

starters for Sunday

Second Sunday of Easter

12 April 2015

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Susan Miller, Probationer Minister at Gorbals Parish Church, for her thoughts on the second Sunday of Easter.

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Quick Guide...

Helping people prepare for reading the Bible in worship can make a real difference. Overcoming nerves, reading in ways suitable to the text, speaking clearly etc.

You may wish to email these three links to the people reading Scripture on Sunday to support them in their involvement in worship: [Managing your nerves](#); [Creative readings](#); [Worship at the Lectern](#)

Introduction

The readings for the Second Sunday of Easter continue to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus and the power of God to bring life out of death. In the reading from Acts we see the power of the resurrection active in the lives of the early Christians in Jerusalem. They seek to live as a community committed to the teaching of Jesus and to his vision of the kingdom of God. Jesus' vision of the kingdom is rooted in the teaching of the prophets of the Old Testament. This Sunday's reading from Isaiah describes the new heavens and the new earth in which peace prevails. Isaiah writes to people who have suffered oppression. The powerful have taken advantage of the vulnerable and some have grown rich by exploiting others. Isaiah prophesies that this situation of injustice is coming to an end. He provides a vision of a just world which reflects God's purposes in creation.

The theme of community and the desire to work towards the common good may also be seen in 1 John. In this letter the early Christians seek to live in a community on earth which reflects their experience of the fellowship of the Father and the Son. The gospel reading for the second Sunday of Easter focuses on the risen Jesus' gift of the Spirit to his disciples. Jesus breathes on his disciples bringing them new life and giving them a source of power for their mission throughout the world. On this occasion Thomas is missing from the group of disciples but Jesus appears to the disciples again on the following week. In this account Thomas is present, and his address to Jesus, "My Lord and my God" reveals Jesus' identity as the Lord of all things and calls into question all human powers and authority.



[Acts 4: 32-35](#)

The reading from Acts describes the first community of disciples in Jerusalem in the period after the resurrection of Jesus. The disciples were devastated by the death of Jesus but have been transformed by their experience of seeing the risen Jesus. They are described as being of “one heart and soul”. Their experience has given them a new understanding of themselves and their role in the world. Jesus’ death and resurrection have inaugurated the kingdom of God. The disciples now live in the present reality of the kingdom of God in which there is abundance for all. Their way of life corresponds to the values of the kingdom of God, and everything they have is held in common. They contribute to a common fund which is then shared to meet the needs of everyone. The group’s unity of belief in Jesus is reflected in the unity of their common fund.

The community’s way of life reflects the practice of Jesus and his disciples who held a common purse (cf. [John 12: 6](#)). The gospels do not tell us very much about the way in which Jesus and the disciples supported themselves. In first-century Galilee and Judea most people lived at subsistence level. Some disciples were fishermen but they had given up their livelihood to follow Jesus. Jesus and his disciples were an itinerant group who relied on the hospitality of supporters. At times they had nowhere to stay, and the vulnerability of the group is expressed in Jesus’ saying, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” ([Matt 8: 20](#)).

In Acts, the community’s sharing of resources means that no one is in need and that no one keeps possessions for himself or herself. The community’s practice points to the nature of the kingdom of God in which there is abundance for everyone and no one has more or has less than another. This vision is reminiscent of the account of the Sabbatical Laws and the Jubilee Laws in the Old Testament. In the Jubilee year liberty is declared throughout the land to all its inhabitants ([Leviticus 25](#)). Land which has been sold to pay debts will be restored to its original owners. Israelites who have sold themselves into slavery will be given their freedom. These laws were intended to prevent the development of social and economic inequality. No one could keep the land of his or her neighbour.



The practice of the early church inspired Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, to sell a field and contribute the proceeds to the common fund. The apostles gave him the name Barnabas which means “son of encouragement”. Barnabas became a leader of the early church in Antioch, and he travelled on mission with Paul. The practice of the early church has inspired many groups throughout the history of the church to share their resources. Today there is growing social inequality and an increasing gap between the rich and the poor in Scotland. At this time the practice of the early church is again a source of inspiration to us to find an alternative way of living.

