

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost – 30 October 2022

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Dr Mark Calder, Senior Humanitarian and Conflict Policy Advisor at World Vision, for his thoughts on the twenty-first 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.

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

It is likely that many in our communities are beginning to see and feel the impacts of the cost of living crisis: on their finances and living standards, and perhaps on their mental and physical wellbeing. Meanwhile, instead of the greater social solidarity we hoped the pandemic would foster, we see the worsening of inequality, with vast profits being made by some at the same time as people (even some employed full-time) are unable to meet their basic costs. The unfairness of this is exacerbated by a political discourse frequently lacking compassion for those most marginalised and disempowered.

Meanwhile, across the world children find themselves without access to their most basic rights, at risk of exploitation and violence, with few life chances, served by an inadequate response from those with wealth and influence. Millions are hungry. Seven million in Somalia alone are thought to be enduring acute malnutrition, as are more than half of Afghanistan's children. Call to mind the face of just one person enduring this daily agony and compassion stirs. Then multiply this one by these millions, before adding those still suffering from displacement from Syria, central and western Africa, and of course Ukraine. The accumulation of human misery in our world today is an unbearably heavy weight for our faith and hope to bear.

We are either distressed and angered by this, or we are not paying attention. Then again, perhaps we've grown weary and numb to it. But the extent to which this injustice is affecting those in some of our own church communities today, is perhaps a grim wake-up call.

Enabling our congregations to find their predicaments, and the world's immeasurable pain, reflected in scripture can provide some solace. It is a great gift that the Bible doesn't gloss over this kind of reality, and today's readings help us to live our faith with both a more clear-eyed view of our world's unhappiness and disorder, *and* the presence of a God who draws hope from despair, justice from injustice, and life from death.

[Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4](#)

These eight verses distil a longer, quite extraordinary exchange between the Prophet Habakkuk and Yahweh, and it may be worth encouraging our congregations this week to spend time reading and meditating upon the full, often troubling and ambiguous, exchange.

If we find it extraordinary, though, this may have more to do with our expectations of prayer and the register in which we usually address God in worship, rather than the

expectations created by the Bible. In fact scripture is full of such audacious complaint to God – and complaint is a key part of biblical lament, that literary terrain in which scripture makes space for human perspectives on pain, suffering, injustice, and loss.

With no biographical details about Habakkuk, and noting the possibility that his name is not Hebrew, there is an ‘everyman’ quality to his words that speak to the universality of disappointment with God’s action (or apparent inaction) in the world. Certainly, the first four verses speak especially clearly to me in my work as a conflict specialist for [World Vision](#), an international humanitarian organisation.

Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble. Destruction and violence are before me.

How often it seems that God has caused me, like Habakkuk, ‘to see’ the horror of violence about which I feel I can do so little? Ukraine, Yemen, DRC, Tigray, Syria, Myanmar, the Sahel spring to mind... and so do children growing in homes and communities affected by violence, including women and girls subject to sexual and gender-based violence, permanently affecting their life chances.

The exchange then weaves its way through vivid observations about the destruction wrought by the godless, apparently without God restraining them, before Chapter Two introduces some consolation.

Yet this is not a quick fix or easy answer. It is a further horizon.

There is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end.

This echoes the biblical motif of ‘The Day of the Lord’. This motif is not to be mistaken as being only that great one-off, the Last Judgement. In fact, it is a recurring feature of biblical storytelling: the moment at the end of a difficult season of injustice when God brings judgement, restoration, and wholeness to the oppressed. Relief. Release. The end, and a new beginning.

It is the horizon of the Lord’s Prayer, when Jesus prays ‘Thy Kingdom Come’. It *involves* the permanent end-times hope of a new heaven and new earth, but it is capable of being *realised* locally and temporarily in our conflict-ridden present too, and has been realised many times before. This prospect is part of the motivation for the Christian peacemakers and peacebuilders I encounter in my work. Seeing the qualified peace in Northern Ireland and the Balkans as instances of such should drive us to cherish peaceful outcomes all the

more. As such, this 'vision for the appointed time' inspires us to action in accordance with God's great Action, not fatalism.

