

# starters for Sunday

## **Fourth Sunday in Lent**

**6 March 2016**

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank the Very Rev Dr Sheilagh Kesting, Church of Scotland Ecumenical Officer for her thoughts on the fourth Sunday in Lent.

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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](#)

### [Joshua 5: 9-12](#)

This short passage begins in an awkward place. The verse is the conclusion of a section which tells of the mass circumcision of the Israelites, the practice having been abandoned during the period of wilderness wandering. The reference to rolling away 'the disgrace of Egypt' is a clear signal that both the reintroduction of the reminder of the covenant (circumcision) and what this short passage is about, the first ever celebration of the Passover in the Land of Promise, mark a new beginning. Now the people are free. Slavery in Egypt and the wilderness wandering are behind them. Manna is no longer required to sustain them.

The passage does not dwell on how the Israelites procured their harvest on arrival in Canaan. Rather the emphasis is on the faithfulness of God who has sustained them and brought them to this land. Yes, it will take time before they become settled in the land, but it is no longer a distant goal, they have arrived. So they give thanks to God in celebrating the Passover, recalling the grace of God in the past as they acknowledge his grace in the present.

### [Psalm 32](#)

The Psalm is entitled the Joy of Forgiveness. Up to verse 5 the focus is on sin and sinfulness, the effects of which are real and all-encompassing. But there is something that is still more encompassing, that takes in both the sinner and the sinfulness, and that is God's forgiveness. The effect is that sin is covered (v1) or hidden (v5). What brings joy is acknowledgement of the sinfulness. That done, the Psalmist turned from being introspective to focussing attention on others. This joy is for sharing. Attention is also directed to God. Verses 6 and 7 give a pattern – invitation followed by confession of faith which is reversed in verses 10-11, a profession of faith followed by an invitation – to rejoice and shout for joy, an invitation which is taken up in the following Psalm, Rejoice in the Lord... sing to him a new song. (Psalm 33: 1, 3)



## [2 Corinthians 5: 16-21](#)

The context for this passage is set out in verses 14-15, a theme that is returned to at verse 21: Christ has died for all and, therefore, all have died. The inclusive nature of this death has certain implications:

- a) The old ways of judging people no longer apply ('we regard no-one from a human point of view' v 16). There are shades here of the wisdom that is folly in the eyes of the world ([1 Corinthians 1: 18-31](#)). There is now a new way of knowing.
- b) This new way of knowing involves a new way of looking at the world. The context (the use of 'all' in vv 14-15 and 'world' in v 19) suggests the translation 'new creation' in v 17. This is not just a statement about a change within an individual (a new creature). Seeing the world in this way, as new creation, affects the way we live in the old world with all its brokenness.
- c) God is the one who has acted in a way that transforms and renews the relationship between God and humankind. There is here a link to forgiveness in Psalm 32: 2. The juxtaposition of 'us' in relation to the ministry of reconciliation in v 18 and 'the world' in v 19 ensures we think of ourselves in relation to the world, not as superior but as an integral part of that reconciliation of the whole world effected by God in Christ.
- d) A commission is given. To be reconciled to God is to become reconcilers in the world, ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us (v20).

## [Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32](#)

The well-known and well-loved 'parable of the prodigal son'. Some call it 'the parable of the lost son' keeping it in line with the two previous parables, the lost sheep and the lost coin. Others refer to it as 'the parable of the loving father', putting the weight on the loving generosity of the father. Whatever emphasis is given, the story involves three people.

It is worth noticing that, despite assumptions often made, the story gives no details about the younger son's behaviour other than to say that 'he squandered his property in dissolute living'. We can read no more into that than that it was inappropriate and undisciplined behaviour. The fact that the elder son accused him of spending his money on 'prostitutes' needs to take into



account the fact the elder son's jaundiced and bitter attitude. The key message about the younger son is that he ends up in a position that is abhorrent to Jews, that is attending to pigs.

The parable can be cast in terms of recognition. The turning point in the story comes in verse 17 when the younger son recognises his position – he would be better off as his father's hired servant. The father's recognition comes, not from his son's repentance, but from the sheer joy of seeing his 'lost' son return. The son does not even get the chance to articulate his confession of recognition. The best clothing is already called for and the food ordered.

In fact the father has acted in a way that would have appalled his neighbours. A dignified head of the family would not have been expected to run to meet anyone! He would have been expected to enquire about his son's behaviour, to hear his confession and only then offer forgiveness. You can almost hear the mutters of 'cheap grace'.

For the elder son there is no recognition. He does not run to meet his brother. He does not accept his father's generosity. What he says you can imagine any good and loyal son or daughter saying everywhere. He has acted like a slave, has never received even a young goat to celebrate with his friends and the young son is rewarded simply for coming home.

The father does not try either to humour the elder son by offering him his own fatted calf, nor does he try to defend himself and lecture his elder son for his selfishness. When his pleading has no effect, he does not disagree but simply reiterates his own recognition of the younger son but with the preliminary words, 'Son, you are always with me, and what is mine is yours' (v31). The father's love has no limits, it is extended to both sons. 'The generosity lavished on the son who was lost outside the household is now extended also to the son who is lost within the household.'

From [Texts for Preaching, Year C: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV](#)

by Charles B. Cousar, Beverly Roberts Gaventa, James D. Newsome, Jr., and J. Clinton McCann.

