

Starters for Sunday

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

31 August 2014

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Jenny Adams, Minister of Duffus, Spynie and Hopeman, for her thoughts on the twelfth Sunday after Pentecost.

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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](#)

Exodus 3: 1-15

Since last week's Exodus text, Moses' life has taken a bit of a turn. Having grown up in the Egyptian court, he still identifies with the Israelite slaves as "his people," and in an impulsive act of retribution for their oppression, has killed an Egyptian. Fleeing, he has made a new life in Midian, and so by the beginning of chapter 3, Moses – the Hebrew-born adopted son of the Egyptian Pharaoh's daughter – is now acting as a shepherd for his Midianite father-in-law.

Moses comes to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God, with the flock. Mountains are often associated with God's self-revelation, and the implication is that this Mt Horeb may be a holy place for the Midianites too. The Exodus story has some references to Horeb, others to Sinai, often overlapping. Sinai becomes associated with God early in the tradition, found in Deuteronomy, Judges and the Psalms – and there are hints of wordplay between Sinai and the Hebrew for bush. Horeb means "wilderness," leading to suggestions it may not have been a specific mountain. In any case, there is a combination of traditions and conventions, and different possible locations, associated with the mountain revelations on Horeb/Sinai.

On the mountain, Moses has a life-changing encounter with the living God – at the bush which was burning, but not burning up. Once Moses' attention is grasped (with an interesting parallel to 2:25 where we are told God has noticed the Israelites' suffering), Moses is called by name by God. He is afraid and he recognises the holiness of the God who is addressing him so directly.

After identifying himself in terms of Moses' Hebrew ancestors – for they are on a mountain that may well be associated with other gods – God shows his compassion for his people, and promises to deliver them from their oppression into a good land (one that currently belongs to others). This poses questions (that Moses does not ask) about why God only just seems to have noticed the suffering, and about the occupation and oppression of those whose land has just



been promised. But in the context of this people's story, it is a promise of liberation – and Moses is the one who is to be sent to Pharaoh to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses is promised God's presence, and a sign –the people will come back to the mountain of God to worship.

Moses' questions then come, asking about who this God is. How will he answers questions about God? God offers three responses: "I AM WHO I AM," "I AM," and "The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." The last answer connects the past and the future, in that the God of Moses' ancestors is also about to redefined for future generations as the God who delivered his people out of Egypt.

As for YHWH, "I AM WHO I AM," that is an answer that has provoked centuries of discussion. Some suggest it is brushing off Moses' question, as it was believed that no-one should pronounce the name of God. There is general agreement that it is a complex form of the verb "to be" – which might tie into acknowledging God as the Creator, or the God who is beyond all creation, the ground of all being.

The "I am" phrase is also used by Moses here. When first called, he responds "Here I am." When told of his commission, he asks, "Who am I?" It is a phrase that is then found frequently in John's gospel, attributed to Jesus and the new revelation of God through him.

[For Reference (re mountains and YHWH): John J. Collins, "Introduction to the Hebrew Bible"]

[Psalm 105: 1-6, 23-26, 45c](#)

This Psalm rehearses the story of God's faithfulness to Israel, from the covenant made with Abraham, through the story of Joseph, to the whole Exodus story – with God in control of everything throughout. The sections we read are the opening verses of praise, then the part that refers to Exodus 1-3, with a final part-verse of praise.

The opening section (v1-6), directs the people both to God - in thanksgiving and praise, in seeking to know the presence of God - and to others - to bear witness to all the wonderful things God has done. It looks back, remembering the past deeds of God, and looks forward to the continual presence of God. Verse 6 connects the people who are praising God with Abraham and Jacob, and therefore to the story of God's deeds that is told in the following verses. The people



are exhorted to call on God's name – probably not a reference to a literal name, as discussed by Moses at the burning bush – but possibly an interesting area to explore, as a phrase used frequently in church.

Verses 23-26 summarise the situation at the very beginning of Exodus – Israel (the people, or Jacob?) in Egypt, and connected to even earlier stories by referring to it as the land of Ham. All that comes to pass for the Israelites and in the hearts of the Egyptians is attributed to God – as is the choice of Moses and Aaron as God's agents.

[Romans 12: 9-21](#)

This section explores further where the self-examination and transformation described in 12: 1-8 may bring us – as individual Christians, and as member of Christ's body, the Church. Verse 2 promises the hope of transformation that we might discern what is good, in verses 4-8 we are reminded of the gifts God gives. And from verse 9 we find more of what that good will look like in our transformed lives.

The virtues described are nearly all ones that concern our relationships with others. Some may be read as relating particularly to the inter-relationships of those within the church (eg v10, 13a, 16), but most stretch the love wider – loving enemies, strangers and those who persecute (all of whom may be inside or outside the church). Some of this seems to harness the competitive instinct, or at least the accountability, of community (eg v13c). Some is concerned with how things appear to witnesses (eg v17). And the motivations described in verse 19 & 20 - that vengeance should be held back, to let God's wrath have room to act, and that enemies should be loved in order to “heap burning coals on their heads” – do not make for very comfortable reading alongside the very positive encouragements to love. But perhaps they give reasons we messed-up humans will find easier to accept in the midst of evil, which enable us to leave judgement to God and get on with that main task of loving.

