

starters for Sunday

Second Sunday after Epiphany

15 January 2017

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Pádraig Ó Tuama, part of the [Spirituality of Conflict Project](#), for his thoughts on the second Sunday after Epiphany.

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Quick Guide...

Helping people prepare for reading the Bible in worship can make a real difference. Overcoming nerves, reading in ways suitable to the text, speaking clearly etc.

You may wish to email these three links to the people reading Scripture on Sunday to support them in their involvement in worship: [Managing your nerves](#); [Creative readings](#); [Worship at the Lectern](#)

Introduction

The readings this week are filled with the truth of what it means to be called and named. From this place of love and belonging, individuals find their vocation. John the Baptist emerges as a peculiar demonstration of quite how much space and variety there is in the household of God. An particular character, with particular style and habits, he has a universal message. And yet, he who has so much, knows his own call enough that when he meets his cousin Jesus he does not respond with jealousy. He was nurtured by a call deeper than the performance of his call, or the notoriety around his lifestyle or the fame of his name. In recognising his cousin, he bows down, he is humble — a word coming from humus meaning ‘ground’ or ‘earth’. What a message for a world today addicted to reputation, fame, public image and winning.

This series of resources are written by people from the Spirituality of Conflict project. The Spirituality of Conflict project brings together friends from different denominations and communities: the [Corrymeela Community](#), the [Iona Community](#), the [Mission and Discipleship Council](#) of the Church of Scotland, [Place for Hope](#), the [Coventry Centre for Reconciliation](#) and the [Irish School of Ecumenics](#). Writing reflections for the three-year cycle of the Sunday gospel, this collaborative project seeks to read the gospel texts through the lens of conflict and read conflict through the lens of the gospel texts. Each person lives a life that holds conflicts at its heart: some conflicts can be the ground for our art or friendships, some conflicts can tear the heart from a society. The lectionary texts can provide wise lenses for us to view our lives, creating a conversation between conflict and the Christian faith, letting each influence the other. The full resource will be available on the [Spirituality of Conflict](#) website shortly.



Scripture Passages Overview

[Isaiah 49: 1-7](#)

Here we hear the song of the servant again, and the servant is caught in the space between love and fear, like so many of us.

The servant is called and named, and knows that they have a purpose (49: 1), they even know that they are like a weapon in God's hand, like a sword, an arrow, a quiver, sharp, and hidden in the hand of God, ready to be loosed (49: 2). And yet, the servant quivers. They are not sure if they have laboured in vain. This poem is like an internal prayer that goes between being convinced of being lovingly named and chosen and doubting their capacity and then also wondering at their audacity of belief and then finally, turning towards God in prayer to be reassured. In it we hear echoes of so many prayers of so many people - do I have meaning? What is the purpose of being alive? Does God know me? Do I belong anywhere? All of these contemporary anxieties find echo in the prayer of the servant here who, as if reminding themselves, says "Yet surely my cause is with the Lord".

For the Christian reading of this text there is a beautiful image where the voice of God re-assures the servant saying "I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (49: 6). The Hebrew word used for salvation here is *יְשׁוּעָה* (Yeshua), the name given to Jesus.

The internal confidence of the servant, knowing that they are so significant as to be an arrow, a sharp sword in the household of God can seem jarring to some readers. It is interesting that this section continues to reflect that the servant is one "deeply despised, abhorred by the nations". The servant does not stand on their sense of being called as an entitlement, but rather as a defiance towards a world that scorns and shows contempt for people on the edges.

[Psalm 40: 1-11](#)

This psalm continues on with a theme found in the reading from Isaiah. The Psalmist is waiting patiently for the Lord, even though they are in the miry bog. The twin narratives of despairing circumstances (miry bog — 40:2) and the song of hope (40:3) occur here too. Again, the reader hears that those who are in despairing circumstances must find hope in something that is far



from flimsy — and avoid matters to do with reputation, fame or temporal power. “Wait patiently” we hear, and make the Lord our trust. (40: 3)

The Psalmist offers an interesting insight. “You have given me an open ear” they say. What does this mean? The Hebrew words may be of interest. The word used for ‘ear’ אָזְנוֹ *’ozen*, carries with it the connotation of hearing and obeying. It is a rich and active verb. Even the word used by the psalmist for “open” pre-empts this, with word כָּרַח *kur* being used, which means to bore, to dig, to hew. None of this occurs without effort. What we are hearing here is a song of the faithful, the song of a person who turns regularly to prayer, not only in the miry pit. They have attuned their ear to the inner voice, to the inner practices from which hope and song come.

To be known and named is one thing. To know that you are known and named is another, and the psalmist reminds us of the regular practices of virtue, generosity, reflection and prayer.

