

starters for Sunday

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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The Mission and Discipleship Council offer their thoughts on the sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost.

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Quick Guide...

Helping people prepare for reading the Bible in worship can make a real difference. Overcoming nerves, reading in ways suitable to the text, speaking clearly etc.

You may wish to email these three links to the people reading Scripture on Sunday to support them in their involvement in worship: [Managing your nerves](#); [Creative readings](#); [Worship at the Lectern](#)

[Exodus 17: 1-7](#)

Throughout these texts God's mercy and grace emerges consistently. They are attributes of God that not even the hardest human heart, or the most intransigent human mind can ultimately resist, or frustrate. In this Exodus reading, the people of Israel were unsure if God was faithful and reliable. Their request for water was an urgent need – testing yet again God's power and inclination towards them. Once more they grumbled, once more God provided. Though some might suggest that, having done much already for them, God's provision here might appear a little grudging, nonetheless God still provides, and the underlying response is one of divine compassion, even for a shallow and forgetful people whose inclination to a lack of respect verges beyond the inappropriate.

We should not be without sympathy for the Israelites. The harshness of the Sinai wilderness is something that even modern travellers comment upon. If the people of the Exodus lacked something as basic as water it is no wonder that their attitude to God deteriorated. Even liberated slaves cannot live on emotion alone. To paraphrase Gandhi, "There are people in the world so thirsty, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of water." That being said, we do need to note that this follows on other miracles where God has provided in time of need. We are encouraged to think – "Why do the people not yet see that God does not intend them to perish?" Just as we might ask why the disciples of Jesus failed fairly consistently to recognise who He was, and, by extension, why the people of God's Church still, after several millennia, fail to believe in and commit to the ongoing revelation of God whose provision and compassion have remained unchanging.

We might also reflect on God's calm and mediating response to the Israelites, and contrast this with our own response to persistent questioning and misunderstanding. The cost of graciousness is considerable. How many visionary individuals who undertake leadership roles



are buffeted by the unrealistic demands of those they seek to lead and trapped by the realities of a pressing situation?

The staff Moses uses to strike water from the rock is the one he used to strike the Nile to turn it, symbolically, to blood. The point is clear – the instrument of death can also be the instrument of life. God can banish water from the Nile and produce water from a barren rock. By mentioning Horeb, we are reminded of the burning bush incident from Moses' past, and the giving of the law and the reaffirmation of the covenant in Moses' future. God's continuing vision of salvation for His people is consistent and God purposes to sustain them with something, in the future, far more significant than food and drink. God's leadership will sometimes take us to the wilderness, and not an oasis, and the level of our obedience in through the hard times will reveal the level of our trust in God. As with any relationship, the more faithfulness we show, the more that faithfulness becomes a natural response. The example of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness would offer a clear parallel here.

Testing God is the root of this Exodus story. God is set up by the people, who attempt to demand that God do something and thus make their belief contingent on God's 'performance'.

It is an attempt to turn faith in to sight. It is an attempt to hold God hostage by determining that God shows His power to our satisfaction.

[Psalm 78: 1-4, 12-16](#)

This is one of the 'historical' psalms (like 105, 106, 136) – and is spoken in the voice of a teacher. Couched as an instruction to children, it rehearses the 'parables' of God's involvement with the people of Israel in the Exodus. By sharing the story with successive generations, a sense of belonging is engendered. We might ask what faith stories, if any, are passed on to our children today – at home, at school, in uniformed organisations, at Church?

Psalm 78 invites all 'children' to use their imaginations and not be satisfied with unadorned literalism when it comes to the stories of God – the Exodus is a story of political intervention as much as spiritual sustenance, the might of Egypt and its Pharaoh are defeated Israel, with God, is led into a new world of freedom and possibility. What did that mean for the Israelites then, and what does it mean for us now? This Psalm call us to consider that different futures are possible



for all of us, with God, and that seemingly insurmountable problems and obstacles can be overcome. The world is not a closed system, remaining unchangeable, and that grappling with the living tradition of faith enables a more resilient and robust understanding of who God is and what God means. If we forget our history, we are doomed to repeat it, but if we are imprisoned by our history and fail to interpret its lessons for our own times, we are doomed to a limited horizon and an ultimately barren existence. History is a good teacher, but a bad mistress. What, through the stories of faith, is God saying to us today?

