

# starters for Sunday

## *Third Sunday after Epiphany*

*24 January 2016*

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Bruce Gardner, retired Minister formerly of Aberdeen: Bridge of Don Oldmachar, for his thoughts on the third Sunday after Epiphany.

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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](#)

## Notes and Sermon Suggestions for Bible Passages

The passages are as follows:

- A:** Psalm 19 – **The Psalmist: Law and God’s Mercy**
- B:** Luke 4: 14-21 [Note: Add v 22-30] – **Jesus in Nazareth**
- C:** Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10 – **Community, Law and Identity**
- D:** 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a – **The Community of Christ**

The notes are written like exegetical, expository sermons, in sections. Each can be adapted as a sermon with sections selected or omitted as desired. Material from across A, B, C and D can be coalesced and/or sections be consulted at for exegesis and expository comment. There are also anecdotal illustrations, which may be useful in this or any other context.

### [Psalm 19](#)

#### **The Psalmist: Law and God’s Mercy**

##### **Introduction: The Tricky Problem of Law.**

One of the problems in discussing *Law* in English is what the word means to us. It often creates the idea of impersonal regulations, imposed on unwilling (and unable) subjects. It conjures up ideas like “technicality”, “loophole” and other doubtful concepts. Also, because we may have read about Pharisees, many of whom used their own kind of Law as a weapon to resist Jesus, we may have only a negative idea of what the Biblical Law originally was.

In the Hebrew language, the word Law is more dynamic, with a sense of active guidance, whether from Moses or - more appropriately, in the Old Testament age - from God Himself.



The Hebrew word for law is Torah. It can mean law generally, or specifically laws in the Old Testament (eg “The Book of the Law” [Torah] in [Nehemiah 8: 1](#)). It often means the first 5 books, Genesis to Deuteronomy, which feature Moses and are thus the “Laws of Moses.”

However, Torah does not mean Law as mere regulations. It derives from a word *arah* meaning to aim an arrow, to direct oneself towards a target. It suggests: holy guidance.

To the Jews, Torah is consciously walking in obedience for God and aiming at that target consciously, every moment of every day. The Hebrew word for living in obedience through Law is *halakhah*, which comes from the verb *halak*, to walk. Walking with God is the aim.

It recalls the story of Enoch in Genesis, chapter 5.

“Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away.” (Genesis 5: 24)

Enoch lived 365 years, which some commentators believe is a reference to the 365 days of the year. Enoch walked with God, fulfilling obedience every day, and finished his journey, just as a year finishes and fulfils its purpose. It is a satisfying way to illustrate obedience.

### Illustration

A child wrote in a Sunday School essay: ‘Every day, Enoch and God went for a walk together. Then one day, God said to Enoch, “We’ve walked so far today, you might as well come home with me.” So he did.’

The story of Enoch is an encouragement in *halakhah*, daily walking with God. For Christians, the story of Enoch is a prophecy of Jesus Christ, the one who fulfilled His walk of obedience every day, to fulfil His divine purpose, to become, in Himself, the one who announced, at Nazareth, the acceptable year of the Lord.

For Jews and Christians alike, the walk of faith involves obedience. The problem, as the Old Testament implies and New Testament states, is that perfect obedience is impossible for us.

Why? Because we sin. This word sin, in Hebrew, is related to the idea we met in Torah, which you remember came from a verb meaning to aim an arrow at a target.

The Hebrew word for sin, *Chattah* (ch is said as in loch) means to miss! It means to miss the target, and therefore to fail to walk obediently in fellowship with God.



Law (Torah) is personal direction from God that we are to follow like an arrow flying to its target. Sin (Chattah) is when we turn away from God's direction and miss His perfect will.

Result: It changes the meaning of Law. It was not like English or Scots or Roman Law: just rules to follow. Law was personal guidance from God, part of a Jew's relationship with Him. Law was not a series of hoops one could jump through to commend oneself, ticking them off like scores. It implied a moral reality flowing from God's being, a revelation of God's holiness, which checks our state of obedience and urges us onward to more holiness.

We see the nature of Law in Psalms 19 and 119. The long Psalm 119 is twenty-two psalms built on the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet: it is a shining tapestry of thoughts about the Law from the viewpoint of a devout, young man. Psalm 119 reminds us that Torah was a mystery Biblical writers reflected on. We will return to this point. Let us focus on Psalm 19.

### **1: God's Torah (Guidance) is integral to His Creation.**

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.” (Psalm 19: 1-4a)

This kind of thinking inspired John and Paul to see Christ as a living embodiment of Torah, the original fount of the Wisdom from God's heart. Judaism and Christianity see a similar truth here, even though it is expressed in different ways. The rabbis saw Torah as existing before Creation, revealed in this created world in Wisdom (Proverbs 8: 22-31) and in the written Torah; so John celebrated Christ's coming to the world in Genesis' opening words:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1: 1-5)

John saw that God's Son is the source of the written Word. Christ embodies Wisdom for He is before all things, in the bosom of the Father. He is the expression of God's Holy Wisdom.



Paul, too, saw Christ as divinely-appointed Creator, the revelation of God. He writes this to the Church of the Colossians in words that have resonated all down the centuries:

*“The Son (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*

*And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” (Colossians 1: 15-20)*

Jews think of Torah as God’s self-expression. We know Jesus, Son of God and trust Him. Jesus in Creation is celebrated in a well-loved, Christian song, MP 367 “Jesus is Lord.”

Jesus is Lord! Creation’s voice proclaims it!  
 For by His power each tree and flower was planned and made  
 Jesus is Lord! The universe declares it;  
 sun, moon and stars in heaven cry ‘Jesus is Lord!’  
 (D Mansell 1987)

Mansell is deliberately using Psalm 19’s opening words, about the voice of God in Creation and identifying it with Christ. For Mansell, and all who believe, God’s voice is not a silent, hidden Wisdom revealed in a plethora of little rules for living: the voice of God in His own Creation is revealed in Jesus Christ, through whom all things were created. Jesus is Pre-existent Torah, the fulfilment and the embodiment of the entire Word of God from first to last or, as He expresses it in Revelation 1: 8, the Alpha and Omega. These are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, comprehending all that can be said on God and Creation, for all statements flow from the same group of letters. It reminds us of the twenty-letters of the Hebrew Alphabet, Aleph to Tau, which underlies Psalm 119. There, too, from the first to the last alphabetic letters, is



described a living relationship with God, celebrating God's Wisdom in His Torah, His Word, which points us forward to Christ (1 Corinthians 1: 30).

## 2: God's Torah reveals Christ in the Creation.

“In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun. It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is deprived of its warmth.”  
(Psalm 19: 4b-6)

As God is portrayed as Israel's husband in the Old Testament books of Isaiah and Hosea, so Jesus Christ is described as Bridegroom of the Church in John 3: 29; even His marriage supper (wedding reception) is referred to in Revelation 19: 7, 9. He is also prophesied as rising as the sun (s.u.n.) of righteousness in Malachi 4: 2. Both ideas occur in embryo in Psalm 19. In its context it is a poetic description of the sun, but it inspires us about Jesus.

God's Wisdom ordains the sun to enlighten; so does Jesus, Light of the World. John says:

“The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.” (John 1: 9)

This is not sun worship, because Jesus is not the sun, nor vice-versa, but all in God's world flows from Christ and thus returns with praise, to worship at Christ's throne. As in Joseph's dream in Genesis 37: 9, sun, moon and stars, created through Christ (Genesis 1: 14-19) return to bow before Him by whom all things were made. Also, the warmth of the sun, life-giving and warming, is given to the whole world, showing the generous self-giving of God.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” (John 3: 6-17)

It reflects the character of its Creator, who offers spiritual light to a darkened world:

“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever



lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.” (John 3: 19-21)

As we know from the New Testament, God’s self-giving extended to suffering and dying on the Cross for us, with the sun darkened at noon, when its warmth was usually at its height.

The Psalmist, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, was not able to understand all he wrote. Today, by the Creator Spirit, his words speak to us of Jesus’ Divine Mission.

### **3. It is a dynamic experience to study God’s written Torah, His Holy Word:**

Not only in Nature do we see God’s wise Torah at work, teaching us, but in its written form in the Bible. The Old Testament writer rejoices in this personal, life-giving power of Torah.

“The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.” (v 8)

Regulations are only complied with but God’s living guidance refreshes the soul with joy and light. To this, the Psalmist brings reverence, even wise fear, knowing who he is dealing with. Yet this sweetness, of God’s grace in the Torah, soothes his fears with love.

“The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The verdicts of the LORD are true, and all of them are righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb. By them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.” (v 9-11)

It is reminiscent of mystics in Christianity and Judaism: the Psalmist is not just admiring regulations or commenting favourably; he is in love with the One who gave them. The pure holiness he senses does not repel him but makes him yearn to be worthier of it and similarly pure. This desire is reflected in the metaphor of gold purified, whose dross is removed by holy fire. It is a quest that rewards him with a sweet soul-sense of beauty, like pure honey.



Christians know this too, as in Caswall's hymn based on a hymn of Bernard of Clairvaux:

Jesus, the very thought of Thee  
 With sweetness fills the breast;  
 But sweeter far Thy face to see,  
 And in Thy presence rest.  
 (Edward Caswall, 1949)

It is impossible to hear these words and not be drawn back to the Psalmist's joy in Psalm 19.

Yet the Psalmist's encounter with Torah is not all going to seem good news. There is bad news preceding good news, but a bad news revealed by God to drive us towards the good.

