

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – 23 October 2022

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Jennifer Stark, Ministries Development Staff member and Church and Community Worker at Richmond Craigmillar Church, for her thoughts on the twentieth 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.

Introduction	3
Sirach 35:12-17	4
Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22.....	5
Psalm 84:1-7	5
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18.....	6
Luke 18:9-14	7
Sermon ideas.....	8
Prayers	9
Musical suggestions.....	12
Reflecting on our worship practice	13
Useful links	15

Introduction

October is a month with a particular focus on tackling poverty. Monday 17 October is the United Nations' International Day for the Eradication of Poverty and 3-9 October is [Challenge Poverty Week](#) and the resources for the first four Sundays in October have been written by Priority Area congregations.

You will also find more Challenge Poverty Week resources on the Priority Areas [Facebook page](#), including videos and prayer memes. We would encourage you to share these with your congregation as a way of highlighting how the church is engaging in anti-poverty work at a local level. Since the early 1990s the Church of Scotland has placed a priority on putting resources into the most deprived communities. However, while there is great work happening in [Priority Area congregations](#) (those in the 5% most deprived parishes), it is important to recognise that the priority for the poorest and the most marginalised is the Gospel imperative facing the whole church.

The themes of justice, judgement, humility, mercy, hypocrisy and lack of charity, echo through the lectionary readings for this Sunday. At the time of writing, the scandals of dishonesty and lack of humility in public life, and particularly those focusing on the (now former) Prime Minister, were playing out in Westminster in ways which concerned and disgusted people from right across the political spectrum. Will our national affairs and standards have improved by 23 October?

I am still relatively new to preaching, and I don't do it every week, so (as we follow the lectionary) I quite often find myself faced with unfamiliar or challenging readings. I usually try to take up the challenge, as I find myself reflecting more deeply on the themes, and sometimes receive unexpected insights of faith.

Ideally, I look at the readings early in the week, and scribble rather incoherent first thoughts. Are there characters there to identify with or explore? Is the setting significant – perhaps in a way I haven't thought of before? Does the reading shock or comfort me, puzzle or clarify for me?

The word 'composting' is a good one to describe what happens for me in preparing worship. It is enriched if I am able to share thoughts with someone else, or better, a group of people, and I would like to thank here Ann, Margaret and Marilyn for their thoughts on the readings. Readings, commentaries and other sources create a kind of 'mulch' and while it's composting, I may be choosing hymns or starting to prepare a worship PowerPoint. I

find that just putting the words and texts on the PowerPoint can stir my thoughts into different directions. It's crucial for me, though, to start writing something quite early on, no matter how disorganised or irrelevant it seems. Gradually, something comes into focus. Occasionally what I feel called to say comes to me early on, but sometimes not till 24 hours or so before the service! Increasingly I find questions are powerful in worship, sometimes asking for a response, sometimes not. Since returning to in-church worship, we have experimented with, for example, two short reflections rather than one longer one, and this has often worked well.

The sermon/reflection is only one part of worship, and I know from experience that other parts may speak much more powerfully to those present. We're fortunate in our church to have a gifted and flexible musician, who often brings a completely different feel to a familiar hymn or tune by using a different instrument (perhaps the guitar instead of keyboard). It can be effective to sing one or two verses unaccompanied. In the Musical Suggestions, I have suggested one or two alternative tunes, which can change how we experience familiar words.

[Sirach 35:12-17](#)

The book of Sirach is part of the Christian Apocrypha, and is included in the Roman Catholic and Eastern churches' Bible. Along with the Wisdom of Solomon, it is part of the Wisdom strand of the Hebrew Scriptures, with many similarities to Proverbs. I chose to look at it as well as the Jeremiah reading, partly just because it was unfamiliar to me and I wanted to explore its connection with the other readings. But also, when talking about the readings with some congregation members, they strongly appreciated its message of justice for the weak and vulnerable; humility; and willing service to God. For me, it also connects more directly with the Gospel passage.

Sirach, or the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira – Jesus son of Sira – was probably written around 200-180 BCE. It's worth reading the [Prologue](#), in which Ben Sira's grandson explains why he has translated his grandfather's book from Hebrew to Greek. The book has many poetical sections on charity, observance of the Law, justice and mercy.

Micah D. Meyer writes of how he once heard a student refer to "400 years of God's silence" between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament; but the books of the Apocrypha are acknowledged now to be indispensable for our understanding of early Christianity, and of the Jewish contexts of Jesus' time. Sirach was familiar and influential for Jews in the first century, including Jesus, and there are clear echoes of it in, for example, the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, and the book of James. It resembles

Proverbs in many ways, but Ben Sira's concern is to integrate Israel's sacred history and teaching into the Wisdom tradition.

