

# starters for Sunday

## *Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

**27 September 2015**

The Mission and Discipleship Council offer their thoughts on the eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost. This week's material, from our archives, was prepared by the Rev Sally Foster-Fulton, Associate Minister at Dunblane Cathedral.

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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](#)

**Esther 7: 1-6, 9-10, 9: 20-22**

**Psalm 124**

**Numbers 11: 4-6, 10-16, 24-29**

**Psalm 19: 7-14**

**Mark 9: 38-50**

**James 5: 13-20**

The lectionary has done an awful lot of editing in its attempt to patch together a story from Esther. In order to really understand the dynamics at play, it is best to read Esther as a whole rather than pick and choose. It is also important to note that the book of Esther, although not theological in any ordinary sense (God is not mentioned), is rich in material to argue with. It is a violent story that offers an opportunity to question our response to it. It is a story that begs questions about how women are used.

There are points that lend themselves to possible focus, but the lectionary in this instance has sanitised the story and, in my opinion, weakened its impact for this week.

Some background: At the beginning of this saga, King Ahasuerus throws a party, one where he flaunts the wealth of his kingdom and in a drunken bid to boast, tries to force his first Queen, Vashti, to demean herself before him and his officials. Her refusal is the prequel to Esther's rise to power because Vashti is banished from the king's presence and he needs a new queen. Esther finds favour in his eyes and she is chosen, but she does not reveal that she is Jewish.



Her cousin Mordecai, who raised Esther after her parents' died, has also won favour with the King because he discovered an assassination plot and his vigilance saves the day.

Mordecai, however, does not gain favour with the King's 2nd in Command, Haman. He refuses to bow to Haman and this insult is enough to cause Haman to plot the destruction of the whole Jewish people. The part of the story we are offered from the lectionary focuses on Queen Esther's successful attempt to save her people from destruction. She and Mordecai reveal Haman's plot to the King, he has Haman hanged, and the people are saved. A feast day is set aside to remember the salvation of the people. The way they are to remember is by giving gifts to the poor.

### [Psalm 124](#)

This Psalm has strong allusions to the theme of provision found in [Numbers 11](#). We sometimes do not recognise God's generous providing – nor do we see God's protective desire. The call and response in the first verse can be used as a re-centring tool; perhaps as a Call to Worship (see below). There is also an allusion to the story of the parting of the Red Seas – If God hadn't held back the torrent, then we would have been lost under the raging sea.

### [Numbers 11: 4-6, 10-16, 24-29](#)

11: 4-6 A fun way to preach this is to bring the story to life, playing on the common humanity of the situation. The children (rather apt name!) of Israel are whinging yet again, and both God and Moses are fed up with it. They are acting like a bunch of kids who are grumpy and out of sorts after a sleep-over! The “manna” God so generously provided has apparently become a bit monotonous and they are crying for a change of pace. The word “manna” can actually be translated “what is it?” Unpacking that – letting the listeners use their imaginations – God gives the people food in the desert and the first response is “what is it?”

They quickly forget that they were slaves in Egypt, look into their rose-coloured rear-view mirror and pine for the devil they knew.

11: 10 –16 The characters of Moses and God respond to the situation with equal measures of maturity. God is irritated beyond belief at the lack of appreciation being bestowed on the Divine rescue attempt and questions Moses' leadership skills.



Moses flares back at God – “this was your idea/these are your annoying, whingy people – I can’t do this all alone.”

It is fun to let this story be just that – a story! The characterisation is rich, so enjoy it. This scene ends with God deciding that maybe Moses has a point, and God agrees to enlist some help for Moses.

11: 24-29 This final scene mirrors our Gospel story, supporting the understanding that God does not hold much store in “right and proper” but is more interested in “getting on with doing good!” “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets!”

### [Psalm 19: 7-14](#)

Verse 7: “The Torah” of God is perfect. The Hebrew word, torah (תּוֹרָה), comes from a root associated with archery. Yareh (יָרֵה) means to shoot an arrow in order to hit a mark. Torah, therefore, can be translated as the arrow that hits its mark. Jesus said that all the law (the Torah) could be summed up in loving God and loving neighbour.

Verse 9: The word “fear” needs to be unpacked for the listeners. For far too long, far too many people have thought that to fear means to be afraid of, and that is not a healthy way to exist in any relationship, especially one with the God who loves you. “Fear” is better translated as “respect,” “reverence,” or “awe.” That is a much more productive state to be held in. To be in awe of God’s goodness leads you to try to imitate that goodness, not shrink away, afraid that nothing you can do will be good enough. If you want to give a gift to your congregation, stop in the middle of this reading and tell them: There is nothing to be afraid of from the God who loves you. There are many things that will be challenging, daunting, surprising; but God is love. Do not be afraid!

