted from Mt. 6:32b, 33 – Your heavenly Father knows all that you need. Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well

• Ask people to reflect upon the international and national news that they have heard this week – what has impacted most upon them.

• Lead a prayer that allows folk to bring these situations to God [you may want to highlight a few N.B. keep an international perspective]

• Pray for the church in those situations which you have mentioned [this reflects the concerns in 2 Corinthians 8 – you might find websites such as that of Tearfund or
Christian Aid helpful].

- Pray for our national situation and in this context for our churches and for our community and political leaders.
- Pray for your local context.
- Pray for your church community [give time to listen to God]
- Give space for folk to, in silence, bring individual concerns to God, then summarise.
- Lead in saying ‘The Lord’s Prayer’

**Blessing/Closing prayer**

Ephesian 3:20, 21,
‘Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations for ever and ever. Amen.’

**Alternative Material**

This material has been supplied by kind permission of Spill the Beans and allows you to explore the readings or theme of the service in creative ways that include everyone gathering for worship.

New material from Spill the Beans is provided in the latest issues available from their website.

All of the activities below can be carried out in church or in the home with some adaptation and notice in advance.

**Through the Season**

**Windows to God – Mirrors for the Soul**

A possible visual hook for this season would be through the use of windows and mirrors. Indeed the overall theme for this season could be based on “Windows to God, Mirrors for the Soul”.

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In some of the passages during the season we encounter people who are looking on to what is happening, as though looking through a window at events taking place. As we read some of these passages, it is like we have a “window” to God, a way of helping us to see something more, and to learn something different about God.

At other times as we explore the passages in this season, it is as though the passages reflect back to us aspects of what it is to be human, positive and negative: the passages act like “mirrors” for the soul.

This thought can be developed so that the focus during the season will switch between whether we are looking through a window or into a mirror. Some weeks we will learn more about God, other weeks we will focus more on looking at ourselves and how we can reflect more of God through our lives.

We remember that some windows are mirrors too!

Possible arrangements might be:
- A large window frame with a separate pane for each week, this pane could either be clear or mirrored (shiny mirror card would work) depending on the week and key words or theme added;
- Two large frames, one as a window on one side of the sanctuary, the other mirrored (either a large actual mirror or mirrored card), adding key words to whichever is the focus for that week.

2 Samuel 1:1,17-27
Theme: Victory and grief
Object: Mirror. Words: Friends, sadness, good news, bad news, king

Bible notes

The Value of Lament – 2 Samuel 1:1,17-27
Increasingly there are times when as a nation we have found ourselves grieving communally. Perhaps it has surprised us that we have found quite overt ways to express that grief in the great sea of flowers that appear in those trysting places of an event that has touched the national soul. From Dunblane to Princess Diana dying we have engaged with each other in sharing sorrow. The image above shows over a million flowers, cuddly toys and other tributes left at the gates of Kensington Palace in September 1997 following the tragic death of Princess Diana. It is this communal grieving that David is expressing as king in waiting though personally he may have had other thoughts about the death of Saul.
Saul had tried to kill him a number of times even organising the services of the witch of Endor to resurrect Samuel to help out but he found out that it was he himself who was next to die. Saul goes into his last battle deciding that suicide is easier though his last battle is an important step on Israel’s path to becoming independent from her enemies. Here David is grieving over a man with whom he has played cat and mouse for many, many years. This is national grief.

The grief he expresses towards Jonathan, however, seems to be far more personal. Jonathan’s love for David is expressed in Jonathan’s choice to cede his birthright to being king and hand that over to David. Jonathan sees in David a far greater king than himself. “O how the mighty have fallen!” is a phrase that expresses a sense of the cost of what has happened. But the Bible has an interesting take on this right in the last verse of the passage. “The Mighty have fallen and the weapons of war have proven to be unfaithful”. This is the ultimate mockery of violence of which the Bible regularly speaks. When war is fought it is with God’s authority and those battles that do not take place with God’s permission are examples of the foolishness and fickleness of humanity. This point and the previous one about Jonathan and David, illustrate the purpose of lament: to grieve over those things that have been wasted. It is a chance to recognise those things that have been taken from us. The Faith offers us that opportunity time and time again through the ancient laments we find in the Bible but it is not something we do other than when we are forced into it. Perhaps if we did take the chance to reflect more regularly on those things we have lost, we may have a greater sense of worth for the things we have: the people around us, the church we love and the faith we hold.

If we allow ourselves time to lament, it may be that we enable ourselves to celebrate more deeply what we have: our friendships and our community. With lament, comes a sense of worth for what we have lost, but also of what we still have, and furnishes it with greater value. David, while he laments here, never seems to recognise fully the value of what he has been given by God and the story continues in a downward spiral between kingship and adultery, rejoicing and murder, victory and grief. Where can we find time to reflect on what we have lost and what we still have and recognise the value of both?

Retelling for Young People

Saul and Jonathan Killed in Battle
Do you have a best friend? What do best friends do for each other? Did you know that David had a best friend? His name was Jonathan and his Dad was Saul, who was king before David.
Remember that Saul wasn’t a very good king? But his son Jonathan was a very good best friend!