The Church of Scotland has a commitment to a number of parishes in priority areas. The 2014 General Assembly Priority Areas Report¹ “Hope and Pain in an Age of Fragility” affirmed the statement from the 2001 General Assembly “priority for the poorest and most marginalised is the gospel imperative facing the whole Church and not just the Church is our poorest communities.” This statement expresses the commitment of the church to provide resources to support the church’s work in priority areas. Churches throughout Scotland contribute to a central fund which is redistributed. The funds are given to churches in priority areas not for the churches themselves but as resources to serve people who are living with poverty. The church’s commitment to priority areas reflects Jesus’ vision of the kingdom of God which brings fullness of life to everyone. It is a matter of justice that the church seeks to challenge social and economic policies which create a division between rich and poor in society.

[Isaiah 65: 17-25](#)

In the Old Testament reading the prophet Isaiah describes a vision of the new heavens and the new earth. The prophets’ vision of the end is described in terms of God’s creative power in the creation account of Genesis. Just as God created the heavens and the earth in Genesis, God will create new heavens and a new earth.

Isaiah addresses people who have undergone a period of suffering, and he urges them to be glad and to rejoice. The prophet’s words contain hints of the suffering of the former things which is too painful to be mentioned or to be remembered. His references to the sound of

¹ The Church of Scotland General Assembly 2014 Hands Across the World



weeping and the cry of distress give some expression to the suffering of the people he aims to encourage with the vision of a new world. Isaiah celebrates the creative power of God who is able to bring a new world out of the present world of suffering and oppression.

Isaiah's vision of the future relates to the human experience of life in the present world. Each person will live to one hundred. Today life expectancy is increasing and many people do live to the age of one hundred. Isaiah also provides a vision of a just society in which everyone builds houses and live in them and everyone may plant vineyards and eat the fruit. Isaiah's hopes and expectations suggest that he has experience of a time when some have built houses for others and have had nowhere to live, and of a time when some have planted but have had nothing to eat. His words offer a critique of the way many people live in the world today.

Towards the end of the reading Isaiah's hopes go beyond what is possible in the natural world. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together and the lion will no longer hunt for prey but will eat straw like an ox. Animals will no longer kill one another to survive. The serpent will eat dust. Isaiah alludes to the creation account of Genesis in which human beings and animals do not kill animals but eat plants for food.

In *The Spirit Level. Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*² Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett have explored the impact of social inequality on the health of people. Some Western countries have gained economic wealth but at the same time many people experience great mental and emotional distress. One of the difficulties in our society is the lack of communal vision of what a better society for all of us would be like. Wilkinson and Pickett argue that unequal societies have greater social problems which affect the whole population. They note that the reduction of inequality has a significant impact on the improvement of the quality of life for the whole society. *The Spirit Level* gives a vision of a just and peaceful society in which no one is exploited just as the prophet Isaiah provides a vision of a society in which all may flourish.

² R. Wilkinson and K. Pickett, *The Spirit Level. Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*. London: Allen Lane, 2009.



[1 John 1: 1 - 2: 2](#)

1 John is a letter addressed to a church but it is also a proclamation of Jesus since it is about the word of life. The opening of the letter begins with the testimony of a community: “We declare to you... we have heard... we have seen.” The members of the community bear witness to their encounter with the humanity of Jesus. The disciples have lived with Jesus and they have witnessed God’s word of life in him. The letter is a testimony to the community’s experience of Jesus and its aim is to draw others into the fellowship of the Father and Son.

The letter opens with the testimony “We declare to you what was from the beginning” (1: 1). The term “beginning” is reminiscent of the prologue to John’s Gospel “In the beginning was the word,” and it recalls the first verse of Genesis “In the beginning”. In John’s Gospel Jesus is linked to the beginning of creation since all things come into being through him. In 1 John the term “the beginning” is associated with the coming of Jesus into the world. Jesus’ mission is portrayed as an act of new creation of the world.

In Genesis, God’s first act is the creation of light and in 1 John God is identified as light. Those who follow Jesus receive life and walk in the light. One of the primary human experiences is the experience of light and darkness in the world. The alternation of darkness and light creates the cycle of night and day. This cycle provides order by giving the world a reliable structure, and it enables life to develop and flourish.

In 1 John light and darkness are interpreted as moral qualities in the human sphere of life. Those who have fellowship with Jesus walk in the light. The letter raises the question of why Christians sin. If Christians are drawn into fellowship with Jesus, why do they continue to sin? The author addresses the views of some members of his audience who may believe that those who have fellowship with Jesus do not commit sin. It is possible that this group believes that faith in God is all that matters for salvation, and there is no need to be concerned about human actions in the world.

