

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – 20 August 2023

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank the 2023 Youth Representatives to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland for their thoughts on the twelfth Sunday after Pentecost. We also thank Youth Work Facilitator, Vicky Stigant and a group of young adults from Inverurie for the use of their archive material from 2020.

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:

<https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/daily-worship>

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

This week's material was explored through conversation with the Youth Representatives to this year's General Assembly.

We asked them to consider each of the passages in the RCL and spoke about what they noticed in the passages, what themes they recognised and how they responded to the readings and how they might use the passages as the basis of a worship gathering.

We hope that through the thoughts and questions in the conversations help you in your creation and leading of worship.

Themes that emerged during the conversation: family relationships; unity, radical welcome and inclusion; God's abundant blessing and provision; God's presence in the midst of environmental issues of forced migration, and sharing the earth's resources.

[Genesis 45:1-15](#)

Joseph was willing to overlook everything his brothers had done to him; he was completely overcome with emotion when he saw them again. The whole palace heard his wailing. It's as though he has been holding his emotions inside for so long that they can no longer be contained when he is reunited with his family. We see that God is at work in dysfunctional situations. Joseph shows forgiveness and offers his family refuge from the continuing famine.

Joseph's brothers are climate refugees. There have been two years of famine already and Joseph has foreseen that there are still five more to come. God sees those who are displaced and includes them in God's plans. We have to be careful when thinking we know God's plan and be mindful of the people who are the sharp end of a painful situation. We may ask how can that be God's plan? It is important to consider how we sensitively ask where God is in the midst of this?

Famine affects everyone, it humbles people of power as well. Joseph was a foreigner, but rises to a position of great power during this time. There is a sense of hope for the outsider in this passage which is good to hold onto.

Psalm 133

The focus of this psalm is on unity, which is compared to something that is holy. Oil is traditionally used for anointing, it's sacramental. The overwhelming abundance of God's blessing is tangible. Imagine what it must be like to have a whole vessel of oil poured over you – it gets everywhere. We were reminded of Mary pouring a whole jar of ointment over Jesus' feet. This is a message of great hope; a promise of life in abundance, for evermore. We see that unity can have an effect on every part of our lives; it works its way into all the cracks.

Oil also has healing properties and is often used as part of a uniting service. At a time of upheaval within the Church of Scotland, where churches are closing and congregations are uniting with others, this is a reminder of God's blessing and abundance that springs from unity.

We cannot make the dew fall, it just happens, and it refreshes everything, even in a parched place. It is our choice to live in unity, and we see the sense of God's provision that comes from unity and reconciliation. Justice is also an important element and brings God's blessing and life for evermore.

This is a Song of Ascent; sung by pilgrims coming together with a common purpose and destination.

The psalm was written by David, who also had a difficult relationship with his brothers, which reflects back on the passage in Genesis.

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Justice and inclusion are uppermost in these verses. We're told that those who keep the Sabbath are rewarded. All are worth blessing. In this passage we see again an emphasis on unity and doing God's work. We must do the work of the Kingdom – to work for justice.

We see God's attitude towards foreigners and the displaced and how they are welcomed into local worship practices.

Inclusion is not passive here, it is a proactive going out and gathering in of the displaced, outcasts and strangers, who are then given equal status. Everyone's worship is acceptable. There is a profound and radical sense of inclusion; the boundaries around who or what is acceptable are being ripped up. This happens at an interesting point in the history of Israel.

The nation is vulnerable, but now is the time to throw everything open and welcome others. We mustn't batten down the hatches at a time of national vulnerability. The verses that are omitted from the Lectionary show the importance of welcoming foreigners and eunuchs – those who we tend to “other”. This practice of radical welcome to all shows who you are. The excluded groups are linked; they are blessed because they loved God first, not because of the worth that's attached to their work or economic value. This ties in with the theme of justice and is relevant to some of the contemporary political conversations in this country.

[Psalm 67](#)

This psalm has a very poetic structure, building up to the middle verse and mirroring the earlier phrases. It has a common voice – it refers to ‘us’ rather than ‘I’ – and is used for public worship. What opportunities are there to use it creatively as part of a worship service?

There is a real sense of joy and praise – joyfulness is encouraged because the message is one of such hope and potential for justice.

The psalm is calling for God's will to be known, not our own. When we do God's will God is glorified and we are blessed. If we did what God wants, then everything would be equitable. This is for everyone, it is not individualistic. It is inclusive, for us, the peoples together. It does not say that everyone has to praise in the same way, we can praise as we are. We are all different, but there's unity in diversity. What unites us is that we are all here to praise God.

There is another link to the theme of environmental justice: equity brings blessing and the earth is abundant. There is enough for everyone, but we are not sharing our wealth or resources with others and people and the earth are suffering.

