Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – 3 February 2019

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Prof Charlotte Methuen, Professor of Church History at the University of Glasgow, for her thoughts on the fourth Sunday after Epiphany.

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Introduction

This year, the fourth Sunday after Epiphany lies on 3 February, the day after the festival of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, once known as Candlemas. In some churches (including the Old Catholic Church in which I serve as assistant priest in Bottrop, Germany), the Presentation marks the end of the Christmas season, and it is only then that the liturgical colour is changed from white to green, and the Christmas tree(s) removed from the church. Even in a church which does not have this liturgical tradition, this Sunday’s readings encourage reflection on our response – both personal, as individuals, and collective, as a congregation and a church – to the incarnation. In this season of contemplating the way the coming of Christ into the world inspires our own discipleship, it may be helpful to ponder the lovely poem by Howard Thurman, “The Work of Christmas”, which picks up the themes of last week’s Gospel passage in ways which resonate with this week’s readings:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers,
To make music in the heart.

Taken from Howard Thurman, *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations* (1985)

This week’s readings remind us of God’s call to each of us to engage with the world (Jeremiah 1: the calling of Jeremiah) and of the need to suffuse our engagement with love (1 Corinthians 13: Paul’s hymn of love), whilst also offering a reminder that responding to this call does not always lead to recognition and appreciation (Luke 4: the prophet not accepted in his own country). In times of trial, God remains a refuge and a source of strength (Psalm 71).
**Jeremiah 1:4-10**

The call of Jeremiah is a moving passage in which Jeremiah articulates his sense of being unprepared and inadequate for the task, and finds himself called by God anyway. This passage stands in a tradition of such calling narratives, and it uses language and tropes that are familiar from other experiences of divine calling in the Old Testament. As Mark Brummitt points out in his “Exegetical Notes on Jeremiah 1:4-10” (*Expository Times* 18 [2007], 503), what we have here “is the report of an inaugural and inaugurating encounter with God coined in the language of an authorizing tradition.” Jeremiah’s self-deprecation, for instance, “though making psychological sense, ... is nevertheless conventional”; Moses (Exodus 3-4) and Gideon (Judges 6) both respond in a similar way. Jeremiah is not asserting his young age, but his lack of confidence; he applies “the well-known rhetorical move in prayer in which pray-ers appeal to their weak or insignificant status,” as Brent A. Strawn puts it (“Jeremiah’s in/effective plea: Another look at n’r in Jeremiah I 6”, *Vetus Testamentum* 55 [2005], 366-377, at 369).

The recognition that this passage draws on familiar ways of talking about encounters with God raises some interesting questions about how in today’s increasingly secular context, such experiences of divine calling can be articulated. Brummitt suggests that “hymns and psalms might be used to give an interpretative context to our own experiences” (503). But what of those who are not familiar with the tradition of hymns and psalms either? What conventions would or could be used to speak of this kind of experience of calling in today’s world?

In her article “Jeremiah 1.4-10: ‘Lost and Found’ in Translation and a New Interpretation” (*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 34 [2010], 351-376), Esther H. Roshwalb suggests that “Jeremiah’s encounters and conversations with God were continuous experiences throughout his life” (355) and that this passage represents “a public declaration of Jeremiah’s authority to follow in the footsteps of Israel’s other classical messenger-prophets” (p.365). That is, what we are offered in this passage is a prelude to an ongoing encounter with God that Jeremiah will continue to experience as a call. We should not be drawn by this passage into understanding calling as a one-off encounter.

**Psalm 71:1-6**

For L. Juliana M. Claassens, this psalm “powerfully exhibits the act of praying to the liberator God in the midst of a situation of extreme vulnerability” (“Praying from the Depths of the Deep: Remembering the image of God as midwife in Psalm 71”, *Review and Expositor* 104 [2007], 761-775, at 761). Psalm 71 draws on other psalms of lament and thanksgiving...
such as Psalm 31:1-3a, Psalm 22:9-10, and Claassens suggests that in doing so, it provides “a powerful example of how prayer may create a space for remembrance” and illustrates the role of memory “in reconstituting oneself in the midst of a life that continues to exhibit threats to one’s wellbeing” (763-764).

Verse 6 presents the image of God as the midwife who took the prayer from the mother’s womb. Claassens observes that the verb used here (which differs from that used in Ps 22:10) is “far from clear” and seems to imply that the prayer was cut or severed from the mother’s womb (767-768). The psalmist looks back to this difficult birth as an assurance that, assisted by God, new life, new beginnings, can come out of traumatic experience.

