Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

19 February 2017

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Dr Susan Miller, Theology and Religious Studies Tutor at Glasgow University and Locum Minister at Ibrox Paris Church, for her thoughts on the seventh Sunday after Epiphany.

Contents

Leviticus 19: 1-2, 9-18 ................................................................. 2
Psalm 119: 33-40 ............................................................................ 3
1 Corinthians 3: 10-11, 16-23 .................................................. 4
Matthew 5: 38-48 ........................................................................ 5
Sermon Ideas ................................................................................. 6
Time with Children ...................................................................... 8
Prayers ......................................................................................... 9
Musical Suggestions ................................................................. 11
Additional Resources .............................................................. 12
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

Leviticus 19: 1-2, 9-18

Our first passage is situated in a section of the book of Leviticus which is known as the “holiness code”. This code contains commandments which are intended to enable the people of Israel to live a holy life. God is holy and the people of God are called to be holy. But what does it mean to be “holy”? The commandments in our passage are concerned with practical actions and they emphasise the importance of social justice. They reflect the ways in which the people may live in good relations with their neighbours. The commandments in Leviticus are addressed to people who live in an agrarian society in the ancient world but they also raise questions for us today in a very different society. The passage in Leviticus is concerned about the ways in which a community may flourish and today we are engaged in the search for “the common good” in our society.

The passage begins with God’s concern for people who live in poverty and who are vulnerable. The prosperous who own land and vineyards are instructed that they should not keep all their harvest. They shall not reap to the edges of their fields or gather all their grapes for themselves. The surplus should be left for the poor and the strangers. These commandments highlight the provisional nature of life. Human beings depend on the cycles of sowing and harvest but the land endures and belongs to God. This passage illustrates the compassion of God who is concerned for those in need, and it indicates that the care of the poor is integral to the Law. In Leviticus, the poor and the stranger have a right to the grain at the edges of each field and a right to gather the fallen grapes.

The following commandments are concerned with honesty and integrity. Falsehood is incompatible with the holiness of God. Lies are prohibited since holiness is concerned with transparency and honesty. The commandments prohibit anyone from taking advantage of a neighbour. The powerful should not hold back the wages of a labourer. Those who are able to
hear should not revile the deaf and those who are able to see should not put stumbling-blocks before the blind.

The commandments in Leviticus draw attention to God’s care for the poor but they also emphasise that judgements should be fair. No one should act unjustly in order to favour the poor and no one should defer to the rich. The final set of commandments is concerned with the inner motivations of the human heart. Hatred is prohibited and grudges are forbidden. Each section of the commandments concludes with the statement, “I am the Lord”. God is able to command because God is Lord of all. The authority of God rests at the basis of the commandments in Leviticus. These commandments are summed up in the commandment in the final verse, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”.

**Psalm 119: 33-40**

Our first passage was concerned with God’s commandments to the people of Israel. Our second passage focuses on a more personal reflection on the observance of the Law. The Psalmist prays to God for understanding in order to observe the Law with “his whole heart”. In this Psalm the Law is depicted as a way and a path that belongs to God. The Psalmist recognises that he is only able to observe the Law with God’s guidance. God is the one who gives understanding and who leads the Psalmist on the right path. The personal features of the prayer are seen in the petitions, “teach me,” “give me,” “lead me,” “turn my heart,” and “turn my eyes”.

