

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – Year A

Sunday 1 February 2026

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Douglas Galbraith, retired minister and lecturer at the University of St Andrews, for his thoughts on the fourth Sunday after Epiphany.

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 is plenty in the readings for today to engage a congregation! – Micah’s blistering exposure of the sharp practices lurking behind acceptable social behaviour; the psalmist sizing up candidates to share tent-space with God; Paul’s pulling of the rug from under the respected societal structures of the time; and the gospel passage which was for so many people their first love in the Bible – the Beatitudes, often learned by heart.

Lectionaries do not set out to find readings that focus neatly on a theme for the day, but in this case, there is an insistent message forced out of today’s readings – a call which tackles one of the most prevalent popular misunderstandings of the Christian relationship with God, so firmly bedded in prayer and practice that it is almost impossible to dislodge. Each passage in some way is struggling to convince us that – we are not good Christians because we have somehow achieved it – but because God has called us and transformed us.

Candlemas

Some may wish to acknowledge the festival in the Christian Calendar which this year falls the next day, Monday 2nd February. In some denominations, the readings for this festival may replace those set for the Fourth Sunday. The Revised Common Lectionary offers a set of readings applicable across all three years: these are the same as the ones Common Order provides for Year A (p.641). Here is not just the very human story of a family rite of passage, the presentation of a male child in the temple forty days following the birth, but a signal in the gospel of the true nature of their child. For worshippers in Scotland, there is another attraction in this festival – that it was appropriated in earlier times as a cultural feature (along with Pentecost, Lammas and Martinmas) as regulating the legal and social life of the people, a time of reckonings, a time of new beginnings. Being embedded in this way, this festival may perhaps remind the contemporary church to multiply ways of engaging with the society in which we today live out our faith. Simeon’s hailing of the child as ‘a light to lighten the Gentiles’, ‘a light that will bring revelation to the Gentiles’, is a reminder, too, that we are still in the season of Epiphany (‘a time for revealing’). Some traditions make telling use of candles at this festival (following the early practice of a procession of lighted candles), a reminder of the importance of symbol in worship. Some may wish to incorporate this family story in an all-age address, even if the service follows the Fourth Sunday.

[Micah 6:1-8](#)

Like the first Isaiah, Micah’s voice was heard in Judah at the end of the eighth century BC. But where Isaiah was ‘speaking truth to power’ in a sophisticated capital city, Micah was a villager who showed the countryman’s scepticism about the elites of society. On either side

of our passage he offers an excoriating analysis of the cruelty that could lurk beneath respectability and the holding of office, condemning the oppression of the weak by the strong, the removal of peasants from their land, the eviction of helpless smallholders, the exploitation of children. In our passage, to sharpen and shock, he borrows a court scenario, calling God and the people to argue their respective cases before the immovable foundations of the earth, culminating in the ringing demand, 'What does the Lord require?' Micah reads the current political situation as part of God's response to the dire situation he outlines, seeing the threatening Assyrians as the hand of Yahweh bringing retribution. In vv.6-7 he dismisses the human propensity to manipulate their environment to suit them, employing clever strategies or religious observances. This is not a situation where deal-making will be effective. His answer to his own question ends with simplicity: 'walk humbly with your God'.

Psalm 15

Psalm 15 (to be sung or read responsively)

This psalm is one of several which are thought to have functioned as an 'entrance liturgy', supposedly a question asked by a pilgrim arriving at the gate to the Temple. On the surface, it looks as if blameless behaviour (subsequently elaborated) is the ticket that gets you in, but David sees the psalm as showing that 'the unshakable security which is there for the worshipper to receive is the privilege of being in God's presence and experiencing his steadfast love' from which all else flows. The series of characteristics that follow, rather than offering the credentials of the pilgrim, create a profile of the person of God. The transformed people of God will inevitably result in moral conduct that is in harmony with God's own character.

