

starters for Sunday

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

29 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 fourth 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

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' painting of the kingdom of God. He has just called on his disciples, been baptised by John the Baptist, and has begun proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. He is on the mountain with his disciples having escaped the crowds in Galilee and is preaching the unexpected. The beatitudes are full of opposites; they are a proclamation of blessings on the things that are unanticipated. Why are we so challenged by the surprise of opposites? Jesus' words are a rejection of the systems of the world for the announcement of the kingdom. In the opposites of the beatitudes, we discover where we have failed to be proclaimers and builders of the world God so faithfully hopes. Jesus is pointing out the necessity of our shift towards righteousness and justice, a new way of partnering in the world.

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

[Micah 6: 1-8](#)

This text from the Prophet Micah ends with a well-known injunction: to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6: 8).

It is worthwhile reflecting on these verbs:

To do

To love

To walk

They are all verbs that require action. While commitment, consideration and intellect are involved in each of these, they are each verbs that require embodiment and work, not mere acquiescence.

The prophet has God recount the story of the people. God has brought the people from slavery, has redeemed them, has given them leaders, and protected them against invasion. God is pleading with the people, is raising what the NRSV calls a ‘controversy’ (in Hebrew a riv, a grievance or legal dispute) against the people. God is asking the people to explore their story and to respond in their lives with the actions that demonstrate faithfulness to the one who has been faithful to them.

The prophet then explores expressions of devotion and piety. These expressions are not vacuous, but ultimately, the prophet goes deep into the heart of all these expressions — burnt offerings, bowing down, thousands of rams, rivers of oil, the offering of firstborns — and points to the timeless three:

Do justice

Love Kindness

Walk humbly with your God.



Psalm 15

This psalm is an elegant accompaniment to the text from the prophet Micah. The psalmist wonders who may dwell in the tent of God.

Before exploring the answers that are revealed in the psalm to this opening question, it may be worthwhile considering a list of what could have been the answers:

Those who seem respectable

Those whose families also seem respectable

Those who do not cause disruptions

Those who do not protest

Those who win

Those whose needs are not expressed

Those whose lives seem 'together'

Those whose circumstances seem easy

Those whose lives imply that they are being rewarded because they have many comforts.

The psalmist offers no such list. The psalmist offers a list of actions, not a list of entitlements, or privileges. The psalmist, like Micah, uses the verb 'walk' to speak of those who walk blamelessly, who act in a just way, who speak truth from the heart, which in the Hebrew understanding is the place of truth. Those who do not do evil to their friends are the ones who may abide in the tent of the Lord — those who do not do evil, who do not separate themselves from their surrounding people, who have cordial relationships with their neighbours. Those who are among people of different values but who do not adjust their values accordingly, those who uphold promises and who do not exploit the innocent.

The readings from the Hebrew Bible speak of embodiment, they speak of devotion — and indeed salvation — being measured by demonstrable action. It is not those who say they are signed up who are signed up. It is those who show.



[1 Corinthians 1: 18-31](#)

The heart of the excerpt from Paul's letter to the Corinthians is where, in the midst of making arguments about foolishness, wisdom, scandal and stumbling blocks, he addresses the recipients of the letter directly:

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

One wonders whether the disputes emerging between the Corinthians were on the basis of whether they were holy enough, whether they were associated with the "right" apostle: Paul, Cephas, Apollos. One wonders whether these disputes were all attempts to give a sense of entitlement by association.

Paul then, writes, and names the anxiety that their disputes are trying to cover: they themselves are people whose birth, or wisdom, or power may be deemed lacking. But this, rather than being merely tolerable, or some kind of exception to inclusion is the very place of radical inclusion. It is precisely because they do not "measure up" in these terms of noble birth, wisdom and power that they are to consider themselves the place where God's community is to be embodied.

It may have been that there was some kind of inferiority complex occurring among the faithful at Corinth. They have become convinced by the voices of those whose nobility, wisdom and power they will never emulate, and so they are seeking to raise their statuses by association with whomever they think will elevate their social standing.

Be humble, Paul seems to be saying. Be of the earth. God came to the earth, in the diminishment of power and the demonstration of greatness by being one of the lowly. Be like this, Paul is saying. It seems foolish. It is not. It is wise.