#### **4. It is a convicting experience to meet with the spiritual power of Torah:**

At v 12, a strange thing happens, linking the Psalmist directly with the New Testament. He says, with joy, that keeping God's decrees brings great reward, but he perceives a problem: he cannot keep the laws perfectly, nor see all his sins. He wants to hit the target but although he well knows he misses it, he does not always know when he misses it.

“But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from wilful sins; may they not rule over me. Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression.” (v 12-13)

The Law, for all its glory and beauty, is beyond his power to follow in perfection. He sees that he will always be wholly dependent on God to preserve him, to save him from himself.

He is humbly aware that, no matter how skilful, an archer can miss the target. He hopes the Lord will make him blameless of wilful, besetting sins (v 13). But while the Hebrew word for blameless can mean perfect, it also means complete, feeling secure. We gain a sense of the difference between this and real perfection in Paul's legalistic righteousness:

“... circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.”



Paul found the difference between a standard of legal obedience and God's Perfection. The Psalmist asked to be innocent of great transgression (v 13), but like Job, he knew it did not mean all transgression. He saw when he deliberately missed the target but did not always know when and why he failed, a problem Paul tackles in Romans 7. The realisation could drive us to despair, but for the fact that knowing our inability to be perfect is itself a gift of the God of Love. In reverent fear, but also trust, we look to God alone, which is why the Psalmist ends with a prayer and a plea for God to accept him. (cf. Romans 8: 28-39).

“May the words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.” (v14)

In that last word, Redeemer, the writer is implicitly puts his faith in God's act of salvation: what the Psalmist cannot do for himself, despite his loving respect for the Law, God can do.

The great advance from the Old Testament to the New Testament arrives when this penny finally drops, that we can never obey God enough: we must trust Christ to fulfil the Law on our behalf. We all fail daily but this is why Jesus came: to live a perfect life for us and die a sacrificial death for us, to free us from God's holy judgment on our failure to hit the target.

Before Jesus, as we see from Psalm 19, the Law was prompting Jews that they would need God's salvation. As long as they thought that keeping the Law was a realistic, alternative salvation, they would never get to the point of seeing their need of an act of merciful grace, implied in the last verse of Psalm 19, where he throws himself on God's care and mercy.

This is not an irrelevant issue, even today. Some legalistic strains of Christianity still exist. That great Biblical treatise on legalism, Galatians, still needs to be preached through.

“Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.” (Galatians 3: 23-26)

The King James Version says the Law was: “...our schoolmaster to lead us to Christ.” We see God's holiness and our own un-holiness: places of shadow are revealed in us by the pure light of God's Law. The Psalmist saw it in the light of what he called Torah. For us, it is the Light of



Christ. We must regret our sins (despite our failed efforts to be good); but then - instead of despairing - we must believe in Who Jesus is, and receive His saving work for us.

This is the Great Plan A, God's plan designed for us before the world was made (Ephesians 1: 3). The temporary Plan B, the Law, was finally unworkable, for we cannot be perfect. This point is emphasised in the Letter to the Hebrews, contrasting Temple law and Christ:

“Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this Priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.”  
(Hebrews 10: 11-14)

### Illustration

Alec was a forty-year old precision engineer in the 1960's, who was deputy head of a department of technicians. He heard his senior order an apprentice to make a brass ring of a precise size. Alec's boss often demanded impossible tasks from apprentices, to humiliate them. Anyway, the young apprentice stayed after hours and did his best, but the ring could not be well made. Back home, Alec could not settle. At eight o'clock in the evening, he put on his jacket and went back to the workshop where he crafted a perfect ring, and substituted it for the apprentice's one. He put the imperfect one in his pocket. So, the apprentice was saved. The boss was astonished, but Alec's good deed was never found out.

Jesus knew that even our best efforts as sinners would never be good enough. He, a Master Carpenter, came to earth and crafted a perfect human life, submitting himself to death on a cross of wood as a perfect sacrifice: to save, from their sins, all who believe in Him. If we understand the Psalmist, our best is not good enough. But God's best is, in Jesus Christ.

This is the Great Substitution. He, through whom the world had its Creation, embraced our destruction. He, the Word, the Torah of God's Wisdom, submitted Himself to the folly and cruelty of sinners like ourselves; He, Light of the World, bowed His head under a darkness



covering the sun, fighting selfishness with self-giving. After descended into darkness, Jesus rose in righteousness, with healing in His wings: He fulfilled the Law, to win our Freedom.

### [Luke 4: 14-21](#)

**[Note: Add v 22-30] – Jesus in Nazareth**

#### **Introduction**

When a community is gripped by legalistic attitudes, rules can blind its people to the original principle and purpose of the rule:

#### **Illustration**

An old, widowed Minister had a pet cat, which followed him everywhere. Unfortunately, the cat would wander in during services and jump on the Communion Table. This did not impress the Elders. So, each Sunday morning, the Minister tied the cat to his chair in the vestry, and only released it after the service. Eventually, the old Minister died. His successor, a kind man, adopted the cat and continued, in time-honoured fashion, to tie it to the chair in the vestry. Finally, the cat died. The Kirk Session met and decided to buy a new cat - because everybody knew that a cat was always tied up in the vestry on Sundays.

Plainly, this is a humorous example, but it shows how an original principle can be lost.

Scotland's religion became legalistic, where rules lost the principle of love. A desire to create a day of peaceful worship led to treating Sunday like a Jewish Sabbath. In a strict approach, the principles of the love of God and neighbour could be lost in accusations.

#### **Illustration**

In a rural parish in Aberdeenshire, a woman, returning from church, took up a broom absent-mindedly to sweep wisps of straw from her path. She was denounced by a neighbour. [NB: This is not fictional: it is in the records of an actual Parish Church.]

In Scottish Reformed national life, Law could be a cause of misunderstanding and misery, oppression, deception and betrayal. It was the age of the cutty stool, neighbour informing on neighbour and people judging others (Matthew 7: 1), not always from a secure, personal basis. Such a discrepancy is caustically parodied in Robert Burn's "Holy Willie's Prayer."



O Lord, Thou kens what zeal I bear,  
 When drinkers drink, an' swearers swear,  
 An' singing here, an' dancin there,  
 Wi' great and sma';  
 For I am keepit by Thy fear  
 Free frae them a'.

The irony is that Willie, frustrated by failure to indict a godly Elder for crimes such as not reading the Bible on Sunday, is said to have drowned in a ditch he drunkenly fell into. As Jesus said, "Judge not, let ye be judged." (Matthew 7: 1) Mercy is the heart of the Law, to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbours as ourselves. It is so easy to concentrate on detail and lose the principle of love. A proper appreciation of the Holiness of God is wise, but at the last, His Holiness should lead us to His Love. And without love, as Paul taught the Corinthians we are nothing. We must fix our eyes on Love.

## **Luke 4: 14-21**

### **1. Jesus' Reputation and Arrival: V 14**

It was potentially tragic that Jews in Nazareth suffered from an error that characterises religious people even today. They loved the Law, the Torah, but they mistook it for laws, for regulations which might confer righteousness on them: they assumed that they were good at them! Blatant sinners, Jesus taught, often understand their failures and their sins against the Holy God more quickly and comprehensively than so-called religious experts.

We recall Jesus' story of a Pharisee and an outcast sinner, which contrasted their attitudes:

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (Luke 18: 10-14)



Religious Jews had added a plethora of purification and other laws to the Bible's own. It was an attempt to get close to real Torah, but it ticked boxes of rules to build up Brownie points. It increased a sense of isolation and election and united them against enemies, but it did not help them draw them closer to God, nor foresee the final fulfilment of the Torah.

The Jews of Nazareth were country cousins of those in Jerusalem: they lived outside Judea and travelled to Jerusalem at special festival times, which we know from the Bible story of Christ in the temple. Despite travelling south frequently, many took care to avoid Samaria, which lay between them and Jerusalem. Many would go west, cross the Jordan and travel south to Jericho before coming back over to head up to Jerusalem. (It is like a Glaswegian going to Aberdeen via Inverness to avoid Dundee). Incidentally, this historical detour made the story of the Good Samaritan on the Jericho Road even more ironic, since the traveller may have gone that route to avoid meeting Samaritans! The point here is that, like all who feel half-accepted by an elite, Nazarenes worked hard at Jewish rules, in order to prove that they were good enough. Sadly, like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable, they failed to see what we all have to understand, that God's Law is not something we can get under our belt: the dogged following of rules as ends in themselves blinds us to what is important: Love. Many Mosaic laws were to do with social justice, preserving family life and kindness to strangers.

The odd aspect of legalism is that while professing to be about love for God, it can miss real love. People professing to be holy often fail to understand the sheer challenge of God's love.

### **Illustration**

Did you ever step off the street into a clothes shop, and stand amongst the dummies who were dressed in elegant new outfits and fashions? At first, it was exciting, a world of possibility. Then you caught sight of yourself in a mirror. Before you came in, you felt well-dressed, satisfied with your appearance. Now, suddenly, you realise that you are shabby, compared to the elegant models around you. If we compare ourselves to God's Son, we become suddenly ashamed that we thought so well of ourselves. We see reality far better when we stop comparing ourselves to others and, instead, compare ourselves to Jesus.



The Law was the first revelation given to face Jews with God's holiness, to convict the soul and conscience that, ironically, they needed something greater than even God's Law. When God's Son came, he became the final expression, to us, of God's Holiness, Love and Grace.

That grace came to the people of Nazareth. They had the chance to show they understood that the Torah they had been following was a pointer to the real God, their Immanuel, but they never got that far. They stumbled on the historic intention of God to love humankind.

“Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.” (Luke 4: 14-15)

Jesus went to Nazareth on a high note. He had just defeated the Enemy in the desert (Luke 4: 1-13) and was engaged in effective ministry in the power of the Spirit (v 14). Jesus' fame had spread. He was the local boy who had “done good.” It was a reason why they should be pleased to see Him. To an extent they were, as long as He did not contradict their previous assumptions about Him as a decent but low-profile carpenter. He disappointed them when He showed them the wisdom from God which exposed their ignorance of God's wide mercy.

As Faber's famous hymn tells us:

There's a wideness in God's mercy  
like the wideness of the sea;  
there's a kindness in his justice,  
which is more than liberty...

... For the love of God is broader  
than the measure of man's mind;  
and the heart of the Eternal  
is most wonderfully kind.

(F W Faber, 1862)



It was not, as some think, their outrage at any claims of Jesus concerning Himself that led to the shameful anger of the men of Nazareth: that issue does not really arise. It was their narrow, embattled view of the world, an implicit denial of God's plan for the Gentiles, which could not stand the challenge of God's Love. It brought their worst instincts to the surface.

Faithful believers, adapting Cromwell's words, must always consider the possibility that we may be mistaken. We may conclude, after reflection and prayer, that we are not mistaken on an issue. However, reacting with anger and fear is no sure sign of knowing God's will.

## 2. Jesus in the Synagogue (Luke 4: 15-20)

This story, of Jesus teaching in the synagogue, teaches us that, if religious people who value certainty are challenged, fear often excludes tolerance, because religious certainty, where it is not strong in love, teeters on the edge of rage. In fear, people do not behave at their best.

“He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.” Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.” (v 15-20)

It was the right of an adult Jew to read and comment on the Holy Scriptures. And Jesus was a regular attender at his local synagogue, as we read in verse 15. Because the Sabbath Law forbade work, which was interpreted strictly, there were no short services followed by freely-indulged leisure activities. The whole day could be spent in discussion and debate. As long as there were ten men to make a quorum (a minyan), synagogue meetings lasted for hours. There might be several readings and commentaries, followed by debates. So, what Jesus started to do was not unusual. From the description, we see that “He stood up to read” (v 16) from the scroll, which is how the Scriptures are presented in synagogues, even in today's age of bound books,



for Torah scrolls are sacred. It was customary, after reading, to sit down (v 20) and men would angle themselves to listen to a speaker, which explains why all eyes were fastened on him. However, the fact that Luke takes pains to mention this, seems to indicate an unusual level of interest in a - now notable - preacher.

To go a little further, Luke 4: 22, not included in our passage, tells of listeners amazed at His “gracious words.” The power of God in the human heart changes a speaker, giving him authority. Peter, afraid even of a servant girl at Jesus’ trial, was empowered to stand before the unbelieving world, after the Spirit came on him at Pentecost, and speak boldly. If one is touched by God’s Spirit, it is obvious to others. Jesus had that clear mark of peace on Him.

However, in Matthew 13: 54-58, we are told some Nazarenes took offence at Jesus: they were jealous of His strange, new wisdom, contrasting it with prior knowledge of His family - not in terms of accusation, but because His family were ordinary villagers. Taken together with Luke’s description, it suggests there existed submerged, mixed feelings about Jesus.

Jesus was handed the Isaiah scroll, which may have been the set portion, providentially, for that time. The word in v 17 for “opened” (KJV) or “unrolling” (NIV) only occurs once in the Bible and is intensive. To some, it says that Jesus chose it Himself. This is not clear. What is clear is that the passage is a significant one about a prophetic deliverance of God’s people.

Many preachers focus on the beneficiaries mentioned in Isaiah’s prophecy, which can make a sermon in themselves, interpreting for today the “good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind and freedom for the oppressed.” (v 18) Literally and metaphorically, there is much, pastorally, to encourage struggling believers: a casual entry in a search engine will throw up link to examples of sermons along these lines.

[Optional Note: Language. Those of a scholarly disposition may want to compare Isaiah 61’s opening verses with Jesus’s words in Luke 4:18-19. Some argue that Jesus reads from a Greek Translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX), which had arisen because many Jews lived far from Judea. Others may argue that Jesus reads from another Hebrew version or applies an Aramaic commentary. This can be a fruitless diversion for preachers.



We know that Jesus spoke Aramaic (Mark 5: 41; 7: 34; 15: 34) but He lived in Galilee of the Gentiles (Isaiah 9: 1), a mixed area. He was found by Greek-speaking Tyre and Sidon: Mark 7: 24-30. He talked to a Roman centurion and Pilate (Mark 8: 5-13; 15: 1-5), whose lingua franca was Greek, although the religious context of both discussions, especially as the centurion was an admirer of Judaism renders the issue less clear. On balance, it is likely that Jesus spoke Greek (a possibility ignored in Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*.) Greek, which was spread across the world by Alexander the Great, was to provide a vehicle for the future New Testament. On the other hand, Jesus belonged to a conservative Jewish community which revered Hebrew scrolls. Hebrew was spoken: John the Baptist, Jesus' relative, uses a common Hebrew pun in Matthew 3: 9: "God is able from these abanim (stones) to raise up banim (sons) to Abraham." (cf. Josephus, *War* 5: 269-272) Matthew and Luke refer to the Law and the Prophets (eg, Matthew 7: 12), two of the divisions of the Hebrew Bible into Law, Prophets and Writings, an acronym of which, Tanakh, Jews use today to describe The Old Testament. Thus, Jesus was probably bi-or even tri-lingual in a time of varied cultures, out of necessity. However, the evidence is not conclusive and contradictory data may create sterile arguments and lead to partisanship, uncondusive to peaceful understanding. A careful preacher may still wish to touch on it.]

Nevertheless, note that Jesus does not go into any detail in Isaiah 61. After reading it, He simply claims that it has been fulfilled, which (however it may have intrigued His hearers) did not, in itself, cause a negative reaction, as the 1976 film, *Jesus of Nazareth* portrayed it.

However, there is one notable omission and one notable addition. First the omission: He does not quote all of the prophecy. He mentions the acceptable year of the Lord (or year of God's favour), but He omits the words: "...and the day of vengeance of our God." He has not come to punish sinners, but proclaim their Salvation. This point is made elsewhere:

"I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world." (John 12: 47)

The addition is that, in reading Isaiah 61: 1-2, He seems to insert a phrase from Isaiah 58: 6 on setting captives free. If so, it is a phrase that was part of a divine rebuke in Isaiah 58:



“Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?” (Isaiah 58: 5-6)

Whether the phrase to set the oppressed free is from memory or a marginal commentary, it adds a note of warning about a religion that has missed the mark and lost its core principle. This proves sadly prophetic, in the light of the reaction to Jesus in the following discussion.

The omission and addition show us that, while He had not come to ignore sin, neither had He come to bring immediate judgment. Supremely, He has come to bring a reign of love, of grace towards sinners that invites all to leave an addiction to rules and to see, once more, the core principle of Love in the heart of God, the love that the Law was meant to reveal.

### 3. The Reaction to Jesus:

People may seek the truth, but what happens when Truth arrives in Person (John 14: 6)? Do they see it? Jesus' homecoming suggests that they do not. It was not His words on the Scripture which offended, nor even the intrusion (if that is what it is) of words from Isaiah 58: 6 concerning a religion that was full of busyness but lacked God's true heart. In fact, Jesus is well-received at first, and the undercurrent of suspicion falters at His grace.

“All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. ‘Isn't this Joseph's son?’ they asked.” (Luke 4: 22)

Jesus knew men's hearts, by the aid of the Holy Spirit (Luke 11: 17). He perceived all the resentful curiosity behind the positive comments, the tensions that were ready to explode. But He does not hold back. Having impressed them with His reading, He challenges them:

“Jesus said to them, ‘Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself!’ And you will tell me, ‘Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’” (v 23)



He begins to speak in a challenging way, telling this isolated, aspiring Jewish community, that the Love of God's is wider than the measure of their minds. God is not keeping His love solely for Jews following their laws, many of which are not His. The Gentiles, by whom Nazareth is surrounded, are not only going to be blessed by the LORD but they were blessed by Him in the past. Jesus startles them with bold examples from their own Scriptures:

“Truly I tell you,’ he continued, ‘no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed - only Naaman the Syrian.’ All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this.” (Luke 4: 24-28)

Jesus is showing a closed community of law that God was preparing an open community of Love. Love lived at the heart of the Law, but the Jews had failed to understand their Bible.

God said through Isaiah: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." (Isaiah 49: 6)

Nazareth, bound by laws, disturbed by fears, rejected the message, and so God Himself:

As John was later to write: “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. (John 1: 10-11)

The One who created us, who came in love, was despised and rejected by men (Isaiah 53: 3), but some did look at Him, saw God Incarnate in the midst and received new Life. So with believers today: we look at Christ and see a man who is God come to save us in love:



“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1: 14)

The people of Nazareth, Jesus’ neighbours, now saw Him as a traitor and, with the ferocity of legalists whose assumptions are unbearably challenged, they sentenced Him to death.

“They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.” (Luke 4: 29-30)

There is a hidden irony here, which explains the story. Why did they not fulfil their threat to throw Jesus off the cliff? It was because it was a Sabbath day. One of the laws rabbis had derived from a reading of Joshua 3: 4 in order to restrict activity of the Sabbath day, was to state that no-one could walk more than 2000 cubits (about 1,000 yards) from their home. Bound by this law of the Sabbath Day’s Walk (cf. Acts 1: 12), they walked towards the cliff but they ran out of distance! Jesus, in the freedom of God’s Spirit, walked back.

