

starters for Sunday

First Sunday after Epiphany

12 January 2014

Rev Ian Elston, Minister of Kirkcaldy: Torbain, offers his thoughts on the first Sunday after Epiphany.

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Introduction

Sometimes the lectionary readings are beautifully connected and a common theme of love or service or salvation runs through them as clear as it could possibly be. Sometimes the readings seem to have been thrown together by a mischievous being whose sole purpose seems to be 'Right, here you are. What are you going to make of this lot?'

So what are leaders of worship to do?

Without coming across all Rev I. M. Jolly, January is often the most miserable time of year. The weather is miserable. People are miserable. Christmas lights are down and town centres are miserable. Trees and decorations and manger scenes which brightened up the church throughout December have been put back in boxes for another year and so churches look miserable. Finances (church and home) are often pretty miserable too. The upsurge in congregational numbers that peaked on the Sunday before Christmas have shrunk back to numbers that make us miserable. January is also the time where adverts appear enticing us with holidays to sunny destinations which we will never be able to afford and which serve only to make us even more miserable. We could go on so much that we could end up making the writer of Ecclesiastes seem a beacon of hope and light and joy.

Today is, for many, the return to Sunday normality. And the chosen readings for today do allow us to decide which theme we want to take. In these passages we find themes of hope and justice; beginnings and changes; strength and servitude. Whatever we decide there is never a better time than to preach a message wrapped in optimism and sprinkled with humour. We all need reminded in these first few weeks of the year that behind grey clouds there is a sun; and with us on dark days is the Son. The joy of January is in the hope of the New Year, a hope rooted in Jesus. What will Christ ask of us this year? What will he bring to our church? Where will he lead us? What can we do to serve Christ and his church in 2014?

This year may be the year where the tide starts to turn, where the emptiness of so many people's lives, the questions that so many want answered about the meaning of life; the anger at injustice and the moral quagmire we are stuck in, brings people to the church to ask and question and discuss and learn what the man from Galilee taught about loving each other, serving each other, putting God first and sharing what we have. And learn too, that the most



miserable day in history - when the Son of God was nailed to a cross; gave rise to the Resurrection - the greatest day the World has known; when death was overcome, new life promised and joy burst forth. So let us look ahead with hope and joy as we preach on this Second Sunday of the year.

[Isaiah 42: 1-9](#)

Isaiah 42 was written at the time of the exile and as such was a time of despair and misery for the Chosen People. Far from their own land, far, it sometimes felt, from God, the past served only to remind them of defeat, the future seemed devoid of hope and the present was just miserable. Yet Isaiah reveals a message of great hope: God will set the people free and they will return to Jerusalem. This passage and the other 'Servant of the Lord' verses echoed down through time until resting on Jesus Himself but must have encouraged people of the day too. Hope may take its time but with God there is no doubt that hope will always be fulfilled.

This passage from Isaiah 42 presents a wonderful picture of a God of justice and power and glory whose chosen servant is not a shouter or orator, not a violent or cruel person but a servant who seeks justice for all. These words are reflected in Jesus' life whose attitude to the old and young and Gentiles and women and sick and all who society treated as second or third class citizens, was one of compassion and welcome. Justice begins with practical caring/serving our neighbour.

[Psalm 29](#)

'The voice of the Lord in the storm' is the heading in the Good News Bible for this Psalm and it continues the above theme of safety and security in God alone. This psalm portrays the God of the high mountains and the lightning flash. This is the God of glory and power... Yet this too is the God who, despite the shows of strength, blesses us his people with peace.

While we have all - probably many times - read and preached on the wonderful story of Elijah hiding in a cave and hearing God not in the earthquake or storm but in the still, small voice, this passage asks us to see God in the earthquake and storm. Not in the sense of a vengeful God judging us and finding us wanting and therefore bringing down natural disasters (every time I



hear any so called 'Christian' talking about natural disasters being a judgement of God because of perceived sin I find myself wishing, rather un-Christianly, that the people who think this way should be sent to live near a live volcano or area susceptible to flooding or one that suffers from earthquakes... anyway I digress...) but in the sense that we can catch a glimpse of God's power through the wonders of Creation.