[Psalm 119:137-144](#)

In my experience, Christians rarely enthuse about the 'Law of God'. In fact, I have more often heard Christians contrast the apparently stifling, guilt-inducing 'law' with life-giving, liberating 'grace', an opposition drawn with some justification from the Apostle Paul's writings. In Galatians Paul even describes us as being 'cursed' with the law.

In this light, we may wonder whether English translations that add 'but' to v141 are reading the Psalm through such a lens. In fact, no such 'but' exists. It could equally be read, 'Small I am, and despised, so I have not forgotten your precepts'!

The Psalmists (here and elsewhere, e.g. Psalm 19) view God's law as a lavish gift, an insight into God's heart, and an enduring measure against which all people's conduct – rich and powerful, poor and powerless alike – can be evaluated. It is therefore something that the 'small and despised' can lean upon when their rights are denied. Liberals and evangelicals alike have often focused on the respective attributes of specific laws, but the Torah's narrative contextualisation of the legal texts should remind us of the radical nature of a Bronze Age society pursuing order according to a statement of the inviolable dignity of all. It was a law that had no need for kingship until the people demanded it.

We do not grasp the beauty of this easily if we focus on idiosyncrasies of a legal code made for ancient eastern Mediterranean agrarian society, but in many respects the economics of the Torah are more progressive and equalising than anything modern humans have sustained. The Torah is therefore an expression of the Word, the divine relationality itself, which should weave its way through Christian sociality in the church and through the church to all people.

But what is striking is that this law, while unbowed before status and privilege, is not 'impersonal' in the modern sense. This law still illuminates the iniquities of the powerful and religious and has the power to set free and refresh the poorest. Jesus applies it contextually and relationally: Zacchaeus knows salvation, or liberation, for generously compensating those he'd extorted; for the 'woman caught in adultery', the law is apparently abrogated and she is told, simply, 'go and sin no more' (John 8); while to the religious leader, law is not enough, 'Except a man be born again...' (John 3).

Here we see grace expressing the law's essence in real life contexts, relative to individuals' respective power and social status, rather than laying it aside.

[2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12](#)

In the midst of great hardship, of uncertainty, affliction and outright danger, the church to which St Paul and his companions write in Thessalonica is a model to us: the Thessalonians model a growth in faith and in love for one another which causes their parent in the faith to boast about them to others!

The editorial cut in this reading means we lose the referent of v11, which is the hope of enduring vindication and the destruction of the evil powers persecuting them. 'To this end...', this hope, continue the Apostles, we pray 'that God will make you worthy of his call'.

This is a rather curious comment, suggesting that in some sense their admirable faith and love is not in itself their worthiness, nor that this worthiness is something attained once and for all. Instead it is a function of the power of God within the community, of which their faith and love is an expression.

It is not uncommon to note the remarkable spirit that animates our siblings in the faith in contexts marked by oppression and deprivation – notably in the global south. We need not romanticise such people and their hardship to assert this, nor should we stop praying for the ongoing sustaining work of God among them in order to continue to bear the fruit that we currently discern.

However we should also pray that, as circumstances around us turn markedly for the worse, our church communities would not be holy huddles barricaded against the world, but expressions of loving solidarity *and* hospitality in which an alternative, Christ-shaped way of being together is made available to our neighbours, a way of being that is robust in the face of injustice, and gentle with the stranger that arrives at our table.

[Luke 19:1-10](#)

Zacchaeus would have been seen as the worst of the worst by many of his neighbours. An Israelite by birth, but who'd sold out his people by collecting taxes for the Romans. Unjustly very rich, young and/or short (the Greek word could mean either), and utterly to be held in contempt.

We tend to think we know who ‘the marginalised’ are – invariably they are those for whom we have sympathy. But most of us have people whose political views or behaviours or apparent complicity with injustice make them beyond the pale for us – our opponents, even enemies. The Zacchaeus story tells us that, whether we like it or not, Jesus has a heart for those in *these* margins too.

