

## **Fifth Sunday after Epiphany**

### **Fifth Sunday after Epiphany – 10 February 2019**

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Jock Stein, retired Minister, formerly of Tulliallan and Kincardine, for his thoughts on the fifth Sunday after Epiphany.

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## Introduction

All four Bible passages are well known, especially the one from Isaiah! If you are thinking, 'How do I choose between them for a sermon?' and there is no obvious local reason, here are some considerations:

- 1 The reading of Scripture has its own impact, and is an obvious way of giving weight to all the passages.
- 2 It is a healthy challenge to present a familiar passage from an unusual angle.
- 3 Another worthwhile approach is to include all passages within the trajectory of the sermon.

### [Isaiah 6:1-8, \(9-13\)](#)

The lectionary omits some of the interesting (and difficult) passages, so you might at least want to include verses 9-13, just as you might wish to include 1 Samuel 3:11-18 after the story of how the boy Samuel learned to hear God.

Uzziah ruled for 40 years in the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. When he died in 736, things began to fall apart. That was the year of Isaiah's call through a vision in the temple. While later on, seraphim (Hebrew plural of 'seraph') and cherubim became names for lofty angels, at this point a seraph was an image like a small sphinx, part human, part animal, with six wings – put into the temple at the insistence of the king of Assyria, who was Uzziah's overlord. That did not prevent God, the overlord of all kings and armies ('hosts'), from using seraphim to speak to his prophet.

The glory words in v.3 do not prove that God is triune, but certainly bear witness to it – one of the distinguishing features of Christianity and a marvellous source of wisdom; for example, that God is not solitary, but lives in dynamic relationship, a relationship shared by special people in the Old Testament, and by ordinary people in the New.

The rest of the passage has three key features:

- 1 Human dismay at the holiness of God – even a prophet recognises they are unclean even at the point of their strength and speech (vv.4-5).
- 2 The desire of God to forgive sin and heal our sense of unworthiness (vv.6-7).

### 3 The difficult nature of Isaiah's call (vv.8-13).

Verses 9-10 are not easy to understand, but are quoted by Jesus in Mark 4:11-12. If we read the verses as about consequence, rather than deliberate purpose, they make sense (compare John 3:19-20). It goes without saying that this is not an excuse for incomprehensible preaching – rather it is a warning not to 'preach peace where there is no peace' (Jeremiah 6:14).

### Psalm 138

The Psalms do not follow a neat pattern. Psalm 138 is quite different from 137, and from 139. When we use a psalm in worship, we are saying in effect, "Here is a poem that has blessed God's people and helped them express their sorrow, their questions, their praise and thanksgiving, even if I do not always know how and for whom this will be the case today." Today's psalm is full of memorable verses.

Verses 1-2b have four verbs: give thanks, make music, bow down, give thanks – and the second 'give thanks' in Hebrew is stronger than the first, a growing determination to exalt this God who is already exalted (2c). At least three convictions follow, continuing this build-up of praise and faith:

- You made me stronger by answering prayer (v.3)
- You pay attention to the lowly (v.6a)
- You protect me from enemies (v.7)
- You will fulfil your purpose for me (v.8a)

Although past, present and future may seem safely wrapped up in these sentences, the psalm ends with a simple, heartfelt prayer: "Do not forsake the work of your hands."

### 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

There is a famous story of a person from the Salvation Army who met a bishop in a railway carriage and asked him, "Are you saved?" Seeing it is an old story, the bishop prefaced his reply with "My dear", and went on to ask, "Do you mean 'have I been saved?' 'am I being saved?' or 'will I be saved?'"

Paul hints at this wide scope of salvation in his preface. The Corinthians have received a message of good news about what Jesus has already done, they stand on that message, but they are challenged to keep holding on to it, in which context they are being saved.

[Philippians 2:12-13](#) expands on this.

From v.3 Paul outlines the message of Christ's death, burial and resurrection. In particular he stresses the number of eye-witnesses to the appearances of the risen Christ. The whole Bible is like an hourglass, with Paul focused on the narrow section in the middle, the coming of Christ and what happened then. Back in Genesis there was the creation of the universe, and going forward to the end of Revelation there is a new creation; each of those books uses poetic language to describe matters beyond the reach of our words; but the Gospels record a time when the God who is beyond all things entered our space and time, becoming a man we could touch and see and hear (1 John 1:1). This is why the words "I believe in the resurrection of the body" are included in the Apostles Creed.

