

starters for Sunday

Third Sunday after Epiphany

22 January 2017

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Haley Jones and Pádraig Ó Tuama, part of the [Spirituality of Conflict Project](#), for their thoughts on the third 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

Christmas feels like ages ago this week, and the rhythms of January are well underway. January is still winter, and the days, while they are lightening in the northern hemisphere, are nonetheless short. The texts for this week are all about finding joy underneath gloom, about finding shelter and support and delight in the midst of trying circumstances.

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 9: 1-4](#)

The reading from Isaiah is a reading promising joy and strength to those in gloom. This short reading from Isaiah is full of contrasts. In the midst of its promises it describes circumstances of difficulty using numerous metaphors:

The writer speaks of the gloom upon the people. The Hebrew word used here (מוּאָפּ muap) has a figurative meaning of the emotional state of sadness and despondency. The people's anguish



(מִצָּר musaq) is also described, by using a word that speaks of the casting (of metal), bringing to mind heat and also the permanence and force implied in such metal casting. The writer uses the words hosek and salmawet to describe darkness - words that bring to mind gloom, despair, ignorance. All of these burdens are demonstrations of might. As the writer describes the “bar across their shoulders” and the “Yoke of oppression” two words are used (mateh and sebet) that are both literal burdens but also items to denote leadership of royalty. The people are burdened by heavy weights, and they are also burdened by the weight of a foreign sovereign claiming rights over them.

All of this serves as a demonstration of the poetic reach of the writer of Isaiah, and the lengths that are travelled to describe the multitude of ways in which the people are in pain. Two things should be noted, particularly during winter, and particularly during a season when “Darkness” is equated with sin and “light” is equated with the inbreaking of God. Firstly, this image of “darkness” is one among many metaphors for human difficulty and secondly, it may perhaps be equally accurately translated as gloom. It is unwise to too-easily associate goodness with light, or even the colour white, as it too easily associates evil or darkness to darker colours. The history of Europeans’ religious work overseas speaks starkly of the racist practices that can be justified by such equation of colours with virtue. The writer of Isaiah speaks with many metaphors, and this is equally possible today.

The writer invites the faithful to recognise that the rod of foreign power that oppresses them will be shattered and that something opposite of gloom will come. This word אור (pronounced ‘or’) implies a light on the face, a positive happy attitude, a relief from trouble, an uplifting of the countenance elsewhere associated with prayer and salvation.

[Psalm 27: 1, 4-9](#)

The psalm continues the joyous celebration of the reading from Isaiah on this third Sunday after Epiphany. The tone of delight is impossible to miss for the psalmist speaks of “Living in the house of the Lord” beholding the beauty (a word that can also mean ‘pleasure’) of the Lord, being hidden in the shelter of the Lord - whether being concealed under the cover or set high upon a rock. The psalmist is jubilant in the face of difficulty, with enemies surrounding him, yet he still is able to offer sacrifices and songs and melodies to the Lord.



The tone of delight in the face of narrated difficulties of enemies and the underlying tone of necessity in the final line “Do not hide your face from me” (v 9) makes one wonder at the personal circumstances of the psalmist during this time. Where is it possible to find the source of such joy that is not dependent on ease of circumstance? Where is the wellspring of life that the psalmist taps into during a time of trial? It is clearly not based on everyday circumstances, but on something deeper.

1 Corinthians 1: 10-18

The writers of both the Isaiah text and the Psalm seem to be writing within the context of personal difficulty. Certainly the language they use can easily be applied to people who are finding themselves in the gloom, or under strife, or feeling downtrodden. The text from Paul to the Corinthians, however, locates the difficulty not in one person, but between people. “Let there be no divisions among you” he writes, using the Greek word schism which is so recognisable to English speakers. It is a mark of sadness and irony that the very word to describe the first major division in the Church of the East and the Church of the West is Schism, the very thing warned against by Paul.

Rather than being separated he urges them to be knitted together, to be complete, and even this word *katartizo* can also mean “ripe”. He urges people to come to a full fruition of the work of the cross that is among them. For him this means that sectarian divisions that are emerging among them as to whose school of Christianity they follow — Paul’s, Cephas’, Apollo’s — are to be recognised for what they are: little schisms. He demonstrates that he himself, as a person trusted by this community of Christians at Corinth, is uninterested in keeping a tally of devotees. He sees this as something that would empty the cross of Christ of its power. The work of the Cross, in Paul’s loving and urgent letter, is made evident in the restoration of a condition of unity and goodness amongst the people who are following The Way. It is the way of self-giving, the way that may seem foolish to those who do not understand it, those who relish the energy that comes from strife — and many of us do enjoy that energy. Rather than emptying the cross of its power, Paul urges the people to empty themselves of their habit of schism.