The theme of being known by God since (before) birth resonates with the Jeremiah passage and both have parallels to Psalm 139. A further link to the calling of Jeremiah is God’s affirmation to Jeremiah (1:18): “I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall.” For Christl M. Maier, Jeremiah himself becomes “YHWH’s stronghold”, representing Jerusalem and the temple, “a person who survives all human and divine assaults” (“Jeremiah as YHWH’s Stronghold [Jer 1:18]”, Vetus Testamentum 64 [2014], 640-653, in title and at 653). The prophet can represent the divine place of safety. Are we sometimes called to do the same?

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

This eulogy for love, now much used at wedding services, offers a reflection on the proper way of existing for the Christian community as a whole, rather than being addressed to married couples or even families. The difficulty of connecting it to the discussions of conflict in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 have led some scholars to argue that it is an interpolation, written by someone other than Paul. However, there is a convincing case for seeing the chapter as an encomium to love, intended to complement and highlight the arguments offered by Paul in chapters 12 and 14. It is love – agape – that will overcome the differences and discord which Paul seeks to counter in those chapters. Moreover, Anathea Portier-Young argues convincingly that the metaphor of being “a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” points to the expectation that musicians would never make music without other performers: “in the biblical tradition, no one cymbal or pair of cymbals ever sounds alone. Their liturgical function is accomplished only in their use together with other instruments and with sacred song” (“Tongues and Cymbals: Contextualizing 1 Corinthians 13:1”, Biblical Theology Bulletin 35 [2005], 99-105, at 104).

1 Corinthians 13 centres on what Stephen J. Patterson views as the “highly crafted set-piece” or “rhetorical gem” formed by verses 4-7 (“A Rhetorical Gem in a Rhetorical
Patterson suggests that Paul and his associates chose to focus on *agape* “because it was of supreme importance to their Christ experience – next to it, faith and hope take second place,” and points out “If we are to take Paul at face value here, his claim is that no other modality – not even faith – is more central to Christian existence than love” (92). This sheds light on other aspects of Paul’s thought. For instance, “Paul associates the experience of the Spirit very closely with love” (see Romans 5:5). Paul feels himself controlled by the love of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:13-15). Justification is through faith, but in Galatians 5:6 and 1 Thessalonians 3:6; 5:8 Paul emphasises that this is “faith made active by love.” Moreover, in Paul’s thought “salvation itself cannot be understood ... apart from love”: victory is assured because nothing can separate the follower of Jesus from the love of Christ (Rom 8:31–39). (Patterson, 92-93) Love, Patterson concludes, “is not a sentimental afterthought”. Rather:

Paul’s fundamental experience of God – whether in religious ecstasy or in community relationships – revolves around the experience of love received and given. He cannot understand God, and especially God working through Christ, apart from love (Rom 5:8). To discover Christ, and to be in Christ, is to allow the love of God to control one’s whole life (2 Cor 5:14). For Paul there is indeed a way that is higher than all others. It is not faith; it is not hope, or righteousness, or holiness. For Paul, “the highest way” is love (93).

A further theme in this passage is the imperfect nature of our knowledge of God, contrasted with the fullness of God’s knowledge of us. Paul’s conviction that “now we see in a mirror, dimly” echoes contemporary philosophical understandings. As Harm W. Hollander points out, “The idea that a true knowledge of God or the divine world cannot be achieved by man on earth was quite common in the Greco-Roman world, not only in Jewish-Christian circles, but also among those of other faiths”; the metaphor of the mirror “was often used to illustrate how God or the invisible deities show themselves to [the human observer] by means of ‘images’ or ‘signs’” (“Seeing God ‘in a riddle’ or ‘face to face’: An Analysis of 1 Corinthians 13.12”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32 (2010), 395-403, at 396-397). Plato’s allegory of the cave teaches something similar. Paul here is clear that full knowledge of God – gnosis – cannot be achieved until “the complete comes.”

**Luke 4:21-30**

There is general consensus amongst New Testament scholars that this is a difficult passage. It presents the response of the people of Nazareth to Jesus’s first act of public ministry to be described in any detail in Luke’s gospel: His reading of Isaiah 61:1-2 in the synagogue followed by the assertion, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” The
congregation is impressed but astounded, for they have known Jesus since He was a child. He is “Joseph’s son.” The ensuing exchange becomes a heated altercation which ends with the crowd wanting to through Jesus from a cliff; however, He walks away from them. Whatever interpretation of this passage is offered, one clear message is the prophetic life is not always easy.

