

## Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

### Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – 17 July 2022

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Sally Fraser, Edinburgh City Centre Chaplain for Workplace Chaplaincy Scotland, for her thoughts on the sixth 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.

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## Introduction

There are some incredibly challenging readings this week, indeed, it's the kind of week you might be horrified to have to preach on. The immediate challenge comes from the harsh words of the Old Testament reading and the psalm. This is not the loving, kind image of God we usually try to convey either from the pulpit or in any kind of pastoral ministry today. However, these are images of God which do form part of our story, as a people and a church, and they are, mysteriously, part of God too. There will be people in our communities who have grown up much more familiar with the harsher side of God, and there will be people living through the dark emotions of these passages right now. Somehow, we must always find a way of holding this darkness and pain. And today we are given the clear message about how to do so in the Gospel reading. There is only one response to this challenge: to sit at Jesus' feet.

But I suspect this might be the biggest challenge, because my observation is that people don't like the idea of sitting still; or find the suggestion that they might have time to do so a little irritating. After all, in daily life we need Marthas as well as Marys. Moreover, there is also a sense that in sitting still we also often feel more of the uncomfortable and painful things we might distract ourselves from in our busyness. As people of faith, we are called to find ways to draw together in our discomfort and challenge ourselves and each other to stay with the difficult feelings, the difficulties and darknesses which are part of our humanity, and also, as today's readings show, part of God.

There is also a wonderful combination of the mysterious and the mundane here, the domestic scenes, baskets of fruit. We are reminded that even when the topics are huge, God communicates with us through the everyday, familiar things and personal encounters. And so much nature, birth, green olive trees. Perhaps there might be an opportunity to use something from the natural world to help encourage the stillness that today's gospel demands?

Or perhaps the liturgy could be used create the stillness or the sitting, having a period of silence, or meditative Taizé music, or perhaps using imaginative contemplation as described below. If technology permits, art could be used to focus on the story, for example this painting by Velasquez: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/diego-velazquez-christ-in-the-house-of-martha-and-mary> . These readings, after all, all point to the incredible creativity of God. Perhaps a little creativity in leading to that sense of awe might be appropriate here.

## [Amos 8:1-12](#)

This reading contains really distressing imagery. I am not sure it is possible to hear the words “the dead bodies shall be many” and not think of news headlines from the last two years, both because of Covid and the war in Ukraine. Those who “wander from sea to sea” reminds us of refugees unable to find places of welcome, and the rising rivers remind us of the floods which are increasingly part of life in some regions. Even the cost-of-living crisis seems to be reflected here, and the grain shortages we currently face. The detail of Amos’ prophecy shows God was concerned with the details of people’s lives then, just as God is concerned with the details of our lives now.

There is something chilling, though, about the inversions here, rather than a God who turns our tears into dancing, we hear of one who will turn songs to lamentations. We hear that those who seek will not find. This darkening is terrifying, and we are told not of simply a material hunger and suffering, but a kind of spiritual drought, a thirst for hearing God’s word.

It might be tempting to surrender to despair here, perhaps to see declining church numbers and increasing secularisation as symptoms of this spiritual drought. But it might be more fruitful to focus on looking for evidence of thirsting for God. For example, it was noted that near the beginning of the pandemic, huge numbers of people were typing ‘how to pray’ into Google. How as communities can we respond to this thirst?

## [Psalm 52](#)

The Psalms, as always, remind us of the breadth of human emotions that can be felt in our relationships with God, and that all our feelings can be found in scripture. This is not the sort of psalm we might choose for a wedding or a funeral, or set to music, but, as with the Amos reading, it shows a passionate voice responding to part of God’s story in our lives.

The Psalmist can be grateful that they are planted firmly, they can grow despite their anger at the injustice and dishonesty they have experienced. The Psalmist can express their anger, lament and release it, and ultimately still flourish because of their relationship with God, as if in God’s house, living in God. An olive tree may ultimately be fruitful, or provide shade and shelter as well as nourishment, showing how those who, despite pain, can live trusting that God can be a source of sustenance or comfort to others.

And as we live in times of continued turbulence, leaning into God’s steadfastness, we can allow ourselves to feel the uncomfortable things, we can lament. Indeed, if we think of

what we as a Church have to offer our wider communities at difficult times, I would suggest that offering a language of suffering and the practice of lament, and meaningfully practising lament might be among our greatest resources. We can offer to our communities that God's house is a place where strong feelings can be felt and can find expression through our ritual and liturgy.

### **Colossians 1:15-28**

This is a beautifully encouraging reading. We may take comfort in the immensity of God, the invisible and the mysterious, guiding and governing all that we cannot understand. Those estranged and hostile, as in our first reading and psalm, are now reconciled. The idea of the fullness of God is important and encouraging too: that all the different and mysterious parts of God we have struggled with across the readings are necessary parts of the whole.

We hear many echoes of the other readings; the steadfastness from the psalm, and the idea that Paul will make God fully known, a sort of antidote to the fear of spiritual drought foretold by Amos.

The idea of nature and creation is powerful here, as we are told that everything is created both through Christ and for Christ. If we don't always think of Jesus as so powerfully connected with Creation, this can help us to do so, this is an excellent reading for Eco groups and Creation services.

