

starters for Sunday

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

3rd November 2013

Mr Iain Johnston, an elder in Colston Milton Church, Glasgow, offers his thoughts on the 24th Sunday after Pentecost.

How do we remain faithful and hopeful, waiting on God, especially in times of struggle, hardship and pain? And how do we channel that hope and faith into action for justice and change?

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[Habakkuk 1: 1-4; 2: 1 – 4](#)

In the first part of this passage, the prophet cries in despair to God, in common with so many both then and now who long for justice, but who feel frustrated and angry at the corruption and violence seemingly all around. God seems to be remote, distant, indifferent – unwilling to listen and incapable of acting – and the picture is depressingly black.

As he witnesses the injustice and violence in the land, the prophet opens with some hard questions for God; questions which then need to be thought through, even if there is no easy answer to them! These opening questions remind us of the serious soul-searching which goes on in some of the complaint psalms, as the prophet lists his major concerns: violence, wrongdoing, destruction, corruption, perversion of justice. The rest of chapter one – containing God's initial response to this litany of complaints – is hardly comforting! It seems that things will only get worse with the advance of the Chaldeans (Babylonians) who will bring further chaos.

It is the first verses of chapter two which underline our key theme for today's lectionary passages: in working through these questions, the prophet realises himself that he must wait patiently on God's response. God is faithful and his justice will, in time, prevail. We can picture someone, having given vent to his frustration, in a subsequent state of relative calm. He roots himself. He listens. He waits. When God's response comes, the prophet is reminded that there is hope for the future, even if it seems distant. The attitude of those who live by faith and who trust in God stands in stark contrast with those whose greed and pride leads them to depend on the transience of wealth.

Or

[Isaiah 1: 10 – 18](#)

In complete contrast to God's apparent silence and disinterest in chapter one of Habakkuk, here we are left in no doubt about God's anger at the corruption and injustice which prevails in Judah. This time, God is fed up with empty prayers and false religiosity which are not backed up with compassion and care for people on the margins of society. God's pronouncement in this situation is quite clear: in order to be in a right relationship with Him, people's outward lives and actions must bear witness to an inner attitude of heart and mind which prioritises love and care for others. Only then can society as a whole be transformed, when its hallmarks will be those of justice and compassion.



[Psalm 119: 137-144](#)

The longest Psalm in the collection is imbued throughout with a strong sense of the Psalmist's dependence on God in all things; because of his complete trust he is able to remain hopeful through both the highs and lows of his life. In the verses in today's passage, the psalmist has come to a point of deep trust and faithfulness, so that he is able to hold on to the sense of God's presence even in the midst of trouble and despair. This trust enables him to keep searching, to keep digging deeper, to keep seeking more understanding.

Or

[Psalm 32: 1 – 7](#)

The psalmist prays from a deep sense of being forgiven and of being in a right relationship with God. He reflects on those times when he is cut off from the knowledge of God's love through his own actions and unwillingness to change – and uses vivid imagery to convey the sense of self-imposed disconnectedness from self, God and others. By contrast, joy and gladness prevail when people live and act justly, in harmony with each other and with God.

[2 Thessalonians 1: 1 – 4, 11-12](#)

Paul's opening greeting to the church in Thessalonica gives us a vibrant picture of a community of faith, bound together through their belief and trust in Christ, which has come only after a period of waiting. The community's faithfulness and trust, in spite of the difficulties and struggles they have been through, enables them to grow in love and to be an example to others.

[Luke 19: 1 - 10](#)

Encounters with Jesus always lead to new understanding and - hopefully – to growth and change. Here we have the story of one such encounter – an account of personal transformation, which leads to Zacchaeus being restored in his relationship with God and, crucially, with other people. Reading between the lines in the story, a lot of waiting precedes Zacchaeus' meeting with Jesus. Either consciously or subconsciously, Zacchaeus has been waiting for something to change in his life. The encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus stands in marked contrast to the



encounter in the previous chapter with the rich young man, who has lived a dutiful life, but is unable to make the change he knows will bring ultimate fulfilment.