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

So far in this letter, St Paul is trying to arrest the attention of his readers who have been tempted into 'more exciting' versions of the faith than that which Paul proclaims. This included their embrace of other gurus (v.12), which has led to division. Somehow, Paul has to clear the slate of the chatter of mistaken interpretations and the clamours of fake theories before he can begin. Paul chooses to do so with shock tactics, right at the beginning of his letter, hot on the heels of his signature thanksgiving for the gifts of his correspondents – as rich in speech and knowledge and spiritual insight. He hits them with what sounds like a dismissal of their new faith (of which the Corinthians were so proud) as nothing more than weakness and foolishness. You can't be serious! But Paul's ringing claim

is, that the place we begin to know Christ is beyond our cultural certainties (the Jews look for signs) and the truths we trumpet (the Greeks desire wisdom). God's weakness is stronger than human strength. This sweeping away of all that people hold sacred leaves nothing in its wake, except for Christ crucified. Allow God in Christ to transform you, who is 'the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption' (v.30).

[Matthew 5:1-12](#)

The passage known as the Beatitudes ('blessed are') sounds like a list of people who have particular, but different, needs or qualities. But notice that in the final verses (11, 12), it is revealed that it is not 'those' who this is about but, rather, 'you' who are being addressed, and this 'you' continues (salt, light). Commentators suggest that this passage is not so much about individual life-experiences but the life that believers are to live in relation to one another and to the world. Once again (if this interpretation is accepted) we find expressed the understanding that we do not bring ourselves to God through our merit, but that God transforms us through the community of the body of Christ of which we are a part.

Sermon ideas

Any of today's passages offer rich pickings for the preacher, but what follows is an outline relating to the overall theme outlined in the Introduction. This was that – we are not good Christians because we have somehow achieved it – but because God has called us and transformed us. The commentary on the Corinthians passage suggested that Paul, at the very start of his letter, sets out to dismantle and correct his readers' and hearers' understanding as to how they relate to God.

The aim of the sermon could be to assist listeners to review their relationship with God and consider ways in which we may remain open to God's guiding. It could be in five parts:

1. As human beings we are wired to connect in particular ways with others. We invent, organise, create, show love, care for others, intervene where we feel there is injustice, bring new life into the world, fight against those we see as enemies, have ambitions for ourselves and those close to us, protect those who are vulnerable, argue, study, sing and pray.

We rightly expect there to be outcomes from this, and that we should learn and grow from these interactions. It is not surprising that these urges and these practices are followed when we seek to know God, or to understand what is beyond our experience.

2. This section could show how the different passages challenge the above – if by these mean we hope to have achieved a right relationship with God. Or one could focus on one of the readings – for example, the dramatic way St Paul dismisses the things we have learned to swear by, seeing them as certainties that can act as blinkers, and offers us the foolishness of the cross and a God whose weakness seems as nothing compared to what human beings universally recognise as strength.

3. However, listeners may need to be helped to reflect on the ways they themselves express their relationship with God, which would usually be through one or other of what are sometimes lumped together as ‘spiritual disciplines’. In Richard Foster’s book “Celebration of Discipline: the path to spiritual growth” he identifies these disciplines in three groups: a) the inward disciplines – meditation, prayer, fasting, study; b) the outward disciplines – simplicity, solitude, submission, service; c) the corporate disciplines – confession, worship, guidance, celebration. One of these might be elaborated upon just to establish the shared features of these disciplines – for example, corporate prayer in worship, or the ‘daily office’ with others or on one’s own, or using one of the many publications which give helpful readings and materials to help people with their individual daily devotions.

4. Does this mean that all traditional disciplines are pointless or ineffective? Have we been just wasting our time in studying, prayer, debating, serving? At this point, unpack Foster’s main contention (a key paragraph from the book is offered at the end of this section) where he notes that all the farmer can do is provide the right conditions for the growing of grain, putting the seed in the ground and leaving natural forces to take over and produce the grain. He suggests that the spiritual disciplines are ‘sowing to the spirit’. ‘They are God’s way of getting us into the ground; they put us where God can work within us and transform us.’