[Ezekiel 18: 1-4, 25-32](#) (alternative reading)

Moral accountability lies at the heart of this reading. We are not to be judged by the faults of our forebears, but for our own faults. God is not concerned with our moral heredity, but with the actions, decisions, words and thoughts that we are responsible for ourselves. Ezekiel takes exception to the concept that the sins of our fathers will be visited on subsequent generations – his argument is that we are responsible for, and will be punished for, our own misdeeds. The proverb quoted by Ezekiel, also mentioned by Jeremiah, is a weak attempt to shrug off our accountability for our own lives and their failings. Our tendency to blame our genes, our circumstances or anything else does not deflect the need we all have to face up to the conscious things we do that are wrong, hurtful and unhealthy. Whilst failing of others in the past have consequences for us, we are not responsible for them. We are responsible for the failings we perpetrate today.

The call, again consistent throughout the story of faith, is to turn and re-turn – to God, which is a psychological as well as spiritual process. Our lives are to be reoriented towards God. What God continues to offer is the possibility of life, and that possibility is available to anyone whatever their condition or state.

There is an individual and community need to show solidarity in dealing with the brokenness that surrounds us, and a response that requires a changed life and a changed attitude. Or, in Ezekiel's words, to seek the new heart and the new spirit that God willingly would grant us when we turn to Him. Why should we choose death when God wants us to live fully? It is time to turn around, and to live.



[Psalm 25: 1-9 \(alternative reading\)](#)

This Psalm underlines the need to trust in God and recognise God's long-term interest in our lives. God's interest is not prurient, nor quixotic, but constant and always with our best interests at heart. God's memory of us is long-term, and whilst He may recall our faults and failings, those things lie in the past; of greater importance is the goodness and graciousness that we showed then, and can still show now.

God underlines that it is our humility that will help us follow Him best. In that humility we can lift up our souls to God. In Jewish prayer, to lift up is a gesture of entreaty used in prayer. In that lifting up we hold our conscious identity and life in our hands, and we hold this up to God. It is a sign of our dependence on God. We also 'wait' on God – a stance of faith which is a recurring feature in Jewish exilic prophecy and lament.

The prayer here is not only of an individual - it can speak for a whole people who pray in solidarity one with another, and one for another. Through such prayer we find freedom, and in that freedom God's instruction will still guide us.

[Philippians 2: 1-13](#)

It is more than likely that Paul is quoting a pre-existent hymn already in use within the Christian community in this text. It outlines Jesus' earthly life in a series of actions that demonstrate His obedience and His proximity to the heart of God. That proximity is then affirmed by God's response of blessing and love and the gift of authority and power. Jesus' way of thinking dictates His action, and the intention Paul has in quoting this is, in effect saying, "If this was good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for the followers of Jesus." Paul portrays general attitudes rather than specific behaviours: when individuals are attuned to the mind of Christ, there will be a variety of responses, whose origin is one, but whose outcome is several.

Unity of thought and purpose is important to Paul. The Christian community cannot achieve or maintain unity if individuals pursue their own courses. Unity requires each one to share a concern for the common good. Paul reworks his consistent thought that though we are many, we are one. We do not work or witness singly, but communally.



This makes uncomfortable reading for 21st Century Christians. Paul does not declare that each Christian can do what they want, nor does he offer a list of rules and regulations to govern our thoughts and behaviour. What he does suggest is that we can only live confident lives of faith because of the work of the gospel within our lives constantly transforming us, and the presence of God in our lives constantly working within us. Spirit-inspired living corrodes the rock-like self-interest that constitutes much of our lives. The Spirit-graced thoughts from within are chiselling their way out into our actions and speech.

