

Third Sunday of Easter – Year B

Sunday 14 April 2024

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev Dr Sheena Orr, Church of Scotland Chaplaincy Advisor to the Scottish Prison Service, for her thoughts on the third Sunday of Easter.

Rev Dr Sheena Orr is a Trustee of Prisoners Week Scotland and a member of the Public Life and Social Justice Group of the Faith Action Programme, which has a vision for the Church of Scotland to be empowered with knowledge, understanding and courage to respond to and pursue issues of social justice and public life both within the Church and in wider society, using our distinct Christian voice to influence policies and decision-making.

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.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the Sanctuary First website:

<https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/daily-worship>

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

Our readings in this third week of Easter invite us to think about our own reactions to the death and resurrection of Jesus and the implications for our ethics, concerns, and lifestyle. What does it mean to us today to witness to Christ's love and power in the world? What is our focus? What is our message? Is our 'us' and 'them' attitude problematic when it comes to thinking about joint solutions? How do we approach the religious and those who deny the power of Christ, while still recognising that the Church/Christ has something to offer? How do we come alongside the unjustly treated while seeking to address the root of injustice?

My sermon preparation starts with reading through the Bible passages in two or three different versions, including a more traditional translation, alongside The Message, which always seems to throw up a new slant on things. I print out the passages and use highlighters to mark themes or phrases, speech patterns and anything else that grabs my attention. I read the passages several times, including the verses around them to give me context. I then note the points that occur to me or questions I might have and things I want to find out more about. Prayerfully reflecting, I let this sit with me for a day or so, depending on how long I have. I then go to a commentary to explore the passage further. By this time, key words and themes are emerging in my mind, although the significance and connections are often not fully formed until I begin typing up the sermon. For me, it is in the writing that I find the message being formed and its relation to current events and issues becomes clear.

Sometimes the main themes jump out from the readings immediately and it is obvious why they have been put together. Not so with these ones. At first, I found them quite disparate. I had to read them through several times to allow the connections to coalesce. There is no short-cut to writing a sermon. Each person comes with a different world view, personal experience and approach.

[Acts 3:12-19](#)

This passage shows Peter in full Pentecostal flow following the reaction of the people to the healing of the lame man at the gate of the temple. Assuming that it was Peter and John's own power or righteousness that brought about the healing, the people are full of amazement, gazing (gawking!) at them. Peter does not hold back, immediately ascribing the healing to God's power through the exaltation of Jesus (alluding here to the portrayal of the Servant in Isaiah 52:13). Lest they miss the point he uses familiar formulaic language from Numbers 25 that would be well recognised by his hearers: it is their God, it is the God of

Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors who has done this – and, crucially, through the glorification of Jesus.

Peter uses the strongest of language to point the finger at those standing around, blaming them for the hugely unjust way with which they treated Jesus, only weeks earlier. Those in his line of sight were not just random individuals. Peter is implying a collective blame, a concerted action of the community including the religious leadership (v17): you handed over, you rejected, you asked for a murderer, you killed. And all this was done to the very person in whose power Peter had just healed. Through these verses the irony of their actions is highlighted as they would rather have an unclean and unrighteousness murderer than Jesus, the Holy and Righteous One. And they put to death the very person who brings life, Jesus the Author/Prince/instigator of life. Again, using familiar scriptural language, Peter draws out the contrast between the way the Israelites treated Jesus and the way their God, the God of Israel, treated Jesus, by raising Him from the dead and glorifying Him.

The good news in Peter's address is that past behaviours and situations can be transformed through faith in Jesus. Power, grace and healing are open to everyone when they call upon the name of Jesus in faith. And having just called them out in the strongest of terms, Peter changes his tone and calls them friends (v17). He appeals to them as fellow members of the Jewish community to which he also belongs. He then, somewhat surprisingly in my opinion, attributes their actions, and those of the rulers, to ignorance. (I wonder if at this point, Peter was remembering his own, and the disciples', initial disbelief when Jesus appeared to them following the resurrection?). Note how the idea of ignorance contrasts with Peter's identification as a witness, as one who has experienced the very things of which he is saying they are ignorant. Following Pentecost, his witness has become stronger, more focused and more authentic, allowing him to stand firmly in front of his compatriots and fellow worshippers, calling them to turn towards the very God they are there to worship in the temple. And now with this new knowledge, about this God that they had known all along, the community is offered the opportunity to have a renewed, powerful and healing relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob so that times of refreshing may come.