When life does seem with hope we are reminded that the God of silence and peace is also the God of power and might. The God who serves also saves. The God who died gives us life. The God who suffered is the God in whom we can place a sure and certain hope.

[Acts 10: 34-43](#)

This speech by Peter contains so many wonderful verses that we could spend a long series going through each single verse. The Gospel is summed up in a few lines: God treats everyone the same. Jesus brought the Good News; Jesus healed and did many good things; Jesus died; Jesus rose from the dead; Jesus commanded his followers to preach the Gospel and testify; all who believe in Jesus will have their sins forgiven. Paul is quite rightly lauded as the great missionary and letter writer and teacher of the early church, but we should never forget Peter, who, in speeches like this, which are perhaps not as eloquent as some of Paul's, prove to be equally powerful through their simplicity, straightforwardness and directness. Paul had the benefit of a good education. Peter was a fisherman. Both - when they spoke about Jesus, did so in their own ways, in their own styles with equal heart and passion.

The context for this speech is of course, Peters' vision of a large sheet covered with all sorts of food which God had used to teach Peter that the Gospel was to be taken to both Jew and Gentile. This must have rocked Peter's faith to the core. Despite seeing Jesus speaking to many 'untouchables' and 'undesirables' and even women and children too it still had not sunk in that here was something new. In this vision God hammers home to Peter that his world (Acts 10: 28-29) which barred visiting Gentiles; which prohibited the eating of unclean food; where legalism and cleaning rituals were a way of life had suddenly got bigger. The 'Way' was to be open to all - regardless of race. Suddenly, for Peter, in this one moment, everything has changed.



When Peter is invited by Cornelius (a religious man who was a Captain in the Roman army and generously helped Jews who were poor) to visit his house the 'old' Peter would have refused - the post vision Peter agrees, In fact, Peter, in chapter 10 v 28 - 29, seems a bit surprised at himself with what he is doing and a bit snappy too. 'I have come without objection... why did you send for me?' Cornelius responds with grace and replies 'we are waiting to hear anything that the Lord has instructed you to say' (Acts10:33). The wonderful speech is what follows. Context is everything here. Peters' speech is given at a time which in many way marks the first faltering steps of the Christian church. Following Jesus is not an exclusive invitation to the Chosen People but to everyone. The implications of this will be felt for a long time.

[St Matthew 3: 13-17](#)

The baptism of Jesus is the starting point of the ministry of Jesus and can be the starting point for a series on the life of Jesus as we take the long journey towards Holy Week. The baptism narrative is well known but still challenges us. John had prepared the way, he has preached about the one who is to come - the one greater than John. John proclaims this 'I baptise with water, the one who comes after me will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire'. So when Jesus presents himself to be baptised, John, not surprisingly, tries to get him to change his mind. Jesus though, knows that this moment is a defining one. In actions that shout louder than any words Jesus announces that he is humble, he will serve, and what clearer sign could there be than insisting his cousin is the one to baptise him. The decision is shown to be the right one as the Spirit of God descends like a dove; the dove alights upon Jesus and a voice from heaven proclaims 'This is my own dear Son with whom I am pleased'. To paraphrase Churchill this is not the very beginning (that happened in Bethlehem) nor is it the beginning of his ministry (that happens after the temptations) but the baptism marks the end of the quiet life and the beginning of the long road to Calvary and Easter morning.