The Psalmist highlights the life-giving features of the Law. He “delights” in the path of God’s commandments and prays for “life” in God’s ways. There is a contrast between the life which is found in God’s Law and the alternative – selfish gain, vanities, and disgrace. This psalm illustrates one man’s desire to observe the commandments. It expresses the personal longing of an individual for life, but the book of Psalms is designed for the worship of a community. The Psalms also express the desires and values of the community. The community of the people of God is formed when people come together in the desire to follow the will of God and to seek the path which leads to delight, goodness, and life.
This reading comes from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, which is one of the most influential letters in the New Testament. In this letter the faith and questions, the struggles and courage of the members of an early Christian community come alive. Paul founded the church in the Greek city of Corinth and he spent some time there, teaching and developing the church. After Paul left Corinth, another missionary, Apollos, arrived. Apollos was a Jewish missionary from the city of Alexandria and he was known for his skill in rhetoric. Some members of the Corinthian church were impressed by Apollos' skills in rhetoric and wisdom. At this time factions began to arise in the church. Some people favour Paul, others follow Apollos, and others follow Cephas. We are not told why the Corinthians favoured these leaders. Cephas is the Aramaic version of the name Peter. Peter is not known to have visited Corinth but some Corinthians may follow him because he is the leading disciple in the group of twelve disciples who were chosen by Jesus. Peter followed Jesus during Jesus’ ministry whereas Paul only became a Christian after Jesus’ death.

In this letter Paul seeks unity in the church and he defines the roles of Christian leaders. He compares the leaders of the church to builders who have the task of working together on the same building. Paul regards himself as a master builder who has laid the foundation of the building. Paul argues that the foundation of the church is Jesus and not any human leader. He compares Apollos to another builder who builds on the same foundation. Paul emphasises that the foundation is what is important. The identity of the church is based on their foundation in Christ. The unity of the Corinthians may be found in their common allegiance to Christ.

Paul's letter has a communal dimension since he identifies the Christian community as God’s temple and he points out that the Spirit dwells within the church. Paul regards the presence of factions within the church as a threat to the church’s existence. The church is intended to be holy as God’s temple is holy. Paul criticises those who think they are wise according to the standards of the Greco-Roman age. The Greeks and Romans prize wisdom but Paul argues that their wisdom is foolishness when seen in light of the wisdom of God. Paul believes Christians should rely on the wisdom of God. Paul places the situation of the Corinthians in the context of
faith and he argues that the Corinthians already have everything. They do not need to depend on human leaders because they belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.

Matthew 5: 38-48

This passage is situated in a section of the Sermon on the Mount which contains some of the most demanding teaching of Jesus. These verses come from a section of the sermon which is known as the Antitheses. Jesus begins each antithesis by referring to the Law which was given to Moses on Mount Sinai with the introduction, “You have heard that it was said…” Jesus then gives his own interpretation of the Law in his statement, “But I say to you…” This passage highlights the high Christology of Matthew’s Gospel. The Law was given by God to Moses. In our passage Jesus has the authority to interpret the Law and to bring the meaning of the Law to fulfilment.

In the opening verses Jesus focuses on the responses of his disciples to violence and aggression. Jesus begins by citing the commandment in Exodus, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” In the Old Testament this commandment is not intended to suggest that human beings should respond to violence with violence. It is intended to prevent the escalation of violence. If someone has lost a tooth, that person should not respond with a more violent action towards the aggressor. Jesus, however, argues that his disciples should not resist an evildoer. His disciples should not respond to violence with a violent action. Jesus refers to common incidents of violence in his own time. The act of slapping someone on the cheek is an insult. Nevertheless, Jesus tells his disciples that if anyone strikes them on the right cheek they should offer that person their left cheek. If anyone should take their coat, they should also give up their cloak. In his next example, Jesus refers to the power of Roman soldiers to force passers-by to carry loads. He tells his disciples that they should not resist but that they should carry the load for another mile. Jesus’ sayings prohibit retaliation and violence. Jesus, however, concludes this section with a commandment which focuses on a positive action. He tells his disciples to give to those who beg and not to refuse someone who wishes to borrow.

