

starters for Sunday

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

30 August 2015

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Páraic Réamonn, Minister of St Andrew's Scots Memorial Church, Jerusalem, for his thoughts on the fourteenth 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](#)

[Song of Solomon 2: 8-13](#)

The Song of Songs – the "best song" – is a song about sex. It is the second of the five scrolls in the third part of the Jewish Bible, the writings. In our Christian Bibles, it is found among the poetical and wisdom books.

This "best song" celebrates the erotic love between a man and a woman. It tells us how glorious it is to be in love. In a series of poems, the lovers describe themselves and each other and their feelings of longing and desire. We learn about love through what they say. Here it is the woman who speaks: "My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag."

Traditionally, Jews read the song as about the love between God and Israel, and Christians saw it as about the love between Christ and the church, or Christ and the individual Christian. But these readings work only because passionate, committed sexual relationships are the best image we have for the relationship between God and his people, Christ and his church. The spirituality of the song is an earthy spirituality: it begins with two bodies in a bedroom.

[Psalm 45: 1-2, 6-9](#)

This is a royal wedding song and has all the sincerity and truth that such songs usually have. Verse 7 maintains the distinction between God and the king that is blurred in verse 6: "Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever." God, here, should probably be glossed as "divine king": the Stuarts would approve.

In its preface to CH4, the committee that selected the contents of the hymnary says that it wished to encourage a wider use of the psalms: "it was felt desirable to represent as wide an experience of the psalter as possible, and to offer a selection of psalms which covered the full gamut of emotional expression or subject matter found in the psalter." Apparently, it was not felt desirable to include the full gamut of psalms found in the Revised Common Lectionary: for



that, we must wait for CH5. On this occasion, we may be glad it gives us a chance to sing something else.

[James 1: 17-27](#)

"In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures." An epistle of straw? Scarcely. Without even a nod in the direction of Luther, James preaches a doctrine of justification by grace through faith and then, without missing a beat, tells us what a life of faith looks like.

We are to be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; to care for orphans and widows in their distress; and to keep ourselves unstained by the world. Widows and orphans stand, as traditionally in the Bible, for the most vulnerable members of our society; world here, as often in John, means a world going in every direction but God's.

Look in a mirror, and see how well you measure up. Only then preach doctrine, if you dare.

[Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23](#)

On Saturday 20 June, Vivien and I had our first Sabbath meal in a Jewish home. "Whenever we eat bread, we wash our hands," said our hostess. "Come!" So we did that.

The bread was delicious.

This is a complicated passage, made both less and more complicated by the bits the lectionary leaves out. The main bit missing, notes Tom Wright, is about nullifying God's word through human tradition – at which point he goes "Hmmm".

There are two different points in the passage: clean versus unclean, scripture versus tradition. "But even supposing we highlight the first, omitting verses 9-13, we cannot understand Mark's point without the transition in verse 17, and his own comment in verse 19," says Tom. "Let's put this right before we too end up making a tradition of misreading Scripture." I suppose he's making the same sort of complaint about the lectionary that I made above about the hymnary.

There are also three different levels in the passage: the argument between Jesus and his high-powered opponents ("scribes from Jerusalem", says Mark, a bit like barristers from London –



some of whom also hang out in the Temple); the argument between Mark and his opponents; and what we are to make of both.

Whatever we make of the text, I hope we won't use it as an excuse for Pharisee-bashing. As Matt Skinner notes, the most straightforward bit, if also the most disturbing, is when Jesus explains where evil comes from. It comes from within all those people who bug us; it also comes from within us. Compare [Matthew 7: 3-5](#).

Perhaps the best (relatively) recent discussion of the Pharisees is John P Meier, *A Marginal Jew* volume 3: *Companions and Competitors* (Yale University Press: New Haven & London, 2001). Meier makes three points in conclusion that are worth quoting:

1. "Both Jesus and the Pharisees shared a consuming desire to bring all Israel, not just an esoteric sect or a privileged elite, to the complete doing of God's will as laid out in the Law and the prophets." But they disagreed strongly about what this meant.
2. "If some of the woes against the Pharisees go back to the historical Jesus, then the debate between the Pharisees and himself became at times fierce and vituperative – which is quite typical of the defaming of adversaries practiced in the ancient Mediterranean world. It is especially typical of the ways various Jewish groups attacked one another around the turn of the era." Even today, when my Jewish neighbours argue, they don't pull their punches; in a recent discussion with Scottish Jews in Jerusalem, I was asked, "Are you for real, man?" Well, I try to be.
3. "[We] should bear in the mind that the earliest strata of the Gospel traditions supply no basis for thinking that Jesus' clashes with the Pharisees were the major reason why he was put to death. Indeed, as to both issues and actors, there is a remarkable 'disconnect' in the Gospels between Jesus' disputes with the Pharisees during the public ministry and his arrest and execution at the end of his life."