Nevertheless, sin is not able to break the relationship between God and humanity. God has the power to forgive sins and cleanse humanity from unrighteousness. In 1 John Jesus has the role of an advocate who intercedes with God on behalf of humanity. Jesus’ death is described as “an atoning sacrifice” which brings redemption to humanity. The scope of salvation is not only



concerned with the sins of Christians but the sins of the whole world. Jesus comes to reconcile human beings and creation. This interpretation of the atonement may be defined in terms of what some theologians call “building right relations”. Human beings receive salvation by being drawn into the loving relationship of the Father and Son.

[John 20: 19-31](#)

The gospel reading describes two resurrection appearances of Jesus to his disciples. The disciples are gathered together behind locked doors in the evening. Mary Magdalene has passed on the news of the resurrection but the disciples remain fearful. Jesus has been arrested by the religious leaders and crucified by Pilate. The disciples are afraid that they could also be arrested and condemned to death. The male disciples, with the exception of the Beloved Disciple, were not present at the crucifixion. Their hopes have been shattered and now they fear they may be arrested.

In the evening Jesus appears mysteriously in the midst of his disciples, and he brings a message of peace. The greeting may be interpreted as the usual greeting of peace but on a deeper level Jesus brings a peace which transcends the horrific events of the past few days. Jesus shows the disciples his wounded hands and side. These wounds indicate that the one who was crucified is the same one who has been raised. Jesus is sending his disciples to continue his mission in the world. Just as God sent him, he is sending them. He brings them a message of peace which has the power to sustain them in their mission to the world.

Jesus breathes on the disciples and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit”. The description of Jesus’ act of breathing on the disciples is reminiscent of the way in which God breathed life into Adam in Genesis (2: 7). God gave Adam life, and now Jesus gives new life to his disciples. The disciples experience the creative power of God which enables them to be agents of the new creation. The disciples receive the Spirit which includes the power to forgive sins. The power to forgive sins is also a power of new creation since the one who is forgiven is renewed and brought new life.

This passage is well-known for its portrayal of the disciple Thomas who doubts the news of the resurrection. Thomas is one of the twelve disciples who have gone up to Jerusalem with Jesus but he is not with the other disciples when Jesus appears. Thomas states bluntly that he wishes to see the marks of the nails in Jesus’ hands and the wound in his side before he will believe. His



response suggests that the wounds Jesus has received and his horrific death have blinded him to the belief that Jesus has been raised.

Thomas cannot believe that someone who has suffered such a cruel death has come back to life. It was not permissible to crucify a Roman citizen, and crucifixion was a punishment reserved for slaves and rebels. Crucifixion demonstrated the power of the Roman authorities, and it acted as a deterrent to anyone who rebelled against the Roman authorities. Jesus has challenged the might of the Roman Empire, and it looks like his mission has failed.

In some respects the response of Thomas is surprising. Thomas was the disciple who urged the other disciples to accompany Jesus on his final journey to Judea. The disciples knew that Jesus may face death if he returned but Thomas said, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (11: 16). Thomas is the disciple who expressed his wish to stay with Jesus despite the threats of Jesus’ enemies. In our reading Thomas is afraid but he still stays with the other disciples. The next week Jesus appears again to his disciples in the same way. On this occasion Jesus comes particularly to see Thomas. Jesus tells him to put his finger in his hands and to reach out to put his hand in his side. He tells Thomas, “Do not doubt but believe.”

In response, Thomas addresses Jesus, “My Lord and my God”. Thomas makes the highest Christological statement about Jesus in the gospels. The disciples call Jesus “Lord” because he is their leader, and they give him their loyalty but Jesus’ death and resurrection also reveal his identity as Lord over all things. “Jesus is Lord” is the testimony of the early church (cf. Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3; Phil 2:11).

Throughout the gospel others have recognised Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God but Thomas is the first person to call Jesus “God”. Thomas recognises the one who has been crucified as God. His faith that the crucified Christ is God calls into question all human structures of power and authority. God’s power does not take up arms, but is able to overcome evil by bringing life out of death. Jesus is now sending his disciples into a world where oppression and violence are still present but the peace of Christ will prevail and the Spirit is a source of life-giving power. The peace of Jesus brings a sense of security, calm and confidence in the midst of conflict. This peace brings the assurance that in the end all things are reconciled by God. It is based on the experience of the creative power of God who is able to bring life out of death.



