

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – 2 July 2023

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev David McCarthy, former Fresh Expressions Development Worker for his thoughts on the fifth Sunday after Pentecost.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the [Sanctuary First website](#).

We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

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Introduction

The four passages that we are looking at this week challenge us to face up to the complexity of life and of faith; they do not allow us to be glib or to gloss over reality: our joys, challenges, certainties, perplexities, triumphs, failures, wisdom, foolishness and much more are brought to the surface.

The Old Testament texts (Genesis 22:1-14, Psalm 13) are potentially unsettling as they lead us to ask deep questions about the character of God: God's goodness and trustworthiness. The New Testament texts (Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42) call us to examine our own attitudes and integrity.

At this point there are three significant limitations which we need to bear in mind. First, the intrinsic limitations on our understanding of God; the created are dependent upon the Creator for wisdom and knowledge and they can never be peers. Second, there is a limit to our understanding of the original contexts and we must be careful about any assumptions which we make. Finally, the format of our time of worship together limits our engagement with the themes, questions and applications which arise.

That said, we want to dig into these passages in our preparation, take time to research, reflect, apply to our own lives as we help others apply it to theirs, and to consider the best format for our local context – if the format is more traditional, think of questions for folk to ponder over during the week, which will help them apply what we have been reflecting upon. If it is Café Church in style, we will need to ensure key points are understood before discussion begins. With both formats (and others) we should give folk the opportunity of further conversation and, where appropriate pastoral follow-up.

It's also crucial that we don't reduce our worship to a cerebral exercise – we want to do our best to provide a setting where people encounter God, and in that encounter, as with the writer of Psalm 13, find peace and reaffirm trust.

[Genesis 22:1-14](#)

This is one of those passages in the Old Testament, which cause us to ask of God, 'Why?' Why did God ask this of Abraham, when later we read that God condemned the practice of human sacrifice (Deuteronomy 12:29-3; 18:9-10; Psalm 106:36-39)? Why put Abraham and Isaac through such an ordeal? There are no easy answers, nor should we look for them; we need to search deeply for understanding. The following may help us on this journey:

- Human sacrifice was practised in the time of Abraham, so culturally Abraham would not, as we would today, dismiss the possible validity of this demand.
- While we cannot say for sure what the motivation for any particular human sacrifice might have been, we can speculate on possible motivations e.g., appeasing the gods for transgression, persuading the gods to act in a particular way, to declare that all belonged to the gods and that nothing could/should be withheld.
- As noted above, the practice of child sacrifice was abhorrent to God and forbidden in the harshest terms.
- Abraham, from his initial call (Genesis 12) has been on a spiritual, as well as a physical, journey – he has been learning more about the nature of God and what it means to trust God. There have been doubts, mistakes, questions, but, overall there has been a deepening in his relationship with God. He now trusts that God will fulfil what God has promised (Genesis 15:1-6; 21:12).
- In the story Isaac does not resist. Given that he is strong enough to carry the wood and Abraham carries only the knife and the fire, he is likely to have been able to resist being bound and laid on the altar.
- Abraham, says to the two men who initially accompanied them that he and Isaac would worship and then return. Is this a deception, or is there more to it than this? Did Abraham believe that God would in some way, either before or after the sacrifice, intervene? Was there hope in his statement that God would provide? The writer of Hebrews seems to think so (Hebrews 11:17-19).

So, without minimising the trauma for Abraham and Isaac, it is clear that, even at the outset of these events, there was something profound in the dynamic between Abraham and God that distinguished this call to sacrifice from the practices of others. Abraham understood that God is the one to whom all, including life, belongs and that somehow – even if he didn't know how – God would fulfil the promise that he (Abraham, through Isaac) would be the father of many.

Further, there is the marker that the God of Abraham, unlike the gods of the surrounding cultures, is not one who accepts human sacrifice: this is the God who provides; this brings us to a stark parallel.

The language to describe Isaac is similar to that spoken by God the Father about Jesus – see Genesis 22:2 and Matthew 3:17; 17:5: loved /beloved son; John 3:16 speaks of Jesus as the only son. In the God of Abraham, we see the opposite of the gods of the surrounding peoples: such gods called for parents to sacrifice children to meet their desires. In contrast, the son of this God who Abraham worshipped, was sacrificed as the only way to meet the

need of humanity. And this difference declared the heart of the true God: unlike the gods of Abraham's contemporaries, who created humanity to be their slaves and do their work, the God of Abraham and Isaac, out of love, created humanity to share in this creativity and in love bore the agony of redeeming them. God is the provider.

Psalm 13

As is often commented, the Psalms demonstrate the freedom we have to be totally honest with God. In them we find expressions of hope, doubt, fear, courage, celebration, lament and more; we find general principles stated and exceptions highlighted, e.g., compare Psalm 121 and Psalm 44. However, what is common throughout is a trust in God: God's love, goodness, wisdom and power – a trust that allows the worshipper to be honest and a trust that frees them to continue trusting, whatever the circumstances.

