

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany – 7 February 2021

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank The Very Revd Dr Derek Browning, Morningside Parish Church, Edinburgh, for his thoughts on the fifth Sunday after Epiphany.

“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.”

National Worship Team

As the restrictions on our ability to meet in groups continue, worship leaders continue to deliver their services both online and offline.

We can help to facilitate participation from the whole congregation by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technology in the service in ways that suit both physical gatherings and video-conference style settings, such as:

- Opening and closing moments of worship that help people mark out a time set apart with God
- Introducing various parts of the worship service to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each one (framing)
- Enabling conversations or prayers in breakout groups
- Holding spaces that allow people to go deeper in worship
- Using the chat function and microphone settings to allow people to actively participate in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord’s Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of ‘holy chaos’
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship

Useful links:

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found [here](#)

Useful tips for creating and leading worship online can be found [here](#)

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](#)

Introduction.....	3
Isaiah 40:21-31.....	3
Psalm 147:1-11,20c	4
1 Corinthians 9:16-23	5
Mark 1:29-39	6
Prayers	7
Alternative Material.....	9
Musical suggestions	16

Introduction

Epiphany, season of lights and revelation and disclosure. A church that focuses on Epiphany and its meaning might be dazzled by the presence and reality of God, as much as it is warmed by God's presence and immanence around Christmas. This closeness of God, and to God, is meant to evoke, maybe even provoke praise! Whether loud and long, or quiet and heartfelt, praise is what Christians ought to be about. Our chief end, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism declares, is to glorify and enjoy God forever.

February may be the shortest month in the year, but it often feels like the longest and the darkest. Epiphany challenges us to lift up our eyes, even when surrounded by darkness. The Scottish theologian D S Cairns in his book, *The Reasonableness of the Christian Faith*, urges us to have the courage to look steadily into the dark. It is in the dark, light will become more evident when it shines. It is out of chaos, creation will come. Or looking at it another way in an Arabic phrase we might see, '*February with wintry weather and cold sad blasts of wind, and the smell of summer in it.*' It is in this bleak time, this dark time, God's February and the season of Epiphany will continue to shine, to point the direction, to give us light, and to remember to praise our Maker and Creator and Saviour.

[Isaiah 40:21-31](#)

In the classic 1981 David Puttnam film, *Chariots of Fire*, it's hard not to remember the character of Eric Liddell standing in a pulpit reading these words about grace and beauty and mounting up with wings like eagles. This whole poetic passage is rich with the splendour, glory and power of God. God will remain faithful, and God will continue to provide hope to weary, cloud-enfolded people.

Repeated twice, so it's important, is the phrase, "Have you not known? Have you not heard?" A reminder, as one commentator puts it, that we are 'theological amnesiacs'. Our memory is fitful and selective. Our theological forgetfulness is what causes us to fall apart, and be downcast, when the time of trouble and crisis comes. We panic, we despair, we think that God has wandered off and left us. Whereas Isaiah tells us, in the poetry of Creation and the reality of an ever-present, if often-elusive God, that God remains foundational. This ever-present God, at one and the same time transcendent and immanent. Beneath us, above us, around us and within us, God. We are called to remember this. Where memory fails, the faith of the individual, and the community, is threatened. Is this what we see in the Church today? We are, once again, in the middle of an existential crisis. We have forgotten Who God is, and who we are as Christians. We often struggle to

remember what to believe or why we believe it. Does this explain why so many feel lost and alone?

God is revealed, again, so that we might have hope, and remember Who God is, and who we are to God. When we are weak, God remains strong. This non-fainting, un-wearying God ministers to us and gives life to us. God revealed renews us. Re-news us; re-creates us.

Faint, weary, powerless and exhausted, like the exiles to whom Isaiah is writing, we are to wait for God. To hope and to expect, with confident faith in a God Who gives life where there is none. In God's February, Spring will come.

[Psalm 147:1-11,20c](#)

The themes of praise, transcendence and immanence continue in this psalm. God heals and comforts, yet also names the stars. God is immensely powerful, yet is also infinitely understanding. Once again the weary and the downtrodden are lifted up, and across a wintry world the increasing presence of light is shed. At this time of year we see this in nature. With more light comes greater revelation. Look around, and see God's activity in the world.

