

starters for Sunday

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

31 January 2016

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Dr David Sinclair, Minister of Glasgow: Wellington, for his thoughts on fourth 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](#)

[Jeremiah 1: 4-10](#)

It is traditional, and perhaps inevitable, that the call of a prophet involves resistance, denial, and protest. Jeremiah is no different in this regard from Moses or Isaiah (to name but two). There are at least two sources of such resistance: one is the feeling of personal inadequacy which Jeremiah locates in his youthful age; the other is awareness that what they are being called to say is not anything anyone wants to hear.

They are both good instincts.

The first is good because any of us without a sense of our own inadequacy are likely to be people without much self-awareness, with little idea of how we are seen, or of how we affect the people and the world around us. That is not a good thing for a prophet any more than it is for the rest of us.

The second is good because we need a sense of who is listening, and of how they are likely to react. Anyone who has seen footage of Ceausescu speaking in Bucharest just before his downfall, or of Winston Churchill speaking in the East End of London just before the 1945 General Election, has seen that look of bewilderment on faces encountering hostility when they expected adulation.

There are times when the Church is called on to say prophetic things to people who will not take kindly to hearing them. There are times when ministers are called on to say prophetic things to congregations who will not want to hear or to listen or to heed. There are times when the Church needs to hear things about itself which are difficult – often from the young, from those who the church thinks ought to be there on a Sunday morning, but for whom they think nothing on a Sunday morning needs to change.



When God calls us to speak, we need to be aware of our own limitations. When God calls us to speak, we need to know the resistance our words are likely to meet. When God speaks to us through other (often secular) voices, we need to have the humility to listen.

As I was preparing this I came across this on the [BBC website](#).

"The Church of England and the Church of Scotland are in collapse," says Ms Woodhead.

"The Church lost touch with our everyday life and has become inward-looking rather than being a broad Church for the whole of society. The Churches of England and Scotland have failed to win the hearts and minds of the young for several generations now, while numbers for the Catholic Church are really only holding up thanks to immigration."

[Psalm 71: 1-6](#)

There is a danger here. And the danger comes if we lack discernment. It has too often been too easy for those in the faith to see all resistance as resistance to God, and to fail even to consider the possibility that what we meet might be the resistance of God.

This psalm may be seen as the prayer of Jeremiah – a cry for help and support, a cry for a safe place, even a hiding place, when words are falling on ears blocked to what is being communicated. And ministers will surely have found themselves in similar positions on occasion, found themselves saying what needs to be said, doing what needs to be done, but receiving little or no support, or encouragement, or even understanding.

The writer of the psalm is a youth no longer; these are words written after years of faithful struggle. So we need to be aware of how our words and our deeds are likely to meet resistance long after the times when the problem could be laid at the door of our lack of experience. There are likely to be times when, even in our more mature years, we feel like we are making little headway as preachers, like doors refuse to open, like minds prefer to be closed.



Congregations need to be aware of the effect their resistance (usually passive) has on the ability of their ministers to keep going. Ministers need to be aware of the ability of their people to move, and to find those ‘movers’ who are able to take things forward. And the church needs to be discerning about when, where, and how messages can be received, and acted upon.

But we also need, individually and communally, to have the discernment to be aware of when resistance to the church may actually be of God. In the 1920s and 30s the Church of Scotland was thwarted in its desire to curb immigration from Ireland, in its desire to fight the battles of the Reformation all over again – this time using social control and stigmatisation. The resistance of the government of the day saved the church from an abuse of its privileges. Perhaps there are issues today in which the church needs to hear, in the voices of the society around us, the voice of God calling us out of our ghetto, out of our hiding, and into the broad plains of an all-inclusive way of being.

[Luke 4: 21-30](#)

It was all going so well! And then he pushed his luck. A little comment, maybe meant light-heartedly, got under his skin, niggled him into words unprepared and unscripted – words that spoke of the role of the prophet, and the prophet’s limitations. They are words that speak directly to any who think they have exclusive ownership of God or God’s care; people who think they have the ear and the eye and the heart of God – and that others are beyond God’s love.

And so Elijah and Elisha are called to witness, called to witness to a God who refuses to abide by the barriers humanity, particularly religious humanity, creates. Foreigners, heathens, those beyond the wall, the hearth, the pale, are spoken of in terms that rile the insiders of the faith. ‘We are the people!’ ‘Oh no, you’re not!’ It’s the mentality of the sect, of those who would limit God’s love, limit God’s regard, and limit God. And Jesus reacts with irritation, even anger; and he provokes anger and outrage in return.

It would not, of course, be the last time that a narrow idea of what it means to be ‘chosen’ would be attacked by Jesus in word or deed. His refusal to allow any attempt to define who was ‘in’, and who was not, would continue to threaten his mission and his life.



Attempts to do similar things can and do still threaten the life of the church. Whenever we try to divide the world, or our society, or our church, into ‘us’ and ‘them’ we drift into hearing the siren voice of the sect – the world where everyone agrees, everyone is the same, everyone is like me. It is a dangerous place to live, one which Jesus broke into and broke down. The church of Jesus must always be a place where barriers break, doors open, horizons broaden, and love spreads.

