

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – 28 January 2018

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Jonathan Fleming, Minister of Erskine Parish Church, for his thoughts on the fourth Sunday after Epiphany.

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.

Introduction

This Sunday is the Fourth Sunday in Epiphany - a season in which we reflect upon and rejoice about the ways in which Christ is revealed to us.

It is also the Sunday on which churches are being invited to hold a special service to 'launch' the Year of Young People.

A toolkit is being prepared for congregations, which will have a number of ideas for churches to get involved and more importantly involve children and young people.

You can request a toolkit online at:

www.churchofscotland.org.uk/resources/children_and_youth/year_of_young_people

Deuteronomy 18: 15-20

How do we know when we are in the presence of a prophet?

How do we distinguish between true prophets and false prophets?

These questions are not only relevant in the present day, but were certainly at the forefront of the minds of those expressing concern in the lead up to today's passage from Deuteronomy. When Moses is no longer around to act as Yahweh's mouthpiece, who is going to take over such an important role? They have just been warned off consulting mediums and similar parties in the preceding verses, so *who* is left to impart God's will to them?

Rather than leave it up to them to sort out, God responds with a promise to raise someone up 'from among your own people a prophet who will be like me' (v. 15). Like other prophets of the age, God promises to 'put My words in the mouth of this prophet who will tell them everything I command him to say' (cf. Isaiah 51:16, Jeremiah 1:9, etc.).

In an age of televangelists and preachers of prosperity amongst many others, we are left asking a big question for today... Who speaks for God? What is certain is that true prophets do not set out to be so. We only need to look at Moses and Jeremiah to see that. Prophets also speak new things in new situations. Irrespective of age, church experience, knowledge or skillset, God chooses people to speak, to act and to inspire.

As we prepare for the Year of Young People, may we be prepared to listen to God's voice and see God's hands and feet in action amongst the young people of our congregations, our villages and towns and our nation as much as anyone else in our society.

Psalm 111

Psalm 111 is an acrostic poem with 22 phrases, each beginning with the subsequent letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It is a Psalm of Thanksgiving, praising God for all God has done for the Psalmist and indeed for the community at large.

Opening with 'Hallelujah' (Praise the Lord!), we read of the Psalmist's public expression of gratitude for God's provision of both food (v.5) and instruction (v.7-8).

In Verse 10, we read how wisdom begins in 'fear of the Lord'. The word 'fear' in Hebrew (יִרְאַה [yirah']) is synonymous with 'love' and 'serve'. It is a word that seeks to illustrate the absolute awesomeness of God - a God who loves us, provides for us and who will never forsake us.

People are often mistaken in believing that wisdom comes solely from intellect and life experience. If God is not acknowledged as the source of our wisdom then one has to ask how strong the foundation of our decision-making really is...

Like the 'fear' of the Lord, wisdom spans all ages, classes, colours and creeds. Sometimes we forget how much we may be missing out on when we choose not to listen to the youth of today. We have a lot to share with one another, be it stories, hopes or dreams, and in doing so, we have an opportunity to allow our churches to grow young together, to be fed by one another and to gain wisdom from each other as members of our church family or our community.

Young or old, we have an equal part to play in the heritage of our nation.

1 Corinthians 8: 1-13

In this part of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we read of one of Paul's concerns about the way of life in Corinth. With many other pagan Gods being worshipped by various means and rituals, it was commonplace for animals to be sacrificed for pagan rituals and the surplus meat to be sold in the marketplace. As a result of this, there is an anxiety amongst those who have chosen to follow Christ as they do not think that they could possibly eat food that has been associated with pagan rituals.

Paul goes on to explain that because he believes that there is no other God but the one true God, it makes no difference that the food has been involved in such acts.

This is not the basis on which one is expected to behave, however. It is not about the physical diet, but rather a spiritual diet. The Christ followers in Corinth are part of the community of Corinth and how they behave as part of that community will have an effect on those around them. What is important to Paul is not knowledge which can make people feel superior to others, but rather love, which works for the good of the community. Love (*agape*) is what should guide us in the things that we say and do.

You do not always have to agree with the people around you, but as part of a community it is important to respect others in the same way that you would hope to be respected. 'Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up'.

Mark 1: 21-28

Following hot on the heels of Jesus' time spent in the wilderness and Satan's failed attempts at temptation, we read of the launch of Jesus' public ministry.

Mark's Gospel is very much a Gospel of action - what takes other Gospel writers a couple of chapters is covered in Mark within a matter of verses. There is a sense of urgency about Mark's Gospel, so it is interesting that Mark chooses to provide a detailed of Jesus driving out demons at such an early point in His ministry.

Another thing that we witness in Mark's Gospel is the breaking of many boundaries. In this passage, Jesus is crossing the boundary of authority - he is not teaching in the synagogue with any 'official' authority like the scribes professed to have. Mark makes a point of

showcasing Jesus to be the one and only person with the authority to make the reign of God known - a reign which breaks boundaries and barriers which have done nothing but restrain God's creation and prevent it from flourishing.

What barriers do we need to break in our Church or churches? Who is struggling to flourish within our congregations? Do we need to let go of our 'authority' in some shape or form in order that all people, irrespective of age, gender, class, sexual orientation or otherwise can fulfil their God-given potential as part of God's much loved creation?

Like the breaking of the heavens at Jesus' baptism just a few verses earlier, let us work to do the work of the Gospel in breaking the barriers that we ourselves have erected.

Sermon ideas

False prophets, animal sacrifices and driving out demons... Not the first choice of passages for the launch of the Year of Young People!