Monique Cuany sees this the underlying question of this text as inclusion. In her reading, Jesus’s comment to the people of Nazareth, “Doubtless You will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’” should be understood to mean “cure your own people”, a reading which coheres with Jesus’s words “And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard You did at Capernaum.’” Jesus, however, points out that because “no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown,” His authority to heal might not be recognised or accepted amongst them, for to them He is simply Joseph’s son. And, He warns them, although there were many widows and lepers in Israel at the time of Elijah and Elisha, “Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon” and Elisha could heal only Naaman the Syrian. (“‘Physician, Heal Yourself!’–Jesus’ Challenge to His Own: A Re-examination of the Offense of Nazareth in Light of Ancient Parallels (Luke 4:22-30),” Novum Testamentum 58 [2016], 347-368). Jesus is clear that His own community will not necessarily take precedence over the needs of others, and it is this that angers the crowd.

Sermon ideas

If there is a theme that links these passages, it is probably (as suggested in the introduction) the need for a prophetic approach to the building of Christian community, albeit with the recognition that the way of a prophet is not easy. It could be productive to explore how this week’s readings offer a response to last week’s gospel, and to Jesus’s proclamation of Isaiah 61:1-2, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” The Luke passage offers one, rather negative, response; the calling of Jeremiah and 1 Corinthians 13 present rather a different perspective, and the Psalm could link them to today’s gospel.

Many preachers will choose to focus on a theme from one of the readings.

- This Sunday offers an opportunity to preach on the meaning of Christian love outwith the context of a wedding, drawing out the theme of 1 Corinthians 13.
The Jeremiah reading presents a useful opportunity to reflect on vocation, and particularly on the ongoing nature of Christian calling.

The Psalm provides material for considering how we respond to God times of trial.

The Gospel reading confronts us with the discomfort caused by a deep disconnect between expectations and their fulfilment.

Another way of bringing the readings together is offered by Joanne Carlson Brown:

Being a prophet is hard work! Jeremiah shies away from the task. The psalmist is beset by foes. And the folks in Jesus’ hometown want to stone Him. Where is all the love Paul sings about in 1 Corinthians? It is there in the never-ending, steadfast love of God that surrounds us from our mother’s womb to the earth’s tomb. It is a love that calls us to do things we feel inadequate to do. It is a love that strengthens us and gives us courage and perseverance in times of trial. It is a love that enables us to speak words of truth to a questioning and sometimes hostile world. Love, indeed, is the greatest of these.

https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/3545/worship-elements-january-31-2016

Time with children

Explore 1 Corinthians 13:12 and the idea of seeing through a mirror dimly:

Take a large hand mirror and dim the glass by rubbing it with a bar of soap. Take a second mirror where the glass is clear. Read 1 Corinthians 13:12. Pass around the mirrors and have the children observe how well they can see in each mirror. Explain that God sees us as clearly as the clean mirror, but often we see only as clearly as the soap-covered mirror. Talk about the value of trusting God when you can’t see clearly what is ahead or why something happens.


Children’s activities might focus on love for one another as individuals, made very differently in the image of God, and on community.

For pre-school children and older: “Lost and Found”

Resources: *a blindfold for each child and a safe room*
Ask children to spread out around the room, then blindfold them. Explain that everyone is lost and can’t see. However, children can call for help and find other children by following the sounds of their voices.

Tell children that you don’t want anyone left on their own, so as soon as they find another child, they should hold hands and try to link up with more children. (Help hesitant children find the others.)

When all the children have linked up together, you may wish to say something like: We all found each other! Good! And God finds us when we are lonely or afraid.

(adapted from https://www.buildfaith.org/8-quick-games/#gref, “Lost in the blizzard”)

• “We are a web”

Resources: a large ball of wool or string (rainbow wool will create a lovely pattern), and a space where the group can sit in a circle

Gather the group and ask them to sit in a circle. Explain to them that you will start off the game with the ball of yarn in your hand. Share something about yourself that makes you special. Some examples might be:

“My favourite colour is …” “I have lost three teeth.” “I’m really good at maths.” “I have freckles.” “Peaches are my least favourite food.”