The key words in this passage are community, joy, fellowship, love, partnership, affection, unity and mind-set or attitude. In these words Paul identifies the common qualities by which the Church must be identified, and through which will be sustained. In response to some unmentioned discord in the Philippian church, Paul's response to their pettiness with a big answer – a hymn, a creed, a confession of faith. In the midst of any dispute, Paul does not want the Church to forget the central events of its history, and the central person of its faith, Jesus Christ.

[Matthew 21: 23-32](#)

In this reading, set in what we call Holy Week takes place, probably the Monday, and Jesus is in the Temple. This is a reading about conflict discernment. Matthew, whilst possibly caricaturing the 'badness' of the religious authorities, wants to make a point about what the issue is that sets the religious authorities against Jesus. Jesus was constantly asked to present His credentials – to people who had already made up their minds that He was not 'from God'.

Jesus' response wrong-foots His detractors. He recognises the issue they struggle with is not simply about authority; it is also about obedience and discernment. John the Baptist's teaching about repentance still lingered on. It remained popular with the people, who not only heard the message but believed in it. Whilst Jesus does not directly respond to the question of the religious authorities, the parable about the two sons is clearly directed against them and their attitude.

There is no evasion possible to Jesus' question about which son obeys his father, or, in Jesus' view, enters God's Kingdom. No matter what the verbal conformity, or expression of faith people may make, if they do not exhibit a consistency between words and deeds, between



religious activity and obedience – then they are not about living out the gracious will of God. In the section prior to this one Jesus has just cursed an unproductive fig tree. The point is surely being made again here. If we are not fit for purpose, if we do not produce ‘fruit’, then we are not doing God’s will. If we are not gracious, inclusive, modelling the heart and the compassion of God, then we are not doing God’s will. If our dogma and our doctrine are word-perfect, and our grasp of historical orthodoxy second to none, but our words and our thoughts and our actions are cold, judgemental and exclusive, then we are not doing God’s will. Better to be a tax-collector, or harlot, who has turned his or her life around and re-oriented towards God’s grace, than a self-righteous Pharisee (then or now) whose demand for ritual, or even confessional purity, betrays no life, no spirit, no soul. Jesus does not close the door on the religious authorities, but the implication of His message and challenge for all remains clear – repent, turn around, and then the Kingdom of God will come near. Do not simply say it, do it.

Christians today can also become blind to what God is doing in the world around them. When Church work degenerates into maintaining an institution with no concern about what God’s contemporary grace is doing, there is no enthusiasm for evangelism, or renewal. When we are backward looking, or inward looking, and refuse to see the sometimes shocking places (to us) where God’s grace and mercy are at work, and the people with whom God works now, then there is little hope for us. Even in a wilderness of secularism, and with unlikely people who we have made unwelcome, God will still work His mercy and His love, and perhaps through them, and their example, call us back in to community with Him once more. Jesus’ ministry becomes once again the window through which we glimpse God.



Prayers

Scripture Sentence

Seek the Lord and His strength, seek His presence continually!

Psalm 105:4

Collect

Grant, O merciful God,
That Your Church,
Being gathered by Your Holy Spirit into one,
May show forth Your power among all peoples,
To the glory of Your Name;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord,
Who lives and reigns
With You and the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and for ever.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Eternal God,
We return with grateful hearts
To You this day.
Beginning anew with You the miracle of grace
That breaks afresh upon us each day.
In this time of prayer with its quiet patience and holy waiting,
Remove from our hearts and minds
The jangling distractions
And the pressing worries
That crowd our minds and hearts;
So that the light and stillness of Your presence
Floods our lives with calmness once more.
We bless You for Your unfailing presence in our lives;
Turn us, once more, to face Your mercy,



Not through fear but with anticipation;
Not through overwhelming guilt, but with steady trust.

Forgive us our disjointed lives,
Forgive us our petulant participation in worship,
Forgive us for our unpredictable witness.
Recall us to the rhythm of service and hope
That enables our obedience to Your call,
And brings that steadiness of purpose and intention
Without which our living and our faith is hopelessly confused.