This reading is one of the more poetic sections, and affirms God's concern for justice for all, identifying particularly people who are vulnerable – widows and orphans – at this time. There is however an intriguing difference in translations of verse 16. NRSV has “the Lord will not show partiality for the poor”, while the New Jerusalem Bible has “he never shows partiality to the detriment of the poor”. It has not always been the case that religious institutions, including churches (or Christianity in general) embraced a ‘preferential option for the poor’. How might poor people feel about the NRSV translation?

[Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22](#)

It often isn't easy to listen to a passage from Jeremiah, let alone preach on it. This passage has no easy assurance of forgiveness from God. It is overwhelmingly a lament and confession of iniquity and sin, a description of its consequences. I would suggest setting the passage in context, for verses 1-6, graphically describing the effects of drought, could hardly be more relevant than at this time when climate change should be shocking the world into action. In our case, we do not need to believe as precisely as this writer that God punishes God's people for sin, to acknowledge that our own sins have brought drought and other tragedies to the earth we live on. We've done it all for ourselves. And it's not that the plea here is insincere – it's more that the consequences of sin have already begun. Here the people *of* God are facing (in their minds) rejection *by* God. Yet, the confession of sin will always be the first step in repentance and change.

Churches have often been rightly criticised for over-harsh judgements of people and actions that we now feel shame for. How do we deal with sin and judgement today in our preaching and worship and our public actions?

[Psalm 84:1-7](#)

It is sometimes hard for us to visualise or imagine the original setting of the Psalms, which were composed at different times for different occasions. We don't know what they would have sounded like, but many would surely have been sung! Psalm 84 is one of the ‘Psalms of Zion’, (others being 46, 48, 76, 87, 122), a group which praises God for Jerusalem and its temple, and may have been sung on pilgrimage.

I was struck, as I had not been before, by the tender image of the birds building nests right in the walls of the Temple, “they keep their young near your altars” (v3, Good News Translation), (and for no particular reason, found myself thinking of Jesus’ words, “Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head”). This verse would lend itself to showing an image of birds nesting during the reading; or possibly could be used as an idea for time with children. The word used for “sing” in v. 4 is *hll*, the root of *hallelujah* – another musical possibility, perhaps for after listening to this reading.

One can easily imagine these verses being chanted as pilgrims travelled, in longing to reach the Temple, a longing that is expressed with great depth in verses 1-2. Many will recognise the verses as the origin of the hymn setting of the psalm, “How lovely is thy dwelling place’. Depending on the theme of the service, you might think of including a short ‘pilgrim walk’ through the church before this reading, perhaps using something like a Taizé chant.

The expression “dry valley of Baca” (v6, Good News Translation) is disputed, as no place with that name can be identified. NRSV interprets it as a valley which is then blessed with abundant water as the pilgrims pass through, relieving their suffering, and you might bring to mind the idea that all of us coming to God’s house to worship may be coming from our own ‘dry valleys’.

For many of us, there are places and times when (or where) God’s presence may be felt with particular strength or poignancy. How can we make our worship such a place and time? One where our thirst is helped by abundant water?

[2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18](#)

The Letters to Timothy and Titus stand (a little doubtfully) under Paul’s name as author, but 2 Timothy is thought more likely to be by Paul. Some scholars have placed them towards the end of the first century, rather than around 65 BCE (the time of Paul’s death). It is agreed however that they reflect a time when the early church was morphing gradually into an institution, with orders of ministry and the beginnings of creeds and confessions; and that the author, whether Paul or another, is calling for the churches to stay faithful to the apostolic gospel and avoid Gnosticism. Timothy (‘my beloved child’) was clearly a much loved and depended-upon disciple, and had a mission centred on the Macedonian churches.

The lectionary in previous weeks has taken us through 2 Timothy, and these verses form part of the concluding section. There seems no particular reason, incidentally, why verses 9-

15 should not be included; for me, adding the personal names and references ‘ground’ the letter in the world and situation of Paul.

The section in Chapter 4 has the flavour of a ‘last will and testament’ from Paul, who appears to have already appeared for trial, and is facing almost certain martyrdom. It is a moving and faith-filled testimony of Paul’s faith and resolution, and his confidence in the love and right judgement of God.

Connections with the other readings for today are not immediately obvious, and preaching on this text may well be as part of a focus on the whole letter during the previous few weeks. One commentator points to the sense of achievement in Paul’s words: “I have run the race, I have fought the good fight, I have kept the faith’.

