

starters for Sunday

Second Sunday in Lent

16 March 2014

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Contents

Prologue.....	2
Genesis 12: 1 – 4a.....	2
Romans 4b: 1 – 5, 13 – 17.....	2
Psalm 121.....	3
St John 3: 1 – 17.....	3
St Matthew 17: 1 – 9.....	5
Prayers.....	6
Musical Suggestions.....	15
Additional Resources.....	16



Prologue

Today's readings are all about signs and promises, signs requested, signs given, and signs difficult to discern. Abram is covenanted by God, he is given the promise of a being a leader of a great nation, when he was beyond the years of having children; Paul discusses Abraham's 'wages' which he says are a gift when the promise comes true; Nicodemus comes to Jesus looking for a sign – and when he is given it, he cannot understand it.

[Genesis 12: 1 – 4a](#)

This is the call from God to Abram to leave his home and go off wandering with his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot to find a land where God promises his to be the leader of a great nation. All this at age 75, when most folk stop wandering or are unable to do so due to age. This is a covenant, an agreement between God and his people, and is something God carries out throughout the history of his people. The covenant with Adam and Eve – with Noah and the rainbow – and later with Moses – God promises great things to those with whom he covenants and his word is his bond.

There may be a feeling that God cannot use us as we get older. We may not be able to do the things we once did but there is always something we can do, encourage, watch and pray – these things we can all do.

Abram steps out in faith and sometimes we too can do no other, frightening though it may seem but resolute in the knowledge that God can do more than we could ever ask or think.

[Romans 4b: 1 – 5, 13 – 17](#)

In this passage Paul is in full flow, discussing his doctrine of justification by faith and not works. Using Abram as an example he doesn't ask what Paul has gained or found. 'What shall we say? Have we found Abraham to be our forefather in terms of the flesh?' For Paul, God's faithfulness has been unveiled, fulfilled in Jesus Christ. As Christian doe we have to become connected to Abraham's family in the flesh?



And how would Abraham's family find their promised land? Through Exodus, marking them out as liberated slaves, God's freedom people. [Gen 15] They are no longer under the law, but under God's grace.

The good news is that Abraham is no longer the father of a nation, but many nations, all who share the faith in God, the life-giver. This is how the one true God has been, in Christ, faithful to what he has promised.

[Psalm 121](#)

Psalm 121 is a Psalm of the Ascents; this was probably sung by the Hebrew Pilgrims as they climbed the steps to the Temple at Jerusalem. Psalms 120 – 134 were the fifteen psalms of ascent and this particular psalm is a hymn of trust.

The opening imagery can be interpreted in two ways; either that the mountains represent God, who made them, or that they represent the alternative source of hope.

The psalmist's question in verse 1 is answered in verse 2 – our help comes from God.

Like psalm 91 it offers a strong testimony to the care and protection offered by God, a sentiment strongly echoes in Romans 8 [... nothing can separate us from the love of God...].

[St John 3: 1 – 17](#)

This of course has the focus of verse 16 – the purpose for Jesus' coming to earth. But of course there is more in this passage; the coming of Nicodemus, the puzzled teacher to find Jesus. What was that all about – his teasing and testing by Jesus?

Nicodemus was a brave man, even to come to see Jesus by night, given that the final conflict between Pharisees and Jesus was gaining momentum. Nicodemus wishes it to be a secret visit. He has heard of the 'signs' of Jesus and is clearly impressed – not just because of the signs but because he believes them to be of God. It could be seen as an opportunity for Jesus to improve himself in the sight of the Pharisees. But instead he seems to try to bamboozle Nicodemus about being born again. You can almost hear the irritation in Nicodemus' response. He thought



Jesus would be pleased at his approach but Jesus instead seems to mock him. Jesus tells him he's a great teacher yet he doesn't understand anything.

