



Fifth Sunday of Easter

14 May 2017

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev John Collard, Interim Minister, for his thoughts on the fifth Sunday of Easter.

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Acts 7: 55-60

Stephen was one of the seven 'deacons' chosen by the whole Christian community and then appointed, through prayer and laying on of hands, by the apostles. (Acts 6:1-7) These seven were given the task of ensuring that the daily 'distribution' (the Greek word is *diakonia*) was fair to all concerned.

Although this was essentially an administrative task, the qualifications required were that they should be 'full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom' (Acts 6:3), and this certainly proved to be the case with Stephen.

He turned out to be a most effective communicator and evangelist for the new faith, and it was this very effectiveness that caused his opponents to jealously bring false accusations against him. He was arrested and brought before Council (the Sanhedrin). Undaunted, he proceeded to lecture them on how Jewish history demonstrated that God's people often rejected God's messengers, and that they had done the very same by betraying and murdering God's 'righteous servant'. (Acts 7:52)

This accusation ignited the simmering anger of the Council members, who threw him out of the city and stoned him.

His dying words: 'Lord! Do not remember this sin against them!' are a clear echo of Jesus words from the cross in Luke 23:34.

Psalms 31: 1-5, 15-16

Psalms 31 has the Hebrew title 'A Psalm by David' and it may relate to some of David's experiences when he was effectively living as an outlaw, being hunted by King Saul. That episode in David's life included a number of narrow escapes to which these verses might apply, e.g. 1 Samuel 23:13.

The tone of the selected verses reflects the extreme threat the writer feels, leading him to plead with God for protection from the danger he faces. But alongside the threat there is a confidence that God will act. So it is an honest facing of a dangerous and potentially deadly situation but facing it with faith rather than despair. These are very much the same notes sounded by Stephen in the Acts passage.



Proverbs 4: 10-18

The book of Proverbs is written in order to pass on wisdom. Some of it comes in the form of direct teaching; 'listen to me' is a common expression; and some in the form of pithy sayings: E.g. 'Better to live on the roof than share the house with a nagging wife.'

In these verses the writer, traditionally understood to be King Solomon, is urging the value of learning. Throughout Proverbs 'foolishness' is associated with an unwillingness to learn because wisdom comes from listening and learning.

The willingness to go on learning right through our lives should be the mark of a wise Christian disciple.

Psalm 119: 9-32

Psalm 119 is a carefully structured piece of Hebrew writing. It has twenty two sections, each of 8 verses. Twenty two being the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, the verses in each section all begin with the same Hebrew letter. Its subject is the Law (Torah) of God, and it is the psalm is the prayer of one who delights in God's law and seeks to live by it.

The overall effect is of a psalm which delights in God's law from A to Z.

Verses 9-32 are the second and third sections, so in Hebrew, the verses 9-16 all begin with the Hebrew letter 'Bet' and verses 17-32 with the Hebrew letter 'Gimel'.

There are echoes of the Proverbs passage in the idea of 'studying your instructions' and 'examining your teachings'. Verse 23: 'The rulers meet and plot against me, but I will study your teachings', sits comfortably beside the Acts story of Stephen's martyrdom.

1 Peter 2: 2-10

This epistle identifies its author as: 'From Peter, apostle of Jesus Christ.' And while modern Biblical Criticism has questioned whether the apostle Peter is its author, the traditional view is still accepted by many. Its contents show that it was written to encourage Christians, scattered across the Roman world, who were suffering severe persecution.



The striking imagery of the passage draws on the idea of a spiritual Temple and speaks of Jesus Christ as the cornerstone and of Christians as the 'living stones' being built together into its structure. The physical Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70AD – in all likelihood around the time this letter was written, which makes the description of the spiritual Temple a very evocative one.

Quoting from Isaiah and the Psalms, the author makes the startling claim that it is the very stone that was rejected that has become the cornerstone of the spiritual Temple. This spiritual Temple is the spiritual home of a new chosen race, God's own people. A description no longer confined to ethnic Jews, but appropriate to all who have been 'called out of darkness into his own marvellous light'.

John 14: 1-14

Chapter 14 is the beginning of a section in John's gospel often referred to as the 'Farewell Discourses'. It extends to end of chapter 17 - which consists of Jesus' prayer for his disciples, the 'High Priestly' prayer. The language is almost entirely direct speech from Jesus. The 'Farewell Discourses' deal with the theme of Jesus departure and how the disciples will cope afterwards. Chapter 14:1-14 includes one of the seven 'I am' sayings of John's gospel – 'I am the way, the truth and the life'.