Jesus forewarned His disciples that trouble and persecution would come their way (Matthew 22:9), the early Church experienced this (Acts 8:1, 2 Corinthians 1:3-11), as has the Church, throughout its history to the present day.

Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:3-11, like the Psalmist, is open about his trouble: both to God and to others. But this openness is an openness of faith, even when doubts and questions arise. So Paul can legitimately highlight and emphasise the priority of prayer and the consequent consolation which he receives. Further, Paul's example in this helps others follow this same path when they suffer, and in turn receive the same consolation (vv5-7)

James, while underscoring that temptation does not come from God, encourages Christians and Christian communities to embrace the fruit of endured trial and temptation: this resistance and endurance brings maturity and wholeness (James 1:1-8, 12-18).

Romans 6:12-23

Paul in his teaching emphasises the gift of the grace of God. A gift which offers forgiveness and life eternal (v23); something which we cannot attain through our own merit or efforts. However, given the waywardness of human nature, this gift was being misunderstood and abused by the Romans: it was being used as an excuse for licence and a moral 'free for all'. In Romans 6 Paul highlights that grace brings us into a relationship, a special relationship, with the giver of life: we are servants, slaves to the giver, and this demands a particular way of living. A way of living that is only possible because of grace.

In case this should, in turn, be misunderstood as God being a self-serving slave owner, Paul emphasises two points. First, Paul reminds his readers that because of their limitations and immaturity he is having to speak to them in 'human terms', using basic images that they could easily understand (v19) – this is not nuanced. Secondly, he reminds them that autonomy is an illusion: we are always in the service of someone or something. We can choose righteousness or sin, God or the Satan, life or death (vv16-18).

Paul does not water down the depravity of being a slave to sin (vv19,20) and contrasts this with the joy of life in being 'enslaved to God' (v20).

A final note to help us put in context the imagery Paul uses: earlier in the letter, Paul emphasises the love and the sacrifice of God to enable grace to be offered, e.g., in chapter 5:1-11. Grace offers us peace and the hope of sharing the glory of God (5:1,2). The focus is kinship, not a utilitarian function; the strong imagery of slavery is used to emphasise that we are not intrinsically independent beings.

Matthew 10:40-42

The teaching of Jesus, in these verses, complements what Paul wrote in Romans 6: grace calls us into a relationship with God and our lives should reflect the character of the one to whom we relate.

As well as this, Jesus highlights the radical intimacy which we have with Him and the Father: when a disciple receives hospitality, so does Jesus and the one who sent Him.

Offering hospitality often signified agreement with the recipient (see Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, page 270, IVP 1992); this agreement, which derived from kinship with Jesus, was expressed in loving action. Radically, there was no hierarchy in receiving love and hospitality: all disciples were of equal status – from prophets to those who, from other perspectives, might be perceived as insignificant.

We should note that in these verses, Jesus is likely to be referring to the way those who followed Him should treat one another, however this does not in any way negate our responsibility to care for all who are in need. See the Parable of the 'Good Samaritan' Luke 10:25-37.

Sermon ideas

As we think about sermon ideas it is important for us to remember that the sermon is not so much about us speaking, rather it is about others hearing, understanding and applying to their lives (individually and corporately) what we are sharing. Hence we must use format, form of words, expressions and illustrations that relate well to the lives and culture(s) of those with whom we are engaging. Also, always keep in mind the 'So what?' question.

You may think it appropriate to focus on only one of the above passages, in which case the notes provided below could form the basis of an outline for a talk, but do remember to apply what you are teaching to the 'grit' and reality of people's everyday life; ask questions that folk can ponder during the week and discuss together.

Alternatively, looking at the readings as a whole, the following outline might be useful:

- Life is complex and the Bible encourages us to face up to this reality: it encourages us (as we said in the introduction) to acknowledge and engage with our joys, challenges, certainties, perplexities, triumphs, failures, wisdom, foolishness and all that is woven into the experience of each life.
- Within the Church (and within society in general) there can be different ways in which people deal with this complexity: from trying to ignore it to 'drowning' in it, from embracing a 'moral abandon' to enforcing a stifling legalism. In Paul's writing and experience he not only had to challenge the licence we see attacked in Romans, but also the legalism, which we see challenged in Galatians and highlighted in Acts 16. If these extremes are mistakes, how then should we live as we walk with Jesus; as we experience, understand and navigate the realities of life?
- First, we must open our hearts and minds to the love of God for us; we need not just to acknowledge this intellectually, but experientially, whole-heartedly. This love is underscored in our readings from Matthew and Romans: Jesus and the Father identify with us; in love they truly pay the ultimate sacrifice that we that we may be free from all our darkness and have the gift of life in all its fullness.
- When, in the depths of our being we accept this love, and allow ourselves to be embraced by it, we have the foundation for trusting God in all circumstances (Genesis 22). We also have the basis for being free to be honest, with God, ourselves and others, (Psalm 13) about our circumstances, thoughts, actions and feelings.