Verse 14: I love that verse, but if the author had asked my opinion, I would have edited it to say this: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart (and what I do about them!) be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” Heresy? 😊



## [Mark 9: 38-50](#)

The story of “Who is the greatest” immediately precedes this passage and the disciples are simply as my Granny used to say “Et up with the dumbs!!” They just don’t get it and in this passage, Jesus tries again. They must have driven him round the bend! Bet we have our moments too. 😊

In verses 38-41, the disciples come to Jesus, indignant because someone outside their circle was “casting out demons” in Jesus’ name. And here, if we are not careful, is where we can get lost in translation. “In my name” does NOT mean literally saying Jesus’ name. “In my name” means “aligned with.” It means in agreement with, working for the same causes, singing off the same hymn-sheet as it were. This is an important distinction. Jesus, in this story, affirms that when we or anyone work for good, we work for him. The word “ecumenical” is derived from the Greek root *he oikoumene ge* which means “the whole inhabited world.” What could we do together if we stopped being so consumed with “being right” and got on with “doing good?”

Verses 42 – 50 move to warnings about our getting in the way, and also about things that get in our way. These passages use hyperbole to great effect! Let the imagery live when you preach this text. Find modern, relevant ways to express the same idea. “If something you’re doing is causing you to stumble your way through the rest of your life, then knock it off!” I remember when I was in my teens, we had an Interim minister come to our church, Dr. Gettys, a wise, old man. When he said he wanted to take our youth group class and talk about relationships, we cringed! What could an old man have to say to us that wouldn’t be – well, embarrassing. He turned out to be brilliant and the advice he gave us, I have held onto and it has proved to be invaluable. He told us that in regards to relationships, this was how you could tell a good one from a bad one:

A good relationship is one that invigorates you, it frees and brings out the best in you. A bad relationship is exhausting, it closes you off to other people and is stifling. It makes you feel bad about yourself because you cannot be yourself!

Simple maybe, but that statement is true for relationships with others and it is true for relationships with things and habits. If they cause you to stumble - if they exhaust you, close you



off to others, make you feel bad about yourself because you can't be yourself, then cut them out!

There is a final point I'd like to unpack in regards to this section. When Jesus used the rather brutal imagery of cutting off hands and feet, of pulling out eyes, it would have been even more shocking to his original hearers because anyone missing a foot, hand or eye would not be allowed in the Temple. Was Jesus maybe alluding to the fact that it was more important to live God's way than to observe religious practices? (a shot over the bow of the self-righteous?) Is it better to admit you're struggling and to ask for help, than to hide behind a mask of righteousness that is bound to slip or worse, not slip until you can't recognise yourself underneath?

### [James 5: 13-20](#)

My friends were pregnant with their third child, and even though he was a bit of a surprise package, they were excited to welcome another child into the world. The other two pregnancies had been a dawdle, a son and a daughter arriving without so much as a hiccup, so they expected this one to go the same way. When there were complications - the baby born at 26 weeks, his mother haemorrhaging and almost not making it herself, they were sent reeling. Then the baby had a bleed in his brain that left him with damage that would only be fully revealed in time. They could do nothing but wait and watch and hope. They weren't particularly religious and didn't go to church, but a nun from the local Carmelite monastery heard about what they were going through and wrote a letter, saying that at 2:00 every afternoon, if it was ok with the family, she would pray for them and their child. My friends had no feelings either way, but were touched by her kindness so said "yes, of course."

Years have passed. The baby is an adult who has cerebral palsy and struggles daily with the disability he developed because of that bleed. His mother recovered but they couldn't have any more children. He was their final, wonderful surprise. But I want to tell you a little bit about the prayers of that nun. My friend said that every day at 2:00, he felt a sense of peace and calm because he knew that somebody was stopping what they were doing to think of his family. He and his wife felt strengthened because they were upheld in their struggle – they were deeply moved because someone who didn't even know them, loved them.



## Prayers



*Living Stones* 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](#). Discounts on bulk orders are available.

## Call to Worship

- Leader:** If it had not been the Lord who was on our side – let the people now say –
- Men:** If it had not been the Lord who was on our side when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us;
- Women:** Then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us;
- All:** Then over us would have gone the raging waters.
- Leader:** God is our refuge and our strength.
- Men:** Calm in the storm...
- Women:** Light in the darkness.
- Leader:** Let us worship God.

## Prayer of Approach & Confession (A Prayer on Prayer)

God is great, God is good, let us give thanks for our food...

Our father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name...

Now I lay me down to sleep I pray the Lord my soul to keep...

God to whom all hearts are open and all desires known...

You're all these things God...

You're great and good, you're the parent who adores and comforts and cajoles,  
the soul keeper who can see right into our hearts...

but sometimes we say our prayers like we're reading the phone book or the obituary...



I guess we forget who we're talking to, and we're sorry...  
sorry when what we're making for tea crowds out a thought for those who won't be having any...  
or when our wish list doesn't include anyone else's dreams...