[Matthew 4: 12-23](#)

The text references Isaiah's prophecy about Jesus, "the people who have sat in the darkness have seen great light". In the looming shadow of death that was the exile, there has been a glimpse of life for the people of Israel.

In a world that values the light over the dark, which is evident in the many ways that we tend to hide from the dark, we find freedom and security in the former rather than the latter. Our comfort level is often determined by our capability to be aware of our surroundings or our ability to "see". The unknown brings us great discomfort and that discomfort causes us to seek refuge in the light. The state of the world does not allow us to hide from the darkness, for darkness manifests itself in a variety of ways through the systems that we have created—locally, nationally, and globally.

The challenging question, however, is whether we should continue to avoid the darkness. Is there something beautiful to be learned while being present in the darkness? What lessons can be gleaned from our experience of learning to walk faithfully in the dark? Jesus continued to walk faithfully in his temptation with evil, with darkness per se.

How can we shift our "otherness" of darkness into the recognition that wonder and holy transformation of ourselves and our relationships can arise from what we most often avoid? Sitting in the night can invoke emotions that we have tried to avoid, but maybe the movement of the Spirit within the night can show us more than we ever imagined. We need moments of night just as much as we need the day, for that is how we truly grasp the radical nature of the Kingdom and the good news.

Sermon Ideas

Sermons from these texts once again can build upon the regular rhythms of prayer that keep the person — and the community — attentive to the prayerful and loving foundation that sustains them, even when circumstances can be trying, difficult, gloomy or embattled.

The writers of this week's texts knew pain, they knew suffering, they knew economic, religious, political and national oppression. They also knew the levels of internal division that can render



empty the fullness of God's goodness towards the community. A community that cannot turn in love towards one another empty the very vessels that could sustain them.

In what way do we do this? How is it that, rather than finding a joy from our shared vision for community, we envision a community that will only experience joy when we are divided from each other? We can imagine that the sacrifice of a difficult person from within our congregation will be the thing that will grant happiness to the "rest of us", and in so doing, we re-enact a small rite of exclusion and marginalisation, treating the person we wish to exclude as Christ was treated. We miss the message of the cross, and in so doing become the persecutors, not the faithful.

The complicated message of Christianity is that God's love is to be found in the beloved and broken community. At the heart of all of the writers' messages is that no circumstance among the people of God will ever feel perfect enough. That's the point, they seem to be saying. We need to be sustained by something deeper than civic ease and interpersonal harmony. And when we are sustained by that which is truly sustaining — ethical living, right relationships, rhythms of prayer — we may find that the relationships that had once seemed so disruptive are the very place of encountering God. And in this practice, we may sing as if we are placed on a high place, or hidden in the sheltering cloak of God. This is a song of joy, because it is a song sung in times of ease and in times of strain. It is a song that proclaims that love is deeper than anything.

Time with Children

Children can teach much about joy, about finding play in places when play seems evasive. A suggestion for the text today is to ask children to make lists of the things that bring them joy, and then to ask them to mention the things that are most important in that list. Loving relationships with people at home, friends and play are surely going to be the things that sustain children's vivacity. and there are direct correlations between their unfettered love of the most important things and the complicated priorities that entangle adult life.



Prayers

Approach to God

God of both light and dark,
Grant us peace as we wait in the dark,
Patience to recognize that the darkness can offer us wisdom from your presence,
And perseverance to remember that darkness is not all that there is.
Give us guidance as we learn to be people of your love in both the darkness and the light of the world.
In the name the Spirit that moves between us,
Amen.

Thanksgiving

God of life and connection
We see your goodness all around us

In trees and fields

In the light upon the faces of the joyful

In the peace on the faces of the sleeping

In all seasons

In all circumstances

And we give thanks that we know that
there are no barriers to love
making a life richer
and life thriving
in the place of love

You, God, are the source of love

And because we are made by you

and for you

and for each other

We, too, can share the love that is life.



In the story of Jesus and his love for his friends
his fellow city dwellers
the people he met in his wandering
we see what love can look like
love that challenges
love that inspires
love that protects
love that creates

Make us more and more like you, God
You who show us,
in the life of Jesus
what love looks like
in this life.

Confession

God said “Let there be life”

And instead we have stifled life.

God said “Let there be love”

and instead we have practiced schism

God said “Let there be peace”

And instead we become experts at grumbling

God said “Let there be friendship”

And instead we fear

God said “Let there be goodness”

And instead, we hide our faces.

God of all Gods

Life of all life

Turn us towards you

who turn towards us



Lift up our faces

So that we may become more like you

And in so doing

may live lives of courage, justice and love.



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

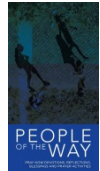
Resourcing Mission



[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.