Sermon Ideas/Illustrations

Justice

The passage also allows us to reflect on Justice today and the call to bring light to the nations and set free those who sit in dark prisons (6- 7). Sadly, the injustices of Isaiah's day are not confined to ancient history but are still very much a part of life today. Rarely a week goes by without a story of Christians being tortured or persecuted in some part of the World. Many organisations - from Amnesty to Barnabus actively support and campaign for the many who are imprisoned unjustly and today could be the time to look at some stories of Christians being persecuted and how we can support them. Similarly we could find out more the ways in which we can support prisoners and their families in our own country.

The strength and Power of God

God is strong and powerful - not a theme we preach on often but it is good to remind ourselves that, to borrow CS Lewis's phrase, 'God is not a tame God'.

I have a vivid memory of a Youth Fellowship weekend away at Blair Atholl in the early 80's. We were under canvas and though it did not get dark until 11pm when it got dark it was DARK. One night we were woken up with a crash and looked outside to see torrents of rain and hear thunder booming and watch the sky light up in a magnificent display of nature. It was frightening and exhilarating and awe inspiring all at the same time. It felt, really felt, as if you were in the presence of real, raw power - a power far stronger than nature. God reveals Himself to us in many different ways - that night God was indeed in the storm.

A Gospel for All

According to Peter those who do what is right are acceptable to (God) regardless of race... This is incredible coming from a good Jewish boy like Peter who would have been told and taught throughout life that not all are acceptable before God. Jesus, through actions and meetings showed that all who come to him are accepted. The classic (i.e. very old) story illustrates this:

An angel was taking new arrivals on a tour of heaven. The new arrivals were shown many sights and wonders before they arrived at a long corridor which stretched for miles. All along the



corridor, at regular intervals, were massive doors each with a sign on it, and one of the new arrivals asked what was behind the doors. The angel pointed to the signs on the doors and as they looked closer the arrivals noticed one door said Protestant another door Baptist and so on. Another new arrival asked if they could open the doors and the angel said 'No' but if they wished they could go through a small side door where, behind a two way mirror come window; they could have a look - if they promised to remain silent.

The group followed the angel utterly intrigued, to the first door, whose sign read "CHURCH OF SCOTLAND" in large letters. The angel led them through the door to a small room and drew back some blinds where the two-way mirror meant they could see but not be seen. And what a sight it was. There were multitudes of people all laughing, talking, and eating. There were smiles and everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. The group looked on in wonder but of course could not be seen.

Next the angel took them along the corridor to a door with a sign that said "CATHOLIC". Again they could see but not be seen. Hear but not be heard. Again the angel showed them to a small room with a two way mirror. Again behind the window were multitudes of Christians laughing, talking, eating and enjoying themselves.

The next room was marked 'evangelicals' and the exact same was observed as was behind the doors marked Baptists and Pentecostals and Liberals and conservatives.

Eventually one newcomer plucked up the courage to ask the angel a question 'Listen, we have seen people all around heaven enjoying themselves. These people are too but why are they behind closed doors, Why are they divided?'

'Because,' said the angel, 'they are the people that think they're the only ones here.'



Time with Children

A. The story of Peter can be wrapped up by asking children to name their favourite foods and think of foods that some people are not able to eat e.g. Vegetarians do not eat meat. Some people cannot eat wheat. Others sugar. Some cannot drink milk. All would be happy if they were allowed to drink or eat what they liked etc.

B. Power and strength - who is strongest? Have a weightlifting contest - with hymnbooks? Winner is strongest but... Who is really strongest here in church? Who has most power? Have some fun with naming organist or leader of Guild etc then mention that strongest and most powerful is the one we worship.



Prayers

Collect

Eternal Father,
at the baptism of Jesus
you revealed him to be your Son,
and anointed him with the Holy Spirit,
Keep all who are born
of water and the Spirit
faithful to their calling as your people;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Opening prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
as we continue the first few steps of a New Year,
we remember that all we have that is good comes from you,
we remember that you have looked after us in the past,
look after us today
and will continue to care for us and guide us tomorrow.
Bless us this year Lord,
from the very young to the not so young,
may we be filled with your compassion, grace and love and may we as individuals and as a church
give people a glimpse of Love for the World.
Hear these our prayers in Jesus name who taught us how to pray together saying...