Zacchaeus is a helpful embodiment of Archbishop Tutu’s comment that, ‘When we oppress others we end up oppressing ourselves too’. The marginalisation of wee Zacchaeus was a consequence of his choices, but that doesn’t mean Jesus was therefore happy to stand, as we might, with pursed lips and a sense of justice being done. Hence both are true that Christ stands with the oppressed, and that His love and saving power reaches across the divide to the oppressors who, in seeking, find themselves sought by Christ.

There is so much to unpack in this short tale, but perhaps the most resonant with other scriptures are ways in which Zacchaeus moves from isolated exclusion and social contempt, towards his inclusion within the house of Abraham, the people of God.

Jesus’ insistence that Zacchaeus’ inclusion begins with showing hospitality: ‘I *must* stay at your house’. The one whom nobody would entertain as guest is now the host of Jesus Himself.

And his belonging to this upside down kingdom, this new social order is expressed even more fully by his lavish gift, above and beyond his debt, to the poor – to those who cannot repay him. In so doing, according to the norms of his culture, Zacchaeus was throwing away his social capital to discover a new kind of belonging, with Jesus, in the household of God.

It is a beautiful and challenging story of a way of belonging together that could be especially needed in times of great hardship and deep division.

Sermon ideas

Today’s readings speak to different facets of righteousness and justice, but one notable thread throughout is the *relational* quality of righteousness. These texts know no dis-attached, individualised piety, but a particular responsiveness and attentiveness to one’s neighbour and the wholeness of our community.

Importantly, this isn’t just a feature of the New Testament readings but of the Hebrew Bible texts as well. Righteousness – *Şedaqah* – is expressed by a heart that is oriented towards, and reaches for the wellbeing, of one’s neighbour – especially the survivor of injustice and

exploitation, but also, in a different way, the one to be held in contempt for their complicity in it.

Ask the congregation how they feel when they think of the state of our country today – the cost of living crisis, for instance, as we head into a winter that will be unmanageable for many. Ask them how they feel about the state of our politics, the state of our hungry and conflict-ridden world more generally, and the birthplace lottery that means some children simply lack the basics they need – from Afghanistan to Ukraine, East Africa to East Asia, and of course in Scotland as well.

Ask them to linger on their emotional response to these realities.

Ask them if it is fair.

Our scriptures give us the opportunity to spend time together in the questions these feelings evoke. How can a God-ordered world be so utterly unfair, unjust? Where is God in all of this anyway? And what is the right response to the Zacchaeuses of the world, the ‘one percent’ who apparently benefit on the backs of the poorest?

Simply the fact that our scriptures preserve long passages in the voice of bewildered humans interrogating an apparently absent God tells us something important. God honours this questioning. We might recall Job, whose questions are not condemned, unlike his friends’ pat-answers of casual piety. In the Habakkuk reading we see how the prophet’s eye is first drawn, not to esoteric mysteries and secret codes about God’s action in the world, but simply the sickening injustice of the here and now.

The point is explicit when Habakkuk notes that it is God who draws his eye to this injustice, this wrong-doing and trouble, this destruction and violence... this absence of God.

For many of us, it is hard to get beyond this bewilderment, and there is at least some solace in the knowledge that the Bible shows us a God who draws prophets to that same place of bewilderment, of outrage, or answer-less-ness.

How much solace is it, though, to those who live with the ‘persecutions and afflictions’ the Apostle Paul describes? And what is the source of *their* steadfastness? For the Thessalonians it is the power of God at work among them. For Zacchaeus the encounter with that power led first to hospitality, then to a surrender of status and wealth, and ultimately to a new sense of belonging.

All of these readings challenge us to create – or implore God’s work among us to establish – communities of radical inclusion which we, in our own power, find simply impossible to create. Yet, though this is not ‘our’ work as such, God has chosen partnership with people as a way of revealing God’s character in and to the world. That clear-eyed engagement with real pain and loss and injustice becomes God’s whisper to participate in this great response.