People who like this sort of thing may find that they like "Divine service and semantics", Yakov Z Meyer's commentary on *Parashat Korach* in [Haaretz](#), 17 June. The fun of Talmudic argument is seeing how they get there; if in a hurry, just read the last paragraph.

Below I give, shortened and slightly revised, what I made of the text 20 years ago.



Sermon Ideas

Fair play for Pharisees

The Pharisees get a bad Christian press. In Luke's gospel, the standoffish Pharisee thanks God that he is not like other people; and we return the compliment. We give thanks that we are not like the Pharisees. They are hypocrites. They are whitewashed sepulchres. Jesus himself says so, no?

Can we understand the Pharisees? This is a specific form of a more general question: Can we understand the stranger? Can we understand those who are very different from ourselves?

Part of our difficulty is that we often read the gospels as though they were the script for a Christmas pantomime. Jesus is the handsome prince – as we say in Hebrew, the Messiah; every time he appears, we clap and cheer. His opponents – and for much of the gospels, these include the Pharisees – are the villains; every time they come on stage, we boo and hiss. But booing and hissing don't help us to understand sympathetically.

The larger difficulty is that in the centuries after Jesus and his first followers faithfully observed the Jewish law, Christianity and Judaism became quite different and quite separate religions. Judaism today is strange to us, and the Pharisees tend to emphasise those aspects of Judaism we find most strange.

We are not always aware of this. We think to ourselves, we have Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in common with the Jews; we have Moses and David and the prophets; what they call the scriptures we call the Old Testament; Jesus was a Jew, and so were most of the followers of Jesus we read about in the New Testament. Surely, Judaism can't be all that different.

But it is.

Since the Second World War, and especially since the 1960s, Christians in Europe have tried strenuously to replace an inherited anti-Judaism with Christian-Jewish dialogue. This is undoubtedly an advance: jaw-jaw is better than genocide. But while the dialogue has helped to change Christian attitudes towards Jews, it is less certain that it has helped us to understand Judaism.



In a fit of exasperation, the American Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner famously denounced the whole dialogue as a failure and even a fraud. Christians and Jews have nothing to talk about, he said. We are two different groups of people talking about different things, and in different ways. We have nothing in common. Neusner overstates the case, but the overstatement helps to underline our difficulty as Christians in looking at Judaism through Jewish eyes.

Even in the first century, Jews were seen as strange. Gentiles thought that it was odd of the Jews to have a temple without a proper idol, and terribly anti-social of them to refuse to worship the gods of Greece and Rome. Gentiles found the Jewish food laws curious, since pork was a favourite meat in Mediterranean countries. The Jewish refusal to work on the Sabbath also attracted puzzled gentile comment.

But Jews were devoted to their customs because, as they saw it, these customs were commanded by the law that God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai. Religion, said the Jewish historian Josephus, "governs all our actions and occupations and speech; none of these things did our lawgiver leave unexamined or indeterminate."

Religion in Judaism was not only festivals and sacrifices, as it was in most of the Greek and Roman world. It included everything. The greatness of the law lay in the very fact that it covered all the trivia of life and of the creation. Josephus thought that Moses was correct in leaving nothing, however insignificant, to the discretion and caprice of the individual. Jewish law brings the whole of life under the authority of God.

Prominent among the experts in the law at the time of Jesus were the Pharisees. Josephus puts their numbers at about 6,000, most but not all of them non-priests. They were known for the precision with which they interpreted the law and the strictness with which they kept it. They developed a substantial body of non-biblical traditions about how to observe the law; some of these traditions made the law more difficult, but others made it less restrictive. According to Josephus, they practised the highest ideals both in their way of living and in their speech.

If they were such shining lights, why did Jesus give them such a hard time?



Part of the answer is he didn't. Often in our gospels, it is not so much Jesus as his followers after Easter, the early church, or the evangelists themselves, who are giving the Pharisees the hard time.