The passage is typical of the tone and content of John's gospel, with its rich use of language and metaphor, as well as painting a rather different portrait of Jesus from the one that emerges from the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). Here Jesus teaches his disciples in a detailed spiritual way, urging them to believe in him and in the intimate nature of his relationship with the Father. This passage is widely used at funeral services as the imagery of 'In my Father's house are many mansions' (14:2 KJV) is interpreted as a metaphor of heaven.



Sermon ideas

These lectionary readings offer a rich and diverse palate of scripture and it would be possible to use one as a focus passage to shape the sermon. Alternatively it would be possible select a theme that is suggested by the readings as a whole:

Focus Passage: Acts 7:55-60

Stephen's stand

His Qualification for Service – when the 7 ‘helpers’ are selected back in Acts 6, the criteria is that they should be: ‘full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom’. The local church depends for its effectiveness on time and energy of a large number of volunteers. What qualifications do we seek in those who serve in our churches? How can we encourage those who may well be ‘full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom’ but may hold back out of a sense of their own inadequacy?

His developing gifts – it is clear that Stephen pretty soon got involved in much more than the daily distribution of funds. Acts 6 speaks of his miracles and wonders as well as the wisdom with which he spoke and Acts 7 provides an example of his preaching. Perhaps it was the recognition and authority that went came with the prayer and laying on hands of the apostles that enabled these gifts of Stephen's to be developed and seen. In what ways do we give recognition and authority to leaders within our congregations? How can we support the developing of gifts – even in cases where that means moving into quite different areas of ministry?

His compelling witness – Was it courage or foolhardiness that took Stephen into a situation of threat and violence against him? What is clear is that his witness to the truth of the gospel didn't waver even when murderous anger erupted, and he became the first martyr for the Christian faith. The comment that ‘Saul approved of his murder’ in chapter 8 verse 1 is a fascinating detail. Was Saul unmoved by what he saw? Did it work in his subconscious to undermine his own hatred of Christians? The text doesn't say. Down the centuries though, this kind of witness has caused many enemies to re-examine the cause of Christ. If men and women are ready to die like this, what does that mean? As Tertullian observed "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church".



Focus Passage: 1 Peter 2: 2-10**Living stones**

Foundations – the critical bit of any building is the bit you don't see. Without good foundations no building will last long. The cornerstone of an ancient building was the first masonry to be set in the foundations, and on it the whole of the building rested. If it was cracked or out of true, the building would crumble. Peter is using this image to illustrate the place of Jesus in the life of Christian believers. Anything not built on him will fall. The irony of the passage is that it is the very stone which was rejected that has turned out to be the critical cornerstone.

Walls – while the foundations are critical, buildings also need walls. Without them the building is of limited use – especially in a Scottish climate! If Jesus Christ is the cornerstone, it is ordinary Christian believers that are the bricks used to make the walls. Unlike the inanimate bricks of a physical building, which can be cut and shaped as required, the 'living stones' of the 'spiritual temple' have minds of their own! There is a sense here that we need to allow ourselves to be shaped together for the walls to be built up. Co-operation with others is the very business of building Christian fellowships. In what ways do we enhance or sabotage the co-operation required to build with 'living stones'?

Uses – the first thing an architect wants to know in order to design a building is, what it will be used for. The purpose of the building will go a long way towards determining its form. The purpose of the spiritual temple, built out of living stones, is to declare the wonderful acts of God. Acts that have reversed alienation (at one time you were not God's people) and replaced it by acceptance (now you are God's people). Our behaviour towards others needs to reflect the actions of God towards us, we have received mercy and acceptance and we in turn must showcase mercy and acceptance towards others.

Overall theme – taking the passages as a whole**Letting go and holding on**

Right through life we have to make decisions about what we hold on to and what we let go. We cannot keep hold of the physical possessions and if we try, we may well end up overwhelmed by stuff that has little value.



The theme of what to hold onto and what to let go, runs, like a thread, through these passages. These decisions will shape how we live and the way in which others perceive our priorities.

What is useful? Many of our homes are full of bits and pieces that we once had a use for, but have now become clutter. The passages in Psalm 119 and in Proverbs 4 urge the usefulness not so much of things as of attitudes. Above all, the attitude of listening and learning. When the focus of that learning is the things of God, then our spiritual lives will continue to grow and develop even when our physical bodies are declining.