Nicodemus talks about signs. Many asked Jesus for signs – but Jesus is never free with his signs. When he calls the disciples there are no signs – then at the wedding in Cana there is a reluctant sign – and just before Nicodemus arrives the Pharisees have demanded a sign for the cleansing of the temple and Jesus offers them the enigmatic sign of his ministry – but no-one can be bothered to try to interpret that sign.

But what are they supposed to be 'signs' of?

Are people really willing to look beyond the sign itself and try to find out where it points?

Or do they wish the miracles as a quick fix, signalling, if you to even think this far, that God will do as you want him to?

Nicodemus wishes the sign for himself. He has come to offer support to Jesus, believing he came from God, but not willing to support him fully until he saw which side was liable to win.

Sitting on the wall with one leg on either side is not an option for Jesus! Waiting to see which way you should jump is not allowed for Jesus' followers! Nicodemus thinks he will back the potential winner without risking his skin, but finds himself standing in the presence of God. And it is not a comfortable stand! This great teacher of Israel who thinks he knows about God to discern him at work in Christ, doesn't realise he is not viewing a sign-worker, but God's own Son. Confronted by the Son, inexpensive goodwill will not do!

Nicodemus is offered the opportunity to enter the real world, the one that God created through the Word. Jesus challenges Nicodemus to commit himself the only way he can - commit to the Son of Man, whose crucifixion is the true sign of God's loving design. What is Nicodemus to do?



[St Matthew 17: 1 – 9](#)

Again a sign misunderstood, this time in the Transfiguration. The disciples are already struggling with the mission of Jesus as he tries to unfold it to them; in the previous chapter Jesus tells them they are right to call him Messiah but wrong in their expectation of what a Messiah will achieve. The disciples are uncomprehending of his description and while only Peter questioned, doesn't mean the others clearly understood.

So how will the transfiguration affect them? Are the words spoken, act as God's seal on all that Jesus has said? Or will God's words merely approve what they believe to be their interpretation of what Jesus is all about? Might they be inclined to think that If God loves Jesus so much he will certainly make him victorious? There must have been a temptation to believe that God was on their side and to discount the picture that Jesus has been painting of the suffering servant.

After the resurrection, the story can take on a different perspective and taken in its proper perspective by the reality of Jesus life death and resurrection. They understand that God does indeed love and approve of everything that Jesus is and has done, and they can see the pattern their own mission must take and that it must follow the hard path to life, not the easy path to success.



Prayers

Collect

Almighty God,
whose most dear Son went not up to joy
but first he suffered pain,
and entered not into glory
before he was crucified:
mercifully grant that we,
walking in the way of the cross,
may find it none other
than the way of life and peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

or

Almighty God,
your Son was revealed in majesty
before he suffered death upon the cross.
Give us faith to perceive his glory,
that being strengthened by his grace
we may be changed into his likeness,
from glory to glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Call

The Lord is my light and my salvation: I will fear no-one.
The Lord protects me from all danger: I will never be afraid.
I have asked the Lord for one thing:
to live in the house of the Lord all my life,
to marvel there at his goodness, and to ask for his guidance.



Let us pray

Immortal God,
You were there, before the world ever was,
You were there,
 creating the world from nothing,
 this world in which we live.

You were there
 at the moment of our conception,
 and at the moment of our birth,
 and you will be there at the end
 when we shall shake off our earthly bodies.

Glory be to you, Immortal God,
ever living, never dying, world without end.

Invisible God,
we can see you in so many different ways

In the beauty of a late spring morning
 when we feel a nip in the air,
 in the vibrant colours of the trees in new leaf,
 in the promise of spring flowers
 all yellows reds and blues
 in the smell of the first cut of the grass.

Invisible God we see you
 in the look of lovers entwined in marriage,
 in the smile of a child as it sees its mother,
 in the hand grasped during pain,
 in the shoulder to cry on,
 in the arms open in welcome.



Glory be to you Invisible God, seen in Jesus
and seen in his followers.

Only wise God
You know what you intended in your creation
and yet sin crept in - to taint and stain - to tarnish and destroy.