The psalm encourages us to welcome the horizons in life and in faith. We are challenged to see beyond our boundaries and limitations, our smallness and near-sightedness, and glimpse for a moment a universe from God's perspective. Is that perspective one of connectedness and continuity? We see fragments of time; God sees the vastness of eternity. Yet within this big picture God remains attentive to the details, which includes us. In the midst of the extraordinary breadth of God's abundance and creation, we see that we are not forgotten, and that our needs are met in the ordinariness of food and drink. God is not only to be experienced in the mountaintop moments, but also in the close relationships and the intimate moments.

One of the major misses during the last months of restriction in our churches has been the absence of singing. At the time of writing the Covid pandemic has foisted separation and isolation upon individuals, communities and churches. There are other times in life, through illness, or bereavement, through work or study, through frailty or through depression, when we are separated from those around us. What singing does, whether it be lament or praise, is draw us together. When we often stumble to find the right words, or the right feelings to express, the words of psalms and hymns and the music that accompanies them fill in those praise-gaps, or lament-gaps, in our faith lives.

This psalm reminds us that it is good to sing praises to God, to be thankful, and to make melody. As we sing, God will lift us up. Too often we live at the surface of things, doing just about enough to get by, and living at the shallow end of things. What praising God does is to lift us up and beyond our shortcomings and the shortcomings of the world. Not to cut our link with the world, but to give us a better perspective on what needs fixing, and how, with God's help, we might do this because we find that we are not alone in this enterprise of life. We are connected, and this gives us hope to go on. The Power behind the cosmos has revealed a face. Praise the Lord, indeed!

[1 Corinthians 9:16-23](#)

Paul is not an easy character, often difficult to understand, yet also sometimes too easy to understand. He annoys and disturbs and, as one commentator notes, nudges the comfortable accommodations we have with the surrounding culture. He is the person who, at the end of a meeting when there is a call for Any Other Competent Business, in a few words undermines all that has been previously agreed. Paul won't let it go, and will consistently and persistently hold others, and himself, to account. God must continually be revealed to a world frequently given to obscuring the Divine.

The matter of Christian identity is at the centre of this reading. Paul, in this very autobiographical piece, talks about the compulsion of the gospel. Because he believes, he *has* to share, he *has* to speak out, and in any way that he can. The message of Christ's love and saving power is so crucial, it burns a hole in Paul's mind and heart, and he is compelled to do something about it. Whatever it takes, Paul will become all things to all people, that he might be enabled through the gospel message to save some people. The gospel is not only to be heard and enjoyed, it is to be lived and preached. If we, like Paul, really believe in what Jesus said and did, how do we share this, and how do we live this? Our relationship to Jesus gives us entry into relationship with every kind of person, whoever they are, wherever they came from. In the easy, non-judgemental way that Jesus got alongside people and walked alongside people, sharing and loving them, we too are called to be the same way. Jesus, and Paul, were right there in the midst of their communities. Is this true of you, and your Church? If the former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, was right when he said that, "The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members", then who benefits from our Church today, what it says, what it does, what it is? How is our Church apostolic today, taking a faith lived out loud to the places we work, the places we volunteer, as well as the places we worship, and in a way that is appropriate, sensitive, and attractive. A Church that identifies with God, and with all of God's children, will build bridges, and bring about transformation. That would be a sign of hope and witness to God, and a humble offer of life to the world.

Mark 1:29-39

Four little vignettes from the early ministry of Jesus. The first a healing miracle involving Simon Peter's mother-in-law. The second a summary of Jesus' healing ministry, set at an evening hour. The third, Jesus drawing strength from prayer, and the fourth, Jesus going out to preach and teach and heal in Galilee. All of them point to revelation, the theme of Epiphany. Here Jesus reveals Himself and His ministry – what He has come to do and to be in the world. The healer, the One connected in prayer to the wholeness of God, and the teacher. There is also a flick-flack from a private event, to a public event, to another private moment, to the final public ministry. God is revealed in the private and public spheres of life. God is not hidden, God is made manifest in actions, and in words; in touch, in silence and in speech.