In the second section Jesus refers to the commandment, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.” The Law is founded on the commandments to love God and to love our neighbours (cf Lev 19: 18) but the Old Testament does not contain any commandments to hate
our enemies. It is possible that Jesus is aware of some of the commandments to hate enemies which appear in texts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. In the Community Scroll, for example, the sons of light are instructed “to hate” the sons of darkness (1QS1: 10-11). In our passage Jesus commands his disciples to love their enemies and to pray for those who persecute them. This commandment is one of the most challenging sayings of Jesus. In the sermon, Jesus argues that his disciples should act in ways that reflect the nature of God. God sends sunshine and rain indiscriminately to the good and the evil, and to the unrighteous and the righteous. God is generous to all human beings and in turn Jesus teaches his disciples to love friends and enemies.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches his disciples how to respond to persecution. Jesus encountered opposition in his mission and he prophesies that his disciples will experience persecution. Most scholars believe that Matthew is writing for a community whose members are experiencing persecution. In this situation, Jesus’ commandments have a practical application. Our reading from the Sermon on the Mount is concerned with the actions and the behaviour of disciples. Jesus, however, characteristically focuses on the inner attitudes and motivations which lead to actions. He teaches his disciples to be “perfect” as God is “perfect”. This commandment is not indented to place an impossible goal upon the disciples. The Greek term “teleios” (perfect) has connotations of completion and wholeness. Jesus is teaching the disciples about a path which leads to the well-being of the disciples and which has the power to transform the world through love. Jesus’ teaching indicates that revenge and retaliation have the power to harm our well-being. On the other hand love and generosity make us whole and give life to others.

**Sermon Ideas**

This week’s readings raise questions about the nature of leadership in both the church and in society. What makes a good leader in today’s world? What are the characteristics of a good leader? Over the past year we have seen changes in the leadership of Britain and of America. Leadership is also a current issue in both the training of ministers and elders. In the church many people take on leadership roles in teaching, leading worship, serving on committees and in conducting mission. What are the key tasks of a leader in the church and in society? In our lectionary readings one of the main roles of a leader is the task of enabling a good community to
flourish. In this section we will explore some of the key ideas in our readings which contribute to our understanding of leadership today.

In our first passage God gives commandments to Moses who has the leadership role of passing on the Law to the people of Israel. These commandments are addressed to the whole community. Moses calls the people to be holy as God is holy. In this passage the leader has the role of communicating the Law to the community. These commandments offer special protection to some of the most vulnerable people in society. Wealthy farmers are instructed to leave some of their crops for people who live in poverty and for strangers who may lack the support of a family. These commandments speak to us today when we think of the many people who are living in poverty in our society. Many people have zero-hour contracts which give them little stability and others rely on food banks to support their families. The laws in Leviticus address a community whose members live in an agrarian society but the commandments to care for those who live in poverty remain relevant today.

The nature of leadership is a key issue in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians because the church has been divided into factions who claim allegiance to leaders such as Paul, Apollos, and Peter. Paul points away from the merits of individual leaders to the person of Jesus. He argues that Jesus is the foundation of the attitudes and actions of the Christian community. In the ancient world human beings gave allegiance to leaders and then expected their leaders to respond by giving them rewards and protection. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus challenges these expectations. He teaches his disciples to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. Jesus’ teaching does not imply that we should stand by while oppressors reign. Jesus does not wish his disciples to step into the shoes of persecutors but to resist evil with love. Jesus breaks down the boundaries between groups and their enemies. Enemies are treated in the same ways as friends. In this way we may reflect the abundant love of God who gives sunshine and rain to the evil and the good and to the righteous and the unrighteous. Jesus leads us on a path of peace in which we are called to stand firm in face of oppression. He is a leader whose vision of the kingdom took him to the cross. His death and resurrection depict the power of God to bring life out of death. In our passage Jesus’ demanding teaching leads us on the way of the cross. Jesus teaches his disciples and us to resist evil with goodness and to transform hatred with love.
Time with Children

Follow the leader

Ask the children if they know the game which is called “Follow the Leader”. In this game the leader carries out an action and everyone repeats the same action. For example, the leader could perform a simple action such as raising both arms or clapping or waving. The actions usually become more difficult. If anyone fails to follow the leader, that person is out of the game. After a short game, ask the children if they can think of any leaders. Eg Sunday school leaders and teachers or leaders in history or in the world today. Who are their favourite leaders? What do they like about these leaders? What do they think makes a good leader?

