

First Sunday after Epiphany – Year B

Sunday 7 January 2024

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev Dr Janet Foggie, Locum Minister of St Mark's, St Andrews, part-time Celebrant of services for all faiths and none, and Convener of Monkswell Woodland Pioneer Ministry Project (funded by the Presbytery of Fife at Lindores Parish Church), for her thoughts on the first Sunday after Epiphany.

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 we combine the story of the baptism of Jesus with the thoughts about coming into a New Year. I chose as my focus the ideas around hearing the voice of God, but there are many other themes in these passages which are just as rich. Through the readings, the idea of hearing God's voice recurs, and another connection to explore is the relationship within the divine of God's voice and the Holy Spirit. We can also ask questions of ourselves in terms of our hearing of God's voice and our speaking in a way that is true to the Spirit or inspired by the Spirit. There's also the question of human judgement, and those times we choose to follow a person, either a 'Paul' or an 'Apollos', rather than using our own judgement and conscience to follow Christ through the voice of God as we hear it.

Whichever direction your preparation for worship takes, it is my hope that the people gathering may find hope and comfort in the voice of God as they think, sing and pray together with worshipful hearts.

Genesis 1:1-5

My thoughts for this week focus on the beginning of verse three: "Then God said". I wonder what role we think the voice of God had in these creation stories. Was it a command to some powers unseen? Or was God's voice the creative force itself? Do we have any other way in which to interpret God's voice in this story? Or is it cut and dried? The conflict between religion and science in the 19th century has not been entirely resolved in the 21st. Does the concept of the 'Voice of God' as a creative force necessarily negate scientific theories, such as the Big Bang? Or is it possible to have a perfectly logical and theoretical scientific model for which the biblical stories provide a metaphorical understanding? I don't propose to answer these questions this week – but they are an interesting background to the power of the voice of God, as described in the story of the baptism of Jesus.

Psalm 29

In this psalm, God's voice is powerful and full of majesty but it is also destructive. "The voice of the Lord [...] breaks the cedars of Lebanon." Where we might be inclined to view weather as a dispassionate and scientific planetary system, in fact we know that weather is also connected to human activity through our impact on the climate. Can the human beings who live on this earth affect the weather in the same way as God's voice? If so, what do we understand when we hear that God also affects the weather? Are we free of any implication in that event? If the forests are stripped bare, do we see this as demonstrating the glory or

strength of God? Or, is it a judgment on the emissions of CO2 over the past 150 years caused by humans?

Looking back to the Genesis reading there was a reference to the “wind from God” (v2), which was creative in force; in this psalm God is in the thunder and wind with a destructive force – how do we understand this today in a modern context?

Acts 19:1-7

This is our only reading this week not to reference the voice of God directly. Instead we hear of disciples in Ephesus who were baptised with the ‘baptism of John’ and had, therefore, not received the Holy Spirit. It appears from the text that this was out of ignorance of the baptism they might receive in the name of the Lord Jesus. Once they learned of the difference, Paul baptised them and they received the Holy Spirit, spoke in tongues and prophesied. In a neat balance with the disciples who followed Jesus, we are told that there were about twelve of them. Why do we give this number of twelve significance, especially when the writer of Acts adds a qualifying ‘about’ to the number?

I wonder how far we believe that we can access or indeed be a vehicle for the voice of God through the Holy Spirit? Is speaking in tongues part of our experience of God’s voice? Or is prophesy? How do we judge that a voice from God is genuine? How do we enable ourselves to see what is repentance and what is redemption – what do we consider to be the difference between the two?

In the previous chapter, in Acts 18:24-28, we are introduced to Apollos, another teacher of “the Way of the Lord”, who also knew only the baptism of John. In this story it is Priscilla and Aquila who take him aside and set him straight. Apollos goes on to teach and help people who had become believers. He is mentioned again by Paul in the first Letter to the Corinthians as a person who should not be set up as a competing voice to Paul’s, nor should the infant church develop sects of leadership devotion rather than devotion to Christ. Again, the question of discernment comes to the fore, hearing the voice of a teacher or preacher is not to be confused with hearing the voice of God.

Mark 1:4-11

We come to our gospel reading. This story is found in all three of the synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. Here we discover the source of the Christian sects that knew only the baptism of John, as he is termed ‘John the baptiser’ – the one who baptises. We are

given a description of John's person, and very unusually for the gospels, his clothing. He was wearing camel's hair garment and a leather belt. The suggestion is that John seemed wild, different, set apart as a holy man. If there is a contrast with how Jesus dressed, ate and spoke, we have to read it from the silence. We are not told what Jesus wears. We do get an insight into his meals, but always as the meals of the people around him: dining with the tax collector Zacchaeus, or at the wedding in Cana, or with the little boy who brought five loaves and two fish. The ordinary nature of Jesus' daily life gets little mention, but the extraordinary nature of John's does grab the writers' attention.

I wonder how far we feel that Christianity should 'show' in our ordinary lives? Do we have a sticker in the shape of a fish on the back of our car? Are we always careful to reflect that public statement in our driving? Do we feel there is a specific way to dress for church? Do we judge others who dress differently? Was that an issue in our youth, but less so today?