Love, good and blessing are strongly contrasted with evil, persecution and cursing, and all the teaching details different ways to live out love in practice alongside other people (who can be terribly difficult to love). All of this is quite counter-cultural within Roman society – social status is to be ignored, honour is to be shown to all, vengeance is to be put aside, strangers and



enemies are to be welcomed and offered hospitality. And it all comes quick and fast, as short phrases with great energy, explicitly and implicitly invoking zeal and ardent service.

Another way of reading verses 9-13 is as “Genuine love is...” with the subsequent verses articulating some of the characteristics of that genuine love, similar to 1 Corinthians 13. [For Reference: Christopher R. Hutson, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4]

[Matthew 16: 21-28](#)

This passage follows on from Jesus’ discussion of his identity with his disciples at Caesarea Philippi. Simon Peter has named him as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. And verse 21 tells us, “From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering... and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” While Peter has had a revelation that Jesus is the Messiah, that is not a term to be bandied about, when the disciples have no real concept what that actually means in Jesus’ life.

First-century Judaism’s many strands held varying degrees of expectation of the imminent coming of the Messiah. But they all expected a Messiah who would usher in a new era under God, overthrowing those who were oppressing the people of Israel (at that time, the Romans), setting them free to live and worship God. Those expectations did not really match with a carpenter’s son from Nazareth, and his motley crew of fishermen, tax collectors, rebels, and women. Those expectations did not include arrest, torture, or shameful execution by the occupying forces.

So the writer of Matthew’s gospel shows us Jesus trying to open his disciples minds to different possibilities for the Messiah – for even if the label was correct, the ideas they had were not. Jesus needed to teach a new understanding, for God’s love would not overcome evil through displays of power and might, but through being prepared to be powerless, to suffer the worst human actions, and face death. Only then could that worst be overcome. This passage marks the turn of Matthew’s gospel towards Jerusalem and the cross.

Poor Peter, perhaps still flush from his great declaration and Jesus’ commendation of him and his words, is shocked and appalled. As a friend and teacher, he doesn’t want anything to happen – a very natural reaction to any bad news shared (how often do we try and deny a bad diagnosis



or prognosis?). And as the Messiah, this path can't be right. Then, in place of the commendation of verse 17 onwards, we find Jesus' delivering a stinging rebuke to Peter. Peter is acting as Satan – the deceiver. Peter is deceiving himself and the disciples – and Peter offers an argument that might have been very tempting for Jesus to hear, as he prepared himself for the road ahead. Peter goes from being a rock to a stumbling block.

Jesus then continues to upturn conventional expectations – this time, for his followers. Goodness and righteousness will not earn people prosperity, but will bring them to struggle and suffering. Worldly progress and power are not the measure of success or true life. These are words that will have been hugely reassuring to the struggling readers of Matthew's gospel. They may be hugely challenging to us.

Verses 27 and 28 then look further forward – beyond Jesus' life, death and resurrection, to a future day of judgement (as envisioned in Daniel 7:13), where the final measure of people's lives will be made, against the true measure only God knows. Verse 28 suggests that time was coming soon – which was definitely the expectation of the early church.

In last week's text, v13-20, Jesus is referred to as "The Messiah" (in Greek "The Christ"), "the Son of the living God," and this week we add to those "the Son of Man," (v27-8). All of these labels have huge amounts of scholarship and discussion associated with them.

Sermon ideas

Here are 2 possible strands to explore:

1. Identity questions

In the Exodus story, we find Moses asking questions of himself and of God. Moses – Hebrew-born; brought up in the Egyptian court; a murderer; now married to the Midianite daughter of a (non-Israelite) priest, living the life of a pastoralist. No wonder he asks, "Who am I?" - which can be seen as a general question, as well as querying his fitness for the job God has just given him.



Moses also asks the identity question of God, getting those big answers. God of the ancestors, of the past promises and actions, but about to become the God who liberates his people. And “I AM” – plenty to discuss there! And how does that link to calling on the name of the Lord, as Psalm 105 does?

Psalm 105 offers a shared identity, as God’s chosen people, grounded in their founding story of the Exodus. That shared identity is described in a different way in Romans 12, where it is the mutual love and the service that reaches out that should define a community of God’s people. There is lots of detail of what that might look like, all of which is relevant and challenging.

In Matthew, along with last week’s readings, we find lots of questions about the identity of Jesus – in the context of his followers in that time and place, and in the context of all time and beyond time. There are the many names given to Jesus – Messiah/Christ, Son of the living God, Son of Man. There is also an identity crisis for Peter, who has gone from the Rock on which Jesus’ church will be built, to the Satan who is a stumbling block to Jesus.