God thus revealed their bondage to laws, the oppression from which Isaiah 61 promised to free them. It was an ironic lesson for an embattled group of fearful legalists: the world had to get ready for God’s true freedom in Christ, which was not only for Jews but also Gentiles.

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Why did I say that Nazareth’s failure to receive Jesus was potentially tragic, not actually tragic? Because Nazareth was forgiven for its unbelief. Other places, such as Capernaum, Korazin and Bethsaida, were condemned for rejecting Christ (Matthew 11: 20-24). Today, they are ruins, but Nazareth stands. Why? Because God is fair. Those places did not know Jesus and saw many miracles but, still, they rejected Him. The men of Nazareth had known Jesus as a boy: it was harder for them to believe. Even their punishment, a lack of miracles because of unbelief (Matthew 13: 58) was merciful, because they escaped rejecting God’s clear evidence. They acted in ignorance, not blasphemy, and a merciful God forgave them.



Even the great Apostle, Paul, had good cause to be grateful for God's mercy to sinners:

“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.”  
(1 Timothy 1: 12-17)

From first to last the rejection at Nazareth shows God's Law fulfilled in Christ's Love. It shows the immense mercy of our God, willing to forgive wayward sinners, like you and me.

### [Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10](#)

#### **Community, Law and Identity**

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one history, separated into two parts later, but, put together again, they describe the Return, over a period of a hundred and fifty years. To understand this Return, we have to understand what they were returning from, and why. The Jews had been taken into Exile in two stages, the northern kingdom ca. 721 BC and the southern kingdom and Jerusalem ca. 586 BC. Despite the Prophet Jeremiah's authoritative pleas for faithfulness to the Lord, the last kings of Judah did not heed him. So, Jews were taken into Exile to Babylon, where they stayed for about fifty years, until 539 BC. They did not count it as a Return, however until the Temple functioned (516 BC); hence the Exile is usually described as seventy years. This gives us a notional fulfilment of Jeremiah 25: 11.

During the Exile, the Jews were captives in Babylon, whose ruins now lie 30 miles from Baghdad, in modern Iraq. Jews were a displaced people: their culture was threatened and, with it, their very existence. As a result of this displacement, the Law started to be an even more important



means of togetherness. They had failed their God and not kept the Laws of Moses; now was a time for reflection and trying to fix their disobedience, working out how to counter-act the slackness that had lost them their Land. The way they did it was to begin a process of forensically examining exactly how to keep Moses' laws by developing a range of new laws to support the Torah, to make it more difficult to break laws by making a lot of new, stricter ones around them. Many of the laws that were developed were codified later in The Talmud, Jewish writings that taught extra laws needed to define exactly how to obey the Law of Moses. Later, this process was called "building a fence around the Torah."

Positively, some thought this meant the Torah was like a garden and extra laws were like a fence protecting it. Because a fence was useless with gaps, however, they tried to plug every gap, every loophole, with new, detailed laws. To other teachers, including Jesus, this fence of laws was a barrier to understanding not only Mosaic Law, but the faith that preceded it. However, a tradition of Torah was useful in Exile: it distinguished Jews from pagans, which was part of its original purpose. And Jews no longer had a king or army: they were now a religious group in the Babylonian Empire. Torah, even with a fence around it, was like an Ark of the Covenant. To keep the Law was a matter of identity and belonging, as vital as blood relationship. (NB: Verses 4 and 7 are omitted in the set reading but family mattered in Jewish community.) Many exiles longed to return to Jerusalem, as we read in Psalm 137.

"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land? If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy." (Psalm 137: 1-6)

Yet the city had been destroyed in the war which preceded the Exile. There was another problem: the Babylonians meant to crush their culture. (We recall in the Book of Daniel how the hero stood up to pressures to abandon Jewish food laws and the sole worship of God.) Eventually, God worked a miracle: Babylon was defeated by Persia. The Persian culture was



different, where the Babylonians tried to crush subject peoples and erase their identities, the Persians were pluralistic, allowing subject peoples to express themselves.

In 539 BC, the Persian King, Cyrus issued a decree that has inspired the Jews ever since:

"This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up, and may the LORD their God be with them.' (2 Chronicles 36: 23)

It seemed to the Jews, now free to go home, that the God of Israel was the Lord of History.

The saga of the Return and successive attempts under Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem's walls, homes, Temple and community of faith – while surrounded by enemies who plotted against them - is a heroic one. It may help us to be more sympathetic to the legal emphases of Ezra and Nehemiah, if we know that it was a fight for survival to ensure that Israel returned to its homeland. If its understanding of God's grace was flawed, it had to return, so that there would be a Jewish community in Israel for Jesus Christ, the Son of God to be born into, even though He would come to tell them the core Law of Love.

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The passage shows two great Bible characters: Ezra the Law-Giver, a Second Moses to the Jew, and Nehemiah the Tirshatha, or Governor, a Jewish official of the Persian King. They devoted themselves to fulfil the Return, not just to the city but to the Law. The passage here is a description of how the Law was not only read, but taught, to the people at the beginning of the seventh month. Like Joshua, the Son of Nun, friend and companion of Moses, who entered the Land, feasting from its produce at the Spring Festival, Passover, so would the Jews now at the Autumn Harvest Festival, called the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths (v 17).

Tabernacles was to be celebrated that seventh month in the way Joshua, Son of Nun did. It was a triumph for Jews, but there was no time for celebration while the Law was untaught.



### 1. They taught a united people:

Before the feast, they had to get right with God, to prepare themselves for sacred worship. They moved to an open area to the south-east of the Temple area, and not only compliantly: the people asked Ezra to take out the Law of Moses to teach them. This was at the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah) a New Moon Festival of special solemnity. So, their morale was high and their gratitude to God was deep, because their walls had been rebuilt by faith (Nehemiah 6: 15) and by united effort, as the opening sentence of Chapter 8 emphasises.

“All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel. And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month.” (Nehemiah 8: 1-2)

Notice, here, that there is no obvious segregation between men and women. Even young children who could understand were included in the teaching. It was a community event.

We learn from this that all-age Bible Study and fellowship events are the norm and, even if we separate infants on grounds of capacity, we should not totally segregate our youngsters, so they feel they are on the back-burner. They are part of the Church, and must know it.

### 2. They taught in a structured way:

There was nothing haphazard about the occasion. Verse 4, omitted in the reading, tells us that “Ezra, the teacher of the Law, stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion.” This took planning and construction. The platform, a forerunner of the pulpit, was not for self-advertisement but to aid communication. To this pulpit was added a team of teachers, six on Ezra’s right and seven on his left: the reading and teaching was to last for six hours, from 6.00 am to noon, and so these others were to relieve Ezra. At the same time, the other omitted verse (7) says that there were 13 Levites among the people, explaining the teaching:

“He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.” (v 3)



It seems likely that they did not listen to readings for six hours, but readings from the Law interspersed with teaching sessions, explaining what they had heard. In other words, it was as well-structured as the organization. This confirms the high level of seriousness brought to it, to which people responded positively, listening attentively to what was taught. It was taken seriously, because understanding the Law of their community was part of belonging.

In the same way, churches which do not have set times of structured teaching and reflection fail to develop the gifts of their members, which are revealed by engagement with the Word.

### **3. They had a high degree of mutual respect and working.**

Verse 7 says that the people were standing as they were taught. If literal, it is a sign of self-discipline. Verse 5 tells us that the people stood up with respect at the opening of the Law, a practice of the early church, seen today in many churches when the Bible comes in.

“Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up.” (v 5)

The event was firmly grounded in the worship of God by everyone there, without exception and there was effective mutual working by Ezra, Nehemiah, Priests, Levites and people:

“Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, ‘Amen! Amen!’ Then they bowed down and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground... They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.” (v 6, 8)

The vertical relationship between the Jews and their God, and their horizontal relationships between each other, worked together. This coordination is often mentioned with respect to the Cross of Christ, where the death of Christ for sin reconciles and heals both dimensions.

“For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now he has



reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation - if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel.”  
(Colossians 1: 19–23a)

We see a people responding to God, and to each other in God, in mutual respect and with seriousness. It recalls a time in our own land when people discussed sermons in fellowship meetings, and on the road to and from Church. The sermon was only part of a network of conscious learning, in which experienced Christians helped in the process of teaching, not allowing doctrine to be lost through inattention or any lack of reflection to fritter it away.

#### **4. Their conviction was not meant to lead to a dead-end of self-blame.**

Mourning can be an appropriate response to regret. Tears of repentance are known in the Scriptures. Peter was crushed with self-disappointment over his denial of Christ:

“Again he denied it. After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, ‘Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.’ He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, ‘I don't know this man you're talking about.’ Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: ‘Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times.’ And he broke down and wept.” (Mark 14: 72)

His tears did not lead to ultimate despair, for Jesus said such mourning would find comfort.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” (Matthew 5: 4)

Repentance may bring tears. Yet that is not a wall of exclusion but a door of invitation:

“A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them...”



“Then Jesus said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ The other guests began to say among themselves, ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’ Jesus said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’” (Luke 7: 37–38, 48–50)

In Nehemiah’s day, some argue, there was a mourning associated with sowing seed, as a kind of sympathetic magic: the weeper inveigles the god, in this case Baal, to send rain according to the measure of the tears. Evidence for this is claimed to be in Psalm 126: 5:

“Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.” (Psalm 126: 5)

This view interprets the weeping of the people in Nehemiah 8 as forced tears to win favour. This is quite incorrect, if we read the details of the response of Ezra and others to the tears:

“Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, ‘This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.’ For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.” (Nehemiah 8: 9)

Some will argue that the mourners listening to Ezra and the others are only reacting as they are expected to, under the influence of local paganism, not as they feel. This could suggest that Nehemiah is rebuking them, re-focusing them on the Word. This is patently mistaken for, first, this is not a time of sowing, but a time of harvest: if tears are to ensure a harvest, it seems rather too late to wait until the harvest to start weeping. Secondly, the people are being judged on their response to the Law of God; so any Baal practices seem out of place. Thirdly, there is no rebuke in Nehemiah 8, only tenderness. The People’s mourning at the teaching of the Law is genuine repentance; the response of their leaders to lead them to joy.