Sermon ideas

Coming to preach on these passages, I would begin to focus on the idea of the voice of God. The people gathered together in worship could think about what was different about John baptising Jesus, compared to the many, many other people he must have baptised to create all these disciples across the Roman Empire around the eastern end of Mediterranean Sea. As ever with the life of 'the Way of the Lord', as Apollos called it, it is much easier to be clear that God does speak to us than it is to be certain every time that we have heard the voice of God correctly. In the story of Jesus' baptism, God's voice is heard by everyone present, the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit descends on Him like a dove.

- In our own experience of the Christian faith, when have we known that God was speaking to us? What were our criteria for deciding this was so?
- Have we ever encountered anyone – like the Christians in Ephesus in our reading from Acts – who believed that they were right but in fact they only had a part of the picture? Did you take them aside and clarify the issue? What was the result?
- When we hear of politicians, nations, or armies, acting on the 'command of God', do we accept that without question? Or do we have criteria – ethical or historical, for judging who is right and who is wrong? What might those criteria be?
- We began our look at the psalm with a discussion of the human actions that lead to climate change – do we believe that God or faith might mitigate these? Or is it up to people to reduce their emissions and try to reduce the warming of the global average temperatures?

- What other issues, contemporary or otherwise, does the human desire to hear the voice of God in the voices of leaders create for us?
- When we do hear God speak, at the baptism of Jesus, it is of love for God's son. When we hear a voice of love, is that always God's voice through us? Could love be the test of divine will, or is it too easily swayed by other human motivations?

Finally, this Sunday is the first in a new year. In our baptisms we begin our faith, we are redeemed and brought into the Christian family. What do we think of the baptism of Jesus? Does it show He is just like us? Or does it show how different He was, being truly human and divine? Can we make 'Christian resolutions' to live up to the hope and responsibility of our baptised life in Christ? What would they be?

Prayers

Approach

God of love and truth,
we come to worship You at the opening of a New Year.
Some of us feel fear for what the future may bring,
some of us feel optimism for good things ahead,
some of us feel like we need to turn over a new leaf.

However we are feeling, we approach You in reverence and humility.
We are aware that there are times we have not heard Your voice,
times we have not followed Your call.
There are times when we have judged others harshly,
for their faith, or their lack of faith,
and we were slow to acknowledge when we were wrong.
Forgive us,
forgive us in the baptising power of Jesus and the Holy Spirit,
forgive us and set for us a path of redemption –
a kinder voice to others, a kinder mindset when we think of others,
and a kinder voice to ourselves.

Thank You, gracious God, that this redemption is ours,
this new life for a New Year is ready for us to take up
and that Your voice will guide us on the way.
So, gather us with Christians across the world as we say Your prayer:
[Here the Lord's Prayer may be said in your local tradition] **Amen**

Thanksgiving / Gratitude

For prayers of thanksgiving why not ask the congregation for their personal points of gratitude as the New Year comes in? Or allow periods of silence for people to consider the things they feel grateful for. One way to do this is to distribute post-it notes and ask people to write their gratitude points down; they can either bring them to the front during a piece of music, or their notes may be collected in as part of worship.

Prayer for others / Intercession *(based on CH4 540)*

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'Come unto me and rest;
lay down, thou weary one, lay down
thy head upon my breast':

God of love,
we bring today our prayers for all those who are exhausted and need rest,
for those suffering from long Covid, ME or post-viral fatigue,
for those who are working on the frontline
[current events may be mentioned]
and who need time to rest and recover.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'Behold, I freely give
the living water; thirsty one,
stoop down and drink, and live':

God of living water,
we pray this New Year for all those who need clean water to live and thrive,
for those who are suffering because of global warming,
either with their water supplies polluted by flooding,
or from drought

[current events may be referenced here]

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'I am this dark world's Light;
Look unto me, thy morn shall rise,
and all thy day be bright':

God of guidance,
we pray today for all who need Your guidance
and who need to hear Your voice this New Year.
We ask that we might enable others
to see Your goodness in our kindness and love,
and be the conduits of Your light in our communities and churches.

'I looked to Jesus, and I found
in Him my Star, my Sun;
and in that light of life I'll walk,
till travelling days are done.'

Eternal God,
gather us in when our travelling days are done,
to Your eternal light, to be reunited with all whom we have lost and loved,
and to worship You there forever,
Amen

Blessing / Closing prayer

This may be said by one person or in unison, or sung: the tune is found in CH4 798

The peace of the earth be with you,
the peace of the heavens too;
the peace of the rivers be with you,
the peace of the oceans too.
Deep peace falling over you;
God's peace growing in you. [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.

A suggested [playlist of songs from CH4 for use throughout Epiphany](#) can be found on the Church of Scotland website.

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 540 – “I heard the voice of Jesus say”
- CH4 542 – “Lord, speak to me, that I may speak”
- CH4 543 – “Longing for light, we wait in darkness”
- CH4 588 – “Praise the Spirit in creation”
- CH4 631 – “A little child the Saviour came”

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’.
- If 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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