

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost – 21 October 2018

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Jock Stein, retired Minister, formerly of Tulliallan and Kincardine, for his thoughts on the twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost.

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Introduction

Unless this Sunday is chosen as Harvest Sunday, probably with different readings and hymns, it may seem 'just another Sunday'. There is great virtue in this down to earth succession of 'seventh days' or 'first days', depending where you pitch them, and we do not need a special theme to trump the great themes of the Bible that take us through the Christian year. While readings from Hebrews span seven Sundays around this time of year, the obvious continuity is with Mark's gospel, and you may well have been preaching on Mark for several Sundays already.

All that said, there is no reason why worship should slavishly follow a single pattern. Provided there is a backbone of liturgical structure, such a backbone can be flexible rather than fused into a rigid form which may soon show sign of *rigor mortis*. And however free or fixed our format, without the breath of God it will be a withering, not a life-giving experience.

[Job 38:1-7 \(34-41\)](#)

Because the lectionary next week jumps right on to Job 42, you might consider having a little 'action' as follows:

The leader reads verse 1, then two other readers (two to signify the omnipresence of God in the storm), read verses 2-6, directing their reading towards the back or sides of a fourth person, who is sitting hunched up, facing the congregation.

The fourth person then says (or reads) Job 40.3-5.

The leader then reads verse 7, which puts the reading properly in context (you could also add verses 34-41, or indeed more verses from chapters 38-41, to the drama).

Bonhoeffer, commenting on v.7 in *Life Together*, says, "God has prepared for himself one great song of praise throughout eternity, and those who join the community of God join in this song."

Job is not surprisingly presented as the drama of undeserved suffering, and the agony of such a sufferer. Here is one of the rare verses which lifts us above such misery into the joy of a creation restored to its original purpose.

The reference to ‘pillars’ in v.6 indicates a pre-scientific world view, as when we speak of ‘going to the four corners of the earth’, or ‘the sun rising’ – it makes no difference to the meaning of the text. There is a lot of poetic language in the Bible, especially the Old Testament, but that is no reason to think it is ‘just poetry’. Divine revelation wears many kinds of clothes.

Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c

This melds beautifully with the Job reading, and there is no reason why a piece of modern poetry should not be added at some point in the service (see under resources).

Psalms like these were probably composed and fitted into the psalter when the Jews were in exile in Babylon. It’s striking how in this psalm God ‘the cloud-rider’ is distinct from the creation, but related to it (as in Genesis 1), whereas other religions of the time would have seen God as either ‘tied up’ with it (so that creation was sacred) or else not involved at all, leaving people to worship local or even man-made gods. It was this Judaeo-Christian view of God which encouraged the development of modern science and an ‘open’ world view which neither banishes God nor makes God dependent on any one scientific theory.

There is an Egyptian ‘hymn to the sun’ from this period. Egyptians were often sun-worshippers. Do you know the dramatic story of Pachacutec the Peruvian emperor? The Incas traditionally worshipped the sun, but age 40, Pachacutec asked to be left on an island in Lake Titicaca for three days. At the end, he summoned all the priests and said, “I have observed the sun each day coming up and going down in a fixed way. If the sun really had been God, he would have roamed all over the sky. There must be Another.”

Isaiah 53: 4-12

Jews would argue that this ‘servant song’ is about Israel. They are correct – but it is not *only* about Israel, since there is one Jew who fulfilled what is written here on behalf of Israel, and not only for the sake of Israel but for the sake of the whole world (see Luke 23: 34, John 10: 11, Acts 3: 18, 2 Corinthians 5: 21, 1 Peter 2: 21-25, 1 John 2: 2). But they are also correct in another sense, in that we Gentile outsiders are grafted into Israel (Romans 11: 13-24).

In this chapter, as in the New Testament, God’s servant suffers in place of others. While the atonement is a mystery, that should not stop us recognising with deep thankfulness that we

have a Saviour who really did give his life for us (vv.4-6), and received it back also for us (vv.10-12).

