

# starters for Sunday

## *Second Sunday in Lent*

**1 March 2015**

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Dr Douglas Galbraith, Precentor of the General Assembly and Editor of the Year Book, for his thoughts on the second Sunday in Lent.

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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

As Lent picks up momentum, the themes lead us in an increasingly focused way towards the kernel of the faith, themes which challenge us both at an intellectual level as well as through the feelings and emotions. This week we encounter the central doctrine of justification by grace through faith. It is a doctrine expressing a truth about God so unexpected and so difficult to credit that through the ages the Church has often faltered in its understanding of it, to be drawn back at various times by such as Duns Scotus, or Martin Luther or John McLeod Campbell.

### [Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16](#)

#### The reading

God makes a promise to Abram/Abraham and establishes a covenant with him and his descendants, and promises Sarai/Sarah that she will bear children.

#### Comment

This is one of those stories destined to be retold over and over again. Its power comes from two directions: it reflects the drive within humankind to establish a relationship and an 'accommodation' with the universe and its mysteries, and it captures in a dramatic and memorable way the longing of women and men to procreate and nurture. It is a narrative that both encapsulates theological searching and the deepest of emotions. It is an early revelation of the teaching that divine promises are unconditional, and of the priority of faith. At this turning point of the human story, both participants receive a change of name, suggestive of baptism, the long preparation for which gave Lent its early shape.



## [Psalm 22: 23-31](#)

### **The psalm**

Dominion belongs to the Lord; he rules over the nations. Future generations will be told, and proclaim his deliverance to people yet unborn.

### **Comment**

The quality of this moving declaration of gratitude to God is all the more telling given the first part of the psalm, which expresses bitterness and despair about the extremity the writer is experiencing. The reason for its choice in conjunction with the Old Testament reading is its affirmation that God's promise to Abraham and Sarah has been made good, that there are indeed 'offspring', that God did not abhor their affliction (the cultural description of childlessness), and that there was a nation and indeed nations in which the rule of God was known, which would extend to 'people yet unborn'.

## [Romans 4: 13-25](#)

### **The reading**

The promise to Abraham was not given within the framework of law but of faith, as the receptacle for grace and the lens through which it could be apprehended. There was no question of he and Sarah achieving this on their own, given their advanced years and situation. 'Hoping against hope', they had faith in a God 'who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist'. His faith was 'reckoned' (NRSV) to him, 'counted' (REB) to him, as righteousness. So in the same way is 'added up' our faith in Christ, as 'handed over to death for our trespasses and... raised for our justification'.

### **Comment**

Paul's claim that God can relate and communicate independently of the law would seem to fly in the face of the Old Testament, and this sends him back to Abraham as a prototype that would be a clincher for those to whom he wrote, calling on them to recognise the promise or covenant entered into then as now fulfilled in Christ. They, and we, are the heirs that are referred to, whose faith 'positions' us to be able to receive the grace – that is, the entirely free and undeserved outpouring from God which brings us to new life. Thus emerges the remarkable and



precious idea or doctrine that we are 'justified by grace through faith'. A commentator has summed it up: 'grace is God's method, faith is God's means, righteousness is God's end'.

## [Mark 8: 31-38](#)

### **The reading**

After the astounded realisation on the part of the disciples that their teacher is the Messiah that the nation has awaited for generations, Jesus brings a cold dose of reality as he speaks of his suffering and death, provoking their incredulous reaction. His rebuke to Peter leads to his defining of his true followers as those who take up his cross. Those who want to save their life will lose it; what profit can there be in material security which costs one's soul? Those who give their life for the sake of the gospel will save it.

### **Comment**

This passage and its immediate neighbours come at the mid-point of the gospel and contain some of the most dramatic words and events of Jesus' ministry. From this point, with the insight to which the disciples have come, and with Jesus' teaching about the cross, the pace of the gospel changes, making this reading sit well at the quickening of Lent. Jesus counters the definition of Messiah commonly held, including by Peter and the others, as a kind of Jewish Caesar, whose followers could expect position, privilege and power. It would be a difficult expectation to dislodge, thus the strength of the 'rebuke' to Peter. Yet the instruction to 'get behind me' is not one of dismissal but of relocation in the true place for a disciple of Christ.