Jesus was crucified in the thirties of the first century. Mark wrote his gospel probably more than thirty years later, just before or just after the destruction of the temple in the year 70; Matthew, Luke and John wrote later still. By the time of the fourth gospel, the followers of Jesus and the successors of the Pharisees were scarcely speaking to each other.

To read about the Pharisees in the gospels is a bit like reading about the Tory party in the *Guardian* or the Labour party in the *Daily Mail* or the Scottish National Party in almost any newspaper south of the border.

But we can't say that the conflict is just the invention of a later generation. Jesus himself disagreed with the Pharisees. He disagreed with them because, like them, he called the whole Jewish people to renewal, but what he and they understood by renewal were two quite different things.

The Pharisees saw the Jews as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation; and they laid all the stress on holiness. The Pharisees wanted to extend into daily life the rules of purity that in the written law applied only to the priests in the temple. They wanted ordinary folk to behave as if they were priests. Hence the Pharisaic stress on handwashing, on purification of cups and vessels, and so on. A key text is [Leviticus 19: 1-2](#): *The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.'"*

None of this is pettifogging ritualism, much less hypocrisy, as Christians have often suggested. But it doesn't make any sense unless you share the specifically Pharisaic understanding of what Jews and Judaism are supposed to be.

And Jesus didn't share it. The purification that interested him was ethical and social purification. In this he stood in one line with the prophets of Israel and – to put my Christian cards on the table – with the most profound intention of Judaism itself.



When Leviticus, for example, ascribes moral laws to the same God who requires ritual purity, what this does is to elevate the status of the moral laws. Everyone in the ancient world thought that God required them to purify themselves and to offer sacrifice; except for the Jews, they thought that everything else had a lower status. Judaism lifted up the whole of life to the same level as worship. For Israel's God, honesty and charity were as important as purification, and justice in social life was as important as – perhaps, even more important than – worship in the temple.

The Pharisees disagreed with none of this, but they still wanted hands to be washed and dishes to be clean. For Jesus, this was missing the point.

To us, Christians living in the 21st century, what Jesus says is self-evident: what counts is purity of heart. It follows at once, we think to ourselves, that the Pharisees, who insist on talking about hands and pots, must be fools or hypocrites. What I have been trying to do, in my clumsy way, is to show that it doesn't follow at all.

Why should this matter? It matters precisely in terms of the point Jesus is making. If we are to be cleansed inwardly, if we are to be purified in our hearts, then part of what this means is learning to understand with sympathy those who are not like us.

God, we believe, breaks down walls of hostility and division.

What could be more ironic, then, than for Christian faith to become a new source of hostility and prejudice? What could be more ironic than for Christian faith to become a new dividing wall, separating us in sympathy and understanding from our sisters and brothers the Jews?



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.

Sentence

God gave us birth by the word of truth,
so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. ([James 1: 18](#))

Collect for purity (!)

Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open, all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden:
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Collect

Almighty and ever-living God,
you are the author and giver of all good things.
Graft in our hearts the love of your name,
increase in us true religion,
nourish us with all goodness,
and of your great mercy keep us in the same;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.



Another collect

Almighty God,
you alone can order unruly wills and affections.
Help us to love what you command,
and desire what you promise;
that in the midst of this changing world,
our hearts may be fixed
where true joys are found;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, forever and ever. Amen. (Book of Common Worship)

And another

O God,
you invite the poor and the sinful to take their place
in the festive assembly of the new covenant.
May your church always honour the presence of the Lord
in the humble and the suffering,
and may we learn to recognise each other
as brothers and sisters,
gathered together around your table.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, forever and ever. Amen. (Book of Common Worship)



The following meditation, morning and evening prayers and blessing have been taken from *Living Stones Week 1 – Chosen*.

Meditation

Chosen before time
as creation was crafted
constellations carved
earth formed
community shaped
covenant forged.

Called in old age
spoken to in dreams
summoned by fire
whispered to in a temple
hand-picked in youth
set apart in innocence.

Beckoned from a beach
taken from a tax desk
gathered from the edges
hailed from despair
lifted into relationship
bought for a price.

Chosen before and for all time,
a dream of the divine,
misfits and prophets
the raw and naive
the faithful and the fickle.
Love the only choice.



Morning Prayer

Here I am, Lord.

Is it I, Lord?

Am I the one You have chosen
to be Your messenger of love today?

To be the witness of Your grace?

To be Your hands and feet and voice
In a careless, stumbling, noisy world?