The healing of Peter's mother-in-law is one of those tiny, but powerfully beautiful moments in Mark's gospel. It happened in a house, reflecting the earliest Christian communities which were house churches where the life of the Christian community was made possible. In the other readings we were encouraged to look at the great vistas and the cosmic to look for the revelation of God's presence. Here we find that same God, in Christ, kneeling at the feet of those in need, reaching out to touch and help and heal, and give a prominent place to women. Here we find the response to Jesus' revelation, one of service.

We find Jesus next with the crowds, and particularly with the marginalised who were sick in body or in mind. They brought them in the darkness of the evening, at sundown. In the darkness of the pain, or suffering, the light of healing shines. Jesus is revealed, in healing. In the darkness of the morning of the new day, Jesus goes to a lonely place to pray. Revelation and ministry need to be rooted in connection to God. In prayer the Father ministers to the Son, through the praying presence of the Spirit. Prayer reveals the connectedness of the Trinity, and when we pray in quietness, in private or public worship, very often it is in that stilling of our hearts and minds and bodies that God will be revealed to us, in inspiration, and in comforting presence.

Fortified by prayer, Jesus returns to the busy schedule of His ministry. He is supremely confident in His vocation. His calling is to bring the presence of God into every situation where people are oppressed by sickness and death, hunger and disability, despair and hopelessness. As one commentator notes, Jesus begins His ministry at home and immediately (Mark's favourite adverb!) extends it beyond the home. And more than that, as the Biblical Scholar Elizabeth Johnson says, a contemporary Church that thinks it has remained faithful by keeping its theological skirts clean without getting its hands dirty in the mess of a broken and suffering world neither hears nor follows the Jesus of Mark's Gospel.

It is in the speaking and the doing that God is revealed – not only in the heavens above, but on the earth below. This is our work as Christians today, speaking and living out God’s word. For some people, we are the only Jesus they will ever meet.

Prayers

Scriptural sentence *(from Common Order)*

“The Lord will give strength to His people; the Lord will bless His people with peace.”

Psalm 29:11

Collect *(From Common Order)*

Merciful Lord,
Grant to Your faithful people pardon and peace,
That we may be cleansed from all our sins
And serve You with a quiet mind;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord,
Who is alive and reigns
With You and the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Prayer of approach and confession

Lord God,
High in the heavens, yet kneeling at our feet,
Let us sing praises loudly, let us pray quietly,
Let us listen attentively, let us act presently.
Let our words praise You,
Let our actions praise You,
Living, loving, eternal God.
As we draw near to You, may we find that You
Already are on Your way to meet us,
And more than halfway.
Bridging sin-gulfs, breaking sin-walls,
Your sparkling, irresistible love wins through.
Let us praise Your Holy Name!

Searching God,
Into every dark place,
Into every hard heart,

Into every narrow mind,
Into every shut mouth,
Into every closed eye,
Come with healing light to open up
And reveal to us not only Who You are,
But what Your love might be,
In us, through us, or even despite us.
Forgive us for choosing bleakness instead of blessedness.
Into our wintry worlds let the smell of summer come;
Let this be, in our lives, God's February,
Redolent of new life, new light, new beginning, new hope.

May God, in infinite mercy, shine healing light
Upon all your living, that the life you live
May be a life lived to God's glory, each day, each night.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Prayer of thanksgiving and intercession

God of the gift of light,
In Your un-wearying love for us
Which brings us once more to see You face-to-face,
Help us live lives of gratitude and grace.
Thankful for what we receive, and what we are enabled to give;
Gracious in our thoughts, and words and actions
As we bring blessing to the lives around us.
We pray today for our homes, and the people we hold dear,
May they know peace and joy.
We pray today for our Queen, our country, and all whose work
Shapes and guides our daily living
In politics, education, economics and business,
May those whose work falls in these spheres know wisdom and courage.
We pray today for our world, and its changing needs,
For health and healing;
For nourishment and generosity;
For shelter and compassion;
For laughter and love.
In the life and the work of Your Church,
And every community of faith where love is put in practice,

May we not trip over our theological skirts,
But get our hands dirty in the doing of good,
So that where we can choose to be anything
We choose to be kind.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Blessing

May the Lord bless you and keep you,
May the Lord make His face to shine upon you,
And be gracious unto you.
May the Lord lift up His countenance upon you,
And give you peace.

