

starters for Sunday

16th Sunday after Pentecost

8 September 2013

Rev Bryce Calder, minister of Kirkintilloch: St David's Memorial Park, offers his thoughts on the sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost.

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Introduction

Today is the sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost. The season after Pentecost is a time to focus on equipping and supporting God's people to be faithful and loving disciples of the Lord Jesus.

Our key Bible Passages for reading and reflection are:

Jeremiah 18: 1-11

Psalms 139: 1-6, 13-18

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14: 25-33

[Jeremiah 18: 1-11](#)

The potter's workshop was a familiar feature of life in Ancient Israel. The skills of a gifted village potter were constantly in demand. It was here at the workshop, as the potter was busy at his daily work, that the inspiration of God came to the Jeremiah one day. [verses 1-3]

As the potter worked, moulding a vessel, he decided that his creation was not quite right. As a consequence, he decided to reshape the clay and start over again. [verse 4]

Jeremiah saw in the potter's actions a dramatic acted parable from God. In effect, Israel was like a piece of clay in God's, the Master Potter's, hand and, at any time, he could refashion his errant creation if he so chose: *"Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done?"* [verses 5-6]. These verses express God's omnipotence powerfully.

As Jeremiah makes clear, how God deals with Israel, or indeed any nation, is dependent upon that nation's response to God's will and direction. [verses 7-11]

Like so many great of the prophetic passages, [Jeremiah 18:1-11](#) contains both words of hope and words of warning. On the one hand, an errant nation that turns back to God can find restoration. On the other, though, a good nation that turns its back on God will be condemned by its action. There is no need for total despair, nor any place for smug complacency.

The passage ends with a warning for Judah - God's chosen people who have strayed from him: *"Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you."* [verse 11a]. Hope is not lost, though: *"Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings."* [verse 11b]. With God there is always the opportunity of repentance and forgiveness.



[Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18](#)

Psalm 139 is a Davidic Psalm, written in the first person singular. It expresses three great truths about God: God is omniscient [verses 1-6]; God is omnipresent [verses 7-12]; and God is omnipotent [verses 13-18]. At a more personal level, the Psalmist talks about a God who knows him [verses 1-6] and who is near to him [verses 7-12], because he made him [verses 13-16].

Although the context of Psalm 139 is not explicitly indicated within the psalm itself, it appears to be a psalm written after a malign accusation from the psalmist's enemies ["... those who speak maliciously..." [verse 20]. No matter what others may claim, God alone truly knows the psalmist's heart: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." [verses 23-24]

Our specific portion of Psalm 139 for today [verses 1-6 and 13-18] focuses in on God's omniscience [verses 1-6] and elements of his omnipotence [verses 13-18].

In Verses 1-6, God's knowledge of us is complete: "O Lord, you have searched me and known me..." [verse 1]. The psalmist finds God's omniscience both amazing and overwhelming: "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it." [verse 6]

In Verses 13-18, God's omnipotence is demonstrated through his creative power: "Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!" [verses 16-17].

The sentiments of Psalm 139 fit well with the thoughts about the omnipotent God contained in [Jeremiah 18:1-11](#). In Jeremiah, he is the Master Potter who holds the nations in his hands. In [Psalm 139](#), he is the Divine Craftsman who forms us perfectly within our mother's womb.

This is an ideal passage to preach on if you are celebrating the Sacrament of Baptism.



[Philemon 1-21](#)

The Letter to Philemon is unique in that it is the only private letter of Paul's that exists. Notice how Paul begins the letter: "*Paul, a prisoner of Christ...*" [verse 1]. There is no claim to apostolic authority as there is in his other letters; this letter is of a more personal and sensitive nature.

Paul is writing to his fellow Christian brother and co-worker: Philemon [verse 1]. He begins his letter by praising Philemon's faith: "*When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith towards the Lord Jesus.*" [verses 4-5].