### **Sermon Ideas**

The sermon could begin with a reminder about the place of Abraham in three major world religions (Christian, Jewish, Islamic), and remind worshippers, in the face of violence and atrocity in other parts of the world, that members of these other religious cultures share the same longing for peace as ourselves, shown in community-building initiatives in this country and other forms of dialogue and common action between different faiths. The good news is never as well reported as the bad. Another example is Egypt. At last year's General Assembly, His Grace Bishop Angaelos, General Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the UK, spoke of attacks in Egypt on 50 churches and other Christian bodies, and noted that, remarkably, the reaction of the Christian



Church had been complete silence – no anger, no revenge, no retribution. Some months later the effect of this became clear, as was reported in the *Church Times* 17/10/14: 'When supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood set fire to Egyptian churches and Christian-run businesses and social centres in August last year, they intended to spark a civil war between the country's majority Muslim and ten per cent Christian populations. Instead, the attacks united the majority of Christians and Muslims in Egypt against a sectarian approach, and helped to reinforce a new image of the country's Christians: that they were patriotic Egyptians, too.' The sermon might then proceed in one of three ways:

1. The sermon could develop into an exploration of how this may be extended. Reference could be made to the Commission on Religion and Belief in Public Life, chaired by Lady Butler-Sloss, which has recently been meeting with a variety of churches and groups across the country. It has critiqued the belief that as long as laws are not broken ethnic groups should be allowed to live in their own communities side by side with the indigenous population. This limited understanding 'has led to forms of ghettoism, and even, from time to time, to such practices as forced marriages and honour killings here... It may also have contributed to young people's going to Syria and joining the Islamic State. On the contrary, to try to create wider communities is in no way a failure to respect the personal identity and culture of others.' Lady Butler-Sloss (in this speech at Leicester Cathedral) reserves particular praise for locally-based initiatives, like the Christian-based organisation Near Neighbours. 'The impression I got was that the work done by local people in their small area is, in many cases, often better than when larger charities go in and take over.' She summed up: 'Underlying all of this is the need for tolerance of others, and a respect for their views, drawing a distinction between reasoned criticism and closed-minded opposition to their culture. It is crucial to make genuine efforts to communicate and to have dialogue – with a desire to learn and not to teach.' (*Church Times* 17/10/14).

2. To develop a sermon about faith and the doctrine of justification by faith through grace, refer to the comments on the readings (above). Do we feel safer if we have rules to follow, things that we can 'tick off' as counting towards righteousness? Can this become our main or only foundation for our attempts to live a Christian life? How do we move from there to trusting faith as the bedrock? Paul points us to Christ, 'handed over to death for our trespasses and... raised for our justification'. Jesus himself points to his own person as the new temple to replace the



one that demanded that people went through correct religious motions. But how do we change our focus? The sermon might suggest patterns of Christian spirituality that lead to a stronger sense of the person of Christ and his presence in our lives. As a dimension of this, one could take into account the unwavering obedience of Abraham and the trust he placed in God's promise (Romans 4:20).

3. The sermon might focus on the name-changing in the Old Testament passage and reflect on the Lenten/baptism link, especially if in your congregation Easter is a time for baptism and there are some persons preparing for this. In this connection, the Pauline idea of living within a long sweep of faith-keeping, from Abraham onwards, could be applied to the communion of saints, a sense of being surrounded by those who have gone this way before and know all that we encounter. It is an 'atmosphere of support' that we may feel that in our corner of the Church has not been strong. It is a dimension that would prevent us from seeing our faith as being nurtured by the limited resources of our own life and our own times, and too great a self-absorption in our faith which made us vulnerable to changes in our circumstances.

**Footnote:** Preachers may find it interesting to get hold of a copy of Jenny Diski's novel, *Only Human: A Divine Comedy*, an ironic, unorthodox and entertaining re-imagining of the story of Abraham and Sarah, not so much for material for the sermon but for relaxation while it is being written!