Prayers

Collect

Almighty and eternal God,
the strength of those who believe
and the hope of those who doubt,
may we, who have not seen, have faith
and receive the fullness of Christ's blessing,
who is alive and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Prayers

Cold, dark, dead was the earth,
Empty and dull – and silent.
Hidden God behind the stone of a tomb
Crushed by the hardness of human hearts
But the Sun rises in the morning
to women in a garden
Then all is green, fresh and new
God of resurrection
God of creation
We praise you.

Sun-giving, life-giving God
Bursting from the tomb
Breaking the bonds of death
You come to the disciples behind closed doors
And breathe your Spirit upon them
The Spirit of God at loose in the world
Son of resurrection
Son of creation



We praise you.

This Easter you bring us new life
You tear apart the greed of the world
Bringing down the powerful
You reach out to the poor and the hungry
But we turn from you
Shielding our eyes from light
Stepping back into darkness.

We do not respond to your love
Our hearts become hard
We hurt you and one another,
We live for ourselves,
Ignoring the needs of others.
And in silence we pray for forgiveness...

You come to us with words of peace
And we know that we are forgiven
For your love is stronger than hatred
You bring life out of death
You take away sorrow
And surround us with joy.

Awakening the world – and us
To compassion
To life in its fullness
And we will not be silent
But praise you.



And so we pray in the words Jesus taught us:

Our Father in heaven
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us

Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power
and the glory are yours
now and forever.

Amen.

In the evening when the disciples meet
Frightened behind locked doors
You come to them with words of peace.

For wicked plots have failed,
And the cruelty of the world has come to nothing,
And the betrayal and the denial of friends have not prevailed.

Life-giving God,

We give you thanks

For Jesus has risen.

He comes to us with words of peace

And we pray that you will come to us today.

In government rooms where politicians meet

In city board rooms where executives plan,

In court rooms where lawyers debate,



Come with words of peace.

In hospital rooms where people are waiting,
In prison cells where people are afraid
In homes where people struggle to make ends meet,
Come with words of peace.

Come to us whenever we are afraid
Whenever we are grieving
Come to us now we pray in silence
For those we care for and are worried about...

Despite the strong and solid doors we lock
To protect ourselves
To shut out the world
Come to us with words of peace.

This Easter breathe on us again
With your Spirit
For you have overcome evil
And wicked plots fail
And the cruelty of the world comes to nothing
And the betrayal and denial of friends do not prevail.

Let us be renewed in the power of your Spirit
That we may open the doors
And go out into the world
To bring words of peace to the people we meet.

Let us be renewed in the power of your Spirit
That we may have life in your name
And go wherever you send us
In Jesus' name.
Amen.



Musical Suggestions

CH4 250	Sent by the Lord am I
CH4 409	Jesus is risen, alleluia!
CH4 416	Christ is alive! Let Christians sing
CH4 419	Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son.
CH4 422	Christ is alive, and the universe must celebrate
CH4 425	The Saviour died, but rose again
CH4 426	All heaven declares the glory of the risen Lord
CH4 432	How often we, like Thomas
CH4 443	He is Lord, he is Lord
CH4 516	We are marching in the light of God
CH4 798	The peace of the earth be with you
CH4 800	Send me, Lord (Thuma mina)



Additional Resources

Resourcing Mission



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#). Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. If there is something you'd like to see on this new site, please [contact us](#) via the website.

Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. [Revealing Love](#) is available now from [St Andrew Press](#).



Music Resources

The hymns mentioned in this material are ideas of specific hymns you might choose for this week's themes. However, for some excellent articles on church music and ideas for new music resources, please check out our online music pages [Different Voices](#).

Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might preach this Sunday. [Preachers Perspectives](#) is a resource where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly.

Scots Worship Resources

[The Kirk's Ear](#) - Scots in the Kirk series for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other times of the year

[Wurship Ouk bi Ouk](#) - Metrical psalms, hymns, prayers and words for worship

[Scots Sacraments](#) may give you helpful material if you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism.

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to Susan Miller for providing us with this Sunday's material.

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