How and when do our efforts matter with God? We speak at funeral services of a ‘life well lived’. As All Saints Day approaches, people might be asked to think about people they’ve known who have mattered. Here we are reminded of the tension in Christian theology between faithful, good works and the undeserved love of God.

[Luke 18:9-14](#)

The tax-collector’s prayer is one that often comes spontaneously into my mind. Why? Somehow it both names my despair and gives me hope.

As often in Luke, you feel yourself taken directly into the physical space of the story. I was particularly struck this time by the placing of the two men. “The Pharisee, standing by himself...” and “the tax collector, standing far off’. I wondered why Luke described them thus. Perhaps it is symbolic of the Pharisee’s mistaken approach to God – that he is in fact like others in his humanity and imperfection, not a ‘stand-alone’ example of a good life (and he does lead a good life), which in reality depends on others too.

The phrase “far off” might well mean that the tax collector does not feel worthy to stand anywhere near other – more apparently worthy? – worshippers.

There is a post-communion prayer in the Church of England liturgy that perhaps echoes this phrase, “Father of all, we give you thanks and praise that when we were still far off, you met us in your Son and brought us home’. (Common Worship, First Order of Communion). We are unworthy, yet not unworthy of the grace and mercy of God. We are imperfect and fallible and yet there is *hope* – the strong message of this parable.

While discussing this passage (and the Sirach text), I was struck by how much everyone hated hypocrisy. It was one of the strongest reactions in the group, perhaps partly because so much hypocrisy has seemed to be around in national affairs at that point.

If God were to speak to these two men in the Temple, what would each one need to hear?

I find a powerful way into stories like this is to imagine what came before and after for the characters. What took each of them to the Temple that day to pray? Why was the tax collector – whose prayer shows an awareness of his sin – doing this hated job for a corrupt administration? Had the Pharisee always prayed with self-satisfaction or was this a momentary lapse? And what happened afterwards to them, and to their relationship with the God to whom they prayed?

This story is one of several in Luke where the Pharisees are critically portrayed and they have a bad press generally in the Gospels. It is important to recognise that the polemical tone towards Pharisees (and, even more tragically, Jews) reflects the viewpoints of the writers during a long period of struggle and tension as the early Christian church was emerging from first-century Judaism. Matt Skinner writes, “Christian use of the word *Pharisee* as a synonym for hypocrite is inappropriate.... it neglects the ways in which Jesus’ (and Paul’s) teaching arose from Pharisaical influences. It implies that the gospels’ combative depictions of Pharisees are historically precise’. (1) The real point of the story may be brought much closer to us if other ‘categories’ are used for the two characters, representing the ‘respectable’ and ‘unpopular/outsider’ groups of our own time.

[1] [Commentary on Luke 18:9-14 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) (2019)

Sermon ideas

There are enormous riches for worship here; but these are possible strands which might be drawn out from two or more of the readings.

Prayer and places of prayer, particularly in the Psalm and the Luke passage. The Psalm voices the joy of pilgrims going to their house of prayer. Is this a moment to reflect on how we were affected by being shut out from our own houses of prayer during periods of lockdown? What did we feel on return? Were there opportunities for prayer during these times (even in desolation) that brought God closer?

“Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to heaven”. What is it about your faith that makes you want to sing?

The Luke parable, in essence, is about prayer. The Pharisee seems to be thanking God; but in reality, is he not talking to himself? One man focuses on the sins of others, the other on his own need for grace. The tax collector’s prayer is above all about awareness, awareness of his sin, and voicing it to God. Contemplative prayer is opening up your deepest feelings, and so opening yourself to God.

Is it significant that this story takes place in the Temple, a place of public worship and private prayer? Most of us will have memories of times in a holy place, inside or outside, which have touched us deeply. Is there one which you, or someone else, might share?

Justice and judgement. The Sirach reading assures us that God hears the prayers and appeals of all, including those who are weaker. The reality of the world (then and now) is very different. What access to justice is there for people living in Priority Areas or anyone who has little money or power? At a time of growing inequalities in our country and a cost of living crisis greater than we have seen for decades, many churches, and not just in Priority Areas, are on the front line and trying to help where they can. Are there hopeful stories that can be shared?

A story about judges and trials:

Once upon a time, a man and his daughter were on holiday in the Scottish Highlands and saw a sign directing them to some sheepdog trials which were being held nearby. The little girl said, “Oh, I’d like to see the trial!” so her father agreed to take her, but when they arrived at the scene, the girl was very disappointed. She said to her father, “But where’s the jury? And where’s the judge in the black cap, who sentences murderers to hang?” (This was before capital punishment was abolished).