Verse 10 lies at the heart of our faith – God the Father is fully involved with the life of the Son, and the cross was not an unfortunate accident. At that point, in that place in history, evil did its worst and was defeated. While we may choose out of courtesy to use the abbreviation C.E. ('common era') instead of A.D. ('year of the Lord'), the coming of Christ still marks a turning point in world history.

Psalm 91:9-16

If you are tempted to read the whole psalm (the early verses come in the lectionary one year later!), v.4 has two images on which the rest of the psalm depends, for the security God offers the believer – the mother bird protecting her young, and the military shield. God protects from common dangers and from hidden forces. There are great testimonies of protection, like that of Sir Arthur Smith; his father gave him a Bible which he carried in his hip pocket in the First World War. On the Ypres front he was blown up by a shell, discovered to his amazement that his injuries were minimal, because a piece of shrapnel had been diverted by the Bible and had in fact lodged at Psalm 91! Yet this did not prevent him being injured much more seriously later on.

The Russian dissident Anatoly Shcharansky spent 13 years in prison for his attempts to emigrate to Israel. His most treasured possession was a little copy of the Psalms in Hebrew, and, wrote Pauline Hoggarth in *Encounter with God* Bible-reading notes, his wife testified how much Psalm 91 meant to him.

It is sobering to think that the devil quoted vv.11-12 of this psalm (Matthew 4: 6) – but even Jesus had to resist the interpretation that we lead a charmed life. We need wisdom to know where and when to go to specific verses in the Bible. The balanced New Testament commentary on what this psalm means is given in Romans 8: 38-39 and in Hebrews 11: 32-38.

Hebrews 5: 1-10

Our Lord Jesus is both priest and victim. The Isaiah passage pointed to Him as victim, this passage now speaks of Him as high priest. The book of Hebrews is written for Jewish Christians, and possibly speaks most to those in a 'high church' tradition, teaching us how Jesus is the one priest who can do all the religious stuff we need done on our behalf. In the

Church of Scotland we talk about ‘ministers’ not ‘priests’ just because we only need the one priest, Jesus; but some churches use the term ‘priest’ and still remember that they have only one ‘high priest’.

Two verses deserve comment: verse 5 is a quote from Psalm 2:7 (the book of Psalms is the most quoted book in the New Testament). The same verse is quoted by Paul preaching to fellow Jews at Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13: 33), where it refers to the resurrection. While Jehovah’s Witnesses use “Today I have become your Father” as a proof text that God was not always the Father of Jesus, the purpose here is quite different, to show that Jesus accepted the call of his heavenly Father to act as high priest for us, “tempted yet without sin” (Hebrews 4: 15).

Verse 8 speaks of Jesus learning to be obedient. We are familiar with His growth in wisdom and knowledge (Luke 2: 40), but this growth continued throughout His lifetime. He was no plaster saint, frozen in perfection – He had to learn what obedience to His Father’s will meant in practice – and so do we. Jesus “was not more perfect in his obedience at the end than at the beginning, but . . . his realisation of God’s will and purpose for him ever deepened” (P.T. Forsyth, *God the Holy Father*, 139).

Mark 10: 35-45

The lectionary misses out verses 32-34, which gives us two bits of information:

(1) Jesus is on the way up to Jerusalem, followed by His disciples and no doubt others (remember, there were many women in his entourage), who were all filled with alarm.

(2) Jesus has repeated the warning that He will be handed over, and that Jew and Gentile together will have Him put to death.

For us, who know the whole story, the request of James and John immediately jars. In that context, with the disciples torn between the normal Jewish belief that Messiah would conquer, and Jesus’ recent words of warning, it is not an odd request at all – and today in many cultures people approach Christianity wondering what might be in it for them (like Simon of Samaria in Acts 8).

Typically, Jesus turns an inappropriate request, and the reaction it causes in the other disciples, into an opportunity for teaching – what a great example. ‘Baptized’ (v.38) in Greek can also mean flooded, overwhelmed with disaster.

