

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

Sunday 4 August 2024

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank the Church of Scotland's National Stewardship Team for their thoughts on the eleventh 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.

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

This week's lectionary texts contain a common thematic thread of God's provision and our response to it. The lectionary passages build from the material provision of food in Exodus, to spiritual provision of Jesus as 'bread of life' in John, to the provision of gifts for the building up of the body of Christ in Ephesians.

The resource '*A Narrative of Generosity*' can be used to facilitate conversation, reflection and action to help a congregation recognise and respond to God's generosity in these and many more areas. (Visit <https://churchofscotland.org.uk/resources/stewardship/a-narrative-of-generosity> for information and contact stewardship@churchofscotland.org.uk for additional resources.)

This is the second of five weeks in which the Gospel reading moves sequentially through John 6, making it ideal as a series to run through the Sundays of August. The Epistle readings also run sequentially week-on-week, so if either Gospel or Epistle was used last week, this week offers an opportunity to continue and develop the same themes.

This week's material was written by the four members of the Church of Scotland's National Stewardship Team, who met online from different parts of the country to read the scripture passages together, share what stood out to each of them, then draw together common themes into this Weekly Worship resource. This model of allowing God to speak through the insights and experiences of a variety of people can be easily replicated in a local setting and can be an enriching and rewarding way to plan worship together.

[Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15](#)

When they crossed the Red Sea into the wilderness, the Israelites sang and danced to praise God for their freedom. Soon, though, the harsh reality of the wilderness replaced their jubilation with concerns for their own survival. At Marah, they bemoaned the lack of drinking water. Moses cried to God, who made the water drinkable. Now, having set out from Elim into the wilderness of Sin towards Sinai, it is hunger that has become their complaint, a complaint that appears to be levied at Moses and Aaron, but is really aimed at God. God again hears the needs of the people and promises to 'rain bread from heaven,' but with a warning that the people should gather only what they need for that day.

God hears the grumbling of the people and acts to provide for their needs. God provides food in two ways: quail in the evenings and a fine, flaky substance (which came to be known as *manna*) resulting from the morning dew. (The question, 'What is it?' in verse 15 could

equally be translated as the statement, 'It is manna'.) There is a similar story in Numbers 11, and it is worth reading that alongside this passage.

These sorts of food are not uncommon in that part of the world. European quail migrate between Africa and Europe in the spring and autumn, and often drop exhausted in the Sinai desert, where they are caught by hunters. The quail in this passage, therefore, are not necessarily a supernatural phenomenon. There is, however, a miracle of timing: just when the people need it most, God provides. Similarly, there is a phenomenon of edible honeydew forming in the Sinai in June and July as insects ingest and excrete the sap of tamarisk trees. As it crystallises, it falls to the ground as a solid substance, known in Arabic as 'manna'. If the manna in this passage, which Numbers 11:7 describes as the colour of tree resin, is a similar phenomenon, then once again the miracle is that it arrives just as the people need it, and that it continues to appear year-round, not just in season. The manna and quails may well have been ordinary occurrences made extraordinary by God's providential timing. Such a 'miracle of timing' is not unknown to us today: how often do we find that an unexpected gift or circumstance comes along at just the right time?

[Psalm 78:23-29](#)

There are several intriguing features of this psalm. It is one of the few psalms addressed to a human community rather than to God (as is Psalm 49, for example). It is long – the second longest in the Psalter after Psalm 119. It is dated to sometime after the fall of the Northern Kingdom (722 BCE). It summarises Israel's past in poetic form, using this story of the past to teach about the present, encouraging obedience to God.

The section of the psalm contained in this passage is a re-telling of the account of this week's Exodus passage. It speaks of God 'raining down' both manna and meat, in the form of 'winged birds,' which can be assumed to be the quail mentioned in Exodus 16:13 and Numbers 11:31. The psalm's added detail that a wind blew the birds to the desert fits with the account of quail migration mentioned above. The language of 'raining down', 'opening the doors of heaven' and 'bread of angels' emphasises the heavenly nature of this provision: it was not Moses and Aaron who provided food for the people, but God.