What is important? The passage in 1 Peter emphasises the way in which Christians together are built into something of vital importance – a spiritual temple. The emphasis is on co-operation as well as on the foundation of Jesus Christ. The relationships we form within the Christian family are among the most important and most valuable assets of our lives.

What is lasting? The gospel passage is part of the ‘farewell discourses’ of Jesus. In these passages as he speaks about leaving his disciples and going back to his Father, Jesus also offers the disciples the comfort of the Holy Spirit – ‘who will stay with you forever’. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit, in our lives now, brings reassurance. And in the life to come, through the continued presence of the Holy Spirit we shall ‘know as we are known’. (1 Cor 13:12)

Time with Children

- If you access to Lego or Duplo, it would be possible to work with some of the children to build a simple structure. That would allow the conversation to move towards what it means that we are ‘living stones’ being built into a ‘spiritual temple’.
- Telling the story of Stephen using pictures either from a book or in PowerPoint would be a good way of reinforcing the Acts passage. I have found www.freebibleimages.org to be a very useful source.



Prayers

Call to worship

Together we settle ourselves in this time of worship ready to hear God's great story,
The story of God's new purposes for the church, for our lives and for the world
Let us listen, let us worship

Opening prayer

Gracious God, as we gather now in this place at this time,
may our senses be alive to your presence among us.
We bring our sight and our sense of smell, our hearing, our sense of taste and our touch.
We bring our hearts and minds and spirits.
Open us up to your presence here we pray.
We remember and claim the promise of Jesus that where two or three gather in his name,
he is there with them, and we believe that through the Holy Spirit,
that promise is fulfilled for us now.
Our worship reminds us of who you are, the creator God,
who made heaven and earth,
who came to us in the person of Jesus, your son to reveal your mercy and love.
And our worship reminds us of we are –
your children, forgiven, cared for, and given our purpose in you.

Prayer of confession

Great giver of life, we confess that when we try to find our purpose in the things we accomplish,
or the possessions we own or in the labels others give us, we are disappointed.
So we return to you again and ask you to renew in us the sense of what you have created us to be.
In the great stories of the Bible and in the presence of the living Jesus,
help us to re-discover our deepest calling
so that we may live as your people in a needy world.
Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.



Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever.

Amen

Intercession

We bring to you, merciful God, our concerns for ourselves and for others.

We pray for those who find themselves caught between the need to let go and the desire to hold on.

We pray for those that are lonely that they might find a companion in you.

We pray for the bereaved that in their sorrow they might be aware of your presence sustaining them.

We pray for those who struggle with addiction, that you Lord, would give to them the strength and support they need to battle their addiction and to overcome it.

We pray for those whose lives have become diminished because of illness, or age that they may be conscious of your life within them, a life which continues to deepen and strengthen, even in the face of human weakness.

We pray who feel the weight of the responsibilities they carry, at home at work or in the church.

For those in positions of leadership, locally or nationally, that they may exercise influence for the good of others and not for selfish ends.

We pray for the church of Jesus Christ throughout the world, that we might be obedient in our discipleship, joyful in our witness and patient in times of difficulty.

May our lives speak of the grace of God in such a way that others may hear and come to know friendship with God that we have found through Jesus.



Musical suggestions

CH4 198	Let us build a house where love can dwell – good opening hymn
CH4 204	I am the church – suitable children’s hymn on the theme of ‘living stones’
CH4 259	Beauty for brokenness
CH4 570	When the storms of life are raging, stand by me
CH4 590	Holy Spirit, gift bestower
CH4 716	Come and find the quiet centre - lovely words to a good tune
CH4 724	Christ’s is the world in which we move – one of John Bell’s hymns to a well-known Scots tune



Additional Resources

Pray Now is designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. *Word of Life* will be launched at this year's [Heart and Soul](#) event and is available for pre-order from [St Andrew Press](#).



SPIRITUALITY OF CONFLICT

The [Spirituality of Conflict](#) website publishes reflections on the Sunday gospel readings in the 3-year lectionary cycle of the church. The reflections explore the themes of conflict within the gospels and offer questions and commentary for private reading, group discussions and public worship. Whilst most of the content will be connected to the Revised Common Lectionary, some will relate to occasions throughout the year – everything from St Patrick's Day to World AIDS Day. All of the content is free to download, use and share with others.

[Quick Guides](#) are designed to help people with the various elements of leading worship, gathering community and ordering space.

Quick Guide...

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](#)



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday archive material and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#).

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to the Rev John Collard for providing us with this 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.