The God of all comfort comes to those who mourn for their sins, because as David found out:

“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.” (Psalm 51: 17)



## 5. They celebrated their togetherness in God:

There was no reactiveness in the leaders: what they told the people to do was as organized and community-minded as the event itself, with a sincere love that was worthy of the Lord.

“Nehemiah said, ‘Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.’ (Nehemiah 8: 10)

They must: a) celebrate in food and sweet drink; b) share with the poor; c) honour the Lord by not grieving but showing joy, strong in heart, knowing that they belonged to God.

### a) To celebrate in food and drink) is an echo of the Elders on the mountain in Exodus 24.

“Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.” (Exodus 24: 9-11)

It is as old as humankind to eat and drink together to show we are at peace with each other. From two families at wedding meals, to the family of God at Communion where we see God in the midst, our eating and drinking is a public demonstration of peace. This is why, when we cannot accept an invitation to eat and drink with someone, we begin with “I’m sorry...” Eating and drinking is a sign of peace and fellowship: to refuse with no word of explanation could indicate that you are not at peace with them. So, here in Nehemiah 8, as is normal in society and in Biblical covenants (cf. Genesis 31: 43-55), God’s People, who had just shown their genuine grief at having failed God in the past, were invited to eat and drink in peace.

A touching detail is that, while in the Spring Festivals (Passover and Unleavened Bread they ate unleavened bread and bitter herbs, a memorial of the bitter captivity in Egypt, here, in the run-up to the Autumn Festival, the Feast of Tabernacles, they are to have choice food and sweet drinks, as a sign of freedom, not only having built the wall and secured their city but having put the Law of their God in the centre of their lives and the core of their hearts.



**b) To share is part of fellowship. God clearly advised Moses to share at the Passover Feast:**

“Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbour, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat.” (Exodus 12: 3-4)

Although it is not always read in its entirety, the advice of Paul to the Corinthians about the Communion meal in 1st Corinthians, chapter 11, warns against lack of sharing, because in their ignorance, those who partook greedily forgot that it was a meal in fellowship:

“So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!” (1 Corinthians 11: 20-22)

Paul goes on to give the advice beginning with, “For I received from the Lord...”, words that many know by heart. But do we always think of the spirit of fellowship in Communion? We may not be doing what the spiritually-uneducated Corinthians did, act with greed, but there are other ways to withhold love. Even a polite formality can be a spirit of denial to others.

**c) Finally, they were to honour the Lord by not grieving but showing joy, being strong in heart, knowing that they belonged to the Lord.**

Nehemiah said, “The joy of the Lord is your strength.” (v 10)

Nehemiah and Ezra and all the people lived in expectation of God's deliverance, but did not see it. They had only the Law to hold onto, which set them apart. Yet even that, in its day, was enough of a promise from God to give them joy to share. How much more wonderful that all that they hoped for (as taught in Hebrews, chapter 11, the saga of a pilgrim people waiting for the promise) was fulfilled long after their time for them, and for all who believe!



Joy is our strength, even in difficult times. Anyone in pastoral ministry knows that many a bedside of a dying Christian is a place of solemn dignity and even joy, suffused by the light of Christ's presence. Many bedsides today are called peaceful if anaesthetics have reduced a person to external silence, but only the Lord knows what they are saying inwardly at that moment - hopefully commending themselves to Him. Yet a Christian bedside, in calamity or illness, dying or not, can be a place of hope, peace and, in a strange way, joy. Christ died on the Cross for the joy that was set before Him and He gives that joy to all who believe.

Beyond mourning lies joy; the Psalmist wrote:

“In his favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.”  
(Psalm 30: 5)

Even Jesus, faced with the ultimate horror of the crucifixion, promised his disciples joy:

“Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.” (John 16: 20-22)

Like the story of Israel, this passage from Nehemiah begins with Law but teaches Love.

And yet Love is a Law too, the greatest, most challenging law of all. The Apostle Paul wrote:

“Let no debt remain outstanding except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.” (Romans 13: 8-10)



Jesus said such love was costly, even sacrificial, the greatest test of our obedience to God.

“Greater love has no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.” (John 15: 13-14)

This Law demands more than keeping regulations. God’s priority is Love. All leadership, all ministry that would change the world and defend the poor and vulnerable will show the sacrifice of Christ. It was foreseen in prophets and apostles. Now we are called to this joy.

## [1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a](#)

### **The Community of Christ**

We are called to see our relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ, especially in the congregation where God has placed us, as part of our faith. We are not isolated entities, rejoicing in our achievements. If we live life solely focused on ourselves, even our faith, we do not really believe. A selfish Christian is like an unbeliever dressed in Christian clothes.

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” (James 2: 14-17)

A Christian Church has to be strong in faith, but also strong in practice or it will belie the Faith. The New Testament book that tells the history of the early Church is called: Acts.

### **Illustration**

A salt cellar is full of crystals. Those crystal are white, sharp, clear-edged, beautiful and admirable. Yet that is not their destiny. When they are shaken out on the meat they disappear, losing their whiteness and sharp edges. They seem lost when they fall into the meat but only then do they fulfil their function. What is that? In the ancient world, salt was not only to flavour food but also, in an age before refrigerators, to preserve it.

By contributing to society and to moral debates, the Christians made the world think and so helped to improve it. Yet it also had to express its faith in love, or its thoughts were in vain.



Too many Christians are afraid to challenge any wrong ideas, even in the Church, lest they lose their clean, white image. A building full of such people is not a church, but a salt cellar.

Jesus said:

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot." (Matthew 5: 13)

We are not the salt of the salt cellar, we are the salt of the earth, of the world around us. If a society goes bad, the salt of the earth is not only to be good in itself, but to work against corruption at all levels, especially by example. The constant fight against falling standards, immorality, blasphemy and selfishness is salt's work, ready to share the word where it can.

Paul wrote:

"Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone." (Colossians 4: 6)

But we are not only to be Christians to outsiders. We work together in our seasoning so that the world sees us, not only working as salt in the world but also with each other, and united in that work. Jesus actually mentions our salt and our unity together in one verse:

"Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other." (Mark 9: 50b)

So, we are to be effective and united: with salt for the world and for ourselves, in peace with each other. This describes an effective congregation: active in mission, truthful and loving.

Paul expresses this way of living in his description of the Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12. Not under Law, but under grace, we are not unified by a religious institution but united by the Spirit of Jesus Christ who is alive, working through us as his hands and feet etc. Paul is not the only person in the ancient world to use this model, but for him, and us, this is not a mere metaphor but a state of being to be realised, in which we work together with God.

A Church that seriously wants to be more than a salt cellar has to take this passage to heart.



## 1. The Body of the Church is the Body of Christ:

“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.” (v 12)

The first sentence makes complete sense and introduces what the passage teaches: the Body of Christ. He is the Head of that Body, as Colossians 1: 18 reminds us, and none other. For this reason, the Church of Scotland does not accept the pastoral authority of the Pope, and, although it respects the Queen, it considers Jesus alone to be the Head of His Church.

The second sentence seems more of a problem:

“For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body - whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” (v 13)

The concept of spirit and drink do not automatically suggest a religious connotation here in Scotland, but it must be understood that Paul is harking back to an earlier comparison. In it, Paul compares the journey of Moses the Lawgiver to the leadership of Christ the Saviour.

“For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.” (1 Corinthians 10: 1-4)

As the rock in Exodus 17 (cf. Numbers 20), by God’s grace, gave water to the Israelites, so Christ, the Second Moses, provides the Spirit, by Divine Grace, to His people. As the water was essential for the Israelites, the Holy Spirit is vital for the Christian Church. The Church must be brought to life and be led and empowered by Christ’s Spirit. The Church is not an institution only, although it exists within various institutional forms: the Church has a living, invisible dynamic and it only exists to the expression of Christ’s work on earth.

Paul explained the Grace of Christ in the Church and its holy purpose to the Ephesians:

“For it is by grace you have been saved through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's



handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2: 8-10)

In its nature and in its functions, the Church must understand that it is no more and no less than Christ’s Body, empowered by Christ’s Spirit of Grace, to seek to know and do His will.

It is so easy for churches to become human institutions dominated by human principles. We are called to remember, and never forget, that we have no mandate for our own ideals and agendas, so we do well to understand the principles of this passage in 1st Corinthians.

## **2. The Body of Christ must be mutually dependent:**

“Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.” (1 Corinthians 12: 14-20)

Paul’s argument is self-evident, once you accept the figure of the Body. Excusing oneself from being part of it is absurd. It could actually seem humorous, deflecting argument, a technique also used by Jesus in dealing with the body as a comparison (Mark 7: 14-23).

However, there is a serious point, here, that everyone in a congregation, indeed within a church, belongs. They cannot pretend otherwise. Moreover, this belonging is no mere accident; neither is it a voluntary arrangement. It is God’s decision that those whom He calls into His Church should fulfil the function in it for which He calls them. It is not only certain officers that are called. Every Christian is called. The Greek word for a church is ekklesia, from which we get the word ecclesiastical. It means the “called-out” – all of us.