[1 Corinthians 1: 1-9](#)

Those who chose the lectionary readings this week seemed particularly attuned to texts that depict a deep sense of call. In this reading from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians we hear his opening greetings. The greetings are full of warmth, where he give thanks for them (1: 4), extolling them that they have been enriched in Christ (1: 5) and he hopes that they are not (1: 7). He hopes that they will be strengthened to the end (1: 8).

This letter was written by Paul to the Corinthians after he had heard of their internal conflicts. Apollos (Acts 19: 1) had told him, and he also had a letter from the Corinthians. He had heard from the "household of Chloe", and additionally he had had some visitors (1: 11; 16: 17). So his response to people who were in conflict opens up with warmth and with a reiteration of how they have been called and a hope that they will be strengthened. To be

to be strengthened is to be sustained, perhaps even named, which is to be called and made blameless (1: 8).

Paul’s admonition is first of all that people who are in conflict must deepen their relationship with their own spirituality, must know that they are called and grafted into the beloved community, what he calls the *koinonia*, translated in the NRSV as the “fellowship”.



Paul is no stranger to argument, having been in some of them himself and having caused many during his lifetime, never mind since. But while he is adept at recommending many practical suggestions for communities dealing with conflict, his first response is to reflect on the loving call at the heart of the beloved community, Jesus of Nazareth, into whose friendship the emerging communities of Corinth are growing.

[John 1: 29-42](#)

The twin stories about John at the beginning of the gospel of John occur over two days. One day he sees Jesus and points him out to his disciples and the next day two of John's disciples, including Andrew, go to Jesus, whom they then follow.

Apart from the references to Jesus in the Prologue, this is the first time that Jesus has entered the scene in the physicality of his flesh. And we first see him through the eyes of John. Jesus is coming towards John, and we hear John's declaration of Jesus' identity, but Jesus is silent. At this stage of the gospel, the Baptist is the sole voice in the wilderness of perception, hallowing the person of Jesus.

John is a man of reputation, yet over and over in these early chapters of the fourth gospel we hear him a man who knows his place in the scheme of things, a place to point towards, a vocation to diminish.

The main reason that the apostle Simon Peter, the one among the followers of Jesus who receives most attention and character development across the gospel texts, came to Jesus in the first place is because Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, first followed John and then, with the direction and blessing of John, went on to follow Jesus.

Jealousy, comparison, rivalry and preservation of reputation are at the heart of so much human discord, from the most familial and internal to the transnational. Friends become jealous of a friend and seek to "put them in their place" through petty humiliations or other acceptable forms of aggression, and large groupings of people — in political, religious or other human organisations — pass comment and sanction on each other in ways that display jealousy rather than recognition of capacity of the other.



John's witness to another is an extraordinary spiritual discipline, where faithfulness to a great vocation is the driving force, rather than fame or reputational preservation. This kind of self-giving is evident in people who love each other dearly. It seems less about strategic priorities and more about the love and identity in which one is held and within which one honours another.

When the disciples of John eventually approach Jesus, we hear the first words of Jesus in this gospel: "What are you looking for?" Their answer is in the form of a question of domesticity; they call him Rabbi and ask where he stays, and he responds, in rich words of hospitality "Come and see." Inasmuch as John is fulfilled in pointing beyond himself, Jesus too is faithful to his calling by gathering followers around him. Each response to vocation is faithful, one pointing towards, the other gathering in. Neither is resisting their identity or vocation, neither is causing the conflict of internal discord, but rather are responding with integrity to that which is deepest in them.

Sermon Ideas

The lectionary this week speaks to some deep Christian truths and some deep human practices.

The first truth is that we are loved and we belong. We see this in the song of the servant, we see it in the practices of prayer of the psalmist, in the gentle tone of Paul's opening words in a letter to a community in conflict and we see it in the open hearted welcome of Jesus to the new disciples to "Come and see".

The other truth that the text speaks to is the human reality of discord:

This may be internal — sometimes people are profoundly conflicted because of their relationship with their own selves.

It may be circumstantial like it seems to be in the psalm where the events of life take over and overwhelm with difficulty, dragging a person down.

Or it may be interpersonal — as it is depicted in the later parts of the letter of Paul to the Corinthians where the friendship between people in a gathering of Christians is waning and under threat.



In all of this we have the strange life of John the Baptist and the openhearted generosity of John's cousin as guides.