[Psalm 4](#)

This psalm is a bit of a mystery. Although it seems at first sight to fall into the general category of lament there is no agreement as to its original setting and it is one of the 34 unaccredited psalms. In view of this, various, and some might say fanciful, interpretations have been offered. Is it a psalm written for communal worship (as the use of *selah* would suggest) or is it an individual complaint that is universally recognised? Is it addressed to a

foreign god or to personal enemies and the injustice they have perpetrated? Is it a prayer for rain or a prayer of trust in Yahweh? Or are we overthinking this and it is simply a Psalm of David in face of Absalom's treachery? (1)

Given the dearth of background information on which to draw we are left to interpret what we have before us. Based on my time as a prison chaplain, and the way people in prison identified with this psalm, I lean towards the idea that this was an individual in a tight spot, which is how the word distress can be interpreted. I see this as a personal lament but a personal lament in the face of institutional and structural injustice ("you people", v2) and even false accusation by those more powerful and wealthier. The victims are many (v6) and the Psalmist's petition to the powerful and the wealthy seems to call upon a sense of community, to change their behaviour, to think about what they are doing and to put things right with God for the benefit of everyone, not just themselves. Is this the collective 'us' of v6 as the victims cry to see some good? Does God's light only truly break through on our communities when there is justice and truth and thus peace?

The psalm emphasises the nearness of God to those in distress. The Psalmist is confident in God's readiness to hear and respond to their plea. The relief brought by God's presence is described in the wonderful phrase in verse 1: "you gave me room". There is a sense of being able to breathe again, of having space to think and at the end of the psalm this has the calming effect of being able to lie down and sleep in peace – sleepless nights are one of the worst side-effects of injustice. But the use of the word '*shalom*' in verse 8 reminds us that while we can experience peace at an individual level when we trust in God, the greater vision is for communal peace, for a wholeness and completeness in society, which can only happen when we collectively put our trust in God. In the meantime, our task, like that of the Psalmist, is to be witnesses to God's peace and justice in our own lives and to hope and work for it in our community.

[1] deClaisse-Walford, Nancy, et al. (2014). *The Book of Psalms. The New International Commentary of the Old Testament*. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids.

1 John 3:1-7

This passage picks up on the themes of recognition and ignorance, righteousness and unrighteousness, justice and injustice, of which Peter speaks in Acts 3, the complainant in Psalm 4 and John in 1 John. It lays bare the reality of the underlying spiritual battle and values between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. It recognises that there are forces at work at the individual and at the community/institutional level. The difference between the two identities is stark. In a world where identity politics challenges so many of

our established definitions, this passage invites us to think about what our identity as Children of God means. Where does it coalesce or diverge from the other identities that are offered by the world? Have we been hasty in assuming that some are of the world when in fact, in God's eyes, they are recognised, and is it we that are ignorant? Have we perhaps assumed, too hastily, what it means to be a Child of God? In fact, what does being like God mean?

The term, Children of God, reminds us of the communal/public aspect of our identity. As Christians we are part of a family. As the saying goes, you can't be a Christian on your own just as you can't be married on your own: we are in relationship; our rights and responsibilities are forged in community. The theologian John Milbank (2) warns against the current trend of possessive individualism which, in his view, has overthrown thousands of years of religious tradition. Being Children of God means identifying with a community that promotes Kingdom values of justice for all.

The only guidance in this passage is that our identity derives from the love given to us by God. What does that love look like? Have we been too ready to give our own (worldly?) interpretation of love? Have we been deceived? What do we really believe about sin? Why such divergence on what sin is? On what lawlessness is? And justice? Righteousness? Purity? Have we been too individualistic in our interpretation to the detriment of our community? How are they all linked?

[2] Milbank, John (2012). *Against Human Rights: Liberty in the Western Tradition*. Oxford Journal of Law and Religion 1 (1): 203-234.

[Luke 24:36b-48](#)

This post-resurrection, pre-Pentecostal event gives us a glimpse into the inner life of the disciples, who come across as startled and terrified, thinking they are seeing a ghost when seeing Jesus following the resurrection. The event takes place after the incident on the road to Emmaus and indeed the understanding is that those disciples who had witnessed Jesus on the road and had seen him break bread were relating their story as Jesus appears. Jesus addresses their immediate doubts and fears through reassuring words, using the familiar greeting, "Peace be with you", through an invitation to look on the wounds and to touch the wounds and finally to give him something to eat. This is no ghost or apparition! They are beside themselves with joy. I wonder how I would have reacted? At what point would I have become convinced? How much 'proof' do I need? What proof do others need?