Verse 1 is reminiscent of the Aaronic blessing in Numbers. There is a missional aspect, a collective responsibility on us bring God's blessing to the whole world. There is a focus on active, outward-facing generosity. Also, the Aaronic blessing is often said at baptism, where the child or person is welcomed into the church community; emphasising that everyone is welcome.

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

This is a complex and confusing passage but it opens with a categorical objection to the idea that God has 'rejected his people'. The passage sounds as though an individual is being spoken to, but presumably it was addressed to a group. Who is being spoken to?

We should not feel guilty if we make mistakes. God is merciful and you'll be forgiven. We see promise and mercy, not judgement and wrath. We get the sense that we're all in this together; our actions have consequences for others and vice versa. We're bound together in God's mercy. We're imprisoned in disobedience – but this shows a unity, that we all need grace and mercy.

Paul is talking about the differences between Jews and Gentiles, where there were clear differences between the communities. What groups or people do we 'other' today, and what can we do about it?

God's grace is irrevocable, but how quickly do we punish or pull away from people for their mistakes? We get a huge sense of God's generosity, of abundant blessing, not just salvation.

If God calls us then we're called and we can't run away from that. It put me in mind of Jonah, or Moses, trying to get out of their calling from God. It doesn't matter if we make mistakes or try to run away, God doesn't make mistakes, and we must trust God's will.

We are all locked into decay but within that God's grace, mercy and hope come into play. It often helps to look beyond the verses of the lectionary passage. The final verse of Chapter 11 is a great summary of the whole passage: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever. Amen."

Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28

This is another complex and confusing reading. The first and second parts are distinct passages, but why do we include them both? They're linked by the concept of acceptable religious practices and inclusion or exclusion.

The first part has the recurring theme that we're all God's children, but that there is a relationship with God that needs to be developed. What does it mean to be planted by God? If our thoughts are not of God, will they be uprooted? Are we 'blind' because we don't seek God's guidance?

Jesus completely rejects the Pharisee's rules around cleanliness, which are exclusive and obstructive. The things that He describes as defiling are all thoughts or actions that undermine relationships and destroy unity.

The story of the Canaanite woman is really confusing and difficult to understand. Jesus came to save the lost and those who need help – there are echoes here of the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, but Jesus seems to contradict everything He has just said to the Pharisees about radical inclusion and the breaking down of barriers to God. Jesus' reply to the woman feels shocking and demeaning and offensive. But she is determined to challenge Jesus, who appears to change His mind. Can we change the mind of God? Does Jesus recognise her faith through this exchange through His response: "As you wish it"?

We shouldn't expect Jesus to speak simply or to give straightforward answers. I don't think that Jesus really believed what He said about only saving those who come from the House of Israel. I wonder if the woman had a lot of self-doubt in approaching Jesus, is that what's being tested here?

Jesus does not initially say anything when the woman first approaches Him. It is only when the Disciples try to make her be quiet and push her away that Jesus responds. Is Jesus prompted to speak by the Disciples, and the way they are acting (like the Pharisees) with a lack of acceptance and inclusion?

In the version of this story in Mark, it follows the feeding of the 5,000, when even the leftovers were plentiful. In the kingdom of God, everything is transformed and we are reminded of God's abundant provision. Perhaps we can see this story as part of this narrative.

Sermon ideas

The following might be used as prompts for an address, for conversations in small groups as part of your worship time, or for the focus of activities beyond the gathering.

- We need to trust God, no matter when we are either faced with a bad or good situation/times. What are the features of a trusting relationship?
- Is God always working? Think of a time when you've struggled to understand where God was; share a story about when you were able to find God in a difficult situation.

- What does unity look like in our Churches today? Take some time during the coming week to look for examples of unity in our churches today – locally, nationally or globally. Bring your findings back next week / share what you have learned with someone else. Explore how you might engage as a group with the Week of Prayer of Christian Unity ([Churches Together in Britain and Ireland](#))

Sermon ideas – Archive material

The theme of inclusion runs strongly through all the passages for this week. In the Kingdom of God we will find all kinds of unlikely and unexpected people. The gospel is good news for all, in every time and place and finds new expressions in different cultures. In the Old Testament the focus was on being the people of God, separate and distinct from other nations, but even here God was looking forward to a time when all people would come to know God and everyone would worship together.

The theme of inclusion is also strongly linked with justice. If everybody is welcome in the Kingdom of God, then we must not be putting barriers in the way of any group or person coming to know God for themselves. How do we make sure that the Church can be a house of prayer for everyone? Are there contemporary practices that we might be taking part in that exclude or exploit people coming to worship God?