John dedicated so much of his life, his comfort, his gifts and his voice to be faithful to his vocation. And, importantly to note, he was popular. Strange though he was he had the attention of people from all walks of life — the privileged and the poor, the occupiers and the ordinary. But this reputation was something he held to lightly because he had a deeper faithfulness, something at the core which meant that he knew his time for speaking and his time for recognising. He directed his disciples towards that which was their own ultimate goal, not seeking to build up his own reputation. He did not display jealousy. He did not seek to destroy Jesus as many who would have been envious of Jesus did. He pointed the way, and when the disciples came and asked Jesus where he lived, Jesus answered “Come and see...”

We can see the virtues of private prayer, spiritual reflection on reputation, wise relationships with our own ambition and the ongoing practice of hospitality as the deep foundations upon which such gospel action is built. This is the koinonia of God, the friendship, the household, the companionship, the connection that underpins all others.

Time with Children

The question for the children is a question that will enlighten the whole congregation.

“What are the things people get jealous about?”

“What do you do when you're jealous?”

“What's the opposite of jealousy?”

Hearing some honest answers to these simple questions from children and young people might give insights into human dynamics that have become more deeply engrained in the adults.



Prayers

Approach to God

God beyond all names,

We do not know all of your names, because you are known by so many.

But you know all of our names.

We are here because we have been called into being,
named into being.

To know some of your names is to know some of your glory.

We know you as father and mother,
we know you as redeemer and sustainer.

We know you as comforter.

We know you as friend.

May we know you, and may we know ourselves

and may we know each other

by many names

Oh God beyond names.

Thanksgiving

We give thanks for callings of leadership, callings of service, callings of insight, callings of challenge.

God, you have called us by our names.

We give thanks for the gift of difficult conversations, knowing that we are called into deeper fellow-ship and friendship with each other.

God, you have called us by our names.

We give thanks for those who have the courage to call others into their own deepest name

God, you have called us by our names.

We give thanks for those who know how to rest, knowing that we are more than what we do.

God, you have called us by our names.



We give thanks for the gift of being known. To be known is to be loved.

God, you have called us by our names.

May we turn with love towards all those we meet, to offer the gift of naming, knowing and loving.

God, you have called us by our names.

Confession

In the life of John, we witness the power of vocation and the power of humility.

We each have capacities and incapacities, callings and limitations.

Often, we respond to each other with comparison, jealousy and pain.

Help us change from the chaos of comparison, and more toward the vocation of life.

In the life of two cousins, Jesus and John, we witness people who knew their purpose and identity.

Our deepest purpose is love. Make us people who live in our purpose.

We ask this in the name of Jesus, the one who invites us to join him where he is.

Amen

Intercession

Jesus, friend of many, when two people asked you where you lived, you said “Come and see”.

Yours is the open heart that makes space for all.

May we find space, and may we make space.

Jesus, you are close to those searching for homes in our towns and cities, because you, too, searched for homes. You found home with your friends.

Yours is the open heart that makes space for all.

May we find space, and may we make space.



Jesus you are close to those who seek employment in our communities. You had work to do, you knew your deepest purpose. You lived your deepest purpose.

Yours is the open heart that makes space for all.

May we find space, and may we make space.

Jesus, you are close to those who are ill and in need of support. You were the one to whom people turned when they were at the end of themselves. And you, too, turned to friends, when you were near the end.

Yours is the open heart that makes space for all.

May we find space, and may we make space.

Jesus you are close to those who are seeking refuge. Before you began to remember, you were carried from one country to another, and there, refuge was given.

Yours is the open heart that makes space for all.

May we find space, and may we make space.

Jesus you are close to the marginalised. You were friends with those on the margins. You honoured and respected people from the margins. And you, too, were forced to the margins. And even there, you brought belonging and home.

Yours is the open heart that makes space for all.

May we find space, and may we make space.



In addition to the above prayers, prepared by our contributor, other prayers may be found in *People of the Way* which is the theme for this year's Pray Now. It was also the theme for Heart and Soul 2016. *People of the Way* is available from [St Andrew Press](#).



Additional Resources

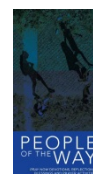
Resourcing Mission



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#). Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. If there is something you'd like to see on this new site, please [contact us](#) via the website.

Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. [People of the Way](#) is available from [St Andrew Press](#).



Music Resources

The hymns mentioned in this material are ideas of specific hymns you might choose for this week's themes. However, for some excellent articles on church music and ideas for new music resources, please check out our online music pages [Different Voices](#).

Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might preach this Sunday. [Preachers Perspectives](#) is a resource where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly.

Scots Worship Resources

[The Kirk's Ear](#) - Scots in the Kirk series for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other times of the year

[Wurship Ouk bi Ouk](#) - Metrical psalms, hymns, prayers and words for worship

[Scots Sacraments](#) may give you helpful material if you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism.

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to the Spirituality of Conflict Project for providing us with this Sunday's material.

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.