Verses 1 and 6 illustrate a decision that modern Bible translators have to make. The Greek says 'brothers', but the NRSV (for example) has 'brothers and sisters' because 'brothers' at the time of writing included both genders.

Paul himself adds a humble touch – he is the least of the apostles, because he once persecuted the church of God. Elsewhere he would call himself "less than the least of the saints" (Ephesians 3:8) and "chief of sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15).

He also shows how Christian thinking embraces the two aspects of life, the human and the divine, without confusing the two. He works hard, but it is all God's grace (v.10). And the Christian life is an ellipse with two focal points, the personal and the corporate (myself and others, vv.10-11).

## [Luke 5:1-11](#)

This passage in Luke takes the place of Mark 1:16-20, but has the same conclusion: the disciples will now not be catching fish, but rather, people. It reminds us that (as John 21:25 observes) Jesus did a huge number of things in His life, and we only have a few of them recorded for us. For that we are dependent on those like Peter and Mary and others who handed down their stories, the judgement of those who selected material for their Gospels, the recognition by the Church of a 'canon' of inspired scripture, and the providence of God.

Note that when Jesus chose His first followers, He went not to the revolutionaries and the mystics who were found out in the hills (generally not living together!), but to ordinary working men, not forgetting the women who were also part of that group (Luke 8:1-3, 10:38-42).

Luke is often regarded as a more careful historian than the other Gospel writers (as he claims in his preface, 1:1-4), and he correctly describes the waters of Galilee as a 'lake' rather than a 'sea' (as in Matthew).

It is striking how Jesus uses imagination in His work, both in finding an unusual pulpit to teach the crowds (v.3), and in finding a challenge to teach the disciples (v.4). While the Bible clearly indicates that we are all sinners, Jesus does not follow any neat scheme such as 'Creation, Fall, Redemption' in His teaching. Jesus simply does 'gospel stuff', as here, and Peter gets a very clear message (v.8).

Families and partnerships are quite naturally important in Scripture (v.10 – and think of how many of David's own family occupied leading roles in Israel). The Old Testament is the story of the family of Abraham, without excluding people like Ishmael and Esau, and the New Testament is the story of God's new family, without excluding Israel (Romans 11:1-2a).

## Sermon ideas

You may well decide to focus on one of the four passages. But if you did want to include all or most of them, here are some possible ideas and angles:

- A consideration of something out of fashion – holiness. Holiness not as a withdrawal from the world, but as a discovery, an encounter in the midst of your life with something, someone totally awesome in the old-fashioned meaning of that trivialised word. With Isaiah it happened during worship. With Peter it happened as God met him at the point of his strength, fishing. With Paul it happened when he was on the way to do something wicked. With the psalmist it seems to be a natural reaction to the greatness of God, a sense of wonder and awe, and an amazement that even if God is like this, God still has time for the likes of us.
- What is the touchstone of true belief? It is the character of God, shown in all four passages. You might want to speak of others whose lives have been changed by discovering what God is like – for example, Augustine and his mother Monica, Teresa of Avila, Mary Slessor, Gladys Aylward, Eric Liddell, Dave Wiles, Bob Holman, or some

less usual suspects you know of. Even better, find someone you can interview during the sermon, or ask to give testimony.

- ‘Temple’ in the Old Testament is the place where God is found, the holy place. Usually that is the tabernacle or temple. But behind that lies the idea that the whole cosmos was made to be the temple of God, something which can be found from Genesis to Revelation, and makes even more striking the teaching that the body of Jesus, and even our own bodies, are the temple of God (John 1:21, 1 Corinthians 6:19). Psalm 138:2 could be used as a text, with the Isaiah passage talking about a physical temple, Paul talking about what happened to the body of Jesus, and Luke talking about a creation miracle. How do we ‘bow down’ when we think about the temple of God in all these senses?
- What does it mean to take God at God’s word? Luke 5:5, where Peter says, “If you say so ...”, Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:2, “If you hold firmly to the message ...”, Isaiah responding “Here I am, send me!” The psalmist is convinced that God’s name and God’s word are higher than anything (Psalm 138:2).