2. What do people see?

There are questions in many of these passages about what people see and hear, and what that tells them about God and God’s people.

In Exodus, we find Moses worrying about how he will answer questions about God and the mission God has sent him on. What will he say about God? There are answers that look back to ancestors, while also looking forward with hope and promise.

Psalm 105 urges the people to address their praise to God, but also to bear witness to all that God has done for them, now and through their salvation history. There is a wider audience for all God’s activity on behalf of the people of Israel.

In Romans, one reason to live out genuine love for friend and stranger is for that to be seen as honourable, noble and hospitable. There is a witness to others in living out love. And that life of love sees beyond any status or enmity, to care for everyone, content to leave looking with judgement to God’s wiser vision.



In Matthew, Jesus is trying to turn upside-down the rules people apply when they observe his life, and the life of his followers. Seeing a man die in agony on a cross will be transformed from a sign of shame and failure into a sign of new life and hope. Seeing Jesus' followers denying their own needs, in order to serve God and other people, will be a sign of true discipleship. What God sees and will judge by is very different from the status and standing of a world obsessed with power and prosperity.

Reflection – In “Dandelions and Thistles: Biblical meditations from the Iona Community,” published by Wild Goose Publications, there is a meditation by Jan Sutch Pickard, offering a reflection by Peter on being called both “Rock and stumbling block”

Prayers

Collect

Almighty and ever-living God,
you are the author and giver of all good things.
Graft in our hearts the love of your name,
increase in us true religion,
nourish us with all goodness,
and of your great mercy keep us in the same;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Prayer of approach & confession

God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,
God of Peter, John and Mary,
God of all people and peoples,
we come to you
together, in this place, today,
to join in the worship of all your people.



God of many names,
Creator, Lord, “I am,”
Son of God, Messiah, Jesus,
we all come to you,
bringing our names and stories and histories,
trusting you know and love us all.

God of diversity and unity,
Father, Son & Spirit,
we come, confessing our divisions,
admitting our failure to love each other,
offering you our damaged world.

God of all love,
that love that crosses time and space,
that never-ending love for all your creation,
you meet us here,
and through your love you forgive us and make us new,
ready to listen and learn and love,
through our many names and stories and lives.

God of Abraham, God of love, our God,
we come.
Accept us, our selves, and our prayers,
which we offer trusting in your Son, Jesus,
Amen



Time with children

Labels/Expectations

Preparation: take some tins of food and swap labels about – e.g. mince, baked beans, fruit...

Offer the children something tasty to eat. Then get out tin(s) labelled fruit/mince/beans, offer them it. Open & put contents into a bowl to see/share.

Is it what we expected? What did the label say? Did the label match expectations?

Jesus was called the Messiah – the Christ – by his followers. The Messiah was going to be God's chosen one who'd lead them all in overthrowing the Romans who were occupying their land. But while they got the label right, Jesus had to show them that it meant something very different. It was about living beside us, being prepared to suffer and die with us and for us, it was about love, not about power.

(There is a more complex version of this, where tin labelled "dog food" has mars bar & jelly concoction to look like dog food, though tastes good. For just looking at whether something is what we expect it to be, probably not necessary to go those lengths!)

You could do something similar in mixing up name labels or size labels on items of clothing.

Identity/Who are you? – last week or this

Play 20 questions – depending on ages/confidence of children, with them asking or answering questions or both – 20 questions, Yes/No answers, to try and identify what you're thinking of.

20Q electronic game – there is an electronic version, where a wee computerised thing asks the questions of you, could get the congregation to choose something, read out and answer the questions together, see if the game gets it right.

Guess Who game – children's game, where by process of elimination, you have to identify the character the other person has – needs older children who get the concept of elimination – or teams of mixed groups of children.

Pictionary-type drawing game – get volunteers to start drawing an object named on a card, others have to identify what it is they are drawing.



All these raise questions of who we are. Which link in to the conversations Jesus had with his disciples; which link in to the roles and life within the church in Romans 12; which link to Moses and his questions about who God was.

Musical suggestions

CH4 114	O threefold God of tender unity
CH4 115	Love is the touch of intangible joy
CH4 132	Immortal, invisible, God only wise
CH4 133	Source and Sovereign, Rock and Cloud
CH4 134	Bring many names
CH4 187	There's a wideness in God's mercy
CH4 251	I, the Lord of sea and sky
CH4 252	As a fire is meant for burning
CH4 355	You, Lord, are both Lamb and Shepherd
CH4 356	Meekness and majesty
CH4 430	Christ has risen while earth slumbers
CH4 521	Children of God, reach out to one another!
CH4 533	Will you come and follow me?
CH4 641	Seek ye first the kingdom of God
Songs of God's People 84	O Lord, all the world belongs to you



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. [Revealing Love](#) is available now 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 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 the Rev Jenny Adams 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.