There is value in pondering the use of the implication of “Peace be with you” in this context. As already mentioned, the concept of peace in the Old Testament involved society-wide justice. The word “you” is plural, as we would expect, as Jesus is addressing the disciples collectively. But it is also a reminder that peace is a community issue. It is impossible for an individual to be truly at peace and whole when others are not.

The remarkable thing about this passage is that none of the disciples says a word. Jesus does all the talking. Sometimes it is beneficial just to sit and listen while Jesus explains what is going on. In this passage it is the disciples who, at first, come across as ignorant and unbelieving. It is only when they have been in the presence of Jesus, when they have been reassured by His physical presence, His words, His touch, His eating, that their minds are open to His words. And even then, there is no commandment. Just a simple statement – “Peace be with you” – that will make more sense to the disciples as time passes. Only at Pentecost will they fully understand what it means to have witnessed these things! Only in the power of the Spirit will they shake off their fear and set about building God’s kingdom of peace.

Sermon ideas

My approach is to write sermons that are more narrative and reflective in nature. With today’s passages I am struck by Peter’s witness to the power of the Risen Lord, how it contrasts with the disciples’ earlier ignorance and how that was transformed post-Pentecost. This raises questions of where our own faith journey has brought us. Peter and John are faithful Jews, they are at the temple, along with their compatriots. They were faithful churchgoers, had been for years. Yet they experienced something different that set them apart, which gave new insight, new power, which compelled them to speak out, to witness.

Like the Israelites, the Church of Scotland has a very strong tradition (okay not quite as long, but there is still a strong tradition). Many of us have been baptised as infants, with our parents/grandparents/godparents making vows for us. But how many of us have experienced our own Pentecost, our own baptism in the Holy Spirit (as John prophesied Jesus would bring in Mark 1:8); our own confirmation of faith which recognises the Risen Lord, rather than being stuck with the traditional God of our ancestors, as the people in Acts 3 were? Do we rely on the old way of doing things, failing to recognise the power God is offering us through Jesus?

I wonder what Peter’s sermon would be to us this Sunday if he visited our church. Would he remind us of things we have forgotten? Would he urge us to some action that we need

to take, or perhaps he would simply exhort us to be witnesses to what God has done in our own lives?

Another approach might be to think about a current situation of injustice that would provoke someone to write a Psalm of Lament today.

Who would they be addressing? What injustice has been done? What are the feelings that come with this? Who is listening? What would they say to those in positions of power? What actions have been taken? Where is the Church in all of this? What would Jesus have us do?

The ongoing Post Office scandal has highlighted that much can remain hidden for years while individuals suffer without redress. What other issues are there that need to be brought to light? The Public Life and Social Justice Group of the Faith Action Programme works to help the Church highlight and respond to the key social justice and public issues of our day. Current areas of interest include violence against women, minimum wage and wider poverty issues, rights and care of asylum seekers, Net Zero and Land Reform. All these have a deeply personal dimension, which is played out within a wider social and community context.

In a café-style church or other more informal setting you may like to explore one of the above issues further and then ask individuals or groups to write a contemporary psalm based on Psalm 4. Some might like to read theirs out. Alternatively you could write one of your own beforehand to share.

Prayers

Gathering prayer/Call to worship

God of peace and justice

Come and stand among us today.

God of peace and justice

Bring Your healing and wholeness as we gather.

Confession/Repentance

Loving God, we cannot always make sense of Your purposes.

But that doesn't mean You aren't at work.

The way may be hidden, the path may appear dark,

but sometimes when You seem far off You are at Your most near.

Teach us, we pray, never to despair,
however bleak it may seem.
When injustice seems all around and peace far off,
help us to hear Your words of promise.

Forgive us when our journey is not humble, or faithful, or just.
Forgive us when we do not take heed of Your words.
Forgive us when we do not notice Your presence.
Forgive us when we don't recognise You working in our midst,
Forgive us when we fail to give glory to Your name.
Forgive us we pray!

[Hold a time of silence]

Come in our weakness and fill us with Your renewing power.
Loving God, when we are in a tight place, give us room.