After you share something about yourself, roll or throw the ball of wool to someone else while holding onto the loose end. The group member who catches the ball of wool shares something special, then rolls or throws the ball to another person, holding on to the strand of wool. Continue this pattern until everyone has had a chance to speak at least twice, or the wool runs out, and you have created a giant web. Once the web has been created, have everyone gently set it down on the ground. Take the time to look at the web together. You might talk about the different shapes you see and how fun it is to know that by sharing all different things about yourselves, you were able to create such an amazing web!

(adapted from https://homefrontmag.com/string-game-we-are-a-web/ )

• “Hula-hoop challenge”

Resources: one hula-hoop (or two)
Ask the group to stand in a circle and hold hands.

Place the hula-hoop over two people’s interlocked hands so it cannot escape the circle.

Explain that the goal of the game is to get the hula-hoop all the way around the circle without anyone letting go of their teammate’s hands.

Have group cheer each other on.

Once the group have completed this once, discuss the successes and challenges and then try again.

Divide large groups into two each with their own hoop. Make this more complicated by using two hoops, or one larger and one smaller hoop.

(https://www.playworks.org/game-library/hula-hoop-challenge/)

• “I know you! And you know me!”

For groups of children who all know each other and are confident in writing and reading:

Resources required: *A4 or A3 sheet of paper and pencil or pen for each child*

First, divide the children into groups of 4 or 5. If possible, each group should sit at a separate table, or at opposite ends, etc., then tell the children to look around at everyone in their group, and ask them to write the first name of each group member down the left-hand side of their piece of paper. Order is not important. Then, ask them to write down something nice about each person next to their name. What they write must be positive, not hurtful or degrading. No one is going to check their spelling or grammar.

Example:

Mark    Always dresses well
Alyssa  She is nice to everyone
Jennifer Is very clever
Andrew  Can name the books of the Bible
Erica   Very good at football

Once everyone has had a chance to write down something nice about each person in his or her group, ask them to pass their paper to the person on their right. Then, everyone is to
find their name and read the comment written about them. After a few moments, get the children to pass the paper again to the person on their right, and let everyone read what comment is written about them on this sheet. Repeat this until the paper is returned to the original author. The children will know what good things others think about them, and sometimes this may be a surprise.

You could ask children to think about what God knows about them that no one else does.

Explain to the children that God is love, and Jesus is the example we have of love. God and Jesus see people for who they really are. With Jesus’s help, we can also see people the same way Jesus does, with love, compassion, kindness and concern.

(adapted from https://www.kidssundayschool.com/gradeschool/activities/i-know-you)

• “Love in action” (discussion for older children)

Ask one of the group members to read the description of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a. Discuss some ways the group members might put love into action. For example, they could share a sandwich with a child who doesn’t have a lunch, or could help a next-door-neighbour carry in their shopping. Ask each child to choose one way to show love in action during the week and report on the experience next week. In preparation for the coming week, each child could make an “I’m love in action” badge to wear.


Prayers

The 2016 Abingdon Worship Annual (edited by Mary J. Scifres and B.J. Beu) offers prayers relating to this Sunday’s readings (adapted from https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/3545/worship-elements-january-31-2016):

Call to worship – Jeremiah 1, Luke 4
Come! Hear the call of God:
“Speak of Me to My people.”

But we are just ordinary folk.
Who will listen?

“I will give you the words.

Scottish Charity Number: SCD1353
www.churchofscotland.org.uk
I will always be with you as you speak
My words of truth and justice and love.”

We gather to worship You,
to praise You for Your loving presence,
and to be strengthened for the calling
You have given us.

Opening prayer – Jeremiah 1, Psalm 71, 1 Corinthians 13, Luke 4
O God,
in the midst of the cacophony of voices
that crush our spirit and deny our calling,
voices that say,
“Who do you think you are?”
we come to hear Your voice of affirmation;
we come to hear Your voice
calling us to be and do
what You have called us to be and do.
Let this time of worship quiet our fears,
soothe our bruised souls,
and energize us for ministry
in and with Your beloved world.
Let faith abide.
Let hope abide.
Let love abide—
here in this sanctuary,
here in our community,
here in our world,
but most of all, here in us. Amen.

Prayer of confession – Jeremiah 1, Luke 4
God, who shapes the course of history,
it is so hard to be a prophet.
We’re just ordinary folks.
What do You expect us to do?
Who will listen to us anyway?
Even if they do, they’ll only get cross.
You’d do better to find someone else—
someone older, someone younger,
someone more articulate, someone with more courage, someone with more faith. But still we hear our call and Your promise. Forgive our feet of clay—when we try and evade Your call, when we make excuses, when we doubt Your presence, when we reject Your prophets, when we reject ourselves. In the opportunities and challenges in our lives, help us see that You are there, and help us respond in faith, hope, and love.