Do I have a choice?

I will go, Lord,
If You really need me
for I know that You hold me in Your heart.

Amen

Evening Prayer

I have wept today, Lord,
for the dark places.

I have felt the pain, Lord,
of the hard places.

I have offered scraps of humanity, Lord,
in the hungry places.

And I give thanks, Lord,

That You sent me there

as Your light

as Your Word

as Your life.

Send me now, Lord,
the blessing of Your peace.

Amen



Blessing

You are chosen,
choose peace.

You are chosen,
choose justice.

You are chosen,
choose life.

This version of the 'Chosen' meditation has been adapted for a time of responsive prayer.

Leader A God of all Heaven and Hosts,
Before all time began,
and creation was crafted,
before constellations were carved,
and the earth was formed,
before all life was conceived,
and a covenant was forged:

You chose your people, your royal priesthood,
your holy nation.

All **You called us out of darkness,
and into your wonderful light.**

Leader B God of all Power and Might,
you spoke to us in dreams,
summoned us by fire,
and whispered to us in a temple.

You hand-picked us in old age,
called us in our youth,
and sent us out to tell the world of your love:



You chose your people, your royal priesthood,
your holy nation.

All **You called us out of darkness,
and into your wonderful light.**

Leader C Lord Jesus Christ,
whose feet touched our world,
and whose Word has touched our lives
you beckoned us in our brokenness,
gathered us from the edges,
hauled us from despair,
bought us for a price,
and lifted us into joy everlasting:

You chose your people, your royal priesthood,
your holy nation.

All **You called us out of darkness,
and into your wonderful light.**

Leader C And so, Loving God, in this moment of quiet,
we bring before you the possibilities of our lives,
all that we hope for,
all that we plan for,
all that we dare to believe is possible.

Hear us now we pray:

(quiet)



Leader D We give you thanks Lord God,
that you sustain us in your love
even as we turn from your light
or seek shelter in the shadows.

For we are your chosen people, your royal priesthood,
your holy nation.

All You called us out of darkness,
and into your wonderful light.

Amen.

Time with Children

This is a story about a shepherd who, just over a hundred years ago, began to plant trees in a dry and desolate part of France, when the French Alps thrust down into Provence. When he began, nothing grew there except wild lavender. But each night he would soak a hundred acorns in water, and each day when he went out with his sheep he would plant them. In time, he planted 100,000 acorns; of these, 10,000 grew and survived.

He turned from oak trees to beech. He created a nursery of seedlings grown from beechnuts near his cottage, protected from his sheep with a wire fence. He also thought about birches. So that the saplings could grow safely, he gave up his sheep and became a beekeeper, with a hundred beehives.

No one knew what he was doing. But the trees grew and became a forest.

He was visited by a forest ranger who notified him of an order against lighting fires for fear of endangering this natural forest. It was the first time, the ranger said, that he had ever heard of a forest growing of its own accord.

A whole delegation came from the government, and the whole forest was placed under the protection of the state. The trees grew, and everything changed. Even the air. Instead of the



harsh dry winds, a gentle breeze blew, laden with scents. A sound like water came from the mountains: it was the wind in the forest.

God is quietly at work in our world, making it good and fertile and beautiful. God is quietly at work in our lives, making us good and fruitful. God is quietly at work in our hearts, helping us to care for our planet and for other people.

(Source: Jean Giono, *The Man who Planted Trees*, a short story published in 1953, to which I was introduced by John McCulloch, my "student" on a summer placement.)

Musical Suggestions

| | |
|---------|--|
| CH4 134 | Bring many names, beautiful and good |
| CH4 142 | A small thing like a hazelnut |
| CH4 154 | O, Lord my God! |
| CH4 170 | Praise and thanksgiving let everyone bring |
| CH4 177 | All praise for wisdom, great gift sublime |
| CH4 179 | Ye holy angels bright |
| CH4 181 | For the beauty of the earth |
| CH4 192 | All my hope on God is founded |
| CH4 213 | Every new morning |
| CH4 518 | Lift up your hearts! |
| CH4 544 | When I needed a neighbour |
| CH4 592 | Like the murmur of the dove's song |
| CH4 602 | Is it spooky, is it weird |
| CH4 644 | O Jesus, I have promised |

Psalm 45: For sung alternatives, try psalms 1, 4, 16, 27, 34, 42, 50, 51, 62, 63, 67, 69...



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 Páraic Réamonn 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.