Lord God,
Your love for us is everlasting
And the signs of Your grace fill us in this time of prayerful waiting.
In the stillness of this moment, we wait, once more,
Upon You, our Lord and our God...

(silence)

We pray all this through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Prayers of Intercession

O God of blazing light and dazzling darkness,
We turn to You our beginning and our end
And source of all good things,
Whose gifts to all the world
Are held in outstretched open hands.
We praise You for Your work throughout the world,
For people sustained through time of famine, flood and fear;
For justice coming in those places
Where terror once held sway;



For peace in homes and communities
Where once the cold, grey hostility chilled all hope.
We pray for lands, for people
Where still the promises of love and the embrace of mercy
Still must be felt,
And name before You...

The wheel of time turns slowly, but Your watchful eye marks
The decades with love and compassion,
Knowing that all will be well.
As the hours and years pass by
We pray even with our limited vision
For those who feel sharp hatreds,
For those who feel soft sadness,
For those who endure fiery frustration,
For those who are limited by the dull ache of despair.

We pray today for our nation,
For our Queen and the Parliaments in Westminster and Holyrood;
We pray for all authorities in our land,
Whose rule is Law, or Education, or Science, or Commerce,
Whose impact on the daily life runs deep,
And whose ethos shapes communities for good and ill.
We pray for clarity of vision, transparency of aspiration,
And generosity of spirit.

We pray for the Church,
And every expression of faith found in our land.
We pray for those thirsting for Your good news,
And for those whose charge it is to lead the people
To the living water.



True to our Saviour Jesus Christ,
Might our thoughts and our words,
Our decisions and our actions
Refresh life, revive hope and restore kindness,
And may His example of lived-out grace
Be found etched upon our own lives.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray,
Who taught us when we pray together to say,

Our Father...

Amen

Offertory Prayer

Through the giving of our money,
And the giving of our lives,
Through the giving of our words,
And the giving of our actions,
May the world be blessed and healed
And be made whole.
May goodness and hopefulness be encouraged.
May those named and unnamed who call upon the Lord today,
Be blessed.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen



Time with Children

Explore with the children, through examples, what it means to trust. Who are the people we trust, and why do we trust them? If we trust someone, what does that mean we do, or think, or feel, and how does it make us behave?

If we promise to do something, what are the consequences if we break that promise? Simply telling children the parable of the two sons, as Jesus taught it, without much embellishment, might be enough. Let the story speak for itself!

Musical Suggestions

CH4 21	Lord, teach me all Your ways
CH4 50	The praises of the Lord our God
CH4 119	O God, Thou art the Father
CH4 167	Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah
CH4 354	O Love, how deep, how broad, how high!
CH4 449	Rejoice! The Lord is King
CH4 458	At the Name of Jesus
CH4 468	Son of God, eternal Saviour
CH4 471	To the name of our salvation
CH4 488	Teach us, O loving heart of Christ
CH4 501	Take this moment, sign and space
CH4 520	Ye who the name of Jesus bear
CH4 608	Spirit of truth and grace
CH4 634	Word of the Father
CH4 639	I bind unto myself today
CH4 646	Forth in the peace of Christ we go
CH4 680	You are called to tell the story
CH4 706	For the healing of the nations



Additional Resources

Resourcing Mission



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#). Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. If there is something you'd like to see on this new site, please [contact us](#) via the website.

Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. [Revealing Love](#) is available now from [St Andrew Press](#).



Music Resources

The hymns mentioned in this material are ideas of specific hymns you might choose for this week's themes. However, for some excellent articles on church music and ideas for new music resources, please check out our online music pages [Different Voices](#).

Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might preach this Sunday. [Preachers Perspectives](#) is a resource where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly.

Scots Worship Resources

[The Kirk's Ear](#) - Scots in the Kirk series for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other times of the year

[Wurship Ouk bi Ouk](#) - Metrical psalms, hymns, prayers and words for worship

[Scots Sacraments](#) may give you helpful material if you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism.

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to the Rev Dr Derek Browning 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.