## Illustration

An elderly man, Tam, an Elder in a Scottish congregation, saw an influx of new believers in his church, some of whom demonstrated gifts that marked them out for the Ministry someday. Every day, Tam walked his dog and met one of these recent Christians, who also walked his dog on the same farm road. The young man, Brian, missed Tam for a few weeks, as the old Elder had fallen ill with the ‘flu. At Church, the Minister asked Brian to take over Tam’s place at the door, welcoming people on a Sunday. Three weeks passed, until one Saturday morning, Tam and Brian were back on the farm road with the dogs. It turned out that Tam was experiencing ‘flu’s depressive effects and he began to complain.

“People like you, Brian, can get up on a pulpit and preach great things from the Bible. And what can I do? Nothing!”

Brian replied: “Tam, do you know what I’ve been doing the last three Sundays?”

“No, what?”

“Taking your place on the door. And I’ve lost count of the number of people whose faces fell when they saw me, and they asked, ‘Where’s Tam?’ Do you know why? It’s because you have a gift of welcome that I don’t have. And you are the first sermon they get at the door.”

After this, Tam and Brian got on even better, understanding each other’s gift in the Body.

So we are called to be together by God Himself and we all have God-ordained functions, which are found by considering the gifts with which God has already endowed us. This applies to every single Christian in a congregation, no matter how ungifted they may feel.

### 3. The Body of Christ must be mutually respectful:

Paul now turns to the matter of how those in the Church are to relate to each other. He says that they need mutual respect. We have seen that no member, called by God, can opt out; by the same token, no member can exclude another, based on the differences in their gifts.

“The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don't need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don't need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable...” (1 Corinthians 12: 21-22)



The eye for seeing, the hand for manipulation, the head for thinking and the feet for balance and walking are delicate and may seem less robust, but no body wants to do without them. They may seem different but coordination of these widely-differing parts makes us fully-functioning beings. The loss of one of them reduces our quality of life. We need them all. Applied to the Church, it teaches us to appreciate those who correspond to the hands, the people of practical service, and the feet, the missionaries and evangelists who share the Good News, the leadership under the True Head, Jesus Christ, and those who notice things pastorally and see situations developing and advise the leadership. All are needed. It is easy for the practically minded to decide that missionaries and sharers of the Good News are a frippery, and for leadership to be so caught up in decisions that it does not heed advice from the perceptive and sensitive souls in the congregation who notice the real needs in the flock.

Also, a person who sees such needs should recall that it may be a person with hands who is most needed. If a church does not use all the gifts, it can be a maimed and blinded church.

### **Illustration**

Laurence was a middle-aged man who was unemployed. He was partly deaf and had become so isolated that he was untidy, talking to himself for company. People who like normal behaviour avoided him. One day, a relative died and he went to the funeral. He heard that God loved him, even him. He took God at His Word and turned up to a church group, sometimes talking out of turn, argumentative, assertive, and obviously vulnerable. The church closed in around him in love and all the gifts were applied. After some time, Laurence found that by practical helps, fellowship, discussions where he was listened to and things explained gently, he felt less argumentative and more accepted. His neighbours were surprised at how his behaviour had settled down. He was not only accepted by the Church but he began to do the work he felt called to do. Laurence had become part of the Body.

In trying to make the same point about not looking down on the vulnerable, but helping them, Paul uses a humorous but effective image of how we dress, again using the Body.

“...and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our



presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it..." (1 Corinthians 12: 23-24)

Put simply, the reason why our private parts are private is because we put on underwear designed to support them. Paul brilliantly points out that it is the unpresentable parts of our own bodies which are given special treatment. The Church must go the same way: "God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it." (v 24)

The Lord challenges us to use our gifts to help those who do not fit our idea of success. God does not call the gifted; He gifts the called. And some of us start from a longer way back. It is the principle Jesus taught when someone asked why He consorted with sinners. He said:

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mark 2: 17)

Since that describes all of us, we have no warrant to look down on others. Rather, we must help them. It has become the defining characteristic of a civilized society, to help the aged and disabled and those with learning difficulties. Helping them teaches us what it is to love.

So we must learn to be respectful of others. If we are all in the same lifeboat, those still in the sea need rescuing and those rescued do not despise those who are where they were.

#### **4. The Body of Christ must be mutually sympathetic:**

Paul follows on from this with an even deeper unity, the empathy of being one Body.

"...so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it." (1 Corinthians 12: 25-26)

This is a profound instinct which modern living, with its stress on selfish individualism, has tried to take from us. It is the heart of Christ, who wept over Jerusalem, not rejoicing in its destruction by the Romans, forty years later in 70AD, but, foreseeing it, still grieved for it. He was only days away from His Crucifixion, but His was a heart free of all selfishness.



Paul taught the Roman Church to identify with and participate in others' joys and sorrows:

“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” (Romans 12: 15)

And to the law-obsessed Galatians, Paul recommended a greater commandment:

“Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ. If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves.”  
(Galatians 6: 2-3)

When the compassion of Christ overcomes Self, the soul finds the greatest victory in life.

### **Illustration**

A pastor experienced great blessing in his Church in Manchester, which, he said, changed his heart. He moved to another city and spoke to fellow pastors about that time of blessing. He confessed: “Before my Church experienced that blessing, I was glad if my Church was doing well, and I was just as glad if your Church wasn't. But now since that time, what I want for me, I want for you too.” His confession increased unity amongst all.

### **5. The Body of Christ must be collective in its variety:**

Finally, we are not to rejoice in diversity for its own sake. We are to seek unity in diversity.

First, the Unity of the Body:

“Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”  
(1 Corinthians 12: 27)

Then the Diversity of Gifts:

“And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues.” (v 28)

Again, He emphasises that this is not about our individual egos and idiosyncrasies vying for attention but the recognition that, as God has called the members, so He has given the gifts.



The gifts are varied but coordinated, like the parts of a body, and all fundamentally valued, but not the same in function. To begin with, in verse 28, Paul isolates three orders of gifts:

“First of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers...”

In a post-Apostolic age, which is the Presbyterian view, the apostolic order was subsumed into the teaching of the New Testament, although some churches retain this office, still. It does not mean to say there are not, still, Presbyterians who are sensitive to God’s Word and His Spirit. Many a church has taken a new, lively direction because of convincing ideas and there are preachers who go around churches, refreshing tired pastors with a wider vision.

The second order, prophets, is associated with the Ministry of the Word, only with the Old Testament concept of foretelling replaced with a preachers’ concept of forth-telling. Again, there are wise preachers (and indeed Christians) who can see the shape of things to come by applying the Scriptures and can persuade their churches to prepare for changes in society, for we must not limit the Word of God, by deciding what it can tell us and what it cannot.

The third order, teachers, is very important even today. In the Mediterranean world, where hand-written books were uncommon and highly expensive, many new Christians were not from a Jewish community and had no background in the Bible. Solid teaching of Salvation History was vital to explain the long journey from Adam to Jesus and the new age of grace.

### **Illustration**

When the Andean Indians of Peru, whose language is called Quechua, were given the New Testament in their own language, there was a real thrill of expectation in the hearts of missionaries that the Church would find a breakthrough in a pagan and secretive society. However, to their disappointment and surprise, no such breakthrough occurred. It was decided to issue more of the Bible and the Book of Genesis was rushed out. After that, the conversions began, in great numbers. A missionary asked an Indian Christian why.

We can paraphrase his reply. He said: “You were always telling us we had to be saved, but until we read Genesis, chapter 3, we did not know what we had to be saved from.”



Teaching of the Bible, and doctrine from the Bible, is still a priority but too many sermons are devoted to a simple message: God loves you and all will be well. It is vital to preach it but, without mature teaching, it can become a childish complacency that cannot face real-life trials, as it is not based on a trust that, with God, we can face all things. (Romans 8: 28)

Paul adds other gifts:

“... then miracles, then gifts of healings...”

The word is plural – healing-s. There are people of faith whose relationship with God, or special training, or their position as Elders makes them more attuned toward miracles and healings, and others will testify to that. Yet because healings is plural, we tend not to create special church posts of “miracle-worker” or “healer”, even where these gifts are recognized, because many have such miracles by prayer. We would not need to go to just one person.

James 5: 14-16 does say that Elders may be called to anoint members with oil for healing. It is still practised today; there are those who testify that Elders anointed them with oil and prayed and that they were healed. Too many Presbyterian Elders have been denied this joy by the dry, intellectual tradition which tries to ignore supernatural graces and gifts of God.

### **Illustration**

Jamie Buckingham, a well-known preacher, told a story of being invited to speak on healing prayer to a Kirk Session, described to him as being ‘suspicious’ of healing. Yet, after he taught James 5, it turned out that one of the Elders had a back problem: to the surprise of both the Minister and Jamie, he asked if he could have healing, there and then.

Jamie was unprepared. He had taken no oil as he had expected the response to be negative. This itself, as he confessed later, was a lesson in how not to teach matters of faith. He told them he had no oil and one Elder went off to the kitchen to find some cooking oil. They sat for a long time, waiting. Jamie was starting to think that the Elder had lost his nerve and slipped home when he came back in carrying a steaming saucepan. “I couldn’t find any oil,” he told them, “but I’ve melted some butter. Will that do?” It felt bizarre but Jamie was now committed and so the other Elders stood up, leaving the man with the back problem seated, and gathered round the melted butter, They each took some goo on their fingers and began to touch the forehead of



the seated Elder, who soon looked sticky. They all felt foolish, and Jamie thought it the worst experience of his ministerial life. But then the man on the seat felt round his back in astonishment. They all froze. He looked bewildered. He was healed.