- This love and trust must be lived out in a way that reflects the One who loves us (Romans 6; the Letter of James). We are not left to figure out on our own what this might mean: we are gifted with the Holy Spirit, Scripture and one another.
- This outworking of our relationship with God, and in turn with others, is a whole-life, life-long calling: nothing is exempt. In Matthew 10 this outworking is focused on our care for those in need.

So what? Some questions that might help us begin to work out some of the implications of the above (you might not want to use them all in the sermon, but you could have them printed out for folk to take away and reflect upon later)

- If I am honest, even if I intellectually acknowledge God's love, do I hold back from experiencing this as a whole person? Why? Am I afraid of God, or what this might mean for my life? Am I too proud? Do I feel too hurt, too vulnerable? Do I feel disappointed with God?
- Do I find it hard to trust? Is this because of past experience or pride (I want to do it my way)? Would I feel guilty, or 'out of order' if I were truly honest with God: does this stop me from being honest with myself (and where appropriate, others)?
- How do I, with integrity, live this out in the reality of my past and present experiences: in the reality of who I am and in the reality of my everyday life? How can I be helped in this? How will I avail myself of this help?
- Where is prayer in my experience? How am I (are we) speaking and listening to God?

These are just examples of questions you could ask. Think about them and others and how you might shape and ask them in your church (and wider) community? Give time after these questions for people to reflect, this might be in silence or with appropriate background music.

Prayers

When we are leading worship, it is important that our prayers are not just our prayers as individuals, but the prayers of the community that has gathered around Jesus. So, put the following suggestions for prayer into the words of your community, in a way that is appropriate for the age range represented [N.B. be very careful not to disenfranchise children with the words, sentences and length of prayer e.g., rather than say 'Let's now pray a prayer of confession ...' you could say, 'Now we want to say "Sorry to God"'].

Approach to God/Call to worship.

Adapted from Psalm 121

We lift up our eyes to the hills – from where does our help come?

It comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth: the One who neither sleeps nor slumbers and who keeps us from all evil.

We come with honesty and with trust for we have seen God's love, authority and glory in Jesus.

Confession

1 John 1:9, 10: 'If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar, and his word is not in us.'

Ask people, in silence, to reflect upon their week.

About what do they need to say 'Sorry' to God and to others and what must they now do?

Acknowledge the encouragement that John gives us to do this.

Lead a prayer which allows people to confess the wrong they have done, said or thought, and the good which they have failed to do, say or think.

Acknowledge the forgiveness which we have in Jesus and the freedom that this gives us (as emphasised by John).

Praise and thanksgiving

Adapted from Psalm 8

O Lord, our sovereign how majestic is Your name in all the earth.

You have set Your glory above the heavens.

We praise You that in love You have created this wonderful universe

and that in love You have given us life

so that we may know Your love and care for Your creation.

Encourage people to again think over their week and recognise one person, relationship, conversation, situation or action for which they are particularly thankful.

Lead a prayer which reflects Psalm 8 in giving praise and thanks to God, which gives space for folk to give their personal thanks for what they have recalled and which also expresses your communal gratitude for something that has happened this week.

Intercessions / Prayers for others

Adapted from Mt. 6:32b, 33

Your heavenly Father knows all that you need.

Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.

Ask people to reflect upon the international and national news that they have heard this week – what has impacted most upon them.

Lead a prayer that allows folk to bring these situations to God [you may want to highlight a few – N.B., keep an international perspective].

Pray for the Church in those situations which you have mentioned [this reflects the concerns in 2 Corinthians 8 – you might find websites such as that of Tearfund or Christian Aid helpful].

Pray for our national situation and in this context for our churches and for our community and political leaders.

Pray for your local context.

Pray for your church community.

Give space for folk to, in silence, bring individual concerns to God, then summarise.

Allow a time of quiet, in which you encourage people to ‘listen’ to God speak to them.

Lead in saying ‘The Lord’s Prayer’.

Blessing/Closing Prayer

Ephesians 3:20, 21,

‘Now to Him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations for ever and ever. Amen.’

Musical suggestions

Our [online music resource](#) is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

- CH4 63 – “All people that on earth do dwell” [Psalm 100]
- CH4 153 – “Great is thy faithfulness”
- CH4 251 – “I, the Lord of sea and sky”
- CH4 426 – “All heaven declares”
- CH4 442 – “Blessing and honour”
- CH4 462 – “The King of love my shepherd is”
- CH4 465 – “Be thou my Vision”
- CH4 506 – “All I once held dear”
- CH4 516 – “We are marching in the light of God”
- CH4 530 – “One more step along the world I go”
- CH4 547 – “What a friend we have in Jesus”
- CH4 549 – “How deep the Father’s love for us”
- CH4 559 – “There is a Redeemer”
- CH4 577 – “Christ be beside me”
- CH4 641 – “Seek ye first the kingdom of God”

Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.
- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord's Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of 'holy chaos'.
- While singing in our congregations is still restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?
Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different "Spiritual Styles"?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?

Did it function well as a whole?

How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?

- How balanced was the worship?
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?
Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/
community?
How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?
How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?
- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

Useful links

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found [here](#)

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

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