5. The sermon then encourages people to persevere in the practices that they find the most helpful, but not to congratulate themselves for their diligence but rather as ‘emptying themselves’ and as bringing them to a place where they are now ready to hear from God. As they enable us to know ourselves better, to accept who we are, the more open we are made to the initiative of God. But we need also to pause, to meditate, to ask: what am I learning, how have I been changed – indeed, have I allowed myself to be changed? To help this ‘listening for God’, we may have to be willing to make more time for silence, for contemplation.

Extract from Celebrating Discipline

The apostle Paul says, “he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will reap eternal life” (Gal. 6:8). Paul’s analogy is instructive. A farmer is helpless to grow grain; all he can do is provide the right conditions for the growing of grain. He puts the seed in the ground where the natural forces of the earth take over and up comes the grain. This is the way with the Spiritual Disciplines—they are a way of sowing to the Spirit. The Disciplines are God’s way of getting us into the ground; they put us where he can work within us and transform us. By themselves the Spiritual Disciplines can do nothing; they can only get us to the place where something can be done. They are God’s means of grace. The inner righteousness we seek is not something that is poured on our heads. God has ordained the Disciplines of the spiritual life as the means by which we are placed where he can bless us.

In this regard it would be proper to speak of “the path of disciplined grace.” It is “grace” because it is free; it is “disciplined” because there is something for us to do. In “The Cost of Discipleship” Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes it clear that grace is free, but it is not cheap. Once we clearly understand that God’s grace is unearned and unearnable, and if we expect to grow, we must take up a consciously chosen course of action involving both individual and group life. That is the purpose of the Spiritual Disciplines.

Not for the sermon but for the preacher

P T Forsyth was a Scot, a theologian, and a Congregationalist (1848-1921) and one of the most popular writers of his time. This advice to preachers is not just of general application but resonates with the theme we have been pursuing.

Do not tell people how they ought to feel toward Christ. It is just what they cannot do. Preach a Christ that will make them feel as they ought. That is objective preaching. The tendency and fashion of the present moment is all in the direction of objectivity. People welcome sermons of a more or less psychological kind, which go into the analysis of the soul or of society. They will listen gladly to sermons on character-building, for instance; and in the result they will get to think of nothing else but their own character. They will be the builders of their own character; which is a fatal thing. Learn to commit your soul and the building of it to One who can keep it and build as you never can.

from *The Work of Christ* 1938 p.4

Prayers

Note: these are not a sequence of prayers to be used together but enable choices to be made depending on the theme(s) and approach chosen for the service

A prayer of approach to God at the beginning of worship during Epiphany

God of light and love,
we come into this place of light,
bright from the witness of our forebears
guarding its flame in times of danger or conflict,
blazoning forth at times of mission and proclamation.

We come to this place of light,
glowing from the love of its worshippers of today
as they live out their faith in family and society.

We come into this place of light,
sour minds and souls stirred as we enter;
this place of light –
the home for Christ the Light of the World,
the Light that the darkness has never overcome.

Help us to open the shutters of our minds
that the light of Christ may shine into every corner of our souls.
We pray in His name. Amen.

A general prayer of Confession

Merciful God,
before we can know your renewing grace,
we seek Your forgiveness.
We are sorry for the times someone stretched out a hand
and we pretended not to notice;
for the times someone wasn't beautiful to us
and we looked away;
for the times truth was on our tongues

and we swallowed it instead of speaking it;
for the times love was in our hearts
and we were too embarrassed to express it;
for the times we were prey to fears
and we didn't trust You with them;
for the times a stranger asked us for something
and we pretended not to realise what was needed;
for the times we haven't loved enough
and for the times we have loved with only part of ourselves;
have mercy upon us, O Lord.

An opening prayer related to the overall theme suggested in the Introduction

God, who lives in mystery,
how many times have we looked for You
and not found You?
How often have we felt alone
and lamented Your distance from us?
Yet, Lord, You have always been there,
and you are here now.
Help us to recognise you when You show yourself
but we are too blind to notice.
Give us the confidence to believe
that at turning points, beginnings and endings,
You watch over us, even if just out of sight.
For you are God, and at no-one's beck and call.
We do not have to find You, for You have found us,
and as we gather to worship, You are here in our midst.
Glory be to You, O Lord.

