

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Fifth Sunday of Easter – 29 April 2018

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Fraser Penny, Minister of Dunkeld Parish Church, for his thoughts on the fifth Sunday of Easter.

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	2
Acts 8:26-40	2
Psalm 22:25-31	2
Psalm 18:19-25	3
Exodus 19:1-6	3
1 John 4:7-21	4
John 15:1-8	5
Sermon ideas	5
Time with children	7
Prayers	9
Musical suggestions	12

Introduction

In the Sundays after Easter the lectionary readings take us through accounts of resurrection experiences as we seek to grapple with this greatest of mysteries. Last week's and this Sunday's readings move us on to think about what that relationship with the Risen Christ looks like in practice for the believer now. The New Testament passages show us an example of how a disciple lives out faith (Acts 8) and the passages from the Epistle of John and the Gospel of John are wonderful readings about the source of that life in the love of God seen in Jesus Christ. They give plenty of scope for the preacher!

[Acts 8:26-40](#)

The story of the Ethiopian Eunuch shows another step forward for the fledgling church. It is significant that the man at the centre of the story is Ethiopian and a high-up official of the Queen of Ethiopia. In other words it is showing the church break into new ground in its mission – geographically and socially. The Gospel is now making inroads into North Africa and into the governing classes of that area.

It therefore provides a good template for mission. It begins with the Spirit's prompting, which impels Philip to go to a particular place, although he doesn't, at that point, understand why. Then he encounters a man who is already searching for meaning. He has been on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and is reading the scriptures. Philip gets alongside him and engages him in conversation. He is able to give 'a reason for the hope that is in him' (1 Peter 3:15) and explains what the passage is about. It ends with the baptism of the Ethiopian official.

[Psalm 22:25-31](#)

Psalm 22 is best known as the one that begins with the phrase Jesus quoted on the cross 'My God why have You forsaken me.' Typical of a Psalm of Lament, it begins in near despair but moves on to a sense of confidence in God leading to trust and praise that is found in the section for today's reading.

The Psalms are honest and true to life. There is a frankness about that kind of Old Testament spirituality which 'gets it off your chest' in the belief that God can take it. That then gives rise to a confidence in God who will act. It may not always look like it and at a particular moment, all the evidence may be to the contrary, but God will act and deliver the righteous – that's the conviction of this Psalm. For the Christian, post-Easter, we know too,

that this life is not always a bed of roses but that we are heirs to eternal life thanks to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Life may have its times of bitterness but in faith we hold to the promise that resurrection is coming.

Psalm 18:19-25

Again, this is a Psalm which speaks of God's deliverance and it seems to be the voice of one particular convert who has discovered that God has acted and it is all of grace, not human achievement (v23). The previous verse, 22, is better known to Christians from 1 Peter Chapter 2, where he applies it to Jesus. God has acted through the one who was crucified 'and it is wonderful in our eyes.'

Originally, we have to imagine this Psalm being used in a procession, acted out dramatically, as the priest led people to the gates of the Temple. George Knight in the Daily Study Bible volume on the Psalms (St. Andrew's Press) says 'It is giving us a theology of God's saving love in an acted parable.' The pilgrim worshipper is now one with all God's redeemed people by grace alone, so he bursts out in praise.

It is not hard to read this Psalm with Christian eyes as we meditate on the events of the Passion and resurrection of Christ.

Exodus 19:1-6

This passage records the lead-up to a seminal moment in the life of Israel as the ground is prepared for receiving the 10 Commandments. Like Psalm 22, this is a passage that bridges the gap between faith and promise. Verse 6 flies in the face of present reality when it says 'you will be to me a kingdom of priests, my holy nation.' The reality is that they are a bunch of wandering refugees living in tents with nowhere to call home, so how can they be a holy nation? We know that many times in their wanderings the people lost sight of this promise and rebelled one way or another, because the reality they were enduring did not match the promise they were given. It took great leaders like Moses to keep them on the right track and believe the promise which would one day come to fulfilment. The promise is there and by holding to the promise in faith they wander with purpose.

Although we are living post resurrection it is easy for Christians to lose sight of the future promise. The temptation is to give up and play the world at its own game. We are tempted to capitulate because it seems sometimes that we are no better off by holding to the promise. We begin to doubt it and are locked in to a type of limbo, where all seems bleak.

However, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the seal on the promise that we too will inherit the kingdom, so hold fast to the promise. We too are travelling people wandering through this life, but it is a journey with purpose and hope because we have the future promise of the risen life in Christ.

[1 John 4:7-21](#)

This chapter is a rich vein for a preacher to explore. It has verses quoted in marriages and in the baptismal service because it emphasizes the centrality of love in the life of faith.

1. Love begins with God and is *the* central truth of Christian faith, for God is love. It is a two-way relationship for us though. It is only by knowing the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ that we can understand what love is. But it is only by loving that we learn to know God.
2. Love is *the* controlling element in Christian faith. Religious people have put many things above this and it leads to a distorted faith. We can make moral rectitude the governing factor and it leads to self-righteousness and judgmentalism. At times, correct doctrine has been the controlling factor, and it has led to harshness and exclusion. These things are good and important but love, as seen in Jesus Christ, must be the controlling factor.
3. Human love is not an optional extra but is our response to God's love, which came first. St. Paul affirms that it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us, He loved us first and it is His love that melts our hardness of heart. Many years ago a church had a mission and used a nice play on words for its slogan 'Love *won* another.' In loving, we show the nature of God in Christ.
4. John affirms too, that love drives out fear. A lot of religion has been dominated by fear and fear has been used to control and manipulate people. The relationship we have with God in Christ has a different quality and character from anything we have known before. In human terms, I don't fear those I love, I fear letting them down and that is the nature of the relationship the Christian has with God. We know we are accepted as we are that we might become different, we don't have to prove ourselves or fear losing God's good opinion of us. He already knows the truth about us and it didn't put Him off! As Psalm 118:23 says, "This is the Lord's doing and it is wonderful in our eyes".

[John 15:1-8](#)

John 15 contains another of the great 'I am' sayings of Jesus – 'I am the true vine.' Here, typical of John's Gospel, he develops the image and leads us into deep things.

My wife and I had our summer holiday in 2017 in the south of Spain, in the town of Jerez de la Frontera, the place which gave Sherry its name. Over the two weeks we learnt a great deal about the production of sherry! For example, all the vines used to grow grapes for sherry are grafted. The type of vine wanted by the grower is grafted onto a parent stem, which makes them less susceptible to disease and therefore healthier and establishes them quickly. It is a good image for Christ the true vine – the life of the vine flows from the strong root.

Exploring this image has many spiritual lessons. Eddie Askew, one-time International director of The Leprosy Mission, published a series of books containing prayers and meditations he sent out to the Mission's workers around the world. In one of them, 'Disguises of Love' he includes a short meditation on this passage, which suggests ideas from this image of the true vine, some of which are included here.

1. It is about the spiritual life of prayer and worship.
2. It is the counterbalance to what we read in 1 John 4. There can be a danger of thinking that, if it is all about love, then we can dismiss the supernatural stuff of faith and just do good. This passage reminds us of the central importance of grafting into the vine.
3. It includes an element of judgement too – there is pruning required but that need not be a frightening thing, but rather something that leads to greater fruitfulness.
4. There is an important message here too, that uselessness invites disaster. The unfruitful branches are cut off and thrown out to make the vine stronger.

Sermon ideas

A sermon on the Acts passage could develop the idea of how we engage in mission and the fact that Philip was ready to respond when the situation arose. Are we ready and able to give a reason for the hope that is within us?

Philip used the opportunity which led to inroads into North Africa and into government circles in Ethiopia. Where are the inroads into our society today? Where is the Holy Spirit prompting us to go in our communities and are we prepared to follow those promptings?

An interesting idea is to consider what made Philip take that particular route that day. The Holy Spirit often prompts us to do something or go somewhere that to us seems a bit random, but often those promptings are the fruitful path to follow. I know as a minister there are times when a particular person comes into my mind for some reason, and there is a sense that I should go and see them. If I respond to that, the worst that can happen is that I look a bit foolish to turn up at their door for no reason. But I have rarely regretted acting on that impulse. Invariably if I don't react to it I regret it because something has happened or was going on in their life.

Interruptions and often unwanted intrusions into our carefully planned day can seem to us a nuisance, but are often the guiding of the Holy Spirit.