There is an interesting shift in emphasis between the Exodus account and its re-telling in this psalm. Where Exodus speaks of 'enough for that day' (v4), the psalm speaks of 'abundance' (v25). What was first regarded as sufficiency is now recognised as plenty. This speaks to the nature of God's generosity, responding to the needs of the people with abundance. If the overall theme of the psalm is obedience, this raises the challenge of how we respond. How can we reflect this generous nature in our everyday lives?

[Ephesians 4:1-16](#)

This passage from Paul's letter to the Church in Ephesus highlights God's generous nature. While the previous readings also emphasised God's generosity, this text goes a step further, by stating how we as Christians are to respond to this generosity.

Paul discusses three main divine gifts to the Church. First, God has given us grace. Earlier in the letter, Paul states: "Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes" (Ephesians 1:4). We haven't done anything to 'earn' this grace; it is freely given. However, in this portion of the letter, Paul urges us to live lives "worthy of the calling you have received." Nothing we do can ever make us truly worthy of the gift of God's grace, but God's grace should make us want to live lives that align with who God has called us to be.

The second gift God gives us is unity. Unity is a theme that pervades this passage, and this unity originates with God, rather than through the works of our hands. Paul highlights the inherent nature of this unity by listing several 'ones': "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (vv4-6). While we don't create this unity, we are called "to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." We are called to steward this unity through our humility, gentleness, patience and love (v2).

Third, God has gifted the Church with diverse members and gifts. Paul again returns to the metaphor of the Church as a body, with different people performing different functions and equipped with different but equal talents "for works of service" (v12). It is notable that God, desiring unity, didn't make us all the same, but instead has given us the opportunity to encounter people who differ from us. Our goal as a Church is to learn to love all peoples "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God."

These gifts – God's grace, unity and diversity – are all freely given, and we are called to live lives that reflect this generosity so that the body of Christ may be built up. That can be a challenge, as verse 14 acknowledges, with its description of spiritual immaturity. However, the good news is that Christ is with us as we learn to live into these gifts: "we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love" (vv15-16).

It may be of interest to note that in verse 12, the Greek word translated as 'to equip' is taken from the Greek *katartismos*, meaning to bring into its proper condition, to perfect. William Barclay writes on this as follows:

“The word is used in surgery for setting a broken limb or for putting a joint back into its place... In the New Testament, it is used of mending nets (Mark 1:19) and of disciplining an offender until that person is fit to take up a place again within the fellowship of the Church (Galatians 6:1). The basic idea of the word is that of putting a thing into the condition in which it ought to be. It is the function of the office-bearers of the Church to see that the members of the Church are educated, guided, cared for and sought out when they go astray, in such a way that they become what they ought to be.” (1)

Taken in this sense, when we discover and utilise our God-given gifts, we more fully realise who we were made to be, and help others to do the same.

[1] William Barclay, *New Daily Study Bible: The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2002), 171-172.

[John 6:24-35](#)

This passage from John follows shortly after Jesus feeds a large crowd. The crowd has gone to the trouble of boarding boats to track down Jesus across the lake at Capernaum, but Jesus recognises that their motivation for seeking him is largely selfish: “you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” Essentially, the crowd has sought Jesus as they want to see what else they can get from Him. This is the same crowd, earlier in the chapter, who had sought to install Jesus as their earthly king, by force if necessary.

The motivation on the part of the crowd is reminiscent of our modern tendency to seek leaders who protect our personal interests. We seek out politicians who will increase our own wealth and prosperity or protect our special interests, even if it is at the expense of other people. The crowd in this passage believes that Jesus can help them fulfil their physical needs and materialistic aspirations. Jesus points this out to the crowd, telling them that they are seeking “food that perishes.” Like their ancestors in Exodus, who sought bread and golden calves, the people are seeking the comfort of material goods.

But Jesus tells them that the Son of Man will give them “food that endures to eternal life.” The crowd is excited by this, asking Jesus, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” The crowd is assuming this is a transaction – if they do something for Jesus, Jesus will give

them this new bread. But Jesus tells them that this isn't how it works: all they need to do is believe, and they will receive the bread of eternal life.

