

starters for Sunday

Fifth Sunday in Lent

13 March 2016

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev George S Cowie, Minister of Aberdeen South Holburn, for his thoughts on the fifth Sunday in Lent.

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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](#)

[Isaiah 43: 16-21](#)

The opening verse of the book of Isaiah identifies its author as being 'Isaiah son of Amoz' and kingly reigns which are mentioned imply that the author was active in the 8th Century BCE. However, many 20th Century scholars agreed that the book of Isaiah actually contains three different bodies of writing. This passage belongs in the second section (chapters 40–55), commonly termed 'Deutero-Isaiah' and originated in the 6th Century BCE.

During this period, the Babylonian Empire was at its height. Under the leadership of King Nebuchadnezzar (604-562), there had been many military victories, including the conquest and destruction of Jerusalem (587). Significant numbers of God's people had been captured and taken into exile. It is in this context that we can understand the oracle of hope which is contained in Isaiah 43.

This passage contains the promise that God will bring about the return of his exiled people. It tells of the God who 'makes a way' and who overcomes seemingly insurmountable obstacles. In verses 16 and 17 the author alluded to the previous exile in Egypt, calling to mind the God who 'made a way' for his people to pass through the Red Sea. However, the writer wasn't wanting God's people to reminisce fondly about the past (verse 18), but instead to trust in the new thing that God would do in the future.

The oracle recognised that a dry desert can be just as impenetrable as the waters of the sea. It promised that God would again 'make a way', this time enabling his exiled people to pass safely through the wilderness as they left Babylon behind. Paradoxically, the God who banished the waters long ago would now provide life-giving water in the desert for his people to drink. A place of death would be transformed into a place of life, making a safe way for the exiles to return home.



[Psalm 126](#)

This is one a group of fifteen Psalms which have been described as ‘songs of ascents’. Such Psalms were possibly sung by pilgrims as they ascended the road to Jerusalem to attend certain festivals, or they may have been sung by the priests as they ascended the fifteen steps to minister at Jerusalem’s Temple. As such these Psalms were used as part of a liturgical ‘approach to God’ and have a mood of anticipation, thanksgiving and hope.

The first three verses of this Psalm tell of the people’s joy when the fortunes of Zion had been restored. The writer perhaps remembered a time of defeat and exile and recognised God’s actions in overcoming the situation. Yet, like Isaiah, it was the future which mattered most to the Psalmist, rather than the past. In verses 4 to 6 he offered a prayer of hope, trusting that God’s people would not merely survive, but would also thrive. Looking ahead they could trust in God’s continuing work: the seeds that they planted in faith would result in a harvest of joy.

[Philippians 3: 4b-14](#)

The letter to the Philippians was written by the Apostle Paul during a time of imprisonment, possibly not long before his execution. Paul had received news about the Christian community at Philippi from their messenger Epaphroditus, whose visit to Paul had been prolonged due to a severe illness. The letter contains Paul’s guidance to the Philippians at a time when they were divided by a dispute about whether or not gentile believers should be circumcised.

Paul opposed circumcision, describing it as ‘mutilation of the flesh’. For Paul a relationship with God could only be established through Christ and the Spirit of God and it wasn’t dependent on the flesh, or on any worldly endeavours. Paul acknowledged that he himself would have much to gain by siding with those who were insisting on circumcision, thanks to his own impeccable Jewish heritage. However, Paul now regarded that heritage as being a pointless distraction, which gave him no advantage in the eyes of God.

In many ways Paul echoed the themes of Isaiah and Psalm 126, by emphasising the importance of the future rather than of the past. What mattered most to Paul was the new relationship with God, established in Christ. He encouraged the believers at Philippi to look forward with faith, rather than looking back to the traditions of the past.



[John 12: 1-8](#)

Luke's Gospel records Jesus making a visit to the home of Martha and Mary (10: 38-42) and certain aspects of that account are similar to this passage from John. However, John's account is more closely aligned to the versions contained in Mark (14: 3-9) and in Matthew (26: 6-13). John places the visit just before Palm Sunday and in some ways the event sets the scene for the Passion.

This passage from John's gospel is like a box that is filled with precious jewels. Different themes can be explored, by extracting individual gems. The following represent just a few suggestions for reflection:

- The passage describes the extravagance of Mary in showing her love for Jesus. The gesture of wiping his feet with her hair demonstrated humility and self-giving which exceeded even the monetary value of the costly perfume. This account illustrates the ways in which the boundless generosity of God's love can be reflected in our own human love.
- The passages in John and Luke both record Mary being criticised by a detractor, but then being affirmed by Jesus. In John's account the detractor was Judas, who complained that the perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor. In Judas we are reminded that self-centred motives are sometimes disguised behind veils of false piety.
- In verse 7 we discover that this event was a symbolic precursor to the Passion. In the Jewish tradition, the bodies of the dead were anointed prior to burial as a sign of honour and respect. Mary's actions therefore had significance for the future.



Sermon Ideas

Look forward in faith.

Each of the Bible passages emphasises the significance of the future and the need to look forward rather than looking back. For all that we can learn from the stories of God accompanying his people in the past, we are primarily being called to look to the future with faith. As we do so, let us:

- Believe that we will be upheld and sustained by God. (Isaiah 43 and Psalm 126)
- Be ready and willing to embrace what is new. (Philippians 3: 4b-14)
- Trust that our own love has a place in God's plans. (John 12: 1-8)

A suggested illustration:

In the British Museum there is a famous map of the North American coastline, which was drawn in 1525. The map reflects its maker's suspicion of the 'unknown', with inscriptions such as 'Here be dragons' and 'Here be fiery scorpions' being written over areas that had yet to be explored. More than two centuries later the map came into the possession of the British explorer, Rear-Admiral Sir John Franklin. Unperturbed by the superstitions of the mapmaker, Franklyn scrubbed away the original inscriptions and wrote instead 'Here is God'.