Anthony de Mello tells a good story in 'The Heart of the Enlightened' (published by Fount). There was a Rabbi who lived in a village on the Steppes of Russia. Every morning for twenty years he crossed the village square to go to pray in the Synagogue and every morning he was watched closely by a policeman who hated Jews. Finally, one morning, the policeman walked up to him and demanded to know where he was going.

'I don't know' said the Rabbi.

'What do you mean, you don't know? For the past twenty years I have seen you go to that Synagogue across the square and now you say you don't know? I'll teach you a lesson!' And with that he grabbed the old man by his beard and dragged him off to jail. As the policeman was turning the key on the prison cell, the Rabbi looked at him with a twinkle in his eye and said, 'See what I mean when I said I didn't know?'

It is good to leave room for the unexpected and the interruption because it may well be that is the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

John 15

Excuse the pun, but this is a very 'fruitful' passage for the preacher.

1. We inhabit a world which truly lives by the maxim of 'justification by works.' We glorify the stressful state and measure our worth by how busy we are. Just gather a bunch of ministers in a room and time how long it is before they talk of how many funerals they have conducted this month and how long it is since they had a proper day off! We speak of this as if it were something to boast about but the net result is that people become more and more stressed, the branch is further away from the vine and so produces plenty foliage but not always a lot fruit.

Churches do it too. We like to boast of how busy we are and how much we do, yet the most fruitful thing a person can do is to remain close to the vine. The busier we get, the less time we have for prayer and the less fruitful we become. We are to depend on Christ, not vice versa! Time spent in prayer and worship is not wasted but the most fruitful thing we can do. There is no point in being frantically busy if we are busy doing the wrong things so take time to graft into the vine, discover His will and then you will be more fruitful.

2. Notice verse 5 says 'you are the branches' – it is plural. Perhaps if we are stressed out by all we are doing it is because we are doing the work of other branches. There is one vine, but many branches. We often say 'if you want something done ask a busy person.' There is an element of truth in that, but in church there must be a place for all the branches to bear fruit. The pruning by the gardener is not necessarily about punishment, but may be an act of kindness, to cut us back a little to allow others to flourish.

3. If you read on to verses 10 and 11 (next week's reading), it is no coincidence that John writes about joy and love. If we are far from the vine and becoming stressed out, then the first casualties are joy and love. We lose all joy in our living because we are too worn out to enjoy anything. We lose love for the task we once enjoyed, we lose love for those we serve because we feel put upon and we feel they are not doing their bit as branches, but leaving it all to us! We may even lose love for God, whom we believe is calling us to do all this frantic activity. Taking time to graft into the vine and let his life flow through us releases us from that burden and restores our love and joy.

Time with children

If you have children present who happily participate, this idea demonstrates how teamwork operates.

Have a rug laid out on the floor with a bean bag (or something similar) in the centre of it. Ask a volunteer to pick up the bean bag – but without touching the rug in the process (the object should be sufficiently far in to make it impossible – otherwise the whole thing will fail!!)

Then ask how this might be possible. The answer is to enlist help. Get another volunteer out to hold one hand of the first person while they lean over and reach the object with their other hand without touching the rug. Use this demonstration to teach about the ideas in John 15 about there being one vine but many branches. If we share the workload then much more is possible. If we cooperate and accept help we can do much more than we ever can on our own.

Alternatively, if the children you have are not keen to volunteer, the same lesson can be made by telling this Italian legend (Printed in 'Together Today' by Robert Fisher, published by Bell & Hyman.)

St. Valentine is best known as the saint associated with love, but legend has it he was also a friend of the birds. One day a quarrel broke out among the birds as to which of them should be classed king. Every bird thought he was the greatest so they decided to hold a competition.

'Let's see who flies the furthest' said the pigeon.'

'No' said the swift, 'let's see who flies the fastest.'

'I think the king should be the strongest' said the eagle.

'The bird who should be king should be the most beautiful' said the peacock.

'Let's choose the best singer' said the blackbird.

'The one who should be wisest should be king' said the owl.

And once again they all started fighting – no one could agree. So they decided to ask Valentine, friend of the birds, to say which of them was best fitted to be king.

St. Valentine thought carefully and said 'he that flies nearest to heaven is best fitted to be king.'