The father had to explain that it wasn’t that kind of trial. No dog was going to be sentenced to prison or condemned to death. Every one of them was there to be affirmed and valued and encouraged and if some of them didn’t come up to the mark, they were always told they were welcome to come back later on, when they had learned how to be more skilful.

Prayers

Call to worship

Leader: Welcome to this house of prayer

All: May it be a home to all today

Leader: Loving God of our whole world

All: Open our hearts to Your presence

Leader: Touch us with Your loving hand

**All: And bring peace to us and between us.
Amen**

Prayer of thanksgiving and confession

God of the ordinary and extraordinary,
in a world where money counts,
where awful things happen,
where power is abused.

It's hard sometimes to see beyond it all
and sing Your praise for the blessings we have.

But we persist
because You have promised to care for the humble
to love us in our confusion
to come to meet us in the silence
or the surprising moment of joy
or the quiet comfort of friendship

With the Church around the world this morning
we join our voices together in praise
and keep silence in prayer.

Forgive us for the times this week when we've not done well
when we've struggled to say the right thing
or go the extra mile.

When we have looked arrogantly at others
and forgotten to open our souls to Your gaze.

Help us to hope
and to share Your love with all around us
in Your name and with your blessing, **Amen**

Prayers of intercession

Responses (see also Musical Suggestions) can be inserted as wished between sections.

Loving God

we pray for our world

for all the millions of people whom You know, though we do not.

We are blessed that we can worship in peace and safety.

We pray for Christians especially today in

Give comfort and strength to those who try to make peace and justice

and turn the hearts and minds

of those who work against them

to good, not evil.

We pray for our own leaders

especially at this time

when wise leadership is so much needed.

Help them to see beyond immediate concerns

and think, above all, of those who are most vulnerable in our communities.

We pray for our work here in [name church and/or community]

For all those who try to fill the gaps

and give hope in dark places.

We ask Your blessing on..... [*local or church projects or initiatives can be named*]

Here in our own church community,

we pray for [*names of those who are sick or in difficulty may be added if appropriate*]

May they know the comfort and gentle touch of Your love,
the love that calls us by our names and says, "You are mine".

Around us here are things that remind us of the people of the past
who have worshipped and worked here.

In a moment of silence, we remember those we love who have died
[*names may be mentioned if appropriate*]

We miss them, and remember them
even as we take comfort that they are in Your care.

God of light and love
You created us for both joy and suffering
You came into the world as our Brother and Saviour
You abide with us in the Holy Spirit, the Comforter.
Be with us in our speaking and our thinking and our hearts and souls
today and this week
in Jesus' name
Amen

Benediction/Closing prayer

L: May we find a place

All: For love to belong in the world

L: May we make a welcome for the lost

All: On the paths of our lives

L: May we find in each place

All: God already waiting for us

L: May God be our vision
and may Christ be our pattern,
may the Spirit be our energy,
and may the love of God
Creator, Saviour and Holy Spirit,
be with us, and those we love
today and always.

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.

You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

Psalm 84

- CH4 52 – “How lovely is thy dwelling place” – Alternative familiar tunes would include CH4 555 (Amazing Grace); CH4 59 (Irish)
- CH4 803 – “We will walk with God, my brothers”
- [“The Lord is present in his sanctuary”](#) – Gail Cole’s Taizé-like chant. Originally in Songs of the Spirit (1978). Also [available on YouTube](#).
- Mission Praise 304 – “I want to worship the Lord with all of my heart”

2 Timothy

- CH4 517 – “Fight the good fight”
- CH4 535 – “Who would true valour see”
- CH4 536 – “May the mind of Christ my Saviour”
- CH4 740 – “For all the saints, who from their labour rest”

Luke 18

- CH4 187 – “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy” – Alternative tunes might include CH4 786 (Ae Fond Kiss)
- CH4 262 – “For the world and all its people”
- CH4 493 – “It’s me, it’s me, it’s me O Lord”
- CH4 553 – “Just as I am, without one plea”
- CH4 755 – “Be still and know that I am God” – This could be used as a response in one of the prayers.
- [Common Ground 94](#) – “O Lord, hear my prayer” – This Taizé chant could be used as a response during the Prayers of Intercession
- [“Have mercy on us, Lord”](#) (Khudaya, rahem kar) – This also works well as a response within a prayer (No. 22, “Love and Anger” by John L. Bell and Graham Maule: Wild Goose Publications 1997)

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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