Second Prayer

Lord God, Heavenly Father, You are mighty indeed.

Mighty and powerful.

You are the Creator of all that is Good

The Maker of Heaven and Earth.

The skies and stars were made by you,
the mountains and seas put into place by you.

Everywhere we look in Creation - from great storms and Grand canyons to
mighty mountains and fast flowing rivers we see evidence of your power and might.

As we look ahead to this coming year we ask that you may bless us through 2014.

Encourage us O Father by our successes of the past; - when we have truly served you with
humility and dedication.

Challenge us, O Christ, to face with fortitude and courage what this year may bring;

Guide us, O Heavenly Spirit, by your eternal presence,
and give us strength to keep close by you in the days to come.

We ask Lord that you may help and guide us this coming year:

Help us to be to be true and faithful to those whom we love and who love us;

Help us to be to be loyal to our friends, so that they may never feel distressed or let down by our
actions;

to work to the best of our abilities , using to the full the talents which you have given to us;

Help us to be to be reliable in all we do so that people may know that we are dependable

Help us to resist temptation so that we may give strength to others who may be tempted;

Lord may our lives this year lead to others discovering you.

May we be humble, gentle and kind; slow to anger and quick to forgive

May we learn to look at our own lives before commenting on others and may we be honest and
true and obedient to You.

Lord we ask for your peace and love and strength in our lives

Help us to be worthy of You and to follow you faithfully

In Jesus Name. AMEN.



Dedication and Intercession

Lord our God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We give you thanks and praise and we dedicate to you our offering. In this we also dedicate the workings of our hands the thinking of our minds and the loving of our hearts, may each be used for the glory of your kingdom, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Lord God as we move forward into a new year,
we ask you to bless all for whom the year is not being looked forward to.

We think of people who are ill and fearful of what the year will bring.

We think of all who have family difficulties and are concerned as to how to solve them.

We think of all for whom the new year is bringing money problems,
and all who are fearful for their jobs.

Lord for us all the future is unknown -
help us to have the faith to trust in you,
the wisdom to do the right thing,
and to be guided by you constantly.

Remind us Lord that you Always keep your promises - remind us too that they are kept in your time and not ours.

We ask your blessing on all who have turned their back on You; or who have not known You.
May they hear your word and Respond to your love

Be with those who are lost,
who have never known you

Help them to seek and find the peace and love found in you and you alone.

Father God - Loving God - we your children pray to you and give you thanks and praise through
the name of your beloved Son, Christ Jesus our Lord.

Heavenly Father we bring before you our loved ones,
and in the silence we pray for them.

For our family,
our friends,



For all whom we know.

May this year be good for all whom we love,

Lord God guide us in our lives - may others see your love shine through us.

May our words and actions constantly point to you

May we put You first in everything

and serve You always.

We ask you to be with us and give us a year where we know and feel and are guided by your presence.

Whatever the year holds may we never lose sight of you.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Show yourselves to be God's servants through the holy spirit by your purity, knowledge, patience and kindness, by your true love, by your message of truth and by the power of God and may the blessing of God almighty, the love of the Father, the grace of the Son and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us and remain with us now and ever more.

Musical Suggestions

CH4 120	God, we praise you
CH4 133	Source and Sovereign
CH4 154	How Great Thou Art
CH4 221	Saviour, again to thy dear name
CH4 248	For my sake and the Gospels go (always thought this hymn has a subliminal message for congregations fed up with their minister or vice versa!)
CH4 336	Christ is our light
CH4 460	Join all the glorious names
CH4 681	Send out the Gospel



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. [Pray Now 2013](#) is available now from [St Andrew Press](#). [Revealing Love](#) will be available to purchase from November 2013.



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 magazine [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 the Rev Ian Elston 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.