The birds agreed and decided to put the matter to the test. At a given signal they were all to start flying upwards so up they went, big and small. Each flew as best they could to outfly the others and reach highest in the sky. Higher and higher they went until the smaller birds began to drop out. One by one they glided back down to earth until only two birds were left in the competition – the lark and the eagle. At last the lark could fly no higher and he too glided down to the ground. The eagle soared on a bit to show how strong he was and then swooped down to land at Valentine's feet.

'I am the king of the birds!' he cried.

But little did he know that there, *on top of his head* stood the smallest and lightest of birds, the tiny wren. No matter how high the eagle went, she always went higher. She had chosen the strongest bird to carry her into the sky and so had gone higher than all the other birds.

'That's not fair' hooted the owl. 'The eagle won because he not only flew the highest but carried the wren as well.'

The other birds didn't know what to think so they waited to see what Valentine would say.

'To rise to the top we need the help of others' said the saint. 'The wren relied on the strength of the eagle and rose to be the highest of all. Just as the Christian must rely on the strength of Christ our Lord, if he wishes to reach up to heaven.

Alas, the birds were none the wiser. The wren thought he had won but the eagle was convinced that he was the king of the birds. As for Valentine, he just carried on loving them all.

The story can either demonstrate the need to rely on each other and share the work load, like the branches in the vine, or the need to remain rooted in the vine, and find Christ's help.

Prayers

Approach

As we focus our minds,
it is easy for our minds to shoot off
in so many directions.
We find it hard to slow down,
to remove all the clutter
and concentrate on You, Lord.
In the stillness of this place,
this time,
take from us the strain and stress
as we feel ourselves rest in Your eternal love,
in the everlasting arms.

Then quietly,
the small beginnings of praise well up
as we remember
what we have in Jesus Christ.
That we have one who is with us,
who guides and strengthens us.
Who holds us through every storm of life
who leads us to everlasting life.

We confess that sometimes the storms we endure
are of our own making.
A foolish word,

a thoughtless comment,
a misguided action,
a quick judgement.
Then we have to live with the consequences,
and the guilt.
Take all that stress from us too
and replace it with Your forgiveness and peace.

Heavenly Father,
in Your hands we are safe and secure –
we rejoice in Your eternal love
and all sufficient grace.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

Intercessions

Jesus Christ, the true vine,
in our need
we come to You,
in weakness,
needing Your strength
for we too easily become dry and lifeless
without Your life-giving spirit.

Jesus Christ, the true vine,
teach us to remain in You
and so to find Your life flowing in us
giving strength and vigour to our discipleship.

And as we come closer to You
our lives are drawn closer to others.
Our minds turn to images of violence we have seen
on the news in places of fear and terror,
to where people are at loggerheads,
over race, religion, land, power.

Our thoughts turn to Christians
living with persecution
who face danger, simply for being linked to You.

Father, prune back all that stands in the way of peace.

Our thoughts turn to people
in leadership and power
- who have decisions to make over the economy
and people whose jobs and livelihood will be affected.
We pray for our nation, and its leaders.
May changes and choices be shaped by the values of the kingdom.

On our hearts
are people in need in our church and community.
Wherever hearts are breaking
bodies are failing
minds are confused
families are ruptured
Lord, come with Your help and healing.

Here, too, as Your church gathered today,
we give thanks for the saints of the past
and the fruit they have borne in our community and beyond.
Like them, help us to remain in You
that we may be fruitful
and bring glory to Your name.
Through Jesus Christ, the true vine.
Amen

Musical suggestions

- CH4 43 – “O God, You are my God alone”
- CH4 248 – “For my sake and the Gospel’s, go” – Ties in with the Acts passage about mission
- CH4 436 – “Christ triumphant, ever reigning”
- CH4 485 – “Dear Lord and Father of mankind” – Fits with the ideas in John 15, (especially verses 4 & 5)
- CH4 536 – “May the mind” – I like the tune it is set to in Mission Praise, which is more reflective)
- CH4 552 – “Oh, for a closer walk with God” – Both tunes are good but ‘the Flower o’ the quern’ works particularly well
- CH4 567 – “Focus my eyes on You, O Lord”
- CH4 678 – “Here is the place” – Although this is in the Ordination Section of the book, it fits many occasions. Set to a lovely, easily picked up, Irish tune
- CH4 716 – “Come and find the quiet centre” – Fits well with the theme of the true vine