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## Sermon Ideas

A linking theme can be found in joy over the power of God's love to restore and renew.

The preacher might concentrate on the faithful love of God and the nature of forgiveness. Jane Williams, with reference to the father's role in the parable, points out how he is 'filled with compassion' (v 20). Thinking of the loss of face already experienced by the younger son in deciding to come home, she reflects on how the father does not allow the younger son to humiliate himself further by making the prepared 'grovelling speech'. Instead he makes the son feel like he is doing the father a favour. 'Does the son recognise that what he needs is not just bread, but also that unfailing love?'

And in relation to the elder son, the difficulty is that of the Pharisees and perhaps also for us, that he cannot believe that his father can love him and at the same time love someone so different from him. (Williams, Jane: *Lectionary Reflection, Year C*, London, 2003, p 51)

If the focus of attention is put on the Epistle and the implications of this 'new creation', it would be a good opportunity to reflect with the congregation on what it might mean to be part of the world-wide church. This link may help: [WCC-inspired Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace](#).

## Time with Children

The Gospel story lends itself to reflection with the children on the father's love in relation to the two sons. Perhaps drawing out the point made above by Jane Williams about how the father is able to love both the sons despite them being so different from each other. With older children that can be compared with our very human notion of fairness, which is a normal reaction to this story!



## Prayers

### Collect

Gracious Father,  
Your blessed Son Jesus Christ came from heaven  
to be the true bread which gives life to the world.  
Evermore give us this bread,  
that he may live in us, and we in him,  
who lives and reigns  
with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever

### Call to Worship

In the name of God,  
**who created us,**  
**who holds us and the whole world in his hands**

In the name of the Son  
**who came into the world,**  
**who reconciles us with God.**

In the name of the Holy Spirit  
**who fills us with eternal life,**  
**who links us with all Christians**  
**and incites us to peace,**  
**we come together to offer our thanks and praise.**



Eternal God,  
Creator of all that is,  
In you we live and move and have our being.  
You have placed us on earth  
and sustained our being through the produce of the land  
and the cleanness of the air we breathe.  
You have made us for each  
to tend and care for the weak  
and ensure a just sharing of the earth's resources.

But we are part of a proud and hard-hearted people  
who hoard what the earth provides  
and seem loathe to share the fruits of our labours,  
who live for today with little thought for tomorrow  
who are afraid to let pain and suffering affect us.  
Incarnate God, you know us in our inner being.  
In your grace you offer us forgiveness  
even before we have the chance to articulate our sorrow.  
You embrace us in all our sinfulness  
and in doing so give us the chance to start again  
to learn from the example you have given us in Jesus,  
who chose the way of the Cross  
that all might know the depth of your love for all you have made.

Spirit of God  
open our hearts and minds  
that we may grasp your forgiveness,  
and forgiven seek to forgive others  
and to live a life of reconciling love  
modelled on the example of Jesus Christ  
in whose name we make this prayer. Amen



*Common Ground gives this prayer of confession which picks up on the theme of being given a new start (Page 496)*

God of all mercy

Give us grace to make a fresh start today.

We know that we have not loved you

with our whole heart,

nor have we loved our neighbour as ourselves.

As we hope to be forgiven,

teach us also to forgive;

and lead us forward in a new life

where neither grudges

nor resentment have a part;

through Jesus Christ our Lord

Amen.

### **Intercessions**

Let us pray for

the nations for the world,

for wise government and careful management of the earth's resources

for peace and reconciliation where there is distrust and war,

for generosity and compassion where there is fear and a hardening of hearts

for understanding and co-operation where there is tension and division.

Let us pray for

those who work with refugees and asylum seekers,

those with little who share what they have

those who are left behind, confused and bewildered,

the stability of their lives ruined

and the doctors, pastors and religious leaders who stay to take care of them.



Let us pray for  
the church as it proclaims its message of hope.  
For its worship and teaching  
that shape it as Christ's body in the world  
so that it shows within its own life  
the reality of the message it is given to share.  
For inspiration through the spirit of resurrection  
and strengthening in faith  
to stand up for justice for all God's creatures,  
to bring reconciliation in the midst of division  
to ensure that the voices of the marginalised are heard in the corridors of power  
and to advocate respectful use of the earth's resources.

And let us pray for ourselves, our families and neighbours  
that we may be welcoming in our attitude to strangers  
forgiving of those who have wronged us  
caring of those who suffer  
and sensitive to the needs of others.

These things we ask in Jesus' name  
and for his sake  
Amen

### **Thanksgiving**

Thanks may be offered for  
God's forgiveness that is offered to us before we ask it  
for the pattern of Jesus' life which affirms the possibility of new beginnings  
for the inspiration of the Spirit  
  
for people and places where we can see signs of the new creation  
breaking into the present bringing relief and hope





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

CH4 21	Lord, teach me all your ways
CH4 87	Lord, from the depths to thee I cried
CH4 166	Lord of all hopefulness
CH4 361	Forgiveness is your gift
CH4 362	Heaven shall not wait
CH4 519	Love divine
CH4 522	The church is wherever God's people are praising
CH4 616	There's a spirit in the air
CH4 635	We now that Christ is raised and dies no more



## 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 i 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 Very Rev Dr Sheilagh Kesting 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.*