Prayer of Confession based on 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

God, how is it that after centuries
of study, of debate, of scholarship,
we are still none the wiser;
those creeds, these confessions,
each one more correct than the one before;

the right psalms for the right day
and the most fitting chants and antiphons;
sitting under the best preachers,
seeking the experiences of mystics.

Forgive us when we try to find our own way to God,
to make God in our own image,
and tame the passionate Christ,
reducing Him to become a pleasant companion –
and not someone who does not mince words
and makes demands on our lives.

Help us to quiet our minds
to hear You call us,
to feel You transform us,
to know Your fierce love,
and to seek Your way.

A collect for Candlemas

God, who is with us in all our periods of growth,
whose beloved Son was brought to the temple
and presented like any human child;
grant that as we seek you in worship
we may know the peace that came to Simeon,
and find, like Anna, our tongues loosened in praise;
so that as we leave this place
we may light the way of others
and show where true salvation may be found;
through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Another worship option

Following an Orthodox practice, perhaps at the point where the Gospel would be read or another suitable time in the service, the leader reads each Beatitude in turn and the congregation responds. The response is the same after each Beatitude (the following or another similar to it). The Revised Standard Version is used here. Thus:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven:

Lord, have mercy upon us and grant us this blessing.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted:

Lord, have mercy upon us and grant us this blessing. (etc.)

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you
and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account:

Lord, have mercy upon us and grant us this blessing.

The leader concludes (v.12)

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven,

for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Amen.

Musical suggestions

Principal Sources Church Hymnary 4 (CH4) and God Welcomes All (GWA)

Micah 6:8

‘to do justice, and to love kindness’

CH4 362 – “Heaven shall not wait”

CH4 685 – “For everyone born a place at the table”

CH4 709 – “The right hand of God”

GWA 30 – “Act justly”

GWA 138 – “Hear the call of the kingdom”

GWA 29 – “In ages past”, vv.1,11,18

GWA 225 – “It all comes down to this “

also – found in many hymn books – e.g. 100 Hymns for Today (UK), Together in Song (Aus)

What does the Lord require, Albert Bayly, tune Sharpthorne (Erik Routley)

Psalm 15

CH4 8 – “Lord, who may enter your house”, chant with antiphon no metrical option given.

Alternatively, it may be spoken in dialogue – with a leader or between two halves of the congregation – itself a form of music.

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

'we proclaim Christ crucified' –

CH4 397 – “In the cross of Christ I glory”

CH4 438 – “The head that once ... The cross he bore”

CH4 405 – “We sing the praise of him who died” ... for this we count the world but loss
'God's foolishness ... wiser than human wisdom' –

CH4 385 – “Here hangs a man discarded” ... clown of sorrows ... every hope absurd

CH4 253 – “Inspired by love and anger” ... a saviour without safety ... fishermen and fools

CH4 465 – “Be thou my Vision” ... be thou my Wisdom

CH4 177 – “O God of blessings” ... chooses weak and small ... mighty fall

CH4 328 – “Wise men, they came to look for wisdom”

CH4 551 – “In heavenly love abiding” ... his wisdom ever waketh ... walk with him

GWA 117 – “How can we worship Caesar's cross”

Matthew 5:1-12

CH4 341 – “Blest are they” (all Beatitudes)

CH4 352 – “O for a thousand tongues” (mourn, poor)

CH4 763 – “God bless to us our bread” (hunger and thirst) could be a repeated response in a
prayer

CH4 659 – “ Put peace into each other's hands” suitable for Communion

CH4 710 – “I have a dream” (peace)

CH4 513 – “Courage, brother” (persecution)

GWA 32 – “You poor in spirit”

GWA 182 – “Blessed are the ones” a re-envisaged version

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 and words-only versions are now available; 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.

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](#)

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