The crowd again misses the point. They demand that Jesus give them a sign: essentially, they're saying to Jesus, "prove it!" Again, they will do God's work if Jesus first can do something for them: they suggest that He give them bread, as was given to their ancestors in the wilderness.

The irony here is that they don't realise that they have already been given a sign, in the feeding of the great crowd. But the sign goes beyond just this miraculous feeding – Jesus' description of the bread of God allows the reader to recognise that it is not just the feeding miracle but Jesus Himself who is the true subject of the discourse. Unlike the finite bread that the crowd demands, the "bread of life" that Jesus offers is freely and abundantly given.

Sermon ideas

Throughout these passages there are many ideas to explore, including:

- **God's response to people's needs**

Provision, abundance, timing. From manna and quails provided in the desert to satisfy hungry stomachs, to the bread of life provided to satisfy hungry souls, these stories show that God is interested in both our physical and spiritual needs. You could reflect on sufficiency versus abundance, with God knowing when we need each of these. How does God's provision align with our own expectations and wants? There can be a temptation to look at life through a lens of scarcity and focus on what we do not have, yet these passages offer an encouragement to look through a lens of abundance and recognise God's provision. How does that alter the way we live? How can we reflect that generosity in the way we respond? We can trust that God knows what is best for us and trust in God's perfect timing. Are there stories within your congregation of God's providential timing?

- **Bread**

There are various references to bread throughout the passages, from bread raining from heaven to the bread of life which does not perish and is everlasting, building on the story of bread being shared that featured in last week's Gospel reading. Bread is a staple food which sustains life, but the 'bread of life' points to something more than physical existence. It may be worth reflecting that bread is not a staple food in all parts of the world, so this phrase is often contextualised. The Christian Conference of Asia, for example, has a hymn called "[The Rice of Life](#)" and Archbishop John Sentamu told the

Edinburgh 2010 Missionary Conference that in his hometown of Kampala, Jesus could well be called the banana of life. These translations point to an understanding of this phrase as meaning that Jesus is that which is essential to sustain life in all its fulness. What does it mean for Jesus to be the essential of life? The name Bethlehem means 'house of bread'. In what ways is this significant?

- **God's gifts to the Church**

The Ephesians passage speaks of many gifts from God: grace, which is freely given and cannot be earned; unity of the Spirit, which we are called to nurture; and diversity of members and gifts, all contributing towards the body which is the Church. It describes how this diversity of gifts is provided so that each may play their own role in building up the body of Christ – all different, yet all needed to complement the others. What are some of the ways that our different gifts complement each other in the life of this congregation? The original text evokes a sense that in fulfilling our gifts, we are enabled to be fully who we were made to be. How can your congregation offer opportunities for people to participate which enable them to discover such a rich purpose? You could play the song, "What was I made for?" by Billie Eilish, sung in the Barbie movie as Barbie transforms from a doll to a person and considers her purpose. Following this, invite people to reflect on the gifts God has given them and how they might be being called to use them.

Prayers

Gathering prayer

We gather today as a body of Your people:

from different ages and stages,

with varied gifts and passions,

unique histories and circumstances,

yet united by our shared faith, our living hope

and the strong bonds of Your love.

We come hungry for the food we need to receive:

the words of challenge and encouragement,

the greater sense of purpose and the call to action.

Jesus, bread of life, feed us this day we pray.

Amen

Confession/Repentance

Loving God,

We come before You now to acknowledge our wrongdoing

and our failure to develop into the people You would have us be.
We bring to You our failures and disappointments,
our immaturity and stubbornness,
our selfishness and greed.
So often we have failed to see Your abundance,
seeking only to gain fulfilment and contentment through the things of this world.
Having acknowledged our sin and our weakness,
we say 'sorry' and seek Your forgiveness.
We ask for Your help in transforming us
into people who reflect Your goodness, love and grace
through the lives we live and the choices we make.
Develop in us the fruits of Your Holy Spirit
so that we might become spiritually mature,
and that together we will grow into a body
which is held together and built up in Your love.
Amen

Thanksgiving/Gratitude

Gracious and giving God,
We give thanks for Your endless provision and abundant grace.
Just as You supplied manna for the Israelites in their time of need,
You continue to provide for us in every season of our lives.
We are grateful for the blessings of food, shelter and clothing that You provide for us each day.
We are humbled by Your faithfulness and Your never-ending love.
Thank You, Lord, for Your abundant provision and for being our ever-present provider.
Amen

