

starters for Sunday

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

16 November 2014

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev C Graham Taylor, Minister of St Luke's and Queen Street Church, Broughty Ferry, for his thoughts on the twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost.

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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](#)

[Judges 4: 1-7](#)

We must start with the redoubtable character of Deborah. She was the only female judge as well as a multitasking leader; military strategist, prophet, politician and jurist as well as something of a feminist. Possibly, in recent history, we could see Golda Meir in the same mould. Nevertheless, whilst the other judges had their foibles which were recorded in scripture for posterity, Deborah has universally positive 'notices' crowned with her epithet of 'Mother of Israel'.

Turning to the text itself, we recall that it forms part of a narrative sequence recording the stories and heroes of the Israelite people from 1500-1200 BCE. Initially verbally transmitted, possibly with a high degree of local colour, Martin Noth (*The Deuteronomistic History*) in 1943 proposed that this material was eventually formulated into the book series of Deuteronomy through to 2 Kings excluding Ruth during the exilic period. The aim of this Deuteronomistic History was to answer the question - has God now forsaken us?

This theory is still held very widely today. However, it has been challenged by a number of scholars yet without any newer consensus developing.

Either way, Deborah illustrates her many roles in our scriptural passage. James Limburg in <http://www.workingpreacher.org/> takes up the story:

We first meet Deborah as she is seated in the shade of a palm tree in the hill country, going about her work as a "judge" settling disputes among her people. But the story picks up as Deborah puts on her prophet's hat and brings a word from the Lord. She summons a certain Barak, from the territory of Naphtali to the north, and tells him that the Lord wants him to call out some 10,000 troops from Naphtali and Zebulun and



bring them to Mount Tabor. There the Israelites will battle the Canaanites under Commander Sisera and will defeat them. Here our pericope ends.

But the story is just getting started. Barak says he'll carry out this order from the Lord, but only if Deborah will go with him. She agrees to go but says ominously that the Canaanite Commander Sisera will be humiliated in this battle. Not only will he be the loser, but he will die at the hand of a woman! (4: 6-10). The remainder of Chapter 4 reports his death and Chapter 5 tells the same story, with a few variations, in the form of a song.

[Psalm 123](#)

Russell Rathburn in his article 'The Hardest Questions' says of Psalm 123:

We know that prayer is not like picking up the phone and calling King Jesus, but this song is fun and funny and actually does get at something— not so much about God, but about a people's very real desire to communicate and a faithful dependence that a benevolent Presence is there.

Here then is the essence of the psalm's impact; the need to communicate, listen and wait for God to speak and act. Yet it also expresses the despair of those feel overlooked even down trodden. As a result, it speaks into a spectrum personal and wider situations in which we feel hopeless and moreover powerless.

Another approach to this Psalm is as a Song of Ascent; a pilgrimage hymn for the journey to the Temple in Jerusalem. Therefore, it is a song of faith. It starts with the theme of looking; the searching for God and seeing of his mercy. This divine support is possibly being invoked in accordance with the covenantal relationship. Therefore, the Psalmist's use of master/servant and maid/mistress analogies in illustration.

But then we turn to the root cause of the Psalmist's vexation. For the Israelite complaint is against arrogance and pride. These grievances are the result of their perpetrators not looking up to heaven but down of their fellows. The message is clear; the faithful look up humbly for assistance whilst the proud look only to themselves without a glance towards the divine will.



Maybe we should leave the last word to St Augustine who, in his [commentary on this psalm](#), wrote:

But that he may not be proud, what ought he to do? Let him lift up his eyes unto Him who dwelleth in heaven, let him not heed himself...

[1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11](#)

We now find ourselves in the strange territory of apocalyptic imagery. The temptation for listeners is to start finding modern day parallels failing to remember the highly complex theological canvas being presented to them. It is best to commence by recalling [Irenaeus of Lyon's](#) advice on this passage:

It is therefore more certain, and less hazardous, to await the fulfilment of the prophecy, than to be making surmises, and casting about for any names that may present themselves.

Whilst few today expect the parousia to occur in their lifetimes, the exhortation for watchfulness remains valuable. Indeed, the term 'intoxication' can easily be applied to the vast number of distractions in western society in this era; allurements that prevent the balancing of spiritual development in hand with material and purely intellectual gains.

Moreover, this passage suggests that Christian ethical conduct is more than a theoretical mind set rather such behaviour is illustrative of the lifestyle of believers on the return Christ. Therefore we should truly live in peace, hope and service.

Much of this comes out when William Loader (www.workingpreacher.org) wrote:

At least Paul in our passage brings to our awareness that the issue of idolatry is far from irrelevant for our times, even if the imminence of the day of the Lord is not. These days the idols... represent powerful vested interests, but from much of Christianity there is little about which they need to be warned. Paul believes Christians should not be so drowsy and drunk, but be asserting the radical new way of faith and love and hope. His world needed it and so does ours.



[Matthew 25: 14-30](#)

Despite probably forming part of Q, this textual portion is believed to have undergone considerable change. Similarly, the use of the word 'talent' suggests individual abilities to the modern ear. However, this was a reference to a monetary endowment of considerable size. Whilst this is not exhortation to invest in the Stockmarket, which of course did not exist in the 1st Century, its hearers would have known exactly how to turn a profit from such a significant amount.

Nevertheless, this parable is not about economics. Instead it uses hard business rules to illustrate the serious implications of the choices we make as Christians. Yet we are presented with a parable that is problematic; the one with least loses out, the one who is cautious suffers and the one most in fear of the master has his fears realised.