Then the tears came. Grown men, Elders who lacked any confidence that God loved them enough to use them for His glory, had seen a miracle in the most ridiculous circumstances, all because one man believed what God's Word said, and they responded to simple faith.

Paul's final list of three gifts have issues of translation. Nobody is certain what two of them mean. The NIV says "helping" and "guidance" or "gifts of administration". The KJV says "helps" and "governments". Such variation in translation can leave us all in the dark.

It may help if we know that the first one means "someone who takes a turn", which suggests helpers, people who step in when you feel tired and discouraged. It might even mean an encourager, people who make people feel good about their service. Or who, like Barnabas, defend you against pressures, whether from people or situation, where you have no friend. Churches need such helpers: helpers in body or helpers of the soul. They edify the Church.

The second word means "to steer a ship". It is the word, through Latin, was "government" later. It refers to folk who direct business, keeps things going in order and this may mean gifts of organization or administration. The Church needs them. Every Presbytery looks for someone gifted in administration to be the Clerk. A Session needs one, too. A Minister, in his spiritual direction, and a Session Clerk in his administrative one, must work together.

Paul finally mentions: "...different kinds of tongues."

In Corinth the gift of tongues was highly-prized: it meant to speak an unlearned language by a miracle of God, languages which some might understand but others not. Being such an obvious sign of the supernatural, it had become a highly-prized gift, used without restraint. Paul blesses it, but he devotes a whole chapter to examining how to bring it under control, pleading that "all things be done decently and in order." (1 Corinthians 14: 40) What is most telling, here, in chapter 12, is that Paul mentions this gift and its interpretation last.

God's gifts are given to be united expressions of His Love, but they are also allocated according to His Will. Paul asks if the gifts are general, clearly expecting a no answer.



“Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?” (1 Corinthians 12: 29-30)

He is challenging those who compete in gifting to see the futility of the exercise. He wants them to strive for greater gifts, like prophesying, because such gifts build up the Body.

“Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.” (v 31)

By hearing truth spoken, visions shared, miracles performed, the Kingdom is advanced more than by hearing someone, or a group, all speaking with no interpreter to explain.

There is no harm in seeking gifts in relationship with God. What is wrong is to seek them in competition with men, seeking to use gifts of grace to gain kudos for oneself. As the death of Christ on the Cross in selfless love teaches us, the Body is not about self, but self-giving.

It is appropriate that chapter 12 ends by heralding the better way of chapter 13. The Body of Christ is now to follow His self-giving love, the new dimension of meaning Christ gave to a Greek word for love: agape. The old law that counted against us is crucified with Christ; we are under His New Law, in which the ego is laid down to embrace the world in His Love.



## Time with Children

### Two Children's Addresses.

#### 1. "Missing the Mark"

**Personnel:** A leader, or Minister, and children.

**Props:** A plastic bucket and some books to prop it on its side, with the open end facing the congregation. Some plastic or tennis balls, or small beanbags, or any safe projectiles.

**Introduction:** "Today, we're going to find out who is good at throwing? Anybody here?" (You may discover a budding sportsperson in the answers. Play that by ear, perhaps asking them to be your helper to pick up the balls, but allowing them to throw as well.)

**Conduct:** Three or four volunteers are then asked for and chosen to throw three balls each into the bucket from a reasonable distance. Be generous. If everyone wants to do it, let them all come and throw one or two balls each. Be careful to praise the efforts of even those who fail to perform well. (At that time it is not wrong to say, "Bad luck!" The Lord knows!)

When throwers have had their turn, the Leader asks if he can have a shot. (If the children complain that the Leader, as a grown-up, is too close, let the children decide what is fair.)

The Leader should try, if possible (but it's not essential) to get one ball in and one miss. Then, on the final try, the Leader should delay a little to build up the moment, perhaps with a drum-roll, then toss the ball back (carefully) over his shoulder in the opposite direction. There will be laughter. "Let's collect the bucket and balls." Children go back to their seats.

"Who got a ball in the bucket? How did you feel?" Pleased. Happy.

"Who missed the bucket sometimes? How did you feel? Sad, disappointed.

[As the Leader has (hopefully) both scored and missed, he can sympathise with both sides. If someone points out his failed last ball, he can say, "We'll talk about that in a moment."]

**Talk:** "Does anyone know what SIN is? [Answers: Definitions: like not doing the right thing. Examples: not tidying your room, being unkind etc.] "In the oldest part of Bible, the word for SIN means to miss the target. Sometimes we try to do the right thing, and we do it. At other times



we try and we miss the target. We want to do good things but we don't do them well, like throwing your covers over your bed instead of tucking them in properly.

“But the worst kind of sin is when we can't be bothered doing the right thing. We don't try. Remember when I threw the first ball? Did I throw it at the target? What is better, to try to hit the target and miss by accident, or not to bother throwing it properly? Yes, it's not even bothering to try. One of the most wonderful things about Jesus was that He always hit the target. He always did the right thing. He never missed. But He knows we miss and rather than giving us a row, He died for all our wrong things on the Cross and rose again, alive, so we could be forgiven. All He wants us to do is to try. Will we all try to do good?”

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, thank you for loving us, even though we do things wrong, and we say the wrong things and sometimes we even think the wrong things. Thank you for loving us so much that you died on the Cross to forgive us. Help us always to know the right thing to do and help us to try to do them, always, for your sake. Amen.

**Praise Suggestion:** “Jesus hands were kind hands.” (CH4 Hymn 351)

## 2. “The Same But Different”: (With thanks to Rev. Jean Boyd.)

**Personnel:** A leader, or Minister, and children.

**Props:** Any range of shoes, such as: 1) a man's dress shoe; 2) a little's girl's party shoe; 3) a climbing boot; 4) a wellington boot; 5) a football boot 6) a pair of ballet pumps

**Conduct:** Show each shoe, identify them and ask the children who wears them and when.

**Next:** “Okay. We see so many different things, here. But what do they have in common?”

**Answer:** All go on your feet.

**Talk:** “The Bible tells us that we are all different. We're just like these shoes, all different shapes and sizes and uses. But we all belong to Jesus and He loves us all.

“We are like these shoes in another way. They are all different but they are all useful too. For instance, look at this (football boot): would that be good for ballet? No? Which one would you choose for ballet? (Children identify ballet shoe.) Look at this nice one (party shoe) would it be good for going through a puddle? No? Which one would you use if you wanted to go through a



puddle? (Children identify the Wellington boot). [Extra fun can be had by asking, as an aside who likes walking in puddles. “Do you splash?” “Should you splash?” What happens if you splash, to you and others? What does Mummy say?]

“Anyway, now we see that these are all different, but they are all useful for different things we do. The Bible tell us that we are like that in the Church. We are all different but we are all important and needed. We look different and may have different jobs, like the Minister, the Elders, the Sunday School Teachers, the different grown-ups and boys and girls, the Mummies and Daddies and Grandparents. And we can all help each other. If a person is old they may be kind and wise, but not so able to run. A little boy or girl can help them get things. An older person can be kind to children by telling them when they do good things. We are all different; we can do all sorts of things to help one another. And we are all loved.”

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, your child has so many different people in it. We look different. We are different, with different ages and abilities. Some of like drawing; some like running and playing games. Some of us like finding out things. We’re all interesting to you and we want to help one another. Show us how, even if we’re different, we can all be like You. Amen.

**Praise Suggestion:** “I’m special” (MP 325)



## Prayers

### Adoration and Confession

#### Adoration

Lord, our God, Maker of Heaven and Earth,  
we are amazed at the generosity of Creation.  
Oh yes, we are baffled by its teeming stars and planets  
and by all its scientific mysteries,  
knowing that scientists find these puzzles of life  
growing ever deeper as they look the more closely into them.  
Even the life of this world on which we live  
seems beyond our imagining, let alone our understanding.  
From the smallest cells to the greatest galaxies,  
life pours forth constantly as You sustain all things by the life-giving breath of Your Word.  
And we human beings, in the midst of Creation,  
live halfway between the invisible microscopic life around us and in us,  
and a vast universe of billions and billions of stars.  
It could easily make us feel insignificant, worthless,  
except that we hear the beat of your heart in all things.

And then we are struck with wonder, so much so that we can say with the Psalmist of old:  
“What is Man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for Him? You have made  
him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honour. You made him ruler  
over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet.” (Psalm 8: 4-6)

You have placed us in the centre of your purpose.  
You loved us before the Creation of the World,  
ordaining that God Himself would become a Man,  
through Your Only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ,  
that He would walk on the Earth, weep for us and die for us.  
In Creation Your hands worked with powerful love, the love in yourself.



You knew that we would fall away, yet You prepared to come,  
as Son and Sacrifice, to pay for our sins and give us Eternal Life.

### **Confession**

Before such love, how can we hold back this morning/evening?

How can we hide all that You already know - that we have failed You,  
and even ourselves, in thought, in word and in deed?

We confess all our sins before You, sins of omission and of commission,  
throwing ourselves on Your merciful grace through the Cross of Chris alone.

We open our hearts to You, Lord, and in a moment of silence,  
we beg you to search our souls by the light of Your gracious Holy Spirit.

Seek out anything within us we should cast aside  
and bring it to our remembrance, in Jesus' Name:

[Silent Pause]

Lord, You urge us so gently in Your Word, through the beloved disciple, John,  
that if we confess our sins, You are faithful and just to forgive us our sins,  
and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1: 9).

We confess our sins to you now, those we can remember,  
those who cannot remember and even those we do not recognise as sins,  
because of our hardness of heart and unbelief.