There are, however, elements within this week's readings, which can be drawn upon on this day:

1 Corinthians 8 - The importance of a well-balanced Spiritual diet

In September 2017, an article was written in The Press & Journal about a 20 year old teaching student called Kirstin, who sets time apart for devotion and attends Church every Sunday - something that would not have been newsworthy 30 years ago.

www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/news-feature/1325350/changing-face-of-religion

This is **not** a time to rebuke young people for not coming to Church on 'our terms', but a time for the entire Church to think about the ways in which we walk a journey of faith with young people in the face of so many demands on their time and talents.

How can we help one another find a spiritual diet that works with our lifestyle?

In what ways can we support one another as we seek to be part of the communities in which we live as well as being part of a worshipping community?

Mark 1 - What authority do we give to young people?

In September 2016, Fuller Youth Institute released a book entitled *'Growing Young - Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church'*, which contains the 'Growing Young Wheel', where one sees the importance of *Keychain Leadership* - how we need to entrust young people with our keys, both physically and structurally:

"...if you are willing to entrust your keys to young people, they will trust you with their hearts, their energy, their creativity, and even their friends. Yes, it can sometimes seem like more work than it's worth—but if you give them your access, you have the opportunity to touch a whole generation."

Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, & Brad Griffin,
Growing Young: 6 Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church
(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), p.55

Time with children

The young people (and adults) could be invited to join in a game of 'Simon Says', from where you could go on to explain that in the passage from Mark, Jesus had authority over the evil spirits. You could go on to ask people about who they regard as people of authority before talking about how we should act with God's authority.

Sometimes we think of authority as being something that only older people have, which is not the case.

Go on to talk about the Year of Young People and how young people also have a role to play in the life of your congregation as well as in our communities and our cities across the land.

Prayers

Prayer of Adoration & Confession

God of creation,
God of love,
God of justice,

You made us,
You know us,

You hear us...

You created us to be agents of peace,
You created us to be purveyors of justice,
You created us to share Your love with others.

You know that our lives do not always mirror this...

You know that we sometimes let opportunities pass us by.
You know that we sometimes keep Your good news to ourselves...

In words of grace You forgive us
of living a life that does not speak of Your reign.

Hear us when we confess that our living is not always balanced.
May You rejoice with us when it is...

Hear us when we confess that our loving is not always made known.
May You rejoice with us when it is...

May we find Your authority
in the way Jesus lived
May we live in His Spirit,
and bring about the justice You call for.

Forgiveness we seek,
new life we need.
(Pause)

As we confess our sin,
We seek Your forgiveness.
In the words we have spoken and have left unsaid.

(Pause)

God of creation,
God of love,
God of justice,

Who made us,

who knows us,
who hears us...
Be with us
as we dedicate ourselves once more to Your way
and once more to Your reign...

So be it.
Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Congregations are encouraged to make use of the Year of Young People 2018 Prayer
www.churchofscotland.org.uk/resources/children_and_youth/year_of_young_people

Welcoming God,
You welcome all of us with Your open arms. Inspire and guide us, that we may we never hinder Your children from coming to You; and remember that we are all part of Your family. Bring us together as a loving community for all, that we may learn from each other as we walk side by side in faith.

Loving God,
We pray for those that have come to know You, whether that relationship is new or if they have made a commitment to You and stepped out in faith; we pray that they would grow in grace and knowledge as they continue their walk with You. We pray for those far away from You. Meet them where they are and give them the courage and strength to make the right decisions, that they may come to know and experience Your gracious love.

Caring and Compassionate God,
We pray and ask You to guide and protect children and young people from that which may restrict them on their journey in life and faith. We pray for the day when all children in the world can be just that: children. Be with them as they experience the dangers and injustices that are ever present in our world today.

Nurturing God,
We pray for all those who work with and support children and young people - for those of all ages who give their time, talents and love to create a place in churches and communities that can be the foundation of growth, confidence and a relationship with You.

Calling God,

You call us to follow, to serve, to welcome and to share.

We come now to answer Your call, to lift our minds and voices to You, and to thank and praise You for all the children and young people in our churches, communities, country and world. We ask that You would walk alongside them and give grant them courage, strength and wisdom as they face the challenges of life.

Guiding God,

As we travel through this Year of Young People and beyond, help us to come alongside children and young people to draw closer to You, to answer Your call to follow, to serve, to welcome and to share together, through the Holy Spirit,

We offer these prayers through Jesus Christ our Lord,
Amen

*(This prayer can be read by different voices. Members of the church can also be invited to develop and write their own prayer with and for young people.
The prayer can be used at different times through the year).*

Musical suggestions

- CH4 755– “Be still and know that I am God” – This could be used as part of a refrain during Prayers of Intercession or following each of the readings
- CH4 724 – “Christ’s is the world in which we move” – A very moving hymn speaking of justice, inclusivity and peace
- CH4 351 – “Jesus’ hands were kind hands” – A nice, simple melody which works well at all-age time
- Mission Praise 454 – “Majesty, worship his majesty” – A powerful hymn which reminds us of Christ’s authority as King of Kings and Prince of Peace
- CH4 352 – “O for a thousand tongues to sing” - A good, rousing, hymn of praise and proclamation
- CH4 348 – “Praise the One who breaks the darkness” – Ideal for referencing the events of the passage from Mark’s Gospel

- CH4 718 – “We cannot measure how you heal” – A gentle melody with strong words

Some musical suggestions for Year of Young People Sunday

There are some great hymns about Youth and Children, written to classic tunes by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. These can be viewed online at

www.carolynshymns.com/topical_index.html#youth

NOTE: If you wish to use one of Carolyn’s Hymns, please drop her an e-mail bcgillette@comcast.net out of courtesy.