

## Fourth Sunday of Easter – Year B

**Sunday 21 April 2024**

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Very Rev Dr Martin Fair, member of the Faith Action Programme *Towards Ministry* team, for his thoughts on the fourth Sunday of Easter.

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

### Towards Ministry – Vocations Sunday

From the calling of Abram onwards, scripture offers us one example after another of God calling individuals – and even whole groups – to step up. Perhaps we find it most beautifully expressed in Isaiah 6:8, where we read:

“Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’”

God calls. Who will respond?

If this pattern is evident in scripture, why wouldn’t we expect to see it still today? And specifically concerning Jesus and the calling of the first disciples, shouldn’t we still expect Him to appear on the Lake Galilees of our lives, inviting us to follow?

“And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.” (Mark 1:17-18)

Where today are Simon, Andrew, James and John and the countless other men and women who, from then until now, have left their nets to follow? Where now are those excited by the prospect of fishing for people?

Of course, this business of calling applies to all Christians, as individuals and to the Church more broadly. We are all called into ministry of one kind or another, individually and collectively. The Church of Scotland’s Theological Forum underscored this in what it brought to General Assembly in 2023 (see Appendix 2, page 04ff):

[https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/107851/theological-forum.pdf](https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/107851/theological-forum.pdf)

But there is general calling and specific calling and, on this Sunday, our focus is on celebrating, encouraging and praying for those who are, or yet might be, called to the specific ministries that the Church of Scotland recognises: Readers, Deacons, Ordained Local Ministers and Ministers of Word and Sacrament.

It is important to note that there should never be any suggestion that those ministries are better or more important than those which operate day in, day out in congregations across the land, whether paid or voluntary. In his writing, Paul makes it abundantly clear that there

is no hierarchy of importance when it comes to ministry. In fact, he suggests that those who operate behind the scenes are not weaker, but are indispensable! (1Corinthians 12:22)

No more important, then, but no less so are those who offer themselves to be assessed, trained and called to the particular ministries referred to above. The Church continues to need those who will exercise ministries of word, word and sacrament and word and service.

This is our focus for today.

### [Isaiah 6:1-8](#)

Here we have one of the better-known passages from the Prophets. Those who are unfamiliar with it from scripture might well know it through the refrain of “I, the Lord of sea and sky” (CH4 251) – perhaps making it a good idea to use both in the service.

The passage begins by lifting us out of the everyday and ordinary by means of a fantastical vision. It’s unlikely that many will have experienced such visions, of heavenly beings and so on, but rather than dismissing such languages and experiences, perhaps we need to understand them first and foremost as being a reminder of God’s might and majesty, of God’ being exalted. Yes, we find God in the everyday and ordinary, but so much is lost if we discount entirely visions of temples and thrones, altars and angels. God is with us, but always ‘other’ – immanent and transcendent.

Though the passage begins with mystery and majesty, it soon takes us to that touching place where the holy and the human meet. This can never be a comfortable place and so it is that Isaiah (in his vision) is struck by an overwhelming sense of unworthiness: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” (v5)

He was aware, no doubt, of the Lord declaring, in Exodus 33:20: “You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” And yet by the miracle of God’s amazing mercy and grace, the passage takes us to cleansing and forgiveness and ultimately to calling. Or, more fully, to calling and responding.

## **1 Corinthians 12:12-31**

When the Church is 'up against it' for whatever reason, the tendency is that we look back through rose-tinted spectacles to when all was well. Almost inevitably, something of that will have been going on in the recent months and years as firstly Covid and then the Presbytery Mission Planning process brought us challenges and uncertainties, alongside stresses and hurts that few had previously known.

The truth is that there never was a golden age and even a brief glance through Paul's epistles makes that abundantly clear. They may not be the same ones, but the early churches knew their issues, as we know ours.

Who knows what exactly was going on in the fledgling Church at Corinth, but it seems obvious enough that there were issues around a lack of unity, spiritual snobbery and some members of the Church being treated differently to others.

As for spiritual snobbery, it might well have been that those who were experiencing certain of the spiritual gifts were looking down on those who weren't. Was it simply a case of, 'we're more important than you'?

Paul addresses these issues brilliantly in this chapter, using body metaphors that are both highly visual and easy to understand. And so here we have a perfect jumping-off point for dealing with ministry and the often-experienced sense that some ministries are thought to be of more importance and of greater significance than others. Paul makes it abundantly clear that there are many forms and types of ministry and ways of serving (see also Romans 12:3-8) and that all are needed for the health and completeness of the Body.

What might it look like if we were to think in terms of a family of ministries rather than a hierarchy of ministries? What if each person's way of ministering and serving was equally valued?

## **Acts 6:1-7**

Throughout Paul's writing we are reminded that no single ministry is more important than the next, but here in this passage from Acts, we have an example of the importance of defining what each ministry is.