Paul then moves on to make a specific request of Philemon. As he returns Philemon's runaway slave Onesimus, who has since become a Christian, Paul asks him to welcome Onesimus back with love and forgiveness: "*...no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother – especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*" [verse 16]

Nowhere in his letter does Paul make a legal case for the release of Onesimus. Nor does he attempt to tackle the injustice of slavery as an institution. Paul simply appeals to Philemon's Christian faith and love: "*I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me.*" [verses 10-11]. Paul's careful use of the words 'useless' and 'useful' are a clever play on Onesimus' name – which in Greek means 'useful'. In other words, in Christ the useless person has been made useful; the runaway slave has become a beloved brother.

There is a clear tension in the Letter to Philemon. Although Paul does not explicitly condemn slavery, by his appeal to Philemon's Christian faith, he implicitly undermines the whole slavery system: how can someone be both a slave and a fellow Christian? Sadly, it took the Christian Church many centuries to be brave enough to carry the implications of Paul's words to their radical and logical conclusion.

If you are celebrating the Sacrament of Communion, this may well be the ideal passage to preach on with its powerful call to break down human barriers that often divide and separate us.



[Luke 14: 25-33](#)

Today's reading from Luke's Gospel is often counted among the so-called 'hard sayings of Jesus'. Its call for the disciple of Jesus to: "... *hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters...*" [verse 26] certainly seems harsh and unreasonable.

I suspect, though, that there is a certain amount of hyperbole at play in this passage. Jesus is not asking us to literally 'hate' our families, but to 'love' him more than anything or anyone else. In other words, our discipleship should be radical and not half-hearted: "*Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*" [verse 27].

The two short parables which follow reinforce Jesus' point. The Parable of the Builder [verses 28-30] and the Parable of the Warring King [verses 31-32] both say similar things from slightly different angles. A builder who does not estimate the potential cost ahead will inevitably run into trouble: "... *when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'*" [verses 29-30]. Likewise, a king who goes to war without anticipating the human cost may well find himself defeated: "... *what king going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose twenty thousand?*" [verse 31]. True discipleship costs and we ought, at least, to be aware of the potential costs before following.

Jesus discourse on discipleship is aimed at the "*large crowds*" [verse 25] that are now following him. In essence, he is clarifying what he expects of those who are his disciples. Discipleship involves more than just admiring Jesus, or even travelling with him. Jesus needs people he can count on absolutely. Their first allegiance must be to him; and him alone: "... *none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.*" [verse 33]. This latter challenge was one that the Rich Young Man [Luke 18: 18-29], for one, was unable to accept.



Sermon Thoughts

1. *“Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done?”* [Jeremiah 18:5].

Judgement is not a popular subject; it is, however, a biblical truth. The prophets, Jeremiah included, are often called to warn individuals and nations of God’s impending judgement. In the Bible, judgement is never capricious, but is based upon the principle of justice and there is always room for mercy. The Book of Jonah is a good example of judgement proclaimed, forgiveness sought and hope given. How do we feel about the idea of the judgement of God? Is it a concept we are comfortable with? How do we sense God’s judgements in our own lives, church, nation etc? How can we tell what is God’s judgement and what is not? In the aftermath of the Haitian earthquake in 2010, for example, the American televangelist, Pat Robertson, claimed that the disaster was a result of the Island’s history; what he called their *“pact to the devil”*. A few years earlier he had connected 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina to American apostasy. Not an easy subject to preach on, but well worthwhile.

2. *“... no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother...”* [Philemon verse 16].

In another of his letters Paul wrote: *“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”*. [Galatians 3: 28]. In Philemon, Paul does not condemn the institution of slavery *per se*; he has a more subtle agenda. Rather, he encourages Philemon to look at Onesimus as a fellow Christian and not as a slave at all. In Christ, all human barriers and divisions come tumbling down. Think about all the barriers that have come crashing down in Jesus’ name. What barriers still need to be tacked today? Think about this in terms of our individual lives, our Church life and further afield.



3. “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” [Luke 14: 27].