Only wise God
We confess that foolishness always
overcomes any wisdom we possess.
That even when we know what is right,
there is always the temptation to do wrong
and it seems too easy to succumb to desire,
to ignore doing what is right,
to pretend that we know best,
to rebel against what doesn't suit us,
to always put ourselves before you and others.

Father forgive
Christ forgive
Holy Spirit, comfort us as we confess to you
sins past that we can never forget,
sins present that still stain what we might be,
sins we cannot avoid for we are weak.

Triune God, Father Son and Holy Spirit,
you give to us all... be we great or small...
lives refreshed in the knowledge of sins forgiven.

May we know that refreshing cleansing now
that we may return to our lives in this
creation made by you for us to enjoy,



better fitted to love ourselves, to be able to
love our neighbours and above all to be able to love you with a clear conscience.

Great Father of Glory, pure Father of Light
We may blossom and flourish for a time,
but we can only do so
if you will feed and nourish us by your power.

Grant to us all in the spring of our life to be
shaped by the wind of your spirit,
refreshed by the gentle rain of your spirit,
and nourished by the warmth of your spirit.

In the summer of our lives
to be strengthen and renewed,
by the radiation of your spirit.

In the autumn of our lives
to bend to the wind of your spirit that we might not break
to allow us to shed, like leaves,
many of the things we no longer need.

So that when we come to the winter of our lives
the frost of old age, might not make us cantankerous
the fog of old age, may not blank out our minds,
nor deafen our ears, nor blind our eyes
that the hard packed snow of old age might not slow our step,
or make us lose our grip or our footing,
that throughout all the season of our lives, we might be fed and watered and nourished by
you...and that we might live our lives to the full, to give blossom and fruit that might be fitting
of the one who created us.



And to you our Creator, be honour and glory in the church from the beginning of time until time shall cease.

Amen

After Sermon

When the heart is hard and parched up,
come upon me with a shower of mercy.

When grace is lost from life,
come with a burst of song.

When tumultuous work raises its din on all sides
shutting me out from beyond
come to me, my Lord of silence,
with thy peace and thy rest.

When my beggarly heart sits crouched,
shut in a corner
break open the door, my king
and come with the ceremony of a king.

When desire blinds the mind
with delusion and dust,
O thou holy one,
thou wakeful,
come with thy light and with thy thunder

Thanksgiving, dedication and intercession

Gracious God, we rejoice in your creative and energising Holy Spirit.

At creation, the Spirit brought order out of chaos
Now he constantly renews and regenerates this world of yours and ours, imparting gifts to the church,



power to proclaim your word
conviction of sin
strength for repentance
and certainty of your love through Christ's death, and resurrection.

We praise you that your spirit is giving us,
new faith to displace unbelief
love instead of insecurity
hope where once there was despair.

Continually fill us with your spirit that we may enter more fully into the immeasurable riches to be found through your grace and shown supremely to us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Strengthen us to fulfil the task you have set us each to do during our earthly pilgrimage
that we might be received into your kingdom at last to hear the words,
well done, good and faithful servant.

Dedication

Accept O Lord this offering which we offer to you now; accept our worship offered to you now and finally accept our lives' work which we rededicate to you in the service of the kingdom. In Christ's name we pray.

Intercession

Eternal light, shine into our hearts
Eternal goodness, deliver us from evil
Eternal power, support our prayers
Eternal wisdom, enlighten our minds
Eternal pity, have mercy upon us;
that with all our hearts and minds and souls and strength we may seek your face, and bring to you in earnest desire, the needs of folk we know to be in trouble this day, through Christ our Lord.



We remember your church Lord, worshipping in all parts of the world;
in the great churches of our land, in abbey and cathedral; in the tiny churches of the islands
where a few faithful folk gather in a draughty hall or school ; in the Crystal cathedrals of America
and in the mud huts of Africa ; in desert wastes covered by burning sand or hard packed snow.