It would seem that as the Jerusalem Church grew, the apostles found themselves under ever-increasing pressure in terms of running the show. And from what might have been a

honeymoon period, day-to-day realities were dawning and with them, day-to-day moans and groans! Many of those in full-time ministry today will tell you of the sense of spinning plates or of constantly moving from place to place to fight fires. In that, there is nothing new under the sun!

But the apostles understood that the situation was unsustainable and that a solution was necessary. The solution came in what we might call a division of labour. They had a clear understanding of what their primary tasks were – proclaiming and teaching the word of God. They knew too, that being distracted from that would be to the detriment of the Church and to its continued growth. With that in mind, a meeting was held at which they proposed a division of labour – and in effect, the creation of a new form of ministry.

It is important to see that the apostles were not delegating that which they thought to be below themselves or to think that the waiting on tables, as Luke puts it, was of no particular importance, in such a way that anyone could do it. In asking the Church to choose people to fulfil this new ministry, they insist that those to be chosen are to be “full of the Spirit and wisdom” (v3). And so seven such believers were chosen.

In the Church today, it’s no less important that we define roles. Our Ministers of Word and Sacrament, our Readers and our Ordained Local Ministers (OLMs) must focus on that to which they have been called and trained. When the ministry of the word is neglected because of too many other calls on a person’s time, the Church will inevitably suffer. And similarly, when Deacons – who also have a word-based role – are pulled in too many directions, the vitally important service element of their ministry gets diluted.

In what ways does this account from Acts challenge the Church today:

- To consider the types of ministry the Church calls people to?
- To reflect on whether or not there are clear definitions between each ministry?
- [at congregational level] What are the expectations of each ministry, and how is prioritising properly understood?

## **Mark 1:16-20**

Here we have one of the best-known passages in the whole of the New Testament. Didn’t earlier generations grow up singing, “I will make you fishers of men”?

For those of us who have been fortunate enough to visit the area, this passage immediately and easily comes alive. We can visualise the stony beaches on the western shore of Galilee,

together with the small boats bobbing on the water. It can take your breath away to think: He walked here.

What would those who were there at that time have made of it? Had they already heard Jesus speaking? Had they already met, or was He still a relative stranger to them when He approached and offered them a career change?

Either way, Mark tells us that Simon and Andrew left their nets and, responding to Jesus' invitation, went with Him. To follow Him ... More than that, Mark tells us that they did so "at once" and "without delay."

The Church believes that Jesus is still in the business of calling and that among the many, there will be those called to leadership through ministry. Of course, now the Church has processes through which that calling is tested and means by which it prepares people for ministry. But below the surface, it's still about Jesus saying, "Come, follow me."

## **Sermon ideas**

The best sermons start with the preacher asking, not 'what am I going to say?' but 'who am I going to be saying it to?' There's no such thing as a generic sermon; every sermon is preached in a specific moment in time and in a specific place and to a specific gathering of God's people.

So, on this Vocations Sunday, may preaching be grounded in the 'who' and the 'where' and the 'when'. With that in mind, who will be before you as you preach – whether in the building or online? Perhaps there will be:

- someone who has the beginning of a sense of call to ministry of one kind or another – but who has yet to respond
- people who may have spotted potential in a person they know and who could encourage (perhaps with a 'word in season')
- people who were part of your congregation but are now in training or in ministry elsewhere
- someone who is now retired from the ministry they once exercised

The whole Church has a responsibility for identifying those who will one day be set apart or ordained, and the sermon offers an opportunity to make that clear.

The brief notes above offer starting points for the various bible passages offered for this Sunday. By way of illustrations and possible directions to go in, the following may be of some help.

- Think in terms of the patterns of the tide, **ebbing and flowing**. Use these as a way to introduce the principle that **Jesus both calls and sends**. He calls us to Himself and then sends us out. We cannot be commissioned until first we have come to Christ but if we respond to His call to “come to me,” but then don’t heed to His command that we “go”, then something crucial is missing.
  
- You might want to start with the concept of **availability**. When we pay attention to what the scriptures have to say about leadership and the way in which individuals step up in particular moments, we see them flowing out of the plan and purpose of God. God reaches out, God calls, and when God calls, the response is: “**Here I am.**” This is the Hebrew word ‘Hineni’ (hee-neh-nee). The various uses of the word in the Old Testament are found at key moments in the lives of the particular individuals. ‘Here I am’ is an offer that goes way beyond the everyday and ordinary. The one who declares ‘Here I am’ is on the cusp of a genuinely life-changing moment.
  - When confronted with the ultimate test, Abraham’s response was, “Here I am.” (Genesis 22)
  - When finally understanding that it was God calling to him in the night, the young Samuel’s response to his master was, “Here I am.” (1 Samuel 3)
  - When encountering the living God in the splendour of the temple and hearing the Lord asking, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” Isaiah responded, “Here I am.” (Isaiah 6)
  - In the very same way (though not using the same word), when Jesus called His first followers, their response was to drop what they were doing and to make themselves available
  - And most wonderfully, when facing up to the angel’s message that she was to bear a child, Mary’s response was, “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be so.”