Generally Mark gives us narrative. The piece of theology, explanation, in v.45 is unusual. Jesus came to offer a ransom, like someone who goes to a pawnbroker and offers a sum of money to redeem an article which is in danger of being lost to the broker for a fraction of its true value. Or as the Old Testament puts it in Leviticus 25: 25, if a farmer gets into financial difficulty and has to sell his land, a relative (the 'kinsman redeemer') should buy it back for him. William Placher in his Commentary on Mark relates this also to Isaiah 59: 12, 15, 20 – Israel's hope of redemption, which grew during the exile in Babylon: a redemption from sin as well as from the power of Babylon. Note however that Mark does not say to whom the ransom was paid – 'analogies' (parables perhaps) like this in the Bible help us get the point, without having to be unpacked in every detail.

Sermon ideas

Some ideas that can be developed:

- The place of ambition. Jesus does not deny this human characteristic which motivates people to seek excellence in business, politics and the arts – but in v.44 He redirects it, and teaches that true success requires a servant heart, and servant practice. Also a willingness to be chosen for leadership, rather than grabbing it for the sake of power – think of the examples of Joseph in Genesis, Mordecai in the book of Esther, and Daniel in Babylon.
- God has first place. God chooses places of honour (v.40). Jesus is our leader, in His death (vv.38-39) and in His life (v.45)
- Note the realism, and the courage of Jesus in talking about the leaders of his day (think Putin and Trump, v.42); in v.43 He openly indicates that their kind of leadership is not what we find in the kingdom of God.
- The way we see things changes as we grow in discipleship. Some speak of a 'double conversion': when we first come to Jesus, it may be because of what He offers us – forgiveness and friendship – but we have to learn to turn back to the world with a desire to give, rather than to receive. Of course we always need to receive from Jesus, but as we grow like Jesus we follow His ways of service, instead of remaining children who always need fed and entertained.

- The first part of Psalm 2:7 is used at Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3: 17, and later in the gospels at Matthew 17:5), as well as in the Acts and Hebrews verses given above. God delights in creation (Psalm 104: 31), but especially in the Son.

Time with children

You could use the story of Sir Arthur Smith (see under Psalm 91), and maybe balance that with the story of Eric Liddell, who died in a prison camp. Who was braver? Did God love one more than the other? Perhaps compare also the stories of a child who goes through school 'at the top', and another who is ill and off school a lot. What does it mean to be 'like Jesus'?

Or, ask children, or children and adults, to act out something like the following scenario: two of the group are vying for group leadership and 'street cred' by boasting of their prowess (script this using whatever is current . . . and you could have a big label 'number 1' which each keep snatching from the other); the others listen with admiration and interest while they 'fight it out'. In the middle of all this, someone notices that one of the children is looking sad and pained (exaggerate for effect), takes him or her aside and talks kindly with them. The short play ends with most of the group still looking at the two contenders, but the rest starting to look over at the two who are in friendly conversation.

Or, with the rest of Psalm 104 in mind, invite people to share the nature programmes they have enjoyed watching on TV, and have one to talk about yourself (e.g. on the oceans, vv.24-25). Discuss the wisdom of God in nature, ending up with v.31, which hopes that God will enjoy it all too! One angle on worship is that we learn to share in the happiness of God.

Prayers

Opening

God, this day we have come to share Your view of humankind,
Your angle on the things of earth,
Your perspective on past and future.
Where we do not see things right,
where we have not done things right,
where we fail You and other people,
forgive us;
make us clean from our sin, and renew a right spirit within us.

God, this day we have come to learn about Your kingdom,
to discover how things work when You are in charge.

Let Your Spirit change us.

Instruct us by Your wisdom, guide us by Your word, inspire us by what is said and done here
today.

God, this day we have come to praise You,
to lift up Your name in prayer and song,
to respond to the wonder of who You are with heart and soul and voice,
to seek the good of others,
to remember the poor and lonely and sick and hungry.
To find new strength to serve You on Monday and throughout our lives.