By contrast, when Zacchaeus hears that Jesus is in town, he is intentional about things. He makes a choice – he wants to find out more about Jesus. He acts – he makes an effort – he runs, going towards Jesus. He overcomes a potential problem, not being put off by his height and the crowd in front of him. After the waiting and the intentional effort, he meets Jesus – who responds with equal intention. The old Sunday School song expresses it in this way: “I’m coming to your house for tea.” I like that – the image of Jesus and Zacchaeus doing that most human of things – sharing food and hospitality together – which transforms the meeting into a real encounter. In that encounter, Zacchaeus’ life is turned around and will never be the same again.

Like the older brother in Luke 15: 28, those who watch this transformation are not happy at what they see and are unable to share in the joy and happiness being experienced by someone who has a real sense of what encountering Jesus actually means - the chief tax collector, the one who has become rich at the expense of others, the one who knew something was not quite right with his life, the one who waited for something to change, the one who made a decision and moved to change things - ends up giving away half of what he has and making amends for the way in which he has abused other people.



Thoughts and Questions for a Sermon

As I prepare these thoughts (at the beginning of September), I read the opening words of Habbakuk, and my mind is on a number of issues which both anger and sadden me. I pray for the people of Syria and for the world leaders who are urging different kinds of responses. “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.”

The sense of despair felt by the prophet so many years ago echoes down through the ages. The injustice, tragedy and the human cost of war and conflict are before us once again on our TV screens - and we feel that sense of anger and despair as so many have felt before us. If we feel like that, it is hard to imagine what the people of Syria – and so many caught up in other conflicts – are experiencing.

I think too of people much closer to home whose lives are in turmoil because of welfare reform – people who are quite literally losing their homes because of the bedroom tax and families who cannot afford the next meal and who struggle with the indignity of having to visit a food-bank. As I write, I am returning from an ecumenical gathering in Liverpool and my mind is reeling from hearing the story of a seven year old boy in that great city peeling wallpaper to eat because he was so hungry. I think, too, of a friend in Glasgow who is seeking Asylum in Scotland. When she visits the office of the UK Border Agency in Govan to sign her papers, she is confronted with posters – paid for with our taxes – which tell her to ‘go home’ - and she sees sets of painted white footprints leading her back out the door.

In this day and age, in our country, the sixth wealthiest in the world, a boy peels wallpaper to eat, and someone fleeing persecution is refused hospitality and refuge. Someone said to me recently that the pressures on many families at the moment are like a perfect storm, or ‘it is like having to constantly dodge knives being thrown at you from all sides’.

No matter how awful things might be, it seems to me that this week’s lectionary passages are reminding us of the need to hold on to hope in the midst of everything. We may not have ramparts to stand on, but just like the prophet so long ago, who cries out in despair and who



wonders when justice will prevail, we need to try, through our anger, to get to a place of relative calm, to remain rooted, to listen and to wait and watch for signs of God's spirit moving in the world around us, so that we can journey alongside people in their struggles. Pope Francis expressed this in the following way in a recent interview with America Magazine: "The ministers of the gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people's night, into the darkness, **but without getting lost.**" (my emphasis)

So, some potential issues to explore in the sermon might be:

1. What's the nature of our own personal encounter with Jesus?

- As well as campaigning and working for social justice, have we considered our own attitudes and actions? What changes need to take place within each of us so that we can, in turn, encourage others to live hopefully and work and pray for God's reign in our world? If each of us were to imagine Jesus coming to our house to spend time with us, what would we want to be discussing with him? What aspects of our lives which needed to change would he be trying to make us aware of?
- Zacchaeus' whole life changes following his encounter with Jesus. At a personal level, he has clearly been waiting for something in his life to change. Perhaps he has been curious. Perhaps he has even been hopeful. He seizes an opportunity when it comes. He gains new information, new insight – and is then able to change. His personal change of heart, of attitude, then leads to change in the community around him as he shares what he has with others. The story does not tell us, but we can imagine what impact his actions must have had on others.
- Personal transformation – an inner change in attitude – leads to an outward change in acts of generosity which go on to make an impact on others and transform communities. All it takes is one person. There is a story of a priest in a South American favela who lived in a street filled with rubbish. In the morning he would come out and sweep the bit of the street in front of his house. By the evening, it was dirty again, so he swept it again the next morning. People wondered why he bothered, until someone else started copying him. Soon, the whole street was clean and free of rubbish.