The Lord's Prayer may be said here or after the next prayer.

Thanksgiving/Gratitude

Loving God, how thankful we are
that You hear us when we call out to You.
When troubles come, You give us strength.
When our distress seems never-ending,
You are our quiet centre.
When injustice rages,
You offer Your peace.
When nights seem endless,
You still our frightened hearts.
When we feel weak and lame,
You raise us up to new life in You.
You put gladness in our hearts,
You give us a hope and a future.

Prayer for others/Intercession

A congregational response may be added. Following the words 'Lord, in your mercy', the congregation say: 'May justice and peace reign in our world'.

All-loving God, we bring our broken, unjust
and warring world to You today.

We long to see Your justice and peace on earth as it is in heaven.

We long to see people flourishing wherever they may be.

We long to see Your righteousness flood our world.

We pray for all those who are in positions of power.

We pray for politicians whose decisions affect so many.

Give them wisdom and courage in the issues they choose to tackle.

Give servant hearts we pray; from local councillors to presidents,

from those behind the scenes, to those on our screens each day.

May the wellbeing of all be their goal.

Lord, in Your mercy

May justice and peace reign in our world.

We pray for all who wield economic power over others,
from our smallest companies to the largest multinationals.

May their dealings be fair to all.

Fair wages, fair conditions,

fair ways of making things and disposing of waste,

fair to the environment.

Lord, in Your mercy

May justice and peace reign in our world.

We pray for all those who use physical and emotional power over others.

From our own living rooms to the world arena

We pray for women who live in fear of violence

in their own homes,

For children who experience abuse instead of love.

For youth who live in fear of violence on the streets.

For all for whom war and the threat of war is a constant.

[You may wish to name current conflicts or events here]

Lord, in Your mercy

May justice and peace reign in our world.

We pray for all who use religious power to shape and control people's lives.
For those who, like the Pharisees,
limit and bind people rather than freeing them.
Those who act in their own power,
blind to the healing love of Christ.
Open their eyes to Your Spirit at work in the world.

Lord, in Your mercy
May justice and peace reign in our world.

Thank You for all those who use their knowledge and power for good.
For those who are willing to stand up and speak truth to power.
For those who risk their own lives to help others in distress.
For those who quietly come alongside the broken and abused and lost.

Guide us in the ways of justice and courage
every step of our journey.
May Your vision and hope for the world infect all we do.

Lord, in Your mercy
May justice and peace reign in our world.

Blessing/Closing prayer

There is an option for all to say this together:

As we leave this place,
may we keep in step with You,
walking humbly,
seeking justice,
living faithfully,
bringing Your peace and wholeness
to a broken and unjust world.

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 2 – “O Righteous Lord who set me right” –Psalm 4 set to music (in a minor key, keeping in tone with the lament aspect). I don’t think I have heard this hymn sung and if the tune is unfamiliar it could be sung by a choir, if you have one.
- CH4 189 – “Be still, for the presence of the Lord” – this hymn refers to the healing and wholeness that comes with God’s presence. If sung after the sermon, why not invite the congregation to sit and sing a verse followed by a verse of music in order to give space for reflection either on what has been said or the words of the song itself i.e. verse 1 – music – verse 2 – music – verse 3 – music, ending with a short time of silence before moving onto the next item.
- CH4 250 – “Sent by the Lord am I” – our response to the call to be witnesses to God’s love, justice and peace.
- CH4 506 – “All I once held dear” – a response to the Good News. I can imagine one of the people in the crowd listening to Peter and then going away and writing this hymn.
- CH4 512 – “To God be the glory” – if Peter was a hymn writer I could imagine him writing one like this following the healing of the lame man!
- CH4 528 – “Make me a channel of your peace” – from the Prayer St Francis. Picking up on the themes of today’s reading; may we be channels of Your peace, love, pardon and faith in a world of hatred, injustice and doubt.
- CH4 531 – “My Jesus, my Saviour” – just enjoy worshipping our Saviour with this short song, usually sung through twice.
- CH4 549 – “How deep the Father’s love for us” – another one by Peter? I will not boast in anything, no gifts, no power, no wisdom, but I will boast in Jesus Christ his death and resurrection.
- CH4 594 – “Come, Holy Spirit, come!” – (Sung to the tune DIADEMATA – “Crown him with many crowns”) – a prayer in song which captures the themes of today.

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'.
- If singing in our congregations is 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

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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