In those days, long ago, lots of young men were soldiers for the king. They had to go and fight in terrible battles.

Today there are still soldiers who fight in wars. Can you imagine if your best friend had to go to war? David and Jonathan sometimes didn’t even know if the other one was still alive.

One day a messenger came to David with some terrible news. Many soldiers had been killed that day. Saul and Jonathan had been caught in the midst of the fighting and they had both died.

Poor David! He was heartbroken. He couldn’t believe his best friend was gone. He was so upset he ripped his clothes and just cried and cried. All of his other friends wept with him.

It’s really hard when sad things happen, especially when we lose someone we love. I wonder if you have ever felt like David did when Jonathan died? I wonder how we can help each other when someone feels their heart is broken.

Activities
These activities can be done with a gathered congregation or at home, with some adaptation.

If you are using the Through the Season ideas above to help set the scene throughout this theme, this week’s focus is the mirror, and keywords that could be used are: friends, sadness, good news, bad news, king, grief.

Gathering
Ask people to turn to someone sitting by them and share a song that makes them cry, or a song that helps them to grieve. Are they the same? Or different?

“The Lord’s my shepherd” is sung both at funerals and weddings; which do you associate it with? Why?

You could use a clip from ‘Finding Nemo’ as a way into thinking about grief: the opening scene where Marlin loses his wife, Coral, and all their offspring save one lone egg, Nemo, is a powerful and all-age appropriate scene.
**Good News / Bad News**

*You will need: some press clippings of good news and bad news stories.*

In church we mostly talk about the Good News of Jesus Christ and that is a good thing but when we receive news it is not always Good News, we often hear about bad news.

What bad news has been in the papers this week? Has anyone received bad news this week? You could use comics/children’s books where you know the goodie or the baddie has received good or bad news.

Falling out with a friend is bad news, hearing about wars, droughts, famines, these are also bad news. Have some press cuttings available to illustrate.

**Care card**

*You will need: paper in different shades of blue, thin A4 card in different colours, pencils, glue sticks, scissors, peel off greetings like ‘God be with you’ (available from online craft shops).*

Fold A4 card in half to make greetings card. Cut blue paper into small tear shapes and stick on card along with greeting. Ask the children to think about someone they know who is sad and then they can give/ send the card to that person or cards can go out with flowers from church.

Talk about how when people are feeling sad, God is still with them.

**Prayers**

**Call to Worship**

*Place the symbols of faith on the communion table before the service begins such as a cross, candle, bread and wine, bowl of water and a bible. During the call, take these symbols from the table and ‘hide’ them around the worship space.*

What would it feel like when all that was valuable to us was taken from us? What would it feel like if those things that meant so much to us were removed? Faith is not just for the good bits but is there to hold us through the difficult parts. Let us gather in the space where we know the God who holds us even when all that we recognise has gone. Such is the love God has for us, nothing can separate us from it. Let us worship that love and her creator.
When Things Get Lost
May we be like David:
human enough to be sad
to recognise the worth of those
who are lost to us.

May we be like David:
honest enough to say
who it is we love
and know that love is held in grace.

May we be like David:
loved enough by God
to face what is hard
and be made more fully human by it.

May we be like David:
powerless enough to lament
and strong enough to weep
for those he loved.

Prayer
Creator God
who knows as much about tears
as laughter,
hear us as we make space to remember
those thing we have lost,
and people who are only memories now.
Help us make space to make tears
when we need to,
and find laughter
when we remember.

Gather our prayers,
our longings,
our disappointments,
and our gratitude.
All are sacred to you, O God,  
so send us from here  
with your promises affirmed in us,  
of a saviour  
who spoke of loss,  
but refused to see that as the end.

May we believe again,  
hope again,  
know again,  
your eternity begun in us,  
as a seed  
grows again  
after winter  
is over.

Hear us,  
be with us,  
hold us,  
surround us,  
love us,  
send us  
into life  
strengthened by  
and encouraged in  
memory,  
hope,  
and promise.

**Sending**

_During this, return the symbols of faith to the communion table that were removed at the beginning during the Call to Worship._

We have created space to lament  
to take time to think about what is important  
and has shaped us  
and has given us worth.

Go now,
Knowing that as we travel the difficult paths, we are held by love.

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 426 – “All heaven declares”
- CH4 442 – “Blessing and honour”
- CH4 516 – “We are marching in the light of God”
- CH4 63 – “All people that on earth do dwell” [Psalm 100]
- CH4 153 – “Great is thy faithfulness”
- CH4 547 – “What a friend we have in Jesus”
- CH4 549 – “How deep the Father’s love for us”
- CH4 559 – “There is a Redeemer”
- CH4 506 – “All I once held dear”
- CH4 577 – “Christ be beside me”
- CH4 251 – “I the Lord of sea and sky”
• CH4 641 – “Seek ye first the kingdom of God”
• CH4 462 – “The King of love my shepherd is”
• CH4 465 – “Be thou my Vision”
• CH4 530 – “One more step along the world I go”

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