There is also a strong call to think about our role as Church, with Christ at our head and holding everything together, educating with wisdom and helping people be 'mature'. It would be good to reflect on what this might look like in our faith communities today.

### **Luke 10:38-42**

Today we find Jesus in a domestic setting, in the home of His friends. I have many connections with the L'Arche community and I have heard the suggestion there that it was unusual for Lazarus to live with his sisters, and that perhaps he had a learning disability and they cared for him. This idea always shapes my imagining of this setting.

Many people struggle with the harshness of Jesus' words to Martha, while some interpret it as affectionate teasing. It is significant of course, that while Martha seems to not understand the importance of being close to Jesus here, she is the one who will express exactly who He is, and state that He is the Messiah. There is a challenge here, does she

know Jesus so well that she can handle His teasing? Or does she know so deeply who Jesus is because He has been firm with her?

Mary is assured of what is eternal, that which will not leave her, and so there is a call here for all of us to see our present struggles in the light of what is to come, as in our other readings today. But there is a mystery here, neither Martha nor Mary could have understood what these words meant at the time. We too must often obey the invitation to stillness before God without any clear idea of exactly why.

Our responses to this story are very dependent on our own temperament, and also perhaps the stage we are at in our lives. It is good to pay attention to the parts of this story which provoke uncomfortable feelings, as they may lead us to insights about what God is trying to show us.

## Sermon ideas

It might be worth asking people if they identify more as a Martha or a Mary. Has this changed throughout their life?

Or whether, growing up, the image of God in the Old Testament reading was more familiar to them than the loving father we often focus on, or has their image changed throughout their life?

This Gospel passage would work incredibly well as an imaginative contemplation. The congregation could be led in a simple stilling, perhaps with awareness of their bodies on their seats, and then awareness of sounds in the room and beyond the room. Finally, an invitation to try to listen to the silence between and behind the silence. The silence between the ticking of the clock, behind the traffic noise.

Then an invitation to imagine being at Martha and Mary's house. What time of day is it? What is the furniture like? What does it smell like? Is it warm or cool?

Who might you be in this scene? Do you find yourself observing from afar or close to the action? Are you Martha, Mary, Jesus or someone else? How do Jesus' words make you feel? Angry, resentful, encouraged, frustrated, joyful, or something else?

Offer some time in silence, imagining yourself sitting close to Jesus. What might you want to say to Jesus? Is there something that makes you angry or frightened that you would like to express? Or is there something you are grateful for you would like to thank Jesus for?

Perhaps if imaginative contemplation would not be appropriate in your setting, you could invite the congregation to ask themselves these questions in their own time.

## Prayers

### Call to worship

Creator God, Your story has unfolded through time,  
from far-flung stars to intimate relationship.  
Help us, as we gather today to know and see You in new ways,  
in our song and in our silence,  
give us the courage to face our vulnerabilities and sit with You,  
confident in Your presence and love for us.  
Amen

### Intercessions

Perhaps an appropriate response would be:  
**Loving Lord, help us to bring our needs to You.**

We pray for those parts of the world where there is war and unrest.  
For those in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Yemen, Palestine,  
and so many other places where there is no peace.  
Hear the cries of those who are frightened,  
strengthen and inspire those who work for peace.  
And help us to be people of peace ourselves.

We pray for justice,  
that in our country and across the world leaders will be inspired by the Spirit  
to act fairly and wisely for the common good,  
and that our institutions would be guided and renewed  
by those seeking to hear Your voice.

We pray for families,  
in particular families struggling with rising living costs  
and the extra struggles that the school holidays bring.  
Help them to know of Your peace and encouragement;  
and help us to form communities which nurture and support families of all kinds.

We pray for our Church, that at times of change and uncertainty

we will be a place of refuge, silence and peace in our communities,  
that in a busy and troubled world we will have wisdom and compassion  
to support people in their pain;  
and guide them to find rest at Jesus' feet.

### **Final prayer and Blessing**

Loving God,  
we have heard of Your power and might,  
and Your smallness and ordinariness,  
Your thirst for justice  
and Your desire for closeness in us.  
As we leave this place,  
help us to take something of all these parts of You into the world with us,  
and to encounter You in our relationships and the events of our lives.  
Amen

May God bless you this week,  
power of the Father,  
friendship of the Son,  
encouragement of the Holy Spirit,  
now 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.

- CH4 132 – “Immortal, invisible, God only wise” – captures the great mystery of God we find in the New Testament reading
- CH4 186 – “Father God, I wonder” or



- CH4 286 – “Tell our, my soul, the greatness of the Lord” both echo the idea from the psalm of being transformed and then passing on praise through the generations
- CH4 189 – “Be still” – might be an ideal opening to the idea of being still before God.
- MP 951 / SF 530 – “To be in your Presence” (My Desire) is perhaps one of the most perfect depictions of sitting at Jesus feet
- “Illuminate the Shadows” by The Porter’s Gate is a very atmospheric cry out and lament, bringing echoes of the feelings in the Old Testament reading and the psalm right up to date: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IbUus9b5Tk>

## 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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