Wherever the people of God gather, there you are in the midst, Lord, in the risen power of Christ
and the surging power of the Holy Spirit, willing to challenge, and comfort, to inspire and
control;

Lord we pray for those who do not know what you can do for them, those for whom the name
of Christ is but a swear word, for those who feel they need something else in their lives, but
cannot find what they lack.

To each may you become real, through the Spirit working in and through others, that the gospel
might be preached and heard and above all received,
that those who seek may find
that tired hearts might be refreshed
that those who have given up on the gospel
might be surprised and given fresh faith.

Lord, we pray for the nation today,
a nation that needs the good news of your Son as much today as ever it did.

We pray for those in our land who need good news
of work to do
of the healing of broken relationships
of a second chance.

We pray for our government and oppositions parties that they might find the right policies for
this country, to bring back
respect for each other
the dignity in honest labour
and a willingness on all sides to work together for the prosperity of all people.



Lord we pray for the world still torn by conflict. We remember particularly the Middle East and the uneasy peace in Iraq.

And for the other warlike pots that simmer at different temperatures, some near the boil, others cooling off, some almost boiling over,
that nations might try to learn to live peaceably with neighbours, that traditions might be discarded, old hurts forgotten and that peace might come once again.

And lastly we remember those nearest and dearest to ourselves, particularly where we know of trouble or suspect it is not far away.

We remember our families, particularly where one is far from home;
in distance from us,
and especially in distance from you.

Lord may we by drawing closer to you be drawn closer to them, and to those whose faith is far away, may we through our love for them, show that love that you alone can give.

We remember those who are far away from good health,
for those at home or in hospital or home
 who are sick in body, mind or spirit;
 for those who sickness find no cure and
 for those whose hypochondria allows them
 to enjoy bad health.

for those who feel they cannot go on without
 another drink
 another bar of chocolate
 another pill.

for those who are frustrated because
 they cannot do the things they once did
 who cannot walk or even stand



who cannot see properly
who cannot hear as well as they once did.

Lord our God be with all who care and tend to the sick; all who doctor to or nurse those who are ill, and the ancillary services who play such an important part in recovery to health and strength; and be especially close to all carers of this world, those who care for relatives and who find that care a strain and who may even be at breaking point even now.

And for the dying we pray O God
that their passage from this world to the next
might be free from pain and anxiety
for the bereaved
that the memories of happy times in the past
might sustain them through the dark days of the present
and that the bleak days that appear on the horizon might be brightened by the knowledge that our parting from our loved ones is but partial and that in your good time we will see all those we know and love in your nearer presence, where there is real joy for ever.

We give thanks for those who have followed you on earth and who now worship you in heaven. May their example be a light to follow amidst days when you light seems afar off and the darkness of evil seems to be brighter than the light of your love.

And to you O God Father Son and Holy Spirit we ascribe all honour and glory now and forever more.

Amen



Musical Suggestions

- CH4 81 I to the hills will lift mine eyes
- CH4 119 O God thou art the Father
- CH4 132 Immortal, invisible, God only wise
- CH4 162 The God of Abraham praise
- CH4 211 Today I awake, and God is before me
- CH4 301 Hark the herald angels sing
- CH4 310 See him lying on a bed of straw
- CH4 354 O Love how deep, how broad, how far
- CH4 358 The great love of God is revealed in the Son
- CH4 393 We turn to God, when we are sorely pressed
- CH4 530 One more step along the world I go
- CH4 549 How deep the Father's love for us
- CH4 551 In heavenly love abiding
- CH4 561 Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine
- CH4 724 Christ's is the world in which we move.

St Matthew 7

- CH4 353 Bright the cloud and brighter the glory
- CH4 355 You Lord, are both Lamb and Shepherd
- CH4 448 Shine, Jesus, shine
- CH4 518 Lift up your hearts! We lift them Lord to thee



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 Alastair Cherry 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.