Hence, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware could write, ‘The Church as a whole is an icon of God the Trinity, reproducing on earth the mystery of unity in diversity. Human beings are called to reproduce on earth the mystery of mutual love that the Trinity lives in heaven.’

Prayers

Gathering

God
Creator, Word, and Spirit,
You call us together in our inadequate diversity
to reflect Your perfect community in our world.
Be among us today that we may express
the Most Sacred
in our ordinariness.

Confession

Almighty God,
our hearts are open to You,
our desires known to You,
and therein lurk the divisions and hostilities
that scar our world,
leaving millions of Your children
wounded, grieving, hungry.

Thank You that these are the very walls
Christ came to break down.
Thank You that You have already forgiven
and made possible a new community in Your Spirit.
Turn our thoughts from our own safety and security
to the glory of Your name
that it may be expressed in our living for the wholeness of society,
beginning here in this church.
Amen

Thanksgiving

Creator God,
Thank You that you made space for us –
for all created things –
within the Divine Communion.
Thank You for Your abundant generosity
as we name our blessings ...

All things come from You,
and of Your own we give You, as we commit again
to live as channels of Your peace
in a world marked by conflict.
Amen

Prayer for others

Healing God,
We pray for Your groaning world
and strain to hear Your groaning with us:
with those living with
poverty
war
oppression
sexual and gender-based violence
hunger
and the daily denial of their dignity as Your children.

Tune our hearts to Your pain
that we may recognise You even in the midst of great evil.
We pray for those with power and influence: [*you may wish to list some names here*]
We pray for those seeking to serve those at the margins
and in the most dangerous places
such as World Vision, and other organisations.

We pray for those closer at hand suffering
from sickness
bereavement
loneliness
that they would know You close at hand,

and for those fearing the near end of life,
that You would grant them a perfect end.

From the Book of Common Prayer:

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son:
Look with compassion on the whole human family;
take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts;
break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love;
and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth;
that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony
around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Blessing – Ephesians 5:1

Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children.
Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ.

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 200 – “Christ is made the sure foundation” – 7th or 8th C. (Tr. JM Neale)
- CH4 362 – “Heaven shall not wait”
- CH4 488 – “Teach, O loving heart of Christ”
- CH4 566 – “When I receive the peace of Christ”
- CH4 572 – “So much wrong and so much injustice” – from the Arabic (Tr. John Bell). A classic Lebanese Good Friday hymn reflecting on the unjust death of Christ, through which we can reflect on injustice affecting Christ’s children in the world, and the truth of God with us in the midst of it. See the original as sung by Fairuz, here: [Fairuz - Wa Habibi - YouTube](#)
- CH4 625 – “O thou who camest from above”
- CH4 706 – “For the healing of the nations”
- CH4 720 – “There is a longing in our hearts”

- New English Hymnal 469 – [“To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love”](#)
- Sing Psalms – Psalm 19:7-14 – to the tune: *Love Divine*
- [“Things are not OK”](#) – Jon Thurlow
- “Come to the Water” – CompassionArt
[Come to the Water - Chris Tomlin, Martin Smith, Kirk Franklin, Watoto Children's Choir, Stu Garrard - YouTube](#)
- “We Seek Your Kingdom Throughout Every Sphere”
[We Seek Your Kingdom \(Official Video\) | Noel Robinson, Lou Fellingham, Andy Flannagan, Donna Akodu - YouTube](#)
- “The Kingdom of God is Justice and Joy”
[The kingdom of God is justice and joy — RSCM Hymn for the Day #84 - YouTube](#)
- “Away with our sorrow and care” – Wesley Tune: Uxbridge/Hymn of Eve
[Away with Our Sorrow and Care \(Charles Wesley\) - YouTube](#)
- “O Be Still My Soul” – Celtic Worship - Steph Macleod, Benji Cowart & Nathan Jess
[O Be Still My Soul \(Official Audio Video\) | Celtic Worship - YouTube](#)

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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