These are our desires.

Take what is weak in us, make it strong.

Take what is amiss in us, make it right.

See our hesitant steps towards You, and embrace us in the arms of Your unfailing love, for
the sake of Jesus –

Jesus our Saviour, Jesus our friend, Jesus our priest, Jesus our companion, Jesus our leader,
Jesus the holy fire of our hearts.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit:
as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end, Amen.

Thanksgiving and intercession

We thank You, God, for everything we delight in –
sunlight in autumn days, colour in nature and art, rhythm in poetry and music;
human achievement and family success;
good humour; work well done; love and friendship
and all your gifts to body and soul.

Most of all we delight in Your salvation,
the knowledge of Your love, the assurance of eternal life,
through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

We commend to You those who work in harsh conditions, and those who have no work;
those whose lives are drab and grey;
those whose poor health takes away delight in living;
those who are lonely;
those who have no home of their own.

Grant them the human help and comfort which they need,
and the spiritual encouragement which will enable them to live with hope and courage,
for the sake of Jesus Christ who leads us to salvation.

We pray for the elderly, asking for them clear faith and human support.
We pray for those in middle years, asking for them wisdom in their choices,
and the recovery of a sense of wonder.

We pray for the young, asking for them good opportunities,
and that their ambitions include the desire to serve.

May we all continue to seek the God of every age,
made known in Jesus Christ, the greatest friend of all.

We bless You, God, space-maker, cloud-rider, earth-lover.

We bless You for the great company of saints who have gone before us and now delight in
Your presence.

With them we honour and praise Your holy name,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and as they were taught to pray so do we say,

Our Father ...

Musical suggestions

- CH4 125 – “Lord of all being” – Einstein called James Clerk Maxwell “the greatest scientist since Newton” and this was Maxwell’s favourite hymn; you could easily relate v.1 to Psalm 104: 1-2
- CH4 127 – “O worship the king”
- CH4 143 – “Who put the colours in the rainbow?”
- CH4 137 – “All things bright and beautiful”
- CH4 149 – “Let all creation dance”
- CH4 91 – “Safe in the shadow”
- CH4 374 – “From heaven you came”

- CH4 154 – “O Lord my God”
- CH4 527 – “Lord, make us servants”
- CH4 394 – “He came to earth”
- CH4 694 – “Brother, sister, let me serve you”

Other Resources

See Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Experiments with Bible Study*, 177-179 for an extended commentary on Mark 10:42-45.

One man who worked hard to find a balance between pantheism (God all through creation) and deism (God separate from creation) was Teilhard de Chardin – his book *The Heart of Matter* is quite short and describes how his thinking developed).

There are many well-known poems on the beauty of creation . . . here are two less well known ones:

‘*The One*’ by Patrick Kavanagh in his *Complete Poems*, Penguin

Green, blue, yellow and red –
God is down in the swamps and marshes
sensational as April and almost incred-
ible the flowering of our catharsis.
A humble scene in a backward lace
where no one important ever looked
the raving flowers looked up in the face
of the One and the Endless, the Mind that has balked
the profoundest of mortals. A primrose, a violet,
a violent wild iris – but mostly anonymous performers
yet an important occasion as the Muse at her toilet
prepared to inform the local farmers
that beautiful, beautiful, beautiful God
was breathing his love by a cut-away bog.

'*Volta*' by Romola Parish, inspired partly by Psalm 91: 1-4, in *Crying in the Silicon Wilderness*, Oxfordfolio 2017:

However many powers of ten we travel
beyond the small world
shaped by the acts of the fathers,
at each end of our lenses
lies unfathomed territory
that some call God.

We explore planets with our machines,
but stars still hide their colours
from the naked eye.

We can read the story told by genes,
but they still spin
their own unpredictable plots.

Not everything's beyond our reach:
ordinary pebbles
smoothed and polished,
hold the weight of all those things
you don't have words for
neatly on your windowsill.

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