2. How do we listen to other people – and for God’s voice - speaking into situations of injustice?

Before they spoke about justice, prophets waited and listened. They listened for the voice of God – and they listened to the people around them. Only after listening did they have the right to speak up and to speak out about the pressing issues of the day.

- What stories/information can be shared about the big issues which are affecting people’s lives at the moment both at home and overseas? In many communities, there will be people involved in congregational and community life with direct experience of injustice and struggle; in other contexts, how can people be encouraged to find out more and increase their awareness?
- How does God speak in to these situations? How is God bothered that a seven-year old boy has to peel wallpaper because he is so hungry?

3. How can we act in the midst of such overwhelming need?

- The prophet is overwhelmed as he cries out to God; we are too.
- We remember that the world is changed through ‘small acts of kindness’ – ‘am I my brother’s keeper’? Yes. If so, what can each of us do which embodies this truth?
- What programmes of the Church or other groups can we participate in to strengthen collective action? For example, World Mission’s A Place at the Table appeal for Syria? Christian Aid’s Tax Justice campaign?

4. How can we remain hopeful?

- The gathering I attended in Liverpool took place, aptly, at Hope University. The university itself was founded by the actions and friendship of two men – the Anglican and Catholic bishops in Liverpool who built real friendship across religious divides. The city’s two great Cathedrals stand at either end of Hope Street.
- It is often pointed out that Martin Luther King did not say “I have a strategic plan” for changing things. Instead, he shared a dream which offered hope for the future.



- What stories of people remaining hopeful and struggling against the odds can be shared? There are obvious well-known examples like Helen Keller, for example, learning to overcome her loss of sight and hearing, and going on to inspire others. Or Nelson Mandela on his journey from imprisonment to freedom. What stories are there from your own community or congregation which can be shared to encourage others?

Time with Children

Ask the children (and adults) about a time when they got excited about someone special or famous who they were going to see? How did they feel? What was the anticipation and build-up like? How was the actual meeting? Did it live up to expectation? Was it a disappointment? At this point you could maybe tell the story of the King's new clothes –and then contrast it with the Zacchaeus/Jesus encounter – this was real and genuine – no disappointments here!

Or you could arrange for some people to act out the story of Zacchaeus in dramatic form. Checking out health and safety, and with appropriate parental permission etc etc (!), is there a young person in the congregation small enough and willing enough to go on your (or someone else's?) shoulders to give the visual sense of Zacchaeus stretching out above over the crowd to see Jesus? The effort he went to was worth it – his life was never the same again.

Conclude briefly with some questions about the changes Zacchaeus made. Were they easy? What do you think Zacchaeus was feeling like when he was giving half his money away? What do you think the people thought of him? Finally, ask people to think of even one small action they can take in the coming week – an action which could have a beneficial effect on others.



Prayers

Collect

Almighty God,
your servant Abraham obeyed your call,
rejoicing in your promise
that in him all the families of the earth
should be blessed.
Give us faith like his,
that in us your promises may be fulfilled;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Call to Worship

Leader: God, you search us and you know us, you have called each and every one of us to seek you and love you ever more deeply, and so we come to worship you here this morning.

All: Open our ears, Lord, we long to hear you.

Leader: Jesus, come to us, meet us here in this place, stay with us and change us.

All: Open our eyes, Lord, we long to see you.

Leader: Spirit of truth, inspire us always in the ways of truth and justice.