## Time with children

In spite of the chorus ‘Fishers of Men’ being an old favourite, none of the four passages seem to give an obvious lead for a children’s address. If you take Psalm 138:6, “Even though you are so high above, you care for the lowly”, here are some illustrations and approaches, which could be illustrated with stick figures if you or someone else can draw well:

- Teacher picks out someone in the class – you think this means trouble, or a test question, but to your surprise it is news of an award ...
- The Queen at the Garden Party chooses a few people lining her parade that she will talk with ...
- You go to a concert; can you imagine the star coming off the stage at the end of the performance, seeing you in the audience, and saying “Let’s go and have a drink/coffee”?

- Your big brother or sister is getting to go out, and you are left behind in the charge of a child-minder you don't like, and suddenly you get a text message which is a wonderful surprise (invent something).

Or you could begin with a simple question, like "Who do you know that's bigger than you?" – you are looking for the reply 'mum' or 'dad' so be ready to field unexpected replies! Develop that by thinking of things they do for you which you find done even though you never saw them doing it. You could end with "It's always good to say thank you to someone when you see them, but with God you can say thank you any time ..." (as at verse 1a).

## Prayers

**Opening** (based on Psalm 138)

We shall sing Your praise O God:  
In a world where money counts  
In a world where nasty things happen  
In a world where power is abused

We shall sing Your praise O God:  
Above the troubles of last week  
Above the noise of the world  
Above the boasts of the proud

We shall sing Your praise O God:  
Even though we are few in number (*if true!*)  
Even though we are weak and less than perfect  
Even though we are easily discouraged

Because You care for the humble,  
You love those who seek You  
and because you have dealt with our sins in the person of Jesus Christ our Saviour,  
who loved us and gave Himself for us,  
who loves us today, who will love us for ever.

Far-seeing God,  
You will do everything You have promised.  
Graciously complete in us the work You have begun;  
complete in our church the work which needs to be done;  
complete in our community the work Your kingdom requires,

that those who share responsibility with us for the world around us  
may discover Your promises and praise Your name.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit:  
as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end, Amen.

**Thanksgiving and Intercession** (based on all the readings)

Lord God,

You have made so many things to bless human life –  
houses and churches, water and boats, ideas and speech, music and art and craft,  
leadership and service, worship and work and play.  
For all Your good gifts, we praise and thank You.

In a world where good news is often unreported,  
we thank You for good things that have happened this past week, and for answered prayer.  
We continue to bring our prayers before You,  
for our friends and neighbours... for our community... for our country.

Bless the Queen and royal family, and those we have elected to govern.  
Restrain or remove those who do ill,  
encourage and empower those who do well, we pray.  
*(Name national and community leaders if you wish).*

You have given your people great leaders like David and Isaiah, Peter and Paul.  
We give thanks for all who have led us wisely and well, and pray for our leaders today  
*(name church leaders if you wish)*

Guide them and guard them all, we pray.

You gave us Jesus to be our Saviour and Friend,  
to be a light to the world,  
to be the glory of your people Israel.  
Thank You for His example, for His teaching, for His kindness, for His willingness to heal.  
We remember all those troubled in body or mind, threatened by the enemies of well-being.  
Heal them and help them all, we pray.

We thank You for the wonder of the gospel  
and for all who have borne witness to the resurrection.  
We thank You for those who have touched our lives for good,

for all who care for us, for those who care with us about the good of humankind and who look with us for the fulfilment of Your kingdom promises.

We bless You for the great company of saints who have gone before us and now delight in Your presence.

With them we honour and praise Your holy name,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit  
and as they were taught to pray so do we say,

Our Father ...

## Musical suggestions

While there are various 'Sanctus' hymns in CH4 (cf. Isaiah 6:3), one of the best is:

- Mission Praise 239 – “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord, Holy is the Lord God Almighty”

If you are not reading the Psalm, you could try

- CH4 95 – “I shall praise you, O God, from my soul” – the tune is rather like a familiar Spiritual tune, and easy to sing.

If using the theme from Psalm 138:6 as a children's address, two possible songs are

- CH4 174 – “God of great and God of small” or the song “Our God is a great big God”

1 Corinthians

- Mission Praise 687 – “These are the facts as we have received them” From the

Isaiah 6

- CH4 251 – “I the Lord of sea and sky”

Luke 5

- CH4 532 – “Lord, you have come to the seashore”
- CH4 120 – “God we praise you” (Sanctus, plus reference to apostles and prophets cf. Isaiah and Paul)
- CH4 183 – “Fill now our life, O Lord our God” (relates to praise in everyday life)
- CH4 202 – “Stand up and bless the Lord”(relates to the psalm, esp. v.2)

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