The key to understand is to bear in mind a recurring theme of Matthew - that damnation lies in the direction of a lack of trust in the divine. Put more specifically, we are being encouraged not to remain where we already are but to venture out recklessly with Christ and for Christ. Returning to the modern usage of the word 'talents' the point is to allow God to use his handsome investment in us to gain a considerable dividend. For the harvest is ripe yet the workers are few.

Here then is the apocalyptic strand once more which runs through this Sunday's lessons. Which also reminds us of the sudden often unwelcoming happenings in life. Specifically, the need to exploit all that we have been given 'here and now' rather than burying gifts for a better occasion. Since we are warned that in advance of such advantageous occurrence, we may called to account.

[Alyce M McKenzie](#) cites the following anecdote to make stress the urgency of doing the Christian imperative:

I was once in a hotel workout room, its sole occupant, walking on the treadmill in between meetings and reading a light novel. A man came in and got on the elliptical machine. He tried watching CNN for a while, but soon got bored and so became determined to engage the only other person in the room in conversation. "My wife makes me come down here everyday. I hate this. What are you reading?" I showed him



the cover. "You seem pretty fit, but you won't live forever," he said to me. "Shouldn't you be reading something more important?" I started to point out that he hadn't brought anything to read at all, but put aside the impulse. He was right. I may live quite a while, but I will die not having read all the important books. Maybe there is more urgency to try than I usually feel.

Sermon Ideas

Whilst it is less likely nowadays that a preacher would wish to delivering a sermon on the imminence of the parousia, there are a number of associated possibilities from these lessons. Of course, the exact application will depend on the prevailing theological stance of the minister and congregation. However, there are some very relevant warnings within these texts. Since although the Church in the West suffers an adverse cultural climate towards serious spiritual and ethical questioning, few would argue against the fact that many congregations themselves are complacent in their response to Christ and his service. Similarly we as individuals are more materially satisfied than any previous era resulting in a sense of malaise in Christian witness and action. Put directly, we may have lost our holy recklessness and attendant trust which only re-emerges in times of personal and collective trauma; periods which the texts warn, none of us will ultimately escape.

Time with Children

At first sight, the texts do not lend themselves to a non-abstract address for the younger children. However, the idea that God sees all that we do whether we think he is watching or not has possibilities.

One address could be based on the road crossing code or Highway Code; we need to observe these rules, whither with an adult or not, because they are there to keep us safe. We should also keep to God's rules even if we do not think he is sees us since his Son is always with us ready to tell us how to be safe.



Prayers

Collect

God, the ruler of all,
mercifully grant that we may be fruitful in good works
and attain to the glorious crown of your saints;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

(An extract from the Church of England's [Collects for Lesser Festivals](#))

Prayer of Approach and Confession

We are to find God in what we know
and not in what we do not know

For God wants us to realise his Presence,
not in life's unsolved problems
but in those we have together already solved.

Let us pray....

O Lord, our Father. Lover of human souls,
grant us today your pardon and your peace.

For the sins of our lips
For words untrue and words unclean and words unkind
For the sins of our hands
For all careless work,
for all wrong deeds
For any action which hurt another
Or which made it easier for another to go wrong



For the sins of our minds
For blindness to the truth
For refusal to face the facts
For all dishonest thinking
For the sins of our hearts
For all pride, all wrong desires
And all false loves

Forgive us, O God

Grant us this day
Peace within ourselves
That our inner tensions may be taken away
That we may no longer be torn in indecision
That we may no longer be for ever halted
Between two opinions

Grant us this day
Peace with our fellow humanity
That we may not disturb the fellowship by disputing
That we may never quarrel within our homes or outside them
That we may live in unity will all

Grant us this day, dear Lord
Peace with you
That the certainty that you love us
Make take all fear away
That we may know
That your love has forgiven us
That your grace upholds us
Above all, that your welcome awaits us



And so grant that we may live at peace with ourselves
In the company of all the saints
and at one with you
Though our Lord Jesus Christ
Who taught us to say...

(Lord's Prayer)

Amen

Prayer for others

Lord God

We thank you that in your loving mercy

We have been given new life in Christ

And in his atoning sacrifice

We rededicate ourselves

to your work in this world

We commit ourselves again to daily prayer,
study and worship

We commit ourselves

to thanksgiving in all circumstances

We commit ourselves to forgiveness

of those that hurt us

And we commit ourselves

to renewed boldness in our witness

For we have been buried with Christ in baptism

And are raised with him

through the power of you our living God

Lord, we pray for all trapped

in the isolation of depression



Help them to see the first buds
of a new spring breaking through
The winter fog of their lonely night

We pray for all suffering marriage
and family breakdown
May they feel the soft zephyr
of your reconciling smile
And the possibility of a relationship
again made whole

We pray for those who hate themselves
Grant that they may truly know
That through your Son
All past failures are cancelled
All climbs are made easy
And all burdens are made light

Above all, remind them and us
That our debts are now cancelled
And God is not against us

At this time of global trouble
We pray for all who may find themselves
this week in...

(name the World's trouble spots)
and all in harm's way
here and everywhere

Give each your blessed protection
From the storm of physical violence
The violence of the poisoned mind



And the violence of the heart
that devalues life
and defiles innocence

We particularly pray for
The members of our armed forces
May they be reassured by your guarding hand
And also know your guiding word
that speaks of righteous, compassion
And just duty

For that was the way of your Son
With whom we have been buried in baptism
And are again raised with him to eternal life
Through the power of you, our living God

In gratitude we turn our hearts and minds
To silent reflection on all that we have heard
And upon what is supreme in our daily lives
(optional period of personal reflection)

Amen

Musical Suggestions

CH4 694	Brother, Sister
CH4 251	Here I am Lord
CH4 159	Lord for the years
CH4 374	The Servant King
CH4 291	When out of poverty born
CH4 567	Focus my eyes on you



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 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 C Graham Taylor 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.