Prayer for others/Intercession

God of all,
As we have been reminded of Your power and Your promise to provide,
we pray for those who may be facing practical struggles or uncertainty about their future.
May they find comfort and strength in Your promises,
knowing that You are a God who never fails.
May we never take Your blessings for granted
and may we seek to pass on those blessings to others,
reflecting Your goodness and generosity in our lives.
Give us hearts of compassion, we pray.
Amen

Offering

Generous God,

We come before You with grateful hearts for Your faithful provision in our lives.
You have blessed us with everything we need and more, and for that, we thank You.

As we give back a small portion of what You have bestowed upon us,
we pray that these offerings may be pleasing in Your sight.

May they be used to further Your kingdom here on earth
and to spread Your love and mercy to those in need.

May our hearts be open to give generously,
not out of obligation, but with joy and a spirit of thanksgiving.

May we always remember that everything we have is a gift from You.

We offer these gifts back to You with humility and gratitude.

In Your name, we pray.

Amen

Blessing/Closing prayer

As we go out into the world,
may we be like bread, broken and shared,
bringing sustenance and hope to those in need.

May we be filled with the joy and peace
that comes from knowing You, the bread of life.

May Your presence be with us always,
guiding and sustaining us on our journey.

We ask all of this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

Amen.

Musical suggestions

God Welcomes All (GWA) is the new supplement to Church Hymnary Fourth Edition. This exciting new collection features over 200 hymns and songs in a wide range of styles by writers from Scotland and around the world.

The full music version is now available; the words-only book and digital resources including the expansion of the existing Church of Scotland music website will be published in due course, with streaming functions and further information on each song; backing tracks; and lyric videos. *God Welcomes All* is available to order from

<https://chbookshop.hymnsam.co.uk/books/9781786225573/god-welcomes-all>

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.

- GWA 70 – “As once you served a waiting crowd” (Bread) – a vision of our life and work influenced by Christ, the Bread of Life.
- CH4 167 – “Guide me, O thou great Jehovah” – a well-known hymn which evokes the Exodus story. The refrain ‘Bread of heaven’ fits with the John passage and sermon ideas.
- CH4 251 – “I, the Lord of sea and sky” – a hymn reflecting on responding to God’s call to use our gifts.
- CH4 511 – “Your hand, O God, has guided” – a hymn reflecting the unity theme of the Ephesians text.
- CH4 655 – “For your generous providing” – written by Church of Scotland minister Leith Fisher, this hymn is a prayer of thanksgiving and petition for God’s providing, drawing heavily on the imagery of bread. It is set to the tune ‘Holy Manna’, a nod to the Exodus reading, but can also be sung to several well-known tunes such as Abbot’s Leigh or Blaenwern.
- CH4 663 – “Bread of life, hope of the world” – a song reflecting on Jesus as bread of life, which draws on some of the themes of Ephesians 4.
- CH4 763 – “God bless to us our bread” – a short song from Argentina ideal for use with children or all ages together, which is best sung several times over. It can be sung in unison, or the first line can be sung by a cantor with the congregation responding.
- Mission Praise 181 – “God forgave my sin” – the chorus of this well-known praise song (‘Freely, freely’) reflects God’s grace freely given and encourages a similarly generous response.

- “Goodness of God” (Bethel Music, from the Victory album) – a contemporary song of worship and thankfulness which acknowledges God’s faithful presence and goodness towards us. CCLI song #7117726.
- “Honey in the Rock” (Brooke Ligertwood and Brandon Lake, from the Seven album) – a contemporary song which speaks of God's abundant and timely provision. CCLI song # 7191257 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4dloOdLSOA>
- “The rice of life from heaven came” – a song from the Christian Conference of Asia reflecting the John passage in a context where bread is not a staple food (see ‘Sermon Ideas’ above). ONE LICENSE song #46654 https://hymnary.org/text/the_rice_of_life_from_heaven_came

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

God Welcomes All can be ordered from [Hymns Ancient & Modern](#)

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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