Sorry, when we lay down to sleep too tired to talk to you,  
but taking for granted that you'll keep track of us...  
or when we doubt you're there at all and keep our hearts close to our chests...

Forgive us, God... when we rattle off words that hold no meaning,  
when we ask for changes we don't want to make  
or ask for forgiveness when we wouldn't be willing to give it....  
God who is great and good...

Our father who art in heaven.  
God to whom all hearts are open and all desires known...  
We pray that you will keep our souls...  
pray we do not speak our prayers idly,  
but remember who we're talking to... Amen

### **A Prayer for Working Together**

You always chose to work this way  
- through us, with us -  
you threw in your lot with twelve friends  
instead of striking out on your own;  
you sat down at tables,  
took time with the children,  
told stories to crowds about the kingdom of God being found in unexpected places.

You told us to feed your sheep  
and love our neighbour and forgive those who trespass against us... always together. Always as  
a family, as your body.



And you have to wonder sometimes  
if it wouldn't have been simpler to just do it yourself...  
when we wander away, you must weary of bringing us back...  
when we ignore you and flounder,  
it must be frustrating,  
when we decide we'd rather not be part of the human race and race headlong into what we  
think will satisfy us,  
you must wonder about the wisdom of entrusting your vision to the likes of us.

But you always chose to work this way,  
and all the beauty we will ever encounter has depended on this dubious decision.  
So God of us all, help us and hold us...  
Christ our brother, mend us and mould us...  
Holy Spirit, comfort and chide and challenge us all the way.

We are your people, your body, your family and your future.  
Live and breathe and have your being in us –  
that is the way you have chosen it to be, together –  
thanks be to God. Amen.

### **Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession**

“I care for you” – how those words just trip off the tongue.  
So easy, like “how are you” and “Can I help you?” and even “I love you.”  
But we know deep down that the reality is so much more than words...  
so for those who listen into the wee small hours when all they want is a little peace,  
for those who hold things together with a grace that only comes from deep within,  
for those who lift and lay gently and patiently even when time is short and so are tempers, for  
those who do things they don't have to do even when they don't want to do them - because of  
love, for them God, we thank you.



We don't say it often enough so we'll say it again – thank you.

“I don't care” – how those words just trip off the tongue.

And they're tempting because life is complicated and frantic and we have enough to be getting on with without getting involved with somebody else's trouble.

But you, Christ of us all, You call us to begin where we are

– to try to love our neighbours, to see the single lifeline that connects us all –  
and so we pray this morning for our friends who grieve,  
who worry about what tomorrow might or might not bring.

We pray for the folk we know and love who are sick or sad or ashamed.

Help them to feel your peace and presence through us – help us to care.

Christ of all, you call us to begin where we are, but also to see beyond ourselves;

to believe that there is a tie that binds all humanity,

and so we pray for the world we live in and are a part of –

we pray for places and for people who,

if we're honest don't mean much to us because they are not the ones we love,

they aren't the faces that greet our mornings or rest in our dreams,

but they are yours every bit as much as we are,

and so we ask you to help us care enough to change the way we live –

so that they can live better lives.

We ask that you grow in us a deeper understanding of our fragile, intertwined lives/the world is a small place.

For Afghanistan/Abroath Egypt/Edinburgh, Pakistan/Pollockshields, Haiti/Harris, Darfur/Dunblane

– strengthen the ties, close up the gaps – may we see each other, not from the suspicious perspective of far away, but close enough to see the brother or sister right before us.

“Who cares?” In the world today, that is a legitimate question.

Help it to be us, Lord. Help it to be us. Amen.



God, we find you in the most unexpected places –  
in the smile of a lover, in the laugh of a child,  
we see your spirit shining from the eyes of a perfect stranger and you speak to us in voices we  
haven't heard in so long but have longed for.

God who cannot be contained, thank you for calling us to holy ground...

We find you in the most unexpected places –  
in the sadness of the desolate, in the cry of a child.

We see your spirit staring out from the eyes of perfect strangers and you speak to us sometimes  
in voices we never wanted to hear and try to avoid listening to.

God who cannot be contained, help us to see you.

We pray this morning for the desolate who find themselves in places unimaginable –  
where there is grief, help us bring comfort,  
where there is pain, help us bring relief,  
where there is anger and violence and what appears to be no way out, help us discover new  
ways to meet in the middle and begin the clear up.

God who cannot be contained,

we find you and when we can't, you find us...

be with us now as we bring the ones we know and love to you who also love them...

God who lives and loves through us, may we walk with you into all our places. Amen.

## Musical Suggestions

CH4 655	For your generous providing
CH4 622	We sing a love that sets all people free
CH4 792	Our God is a God who makes friends
CH4 198	Let us build a house
CH4 36	Psalm 46



## 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 Sally Foster-Fulton 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.*