[Matthew 5: 1-12](#)

What does the kingdom look like? What does it mean to live in a kingdom? How does that shape our understanding of conflict? Jesus is offering a new way of being in the world, another way of engaging with the human systems that put power and our security in wealth, individualism, and moral codes that are not of God. The even greater challenge in the beatitudes for us today is to not live in subjugation of these worldly ways. St Augustine refers to the Beatitudes as the,



“perfect standard for the Christian life.” When we live in faithfulness to the life as expressed in the beatitudes, we say ‘yes’ to the invitation to participation in the kingdom of God. The beatitudes don't ignore the possibility of conflict or suffering, for that is what is made known in the opposite nature of Jesus' words. You most likely will be persecuted, people may speak false words against you, and they will insult you, but the challenge is in remembering who you are in God and the call of your life as a result. It is an active response that requires a shift, a passionate dance with the world that is often moving against us. In the dance with the sensitivity of human existence, tension and conflict are possible and a natural result of two worlds colliding. We dance against what the world is telling us is appropriate and right into the world of the kingdom. We raise our voices, because we know the good news of the kingdom is not a story of injustice, inequality, or ignorance.

Sermon Ideas

The Community of Cross of Nails is an international network of partner churches and organisations who have been inspired by the Coventry Cathedral story and are doing peace and reconciliation work within their own context. Christ Church Cathedral in St. Louis, MO, USA is a thriving community committed to racial equity. They have been partners with the ‘Black Lives Matter Movement’ in St. Louis after the shooting and subsequent death of teenager Michael Brown by a Ferguson police officer. Their work for justice and reconciliation is exemplary of the picture that Jesus paints in our scripture text. Christ Church has become a place of hope, education, and partnership with minority voices. They have stood amongst the voiceless who were finding their voice in protests and nonviolent direct action and said, “Use me.” They thirst for righteousness for their friends of colour and seek to be radical peacemakers with a heart for justice. However, this story does not belong to Christ Church Cathedral in St. Louis alone but is a story of many communities seeking to be a living example of the kingdom that Jesus is preaching on the mountain. Does this include your community? If not, how might the beatitudes be speaking to the work you're called to do? Do not try to make the opposites of the beatitudes more comfortable, but use them as a means of challenge and action.

It may be of interest to your congregations to explore some contemporary British and Irish communities who are seeking to witness to the beatitudes today. The communities and



organisations that have contributed to the Spirituality of Conflict resource are working together in friendship and witness in the hope that beatitude can be found, even in the conflicts of contemporary life.

The Corrymeela Community, The Iona Community, The Mission and Discipleship council of the Church of Scotland, the Coventry Reconciliation project, the Irish School of Ecumenics and Place for Hope may all be places of interest for your consideration of narratives of witness to the beatitudes.

However you may prefer to witness to events in your own congregation, in your own community, in your location or groups who are making a difference to the difficulties in your parish area. Wherever there is strife, there is usually a group who are proclaiming justice, beatitude, blessing and life. They are the echoes of the voice of Jesus standing on the hillside speaking words of joy to communities under oppression. He is pointing to a deeper story that will sustain them. And today's sermon may be a way to share this.

Time with Children

It would be interesting to hear from children who they admire. Are there people who speak out against bullying, or who speak out against the exclusion of people based on ability, identity or appearance? Who do children admire? Perhaps the children could think of writing their own beatitudes:

“Happy are those who don't run as fast as others, for they will enjoy the view”

“Happy are those who aren't the most popular in the class, for they will treasure their friends”



Prayers

Approach to God

Jesus of Nazareth,
 We did not come towards you
 You came first to us
 And lived among us
 Speaking, Including, Welcoming, Protesting,
 Teaching, Challenging, Sharing, Dying, Rising.
 You are so much more than your words
 You are Word made Flesh, Embodied
 Enacted, Enlivening among us.
 Make us more like you.
 Make our words live
 thought the actions of our lives
 We ask this because you, Word of Life
 are also the Bread of Life.
 Amen.

Thanksgiving and intercession

Thanks be to God, who calls us all to action.

We pray for those who argue for justice.

May their words find shape and life!

We give thanks for those who turn words into action.

Thanks be to God, who calls us all to action.

We pray for those whose words save lives.

May their words find shape and life!

We give thanks for those who listen.

Thanks be to God, who calls us all to action.

We pray for those who can change the lives of those who are most under threat

May their words find shape and life!



We pray for those who are standing up against injustice.

Thanks be to God, who calls us all to action.

Confession

Merciful teacher on the mountain,

You've offered us a challenge that is converse to the world we exist in.

You've boldly declared what it means to not be transformed by this world but to be renewed by the Spirit.

We confess that we have failed to live up to the call of—peacemaking, meekness, mercy, justice—and filled our lives with the ways of the world—selfishness, greed, degradation of your creation, injustice.

Open our hearts, O God, to understand your will.

May your passion on the mountain for a new world order illumine our work for the kin-dom that you proclaim.

We pray in the name of the One who first loved us and calls us to love,

Amen.



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

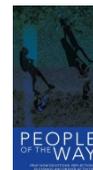
Resourcing Mission



[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.