### Time with children

This segment takes up the theme of obedience, shown in the faith of Abraham and Sarah, and in Jesus' call to the disciples to become his obedient followers by taking up the cross. It centres on a recent project to re-establish the endangered species of the whooping crane.

Whooping cranes are very tall, typically 5 feet (1.5 metres) in height. They are white, with long legs. They live in North America. The children might like to speculate as to why they are called 'whooping'.

The trouble is that they very nearly became extinct; at one time only 15 pairs remained (what we call 'an endangered species'). It was decided to try and save them. Some Americans managed to breed them from eggs in cages and enclosures where they would be safe from harm and from



bad weather. The trouble was that the whooping crane is a bird that usually spends half its life in a warmer place; they have to fly 1,500 miles to get there. These young cranes did not know about that because they have never lived like cranes, nor have they any parents. How were they to get the young cranes to get into the habit of flying to a warmer place each year? They needed something the young birds could follow so that next time they would know what to do.

Their brilliant idea was to use a microlight aeroplane, a tiny machine which a pilot sits on like a motorbike, except that it flies through the air. But they had to teach them to follow the plane. First they played noises of the engines beside the eggs so that the birds got used to the noise in their shells. Then they trained the birds to hop and run after one of the aeroplanes taxiing slowly on a runway by rewarding them with food when they did it properly. What they were hoping was that in October, when it is the usual time to leave the state of Wisconsin in the north of the country, the cranes would actually take off behind the aeroplane. And they did! Every night for twenty-five nights the little aeroplane touched down in a field, and all the young cranes behind them, where there were people to look after them. When at last they came to Florida in the south, there they met for the first time grown up and experienced cranes who, when the time came to return, took them back for the summer.

## The Worship

### Using the psalm

Verse 22 of the Psalm could be a source for a Call to Worship:

'In the midst of the congregation I will praise you:

you who fear the Lord, praise him!'

The set psalm is not included in CH4 in a metrical version to be sung, but it does appear (nos. 12, 13) both as a Gregorian chant (surprisingly easy, indeed enjoyable, to sing when a musician who understands chants shows a congregation how to do it) and as a text to be read. The relevant section of this latter, text, version could be read between leader and people, as shown, following the first reading.

However, the psalm, particularly the later verses, is also reflected in the worship song in CH4 121

'In the presence of your people'.



## 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.

### An Opening Prayer

God, you loved the world so much  
that you embraced it in all its suffering  
in your beloved Son Jesus Christ,  
who sought the way of the cross  
that he might come to Easter  
and offer us the way back to you.



We thank you for this space apart,  
not just on this Sunday morning  
but in the weeks that are to come -  
space to become more receptive  
to the incredible promise of new life:  
life to challenge all that is deathly in our world,  
life to challenge all that is dull in our hearts.  
Help us to use this time,  
not just in prayer at worship,  
but in the thoughtfulness  
in which we go about these coming days,  
listening for your voice in all we do,  
as you challenge the habits that restrict us  
and the assumptions that close our minds.  
Help us also to be aware of others  
who at this time are examining themselves,  
whether from religious duty  
or because they have reached a turning point,  
in a career, or in a relationship, or in a crisis.  
Give us an ear that listens  
that we may find the words to sustain  
and the openness to learn  
through Jesus Christ,  
our deliverance and our hope. Amen.



## Musical Suggestions

CH4 162	'The God of Abraham praise'
CH4 214	'New every morning' esp v.3 'room to deny ourselves'
CH4 402	'Take up your cross'
CH4 533	'Will you come and follow me?'
CH4 534	'Make me a captive, Lord'
CH4 555	'Amazing grace!'
CH3 664	'O for a faith that will not shrink'
CH3 411	'My hope is built on nothing less'
Mission Praise 568	'My hope is built on nothing less'
Mission Praise 760	'When we walk with the Lord', chorus 'Trust and obey'

Lenten hymns may also be used



## 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.

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*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.*