In Your Mercy, forgive us; in Your Grace, renew us; by Your Spirit now inspire us.

\* In Jesus' name. Amen.

[\*Note: If a congregation has the Lord's Prayer here, then after "...inspire us", substitute: "We ask it in Jesus' Name, joining together in the Prayer He taught us, saying: Our etc."]



**Intercession and Supplication:**

NB: For congregations that use responses, this can be inserted as desired between sections:

[C: O Lord, Our God, now hear us.

**R: And let the joy of the Lord be our strength.]**

O Lord, before the mountains were born, or the whole world was created,  
from everlasting to everlasting You are God.

Immense in majesty, You are Lord of the Ages and yet ageless.

You are the ancient of days and as young as the first light of the morning;  
you are holy as the deepest fire and as new as the lightest, dancing spark of Life.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are the Holy God.

You revealed Yourself in the Incarnate Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God,  
Child of Bethlehem, Man of Nazareth, crucified victim of Jerusalem.

He Himself is our peace: Jesus brought us healing,  
spoke the Truth in Love and laid down His life for us.

In the Name of Christ, the Name above every name,  
we come to pray for a needy world, for broken hopes and people,  
for ourselves and our nation that we may live to honour You.

We ask You to give us the strength of His joy, that joy for which Christ endured the Cross,  
that we, suffering with the World, may pray aright and call down Your mercy where it is needed.

[C: O Lord, Our God, now hear us.

**R: And let the joy of the Lord be our strength.]**

We pray for peace, Lord, where men sacrifice humanity for bitter and deluded principle,  
where the poor and helpless, the orphan and the widow are cruelly treated  
and Your own people are brought to the test by brutality.

Give the poor help, through softening nations with compassion for them,  
and give strength to Your People in the hour of trial to witness,  
even to those who abuse them, that all may see and recognize the Love of Christ in them.



[C: O Lord, Our God, now hear us.

**R: And let the joy of the Lord be our strength.]**

We pray for an increase of justice, to set the scales right for employer and employee, for ruler and ruled.

We pray for greater honour and responsibility in representatives in all organizations, in Governments or businesses or cultural organizations, where immense wealth is circulated to indulge a few, while poor and hungry people weep, unheeded.

[C: O Lord, Our God, now hear us.

**R: And let the joy of the Lord be our strength.]**

We pray that the rich nations would help, rather than hinder and exploit, weaker ones, that Fair Trade would thrive in the host nations and here at home.

Move our hearts to buy the Third World's products so that parents may have a future for themselves and their children.

[C: O Lord, Our God, now hear us.

**R: And let the joy of the Lord be our strength.]**

Lord, bless all charities and missions that work in practical ways to bless those who need education and dignity, especially women and girls.

Bless all teachers in the poor nations, often struggling to express their gifts without encouragement.

Bless pastors and the people of many churches in the developing countries and help their children to grow in peace and prosperity, in the hope of the Gospel, with open doors to advancement and without threat of violence and abuse, slavery or oppression.

Lord, give the Light of Christ to Your World.

[C: O Lord, Our God, now hear us.

**R: And let the joy of the Lord be our strength.]**



We pray for those who rule over us, for our Queen and her family,  
 for our governments in Westminster and Holyrood,  
 in Council chambers and Community Councils, that they may have great wisdom and seek peace.  
 We pray that they would honour the great tradition of the Church  
 which over fifteen hundred years and more has helped to forge the values of the nation.  
 Most of all, we pray that those same, precious values, the teachings of Christ,  
 would spread and thrive among us,  
 for Your Word says: “Righteousness alone exalts a nation.”

[C: O Lord, Our God, now hear us.

**R: And let the joy of the Lord be our strength.]**

We pray for the Church Catholic throughout the world,  
 both institutional and underground, both honoured and persecuted,  
 that Your living presence would be with them, encouraging them,  
 so that all would know, beyond tradition, the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace.  
 We pray for the Church of Scotland and all churches in the land,  
 that we would know God’s Grace in abundance.

Bless the Moderator of the General Assembly, Rev. Angus Morrison,  
 so that he knows joyful good health and strength, to fulfil his duties with happiness.  
 Bless our Presbytery Moderator -----, and clerks in Assembly, Presbyteries and Sessions,  
 that their work may be not a burden to them, so that they may experience Your richest joy.

[C: O Lord, Our God, now hear us.

**R: And let the joy of the Lord be our strength.]**

We pray for the sick, that they may know Your healing hand upon them;  
 for the bereaved, that they may know Your comforting presence;  
 for the lonely that they may find peace and fellowship and the caring of the Christian Church;  
 for those in addiction, that they may find victory;  
 for those hurting in painful, struggling relationships, that Love would overcome all things;  
 for the unemployed, that they may find work and hope;



for the disabled, that they may know our love for them and our appreciation of what they give to us;

for all in service, whether defending the nation, guarding our streets or caring for people;

for children, that they may grow to be a blessing to their families and their families to them;

for parents and grandparents, that they may find the quiet rewards of love;

for single and divorced people, that Christ the Bridegroom would be close to them and lead them to that relationship which He has chosen for them;

for all who suffer in their mind and heart, that the sweet honey of Christ would fill them, their darkness give way to light, their fear to faith, their loss to love.

[C: O Lord, Our God, now hear us.

**R: And let the joy of the Lord be our strength.]**

Lastly, we pray for ourselves, that You would supply our heart's need at this time.

In a moment of silence, we ask you, O Lord, to hear our cry, even where we have no words.

[Silent Prayer.]

Our great and merciful God, we commit ourselves to You in faith, hope and love,

and we gather all our thoughts, spoken and unspoken,

and even the deepest and most mysterious motions of our hearts,

in the precious and perfect Name of Jesus, Our Saviour. Amen.

[Note: Where a congregation adds the Lord's Prayer to the Intercessory Prayer, this may end:

"...in the precious and perfect words of Jesus, Our Saviour, saying together, etc."]



In addition to the above prayers, prepared by our contributor, other prayers may be found in *Living Stones* which is the theme for this year's Pray Now. It was also the theme for Heart and Soul 2015. *Living Stones* is available from [St Andrew Press](http://www.standrewpress.co.uk).



## Musical suggestions

### For Psalm-singing congregations:

CH4 4	Psalm 8
CH4 10	Psalm 19
CH4 15, 16	Psalm 23
CH4 18	Psalm 24
CH4 36	Psalm 46
CH4 43	Psalm 63
CH4 45	Psalm 67
CH4 46	Psalm 68
CH4 48	Psalm 72
CH4 50	Psalm 78
CH4 57	Psalm 93
CH4 59	Psalm 95
CH4 63	Psalm 100
CH4 69	Psalm 103
CH4 79	Psalm 119
CH4 81	Psalm 121
CH4 82	Psalm 122
CH4 86	Psalm 126

### Hymns:

CH4 112	God, Whose Almighty Word
CH4 119	O God, Thou art the Father
CH4 127	O worship the King
CH4 132	Immortal, invisible
CH4 153	Great is Thy faithfulness
CH4 154	O Lord my God
CH4 158	God moves in a mysterious way
CH4 159	Lord, for the years
CH4 160	Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven



CH4 161	O God, our help in ages past
CH4 166	Lord of all hopefulness
CH4 167	Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah
CH4 187	There's a wideness in God's mercy
CH4 189	Be still, for the presence of the Lord
CH4 190	Art thou afraid
CH4 191	Do not be afraid
CH4 192	All my hope on God is founded
CH4 251	I, the Lord of sea and sky
CH4 261	Father Eternal, Ruler of Creation
CH4 264	Judge Eternal, throned in splendour
CH4 265	Pray for a world
CH4 340	When Jesus saw the fishermen
CH4 351	Jesus hands were kind hands
CH4 352	O for a thousand tongues
CH4 356	Meekness and Majesty
CH4 385	Here hangs a man discarded
CH4 392	When I survey the wondrous cross
CH4 396	And can it be?
CH4 405	We sing the praise of Him who died
CH4 419	Thine be the glory
CH4 425	The Saviour died but rose again
CH4 512	To God be the glory
CH4 513	Courage, brother, do not stumble
CH4 514	Onward, Christian soldiers
CH4 515	Soldiers of Christ arise
CH4 551	In heavenly love abiding
CH4 554	Rock of Ages
CH4 560	Jesus, the very thought of thee
CH4 561	Blessed assurance



MP 7	All creatures of our God and King
MP 20	All people that on earth do dwell
MP 319	I'd rather have Jesus
MP 327	Immortal, Invisible
MP 372	Jesus, lover of my soul
MP 386	Jesus, the very thought of Thee
MP 469	My faith looks up to Thee
MP 473	Living under the shadow of His wing
MP 488	O Breath of Life
MP 536	On a hill far away (The old, rugged cross)
MP 560	Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven
MP 683	There's a wideness in God's mercy
MP 888	Loving Shepherd of Thy sheep
MP 975	Before the throne of God above
MP 1062	I can only imagine
MP 1072	In Christ Alone
MP 1094	Men of faith (Shout to the north)

**Children:**

CH4 178	God is good
CH4 186	Father God, I wonder
CH4 558	Lord, I lift your name on high
CH4 559	There is a Redeemer
CH4 564	Jesus loves me
CH4 749	Soon and very soon
MP 49	Be bold, be strong
MP 99	Come on and celebrate
MP 185	God is good
MP 325	I'm special
MP 346	It is a thing most wonderful
MP 809	Blessed be the name of the Lord



## 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. [Living Stones](#) is available 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.

*The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to the Rev Bruce Gardner 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.*