[1 Corinthians 13: 1-13](#)

Elsewhere Paul argues that love is all you need – that love is the fulfilling of the law. In this, probably inserted, chapter of the first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul offers love as the answer to whatever question you may care to ask. Of course the ‘prophecy’ of which Paul speaks here is not like the prophecy of Jeremiah or Ezekiel or Elijah; this prophecy is about speaking in ecstasy, in tongues – just as the ‘knowledge’ is the alleged knowledge of sacred mysteries, the ‘gnosis’ of the Gnostics.

It has many times been suggested that the task of the minister is divided between the prophetic and the pastoral, and that the task of ministry is to find a way of being that incorporates and balances the two. It is not always (or ever?) easy. It is, for example, difficult to speak a prophetic word about war and its evils while members of the congregation have loved ones in the midst of it. But it is important not to avoid a prophetic word just because its hearing will be hard. Avoidance does not bring balance.

The secret, Paul suggests, is love. Love is at the heart of prophecy and pastoring alike. The prophet and the pastor, in our way of doing things, are the same person – and so each task is approached in a way informed by the other. The relationship between the two is as important as the relationship between minister and congregation.

In a sense, the more mature the relationship, the more adventurous may be the preaching; the more mature the faith, the more we can be pressed about its implications for our life and our living. But, like the comments above on Jesus’ relationship with the congregation in Nazareth, the direction of our faith, the direction of our love, needs always to be outwards. As God’s love flows out through Son and Spirit, so the love exhibited by the faithful needs always to be shown to those outside the congregation and beyond the walls.



It is not for the followers of Jesus to display love only among themselves, while lobbing verbal bombs into the streets and into the gatherings of society; rather it is to take the love of God wherever they go, wherever people meet. It is to create a relationship of love so that the prophetic word may have its proper context in which to be heard.

Time with Children

‘What is a prophet? The story of Temple Grandin’

Temple Grandin was born in the United States in 1947. When she was two she was diagnosed with autism, and declared to be ‘brain damaged’. She didn’t start speaking until she was four. When she got to high school she was teased constantly by the other children because of her habit of repeating what she had heard. But in spite of this she went on to a school for gifted children – and gained a whole line of university degrees.

She became famous for her insights into how to look after animals, introducing lots of new ideas. She realised that curved enclosures were much less stressful for animals, and that they could be calmed down by being held very tight – because she knew that that worked for her.

She became a great advocate for animal rights, and for the rights of people with autism. She has become a prophet – telling people new things, teaching people to look at themselves and others in different ways. Like all prophets she started off with people telling her she had nothing to offer, that she didn’t understand, didn’t know what she was talking about.

But like prophets in the bible she had something important to say – and eventually people listened. And the world was a better place because of it.

For more information on Temple Grandin, see [Wikipedia](#), and her own [website](#).



Prayers

Collect

Living God,
in Christ you make all things new.
Transform the poverty of our nature
by the riches of your grace,
and in the renewal of our lives
show forth your glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is alive and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Prayer of Approach

Lord God,
you are the God who calls us
who calls us where we would rather not go
who calls us to speak when we would rather not speak
who calls us to face what we would rather not face.

Lord God,
you are the God whose love goes ahead of us
whose judgement forges new ways
whose voice creates and castigates and cares.

When you call us
we are never prepared
never equipped
never ready.



But still you call us
still you send us
still you depend on us.

So we praise you
for your faith in us
even as we confess
our lack of faith in you
we praise you
for your limitless love for the world
even as we confess
our limiting of that love
we praise you for your confidence
that your people and your world
can respond to your love
even as we confess
our limited hope
our limited faith
and our limited love.

Take our limitations and transform us
speak to us and through us today
make of us what you will tomorrow
and in us
to our constant amazement
be the answer to the prayers of your world.



Prayer of Response

Lord we pray today
for those we are tempted to exclude
from our thoughts and our concerns

...

for every barrier we try to erect
create instead a highway of hope.

For every person who feels excluded
from church or society
make each of us a new hope
and a fresh understanding.

Lord we pray today
for those we have given up on
those who we think of as stuck in a past
we do not share or cannot wait to be rid of

...

for every wall of hostility
our impatience builds
raise up instead a future of faith.

For every person who feels the world
or the church is moving on without them
make each of us a new hope
and a fresh understanding.

Lord we pray today
for those beyond our affections
those whom our gathering forgets

...



for every back that is turned
every sidelong glance that is given
every contact that is spurned
lead us in a longing of love.

For every person who feels
rejected by the church for who they are
make each of us a new hope
and a fresh understanding.



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](#).



Musical Suggestions

Any hymn from the 'Mission and Service' section would fit, for example:

CH4 248	For my sake and the Gospel's, go
CH4 250	Sent by the Lord am I
CH4 251	I, the Lord of sea and sky (Here I am, Lord)
CH4 252	As a fire is meant for burning
CH4 253	Inspired by love and anger
CH4 257	Singing, we gladly worship the Lord together

Also, hymns from the 'Ordination' section, for example:

CH4 681	Send out the gospel! let it sound
CH4 683	Go to the world!

Or from the 'Confirmation' section, such as:

CH4 642	Ye that know the Lord is gracious
CH4 644	O Jesus, I have promised
CH4 646	Forth in the peace of Christ we go



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 Dr David Sinclair 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.