This morning we are going to hear about one of the first leaders of the church. His name is Paul and he was a good leader of the early church. Paul travelled all over the world to tell people about Jesus and he started many churches. One of the churches Paul started was the church in Corinth in Greece. The people in this church had favourite leaders. Some people liked Paul best. Other people liked a leader called Apollos and others liked Peter, one of Jesus’ disciples. Paul is worried that the people in Corinth are starting to form groups based on the leader whom they like best. Paul writes to the Corinthians to say that human leaders in the church should not be competitors. They are like builders who are working on a building together. He teaches the Corinthians that the most important leader of all is Jesus. Paul says that Jesus is like the first stone which is put in place when a new building is made. Jesus is the most important leader for everyone in the church. We come together to worship him and to hear all about his life. We come together to hear about everything he did and to listen to his words. Then we can follow him and one day become builders in his church.
Prayers

Prayer of Approach

Journeying God
You give us a map for our journey
With a road over the mountains
And a path beside the cool waters
You give us a map
With a road that leads to life.
Forgive us when we turn aside from your way
When we prefer to take shortcuts
When our eyes deceive us
And we are taken in by the vanities of the world.

Turn our hearts to you, we pray
And away from temptation.
Fill us with compassion
for our companions on the way.
Come to our aid
When we are weak
When we are weary
When we lose our way

Wherever we walk, guide us
Wherever we walk, guard us
For our heart’s longing is for you
And in your righteousness we find life.

Prayer of Intercession

God of sunshine and rain
We give you thanks for a world of beauty
A world of sunlight and cool water
You give life to each one of us
And you open your hands
to share the good things of the world with us.
We give you thanks for Jesus
who brings us the vision of the kingdom
and teaches us to walk the paths of peace.

In a world where many leave their homes
To seek a place of safety
Give us a spirit of welcome and generosity
In a world where many suffer from violence
Give us the hearts of peacemakers
In a world where many live in poverty
Let us open our hands and share.

God of sunshine and rain
You care for the good and the evil
The righteous and the unjust
And you care for us.
Open our hearts to love
Friends and strangers
The loving and the unkind
The angry and the hurt
The suffering and the good.
In Jesus’ Name
Amen

In addition to the above prayers, prepared by our contributor, other prayers may be found in People of the Way which is the theme for this year’s Pray Now. It was also the theme for Heart and Soul 2016. People of the Way is available from St Andrew Press.
Musical Suggestions

CH4 510  ‘Jesus calls us here to meet him’ – a good opening song which points to the welcoming role of Jesus.

CH4 465  ‘Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart’ – a song which speaks of the desire of Christians to see the world through the eyes of Jesus.

CH4 200  ‘Christ is made the sure foundation’ - a song which recalls Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians that Christ is the foundation of the Christian community.

CH4 739  ‘The Church’s one foundation’ - a song which recalls Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians that Christ is the foundation of the Christian community.

CH4 189  ‘Be still for the presence of the Lord’ – a song which speaks of the presence of Jesus within worship.

CH4 769  ‘Holy, Holy, Holy – Santo, Santo, Santo’ – a short song of worship which expresses the emphasis on the holiness of God in the lectionary readings.

CH4 31   ‘I waited patiently for God’ (Psalm 40) – a song which emphasises our dependence upon God.

CH4 528  ‘Make me a channel of your peace’ – a song which expresses the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon in the Mount.

CH4 724  ‘Christ’s is the world in which we move’ – a song which calls us to participate in the love of Jesus for the world.

CH4 250  ‘Sent by the Lord am I’ – a song which speaks of the mission of the church in the world.
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. People of the Way 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 Rev Dr Susan Miler 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.