All: Open our hearts, Lord, we long to know you.

Amen



Prayer of approach and confession

God of faithfulness

Conscious of the ways in which your love, and the love of those around us, sustains us in times of struggle, we come before you now in gratitude. We think of times when someone has encouraged us with their words,and we give thanks. We think of times when someone has cared for us in unexpected ways..... and we give thanks. We think of times when someone has listened patiently to our worries and fears.....and we give thanks.

Yet we are conscious too, of the ways in which we have failed to return your radical transforming love, and so we take a moment, here in this place, to think back on the week which has passed:

(pause for silence)

We may have said an unkind word...

We may have acted selfishly...

We may have ignored the needs of those around us...

We may have thought that we were the only ones who mattered...

We are sorry for any way in which we have hurt others and hurt you.

(pause for silence)

As we look to the week ahead...

When we hope to speak a kind word

When we hope to act selflessly

When we hope to open ourselves to the needs of those around us

When we hope we will realise that we're not the only ones who matter.

We pray in the name of Jesus, who taught us when we pray to say... (Lord's prayer)

Amen.



Prayers for others

(suggested response:

Leader: Jesus, stay with them

All: may your presence bring healing and hope

or sing CH4 784 'Come light, light of God' between each section)

Loving God – you keep on looking out for us, you never give up on us, and we give you thanks for your constant love and faithfulness which is the source of our joy and our hope.

On this one day of the week when we take time to free ourselves from the routine and business of everyday life, we pray anew for your healing power.

Across our world there are those who wait and who hope, who long to be reunited with the people and the society around them:

- We bring before you the devastated people and communities of [amend as appropriate: Syria, Israel/Palestine] and all countries torn apart by war, conflict and violence.
- We pray for those who work for peace and reconciliation, for soldiers caught in the midst of conflict and for families who grieve the loss of loved ones.

Jesus, stay with them: **may your presence bring healing and hope**

In our own neighbourhood there are those who wait and who hope, who long to be reunited with the people and the community around them:

- We bring before you people struggling with addictions, people struggling with illness of body or mind, people struggling to make ends meet, people struggling to find happiness because of too much wealth
- Jesus, stay with them: **may your presence bring healing and hope**

In and around our church there are those who wait and who hope, who long to rediscover their faith which seems, sometimes, to have deserted them:

- We bring before you congregations struggling with the business of survival as well as being faithful to the gospel, ministers, elders and others in leadership who are tired and who long for a sense of renewal
- Jesus, stay with them: **may your presence bring healing and hope**



There are some known only to us who wait and who hope, who long to sense your spirit working in their lives:

- We bring them before you now, both those mentioned by name and in the silence of our own hearts:
-
- Jesus, stay with them: **may your presence bring healing and hope**

Like Zacchaeus, may we respond to your love through inward change and outward action.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen

Offering Dedication

God, you gave everything for us. We offer our gifts, praying that they are used in ways which bring about transformation in our communities and in the world, and we ask too, that your Spirit helps each and every one of us to speak out about injustice and to do and give the most we can in the service of others. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Closing responses

Leader: Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength

All: They shall rise up on wings as eagles

Leader: They shall run and not be weary

All: They shall walk and not faint

Leader: Help us Lord

All: Help us Lord, in your way.

Amen



Musical Suggestions

CH4 105	Glory to God above!
CH4 172	Sing for God's glory
CH4 253	Inspired by love and anger
CH4 258	When the hungry
CH4 533	Will you come and follow me?
CH4 542	Lord, speak to me
CH4 543	Longing for light
CH4 565	How can I keep from singing?
CH4 575	Over my head
CH4 710	I have a dream
CH4 721	We lay our broken world
Songs of God's People 106	Those who wait on the Lord
Various	Zacchaeus was a very little man



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. [Pray Now 2013](#) is available now from [St Andrew Press](#). [Revealing Love](#) will be available to purchase from November 2013.



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 magazine [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 Iain Johnston 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.