Actively including and welcoming new people into the community of faith sounds great, but in reality is often difficult when new people do not behave in the way they expect them to. The Jews and the Gentiles needed to grapple with this issue and as we do today. We have a tendency to add in rules and create expected standards of behaviour and attempt to enforce these on others, often unwittingly, and this can mean there is tension when we experience a clash of cultures, such as the person who has their phone out during the sermon – are they being disrespectful and rude, or are they following the bible text, looking up something they didn't understand, or telling a friend about what they're doing?

Being a Church that is open to all people doesn't happen by accident, but takes the whole body of Christ to commit to actively practising inclusion. This is hard and will sometimes mean asking difficult questions of ourselves, rethinking the way we've always done things and continually coming back to the bible and to prayer to rediscover how we live out our faith in this place and at this time. In doing this we become part of the ongoing story of the gospel going out to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and Scotland, as well as to Zoom, TikTok and the ends of the internet.

Discussion Questions

1. When have you felt included in something?
2. When have you felt that you didn't belong?
3. Is there a code or standard of behaviour here? How would you know if you'd broken it?
4. What one thing could you do to help someone feel welcome and included here?

Vicky Stigant and Young Adults group archive material, 2020

Prayers

Gathering

God of Unity

You created all of us,

You are the Lord of all nations.

We gather to worship here today –

in person, online and with Christians all over the world, as one family.

Amen

Confession

Lord God,

You love us more than we can even comprehend,

and yet still we turn away from You.

We act in our best interests

believing that we know what must be done,

and that we know best.

We do it so often –

in the small things and in the biggest of things

we reject You, Lord.

We are sorry.

You know our hearts.

You know us deeply and intimately.

You know what we've done and what we will do, even before we do it.

You keep Your promises,

So, let us not be afraid to confess our deepest sins to You.

May we know the freedom Your truth provides us –

that through Your Son Jesus,
We may know forgiveness.

Hold a moment of silence

Forgiving God,
help us open our hearts to You.
Speak to us and guide us as we live out our faith –
In our worship today, through a bible study,
by helping our neighbour, volunteering in our community,
and reading Your word.
Bring us closer to You
and help us in turn to glorify You in our actions.
Be with us always
And may Your presence be known among us.
Help us to focus our thoughts
and remember that You are in everything that is good.

In Jesus' name we pray
Amen

Intercession

Father God,
We are thankful for all that You have given us.
You are with us in all the challenges of life.

We bring to You our prayers for others:
For people who are struggling with their health, be it physically or mentally.
For people who are in difficult relationships with partners, family, friends or colleagues.
For people who have experienced loss and are struggling with bereavement.
For the people who are filled with uncertainty, and are struggling financially.
Loving God, bring us all peace, comfort and hope.

We pray for the leaders of our world:
Guide our politicians and diplomats that they may be truthful, just and caring
as they communicate and take action on our behalf.
Bless our King and country with the willingness to do Your work,
to be inviting, supportive and loving of all people and care for all of Your creation.

And God, we pray for all the people of the world:
Bring peace for people caught in the indifferent destruction of war.
Bring hope for all those who cannot see an end to their struggling and despair.
Empower us all in whatever way we can, to work to bring relief, peace and care
to each and every situation we encounter.
May we work with Your Holy spirit to bring hope.

All of this we pray in Your name,
Amen

Sending

God of unity,
You equipped us, not with the ability to overcome any task by ourselves,
but with individuality and a uniqueness that, with Your love and Your guidance,
allow us to cultivate lives and communities that walk with You.
Loving God, continue to shower the whole world with Your graciousness.

You sent Jesus Christ, Your only Son,
To guide us, in teachings and by example.
Guide us to the places we must go and to the people we must meet,
Whether it is easy or difficult, help us to hear Your call.
So that we can do all that we can for You and Your people.

May we go and make disciples
Knowing that You are with us.

or

Sending

Holy Spirit,
bring Your light, love and inspiration to us.
Fill us with Your awe inspiring power.
Remind us that we live for You and for each other, not for ourselves.
As we reflect together today, as we go about our business this week,
And as we live out the rest of our lives
Be within our thoughts and actions.
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 124 – “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation”
- CH4 172 – “Sing For God’s Glory”
- CH4 193 – “God is love: his the care”
- CH4 198 – “Let us build a house where love can dwell”
- CH4 204 – “I am the church, you are the church”
- CH4 270 – “Put all your trust in God”
- CH4 522 – “The church is wherever God’s people are praising”
- CH4 531 – “My Jesus, my Saviour”
- CH4 623 – “Here in this place new light is streaming” (Gather Us In)
- CH4 796 – “The Lord bless you and keep you”
- CH4 803 – “Sizohambra Naye” (We will walk with God, my brothers)
- Community of Taizé – “The Kingdom of God is Justice and Peace” (widely available online)

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'.
- When singing in our congregations is 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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