I remember my old PE Instructor at Hendon Police Training College shouting at us new, fresh-faced recruits: “*There’s no gain without pain!*” The Metropolitan Police Force had no intention of allowing a bunch of unfit recruits out to protect the streets of London. A lot of pain ensued, but the gain was certainly worth it! The things that count in life, like gaining in fitness, usually come at a cost. Likewise, discipleship costs. We cannot truly follow Jesus unless we dedicate our whole lives to the Kingdom of God. Many people admire Jesus and like the sound of his teaching; however, they are not prepared to give up all to follow him. Contrast the story of the Calling of the First Disciples [Luke 5: 1-11] with that of the Rich Young Man [Luke 18: 18-29]. Andrew, Peter, James and John gave up their livelihoods to follow Jesus, so important was he to them. The rich young man, however, clung to his money. Are we prepared to pick up our cross? Or do we prefer to live a safer, more comfortable existence? If we adopt a half-hearted approach to discipleship this leads to us missing out on so much that God intends for us in Christ Jesus.



Children's/All-Age Address

Based on Jeremiah 18

Invite a potter into church [to give a live demonstration] or show pictures/video of a potter at work [several downloads of potters working are to be found on YouTube]. Alternatively, if you have mainly young children, you could give them some play-dough and ask them to make something. Use the potter analogy to talk about the loving God who has formed each of us like a master craftsman.

Based on Psalm 139

Take a baby in your arms [ideal if this is a Baptism Sunday] or show pictures of a baby. Explain how God has made each of us wonderfully and perfectly: *“I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made...”* [verse 14]

Based on Philemon 1-21

Every name has a meaning. Using a Baby Name Book, look up the names of some volunteers and see what they mean. The name Onesimus, the runaway slave in the Letter to Philemon, means “useful”. When he came to faith in Jesus, Onesimus discovered that he truly was “useful” to Paul [in his imprisonment], to his old master Philemon and, most of all, to God. Some traditions say that Onesimus went on to become Bishop of Ephesus. All of us are useful to God. NB You could finish at this point, or, go on to think of some of the useful things that we can do for God.



Prayers

Call To Worship

[From [Psalm 1](#)]

Leader: Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked

Or take the path that sinners tread

Or sit in the seat of scoffers

Women: But their delight is in the law of the Lord

Men: And on his law they meditate day and night.

Leader: They are like trees planted by streams of water

Which yield their fruit in season

Women: The wicked are not so

Men: But are like chaff that the wind drives away

Leader: Therefore, the wicked will not stand in the judgement

Not sinners in the congregation of the righteous

Women: For the law of the Lord watches over the way of the righteous

Men: But the way of the wicked will perish

Leader: **Let us worship God...**



Opening Prayer

Loving God,

We praise you today for the fact that throughout history you have always been with your people, guiding them in your ways:

You led the people of Israel safely through the wilderness under the leadership of Moses.

You sent your Son Jesus to be the Light of the World: to be Our Light.

You inspired the prophets and apostles to write down your truths in Scripture – in order that all people might hear your word - even today.

You fill us with your Holy Spirit: the Spirit who helps and enables us to lead the Christian life.

Father God, guide us in our worship on this day.

May we worship you in Spirit and in truth: giving you all the glory and honour you are due.

Almighty God, our hearts are open to you

And you know all our hope and desires

By your Holy Spirit

Purify our motives and strengthen our minds

So that we might love you and serve you forever

Forgiving God, in recent days we have let you down in many ways: in word, in thought and by our actions.

We are sorry for all the times that we have hurt you: and others – and let ourselves down.

Hear us now as we confess our wrongs before you in a moment of silent reflection.

Those whom God has forgiven are truly forgiven indeed: through the sacrifice of Christ Jesus on the cross.

Thank you, Lord, for your forgiveness and for your opportunity to start afresh:

Renew us now and refresh us by the power of your Spirit.



All these things we pray in Jesus' Name.

Hear us as we join together now in saying the words
of the Family Prayer which he taught us:

Our Father who art in heaven...

Prayers of Intercession

1. In a Guided Intercessory Prayer, using short times of silence, encourage the congregation to pray for those to their right/left, in front/behind them, in their families, town, country, world etc. You can use/adapt this prayer in many different ways.
2. This Sunday is the one nearest to the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks upon NYC. You can use the occasion to pray about violence, terrorism and war in our world.



Hymns/Worship Songs

Like last week, there are many themes picked up in our four Bible Passages for today. The following hymns/songs reflect some of these. Again, I have selected a good number and variety of Hymns to give plenty of choice.