God has always looked for, and has found, those who have been willing to serve by making themselves available – by accepting a call to give over their lives by saying, “Here I am.” Even now, the Towards Ministry team is meeting with some who are considering making that response and their colleagues in the Training Team are delighting in working with those who have already pinned their colours to the mast by saying, “Here I am.”



What about you? Are you already serving? Have you already made yourself available? Or in this new day, might God be calling you to something new, a brand-new challenge? The Towards Ministry team is here to support you as you discern – and perhaps to stand with you as you join the long list of those who've said, "Here I am."

One of the most common responses to any discussion about ministry is: I couldn't possibly do that! And that flows out of 'I'm not good enough' or 'I haven't got what it takes.' All of this is to say that many people feel unworthy and unable. There's something good about that – we should be wary of those who see themselves as the finished article! At the same time, we need to be able to encourage people with the truth that God also equips those who respond to call. In other words, the starting point is not whether you have what it takes, but whether or not you will make yourself available to God and open to the work of the Spirit in your life.

## Prayers

### **Call to worship** (*Psalm 66:1-2,4*)

Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth;  
sing the glory of His name;  
give to Him glorious praise.  
All the earth worships You;  
they sing praises to You,  
sing praises to Your name.

Let us worship, singing to God's praise and glory.

### **Prayers of gathering, adoration and confession**

With glad and grateful hearts, we praise You, O God,  
that You have opened the gates to let us in.  
And here we are, joyful:

*To be in Your presence  
To sit at Your feet  
When Your love surrounds us  
And makes us complete.*

*[Hold a time of silence]*

For a few precious moments we would be still,

to know that You are God:

*You, the Holy One are here  
Your glory is shining all around  
You are moving in this place.*

*[Hold a time of silence]*

Forgive us, Loving God, that much of the time  
we are too busy to be aware that You are in the room –  
overly distracted to notice what You are up to.  
Our lives are lived less fully as a result.  
We talk of following Jesus, but wander off on other paths.  
Forgive us, we pray.

*Purify our hearts  
Cleanse us from within  
Make us holy.*

*[Hold a time of silence]*

Now send Your Spirit, good and generous God,  
that by daily transformation  
we might become evermore the people You made us to be.  
We love You and long to love You more.  
We serve You but long to serve more faithfully.  
Hear us, we pray, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

### **Prayers for others**

God of heaven, and yet God over all the earth,  
we marvel that You hear us as we pray  
and that You respond according to Your good will and purpose.  
In all things, we pray: Your will be done; Your Kingdom come.

Help us, Lord, to be faithful in prayer, day by day,  
that we might be ever mindful of the harsh realities  
being faced by so many today.  
And as we pray, soften our hearts that, filled with Your Spirit,  
we might exhibit love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Lord and Head of the Church, today we pray for the Church  
and not least that You might equip Your Church  
with those who would minister among us  
and across our communities.

*[A PowerPoint slideshow can be used to accompany the following prayers. The pictures are in order according to the words and phrases **in bold**. Allow a few moments for each picture to be appreciated.*

*Email: [ministry@churchofscotland.org.uk](mailto:ministry@churchofscotland.org.uk) to request the Powerpoint file.]*

Hear us then, as we pray for those who, right now, are listening for Your call and entering into the **discernment process**: some to **Readership**, some to the **Diaconate** and some to be **Ordained Local Ministers** and **Ministers of Word and Sacrament**;

The families of people for whom ministry will represent a huge life change; all those who will present themselves for national assessment this spring.

Those who have come from many different countries and are in the process of **familiarisation**; and **experienced ministers** who will mentor candidates for ministry in their placements and through **probation**.

Those who have completed their preparation and are presently serving as **Assistant Ministers**, waiting for opportunities to open up, that they might receive their first call.

**Educators** at the various Church Colleges, that they might play their part in preparing students for ministry.

**National staff** and Presbytery representatives, who support and guide candidates through the journey to ministry.

And for all of us, God,  
help us to encourage and support those who are called to ministry in all its forms – those who have served faithfully and are now retired, or are nearing that time, and those who are just starting out.

Might we and they together serve You faithfully  
as You work through us to establish Your Kingdom.

These and all our prayers, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

### **Blessing/Sending**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord,  
according to God's calling upon your life,  
and may the blessing of God Almighty,  
Creator, Redeemer and Spirit,  
be with you and those you love – and those you struggle to love –  
now and forevermore. 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 248 – “For my sake and the gospel’s, go”
- CH4 251 – “I, the Lord of sea and sky”
- CH4 250 – “Sent by the Lord am”
- CH4 532 – “Lord, you have come to the seashore”
- CH4 533 – “Will you come follow me?”
- CH4 679 – “One is the body and one is the Head”
- “Open the eyes of my heart” – Paul Baloche’s song is appropriate for the Isaiah 6 reading. CCLI # 2298355
- “God the Spirit, guide and guardian” <https://www.hopepublishing.com/find-hymns-hw/hw3103.aspx> CCLI #381340

## 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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