Words of assurance – Psalm 71
God is our rock and our fortress. In God we find our hope and our strength. We are always surrounded by God’s forgiving love, a love that has known us from birth and will never leave us.

Passing the peace – 1 Corinthians 13
The love of God surrounds us.

We rejoice in that love.

Let us greet one another in that love, in that hope, in that abiding faith.

Response to the word (Jeremiah 1, 1 Corinthians 13)
Hear God’s word: the words of call, the words of promise, the words of faith, the words of hope, the words of love. Live God’s word—the words of life.
Prayer of offering – Jeremiah 1, Luke 4
Gracious and loving God,
receive our gifts of self and substance.
They have belonged to You
since our very beginning.
We give them freely, joyfully, prayerfully.
With them we praise You.
With them we celebrate the great power
that is love:
a love that abides always,
a love that radically transforms,
a love that makes us whole.

Benediction – Jeremiah 1, Psalm 71, 1 Corinthians 13, Luke 4
Go forth, celebrating faith.
Go forth, celebrating hope.
Go forth, celebrating love.
Go forth to be the transformed people
that God calls us to be.
Go forth to transform the world:
in times of prosperity,
and in times of disbelief, hostility, fear, and rejection.
Go forth with the knowledge
that you are always surrounded
by the presence of our steadfast, loving God,
our rock and our redeemer.

Prayer of commitment – Holley Gerth, inspired by 1 Corinthians 13
Lord, because love is patient...
Help me to be slow to judge, but quick to listen,
hesitant to criticize, but eager to encourage,
remembering Your endless patience with me.

Because love is kind...
Help my words to be gentle and my actions to be thoughtful.
Remind me to smile and to say “Please” and “Thank You”
because those little things still mean so much.
Because love does not envy or boast, and it is not proud...

Help me have a heart that is humble and sees the good in others. May I celebrate and appreciate all that I have and all that I am, as well as doing the same for those around me.

Because love is not rude or self-seeking...

Help me to speak words that are easy on the ear and on the heart. When I’m tempted to get wrapped up in my own little world, remind me there’s a great big world out there full of needs and hurts.

Because love is not easily angered and keeps no record of wrongs...

Help me to forgive others as You have forgiven me. When I want to hold onto a grudge, gently help me release it so I can reach out with a hand of love instead.

Because love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth...

Help me stand up for what is right and good. May I defend the defenceless, and help the helpless. Show me how I can make a difference.

Because love always protects and always trusts...

Help me to be a refuge for those around me. When the world outside is harsh and cold, may my heart be a place of acceptance and warmth.

Finally, because love always perseveres...

Help my heart continually beat with love for You and others. Thank you for showing us what the word love really means. Amen.

Musical suggestions

- CH4 192 – “All my hope on God is founded” – draws on Ps 71 but addresses of the themes of this week’s readings.

- CH4 251 – “I the Lord of sea and sky” – a hymn of calling and commitment.

- CH4 795 – “Take, O take me as I am” – a chant reflecting on vocation and change.

- CH4 519 – “Love divine, all loves excelling” – Charles Wesley’s celebration of divine love.

- CH4 489 – “Come down, O love divine” – reflecting both divine love and God’s calling.

- CH4 390 – “Open are the gifts of God” – another hymn reflecting on love’s gifts, which might be enhanced by the inclusion of the original opening verse:
  Morning glory, starlit sky, soaring music, scholars’ truth, flight of swallows, autumn leaves, memory’s treasure, grace of youth.

- CH4 348 – “Praise the One who breaks the darkness” – a celebration of the liberating presence of God in the world and God’s call to us to join in that mission

- Luther’s “A mighty fortress is our God” fits well with Psalm 71, but is not in CH4.

- For children, the magic penny song offers a lively reflection on the importance of sharing love:

  Love is only something if you give it away, give it away, give it away.
  Love is only something if you give it away, you end up having more.
  Love’s just like a magic penny, hold it tight and you won’t have any.
  Lend it, spend it, and you’ll have so many they’ll roll all over the floor.
  Love is only something if you give it away, give it away, give it away.
Love is only something if you give it away,
you end up having more.
Money’s dandy and we like to use it,
but love is better if you don’t refuse it.
It’s a treasure and you’ll never lose it
unless you lock your door.
Love is only something if you give it away,
give it away, give it away.
Love is only something if you give it away,
you end up having more.