CH4 4	How Excellent In All The Earth
CH4 6	God Shall Endure For Aye
CH4 7	How Long, O Lord
CH4 18	The Earth Belongs To God Alone [Communion Hymn]
CH4 39	God The Lord
CH4 48	His Large & Great Dominion Shall
CH4 51	God Of Hosts
CH4 57	The Lord Doth Reign
CH4 62	Sing A New Song To The Lord
CH4 69	Just As A Father Shows His Love
CH4 79	Teach Me, O Lord, The Perfect Way
CH4 88	Up From The Depths I Cry To God
CH4 96	You Are Before Me Lord
CH4 113	God The Father Of Creation
CH4 116	Loving Creator
CH4 127	O Worship The King
CH4 129	The Lord Is King!
CH4 132	Immortal, Invisible
CH4 137	All Things Bright & Beautiful
CH4 142	A Small Thing Like A Hazelnut
CH4 157	Sing Of The Lord's Goodness
CH4 167	Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah [Communion Hymn]
CH4 181	For The Beauty Of The Earth



CH4 189	Be Still, For The Presence Of The Lord
CH4 193	God Is Love!
CH4 195	Here To The House Of God We Come
CH4 198	Let Us Build A House
CH4 205	Lord, Can This Really Be?
CH4 246	Great God Of Every Shining Constellation
CH4 254	O God, We Bear The Imprint Of Your Face
CH4 259	Beauty For Brokenness
CH4 261	Father Eternal, Ruler Of Creation
CH4 264	Judge Eternal, Throned In Splendour
CH4 266	God The Omnipotent!
CH4 267	Blest Be God
CH4 340	When Jesus Saw The Fishermen
CH4 356	Meekness & Majesty
CH4 357	This Is My Will
CH4 396	And Can It Be?
CH4 402	Take Up Your Cross
CH4 458	At The Name
CH4 469	Restore, O Lord
CH4 484	Great God, Your Love Has Called Us Here [Communion Hymn]
CH4 485	Dear Lord & Father
CH4 502	Take My Life
CH4 505	All That I Am
CH4 508	I Bind My Heart This Tide
CH4 509	Jesus Calls us!
CH4 510	Jesus Calls Us Here To Meet Him
CH4 511	Your Hand, O God, Has Guided
CH4 514	Onward! Christian Soldiers



CH4 520	Ye Who The Name Of Jesus Bear
CH4 521	Children Of God
CH4 533	Will You Come & Follow Me?
CH4 536	May The Mind Of Christ
CH4 550	As The Deer Pants For The Water
CH4 567	Focus My Eyes On You
CH4 572	So Much Wrong
CH4 595	O Breath Of God
CH4 596	Breath On Me
CH4 616	There's A Spirit In The Air [Communion Hymn]
CH4 619	Spirit Of The Living God
CH4 624	In Christ There Is No East Or West
CH4 643	For Me To Live Is Christ
CH4 644	O Jesus, I Have Promised
CH4 655	For Your Generous Providing [Communion Hymn]
CH4 658	Before I Take The Body [Communion Hymn]
CH4 665	Gentile Or Jew – No More [Communion Hymn]
CH4 705	It's God Who Holds The Nations
CH4 719	The One Who Longs To Make Us Whole
CH4 721	We Lay Our Broken World
CH4 802	We Are Here To Praise You



Additional Resources

Resourcing Mission



www.resourcingmission.org.uk is host to Starters for Sunday as well as key mission resources from the Church of Scotland, for download and purchase, and has an online booking facility for Mission & Discipleship events (eg National Youth Assembly). Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. We welcome all feedback so if there is something you'd like to see on this new site that isn't already there, please use the 'Website Feedback' option on the '[Contact Us](#)' page.

Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in Prayers. You may also be interested in looking at our publication **Pray Now 2013**. Please click [here](#).



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** which can be found on our Resourcing Mission website [here](#).

Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for **what** you might preach this Sunday. If you would be interested in looking at our free materials on **how** you might preach, please click [here](#) to see our [Preachers Perspectives](#) web page 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](#) If you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism you may find some helpful materials here

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to Rev Bryce Calder 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.