The generosity of love.

The two Old Testament passages both describe the generosity of God's love, sustaining people along the way and promising blessings in the future. The gospel reading portrays the generosity of human love in the selfless giving of Mary.

As a theme, explore the potential of love, which is extravagantly given rather than tightly restrained. In particular, such love can enable others to thrive, not merely to survive. (Reference could be made to the Church of Scotland's 'The Chance to Thrive' project, which aims to improve the wellbeing of eight communities in the poorest areas of Scotland.)



Time with Children

Mary of Bethany

Beforehand, obtain a variety of samples of different perfume and aftershave. These can either be borrowed from members of the congregation, or else obtained as 'testers' from a friendly shop.

Conduct a perfume test: ask the children to give their opinions of each scent. In particular, see if they can distinguish:

- a) which ones are intended for men and which ones for women?
- b) which would be the most expensive to buy?

Then tell the story of Jesus' encounter with Mary at Bethany. Emphasise the precious nature of the perfume and that Mary's love for Jesus made her generous with what she had.

Prayers

Call to Prayer

A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God'.

(Psalm 40:3 – NRSV)

Collect

Most merciful God,
by the death and resurrection
of your Son Jesus Christ
you created humanity anew.
Grant that by faith in him
who suffered on the cross,
we may triumph in the power of his victory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.



Prayers of Praise and Confession

Almighty God, Father of us all:

long ago you called Abraham and Moses,
inviting them to travel with you on faith's great adventure.

We rejoice this day,
that you are accompanying us on our own journey,
showing the way in times of uncertainty
and encouraging us when the road is hard.

Your light shines on the road before us.

Gentle God, we praise and thank you for the guidance you give.

We turn to you now in this time of worship,
seeking your direction in our lives.

Speak to us in the words of scripture
and in the voice of conscience,
that we may know your will for our lives.

Your light shines on the road behind us.

Forgiving God,
when we look back we can see where we have been
and we can recognise the mistakes that we have made.

So often we have tried to travel without you,
choosing to walk on paths of our own making.

We are glad that you have never abandoned us on our journey,
no matter how far we have strayed from the road.

Your light shines within us.

Heavenly Father,
as we walk together into the future,
may we learn to love you more deeply
and learn also to love our fellow travellers.



May our journey teach us how to care,
and to how to reveal the compassion of Christ.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thanksgiving

Most generous God:
with thankful hearts we rejoice in your goodness towards us
and in the many blessings that we receive each day.
In love you provide for your people's needs
and you accompany us along the way.

We give you our thanks
for the physical gifts that sustain us
and for the added blessings which make life more joyful and full.
We rejoice that you freely pour out the perfume of your love,
even though we are not worthy to receive it.

We are thankful for those who have been bountiful towards us,
giving of their time, their skills and their love.
As a token of our gladness, may we also bless others,
being generous with all that you have bestowed.

Intercession

We pray for those whose lives seem devoid of blessing
and who lack the basic things that we might take for granted.
We commend to your care any who are affected by disaster, or war
who struggle to survive, far less to thrive.
Help us to hear Christ's whisper of love,
calling us to respond to our neighbours' needs.
May we be open-hearted and generous people,
that others may enjoy life in all its fullness.



We pray for people of power and influence,
whose decisions affect the lives and lifestyles of others.
Fill them with love for the people they serve
and with generosity of spirit for those in greatest need.
We pray for Her Majesty the Queen and the Royal Family,
for those who serve in parliament in Holyrood and in Westminster,
for those who serve in local government.
Grant them the transforming love,
which enables all people to thrive.

We pray for any who feel that their living has been curtailed,
by illness, by disability or by other forces beyond their control.
Grant encouragement to any whose strength is failing
and inspire those who offer compassion and care.
We pray for those who look after family members, or friends, at home
and for those who are employed in the caring services.
May they be encouraged and supported in the work that they do
as they pour out the perfume of gentleness.

Most generous God:
in a moment of quietness, we now bring you our personal prayers,
commending to your kindness and care
any who are in our thoughts today.
As we call to mind the names and the faces of those for whom we care,
we remember also to pray for ourselves.

Silence

Loving Father:
we rejoice that you have listened to these prayers,
the words that have been spoken
and also the silent meditation of our hearts.



We offer them all in the name of your Son,
 Jesus Christ our Lord,
 whom with you and the Holy Spirit
 is to be glorified as one God, forever.
 Amen.



In addition to the above prayers, prepared by our contributor, other prayers may be found in *Living Stones* which is the theme for this year's Pray Now. It was also the theme for Heart and Soul 2015. *Living Stones* is available from [St Andrew Press](#)

Musical Suggestions

| | |
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| CH4 86 | 'When Zion's fortunes God restored' (Psalm 126) |
| CH4 159 | 'Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided' |
| CH4 167 | 'Guide me, O thou great Jehovah' |
| CH4 237 | 'Look forward in faith' |
| CH4 262 | 'For the world and all its people' |
| CH4 354 | 'O Love, how deep, how broad, how high!' |
| CH4 497 | 'Almighty Father of all things that be' |
| CH4 502 | 'Take my life, Lord, let it be' |
| CH4 503 | 'I will offer up my life in spirit and truth' (John 12) |
| CH4 562 | 'Through the love of God, our Saviour' |
| CH4 694 | 'Brother, sister, let me serve you' |



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. [Living Stones](#) 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 Rev George S Cowie 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.