And the blessing of God Almighty,
The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
Be among you and remain with you,
Now and forever more.
Amen

Alternative Material

This material has been supplied by kind permission of **Spill the Beans** and allows you to explore the readings or theme of the service in creative ways that include everyone gathering for worship.

New material from Spill the Beans is provided in the latest issues available from their [website](#).

Intro: It is our hope that you will find a range of different ideas that will encourage you to explore the depth within each week's story. Like a huge bowl of multi-coloured jelly beans of assorted flavours, or a table laid out with a rich feast, no one should be expected to consume everything!

Likewise, if you use nothing directly in this material but find your own creativity sparked and catalysed, then these resources have done their job.

The intention is not to complete “the task” brilliantly, but rather to provide opportunities to begin conversations, build relationships, retell the story of the day, and talk about what it might have felt like then and what it means for us today.

Setting the scene

You could set the scene by having a display of mirrors / mirror balls on a table or on the wall in your entrance / gathering area or on a table at the front of your worship space. One white candle could be placed on top of the mirrors to link with the Advent / Christmas visual and to remind us that Christ’s light shines today and that is the light we are revealing through our lives and in our world.

Design your display to suit your worship space, using either a large free-standing mirror or wall mounted mirror or mirror tiles (which can be bought from a DIY shop) and CDs stuck to a board which can be placed at the front of worship space, perhaps resting on a table covered in shiny gold or silver fabric. You could hang a large framed mirror to the wall. If you used a lamp during Advent, you might be able to position it close to your mirror display so that the light is reflected within the mirror. A small adjustable desk lamp would also be useful here.

Whether you are using the mega candles or lamps, you could also think about moving them around your worship space week by week, at the back, by the font, amongst the people, at the front, into the centre, bringing them from further out into the heart of things as the light is gifted to the people.

Bible Notes

Authority, Healing and Exorcism – [Mark 1:29-39](#)

Mark’s day in the life of Jesus continues. Fresh from the stramash in the Synagogue, Jesus and company head to Simon and Andrew’s house. Simon’s mother-in-law’s presence there may mean she was a widow. She is ill. Is there a link between her fever and the Synagogue episode?

Marked, Steve Ross’s graphic novelisation of the gospel of Mark (St Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 2009) certainly imagines one. Jesus (unnamed) lives in a world of occupying soldiers, razor wire and checkpoints. A boy, witnessing the violence of the invading forces is then possessed, “SLAM”, by an unclean spirit. “I swear he’s not contagious. He’s just ...”, “Please... someone ... Help me” as people walk by, blindfolded. In a place of public worship, Jesus cuts the preachers microphone cable, tears blindfolds from people in the congregation and is ‘outed’ as the holy one of God by the voice of our old friends, the

unclean spirits... Ross depicts this visually, his Jesus reaching into the throat of the man possessed tears the spirit from him.

The spirit then runs for it... until cornered in a house, where an unnamed woman is lying fevered in bed. Ross links the possessing spirits and the fever. The woman, released, then cooks him breakfast... "You kids today! You think you can tear around, saving the world, without a proper breakfast. Sit!" At this moment in *Marked*, Jesus expels the spirit, dumping it in a bin. Witnesses, catching on, are soon selling tickets for the healer-come-exorcist and crowds gather. Mark tells us that this takes place at sundown, the Sabbath over. Time to go to work!

In his controversial *The Historical Jesus: the Life of a Mediterranean Peasant* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1991), John Dominic Crossan argued that Jesus was actively itinerant, moving on before any one particular site became the brokering place for healing and exorcism. For Crossan, Jesus' view of mission was radically itinerant whereas Peter would have centred mission from the base in Capernaum. Elsewhere, Crossan links demon possession to the possession of God's people by Rome (Crossan, p.313ff). The more orthodox N.T. Wright argues that Jesus' exorcisms signal his 'head on war with the satan' (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, SPCK, London, 1996, p.195ff). For Wright, Jesus' real battle was with the accuser, the satan. To have 'faith' was to recognise that the God of Israel was alive and active in Jesus—in his teaching, healing and exorcising. Hence the comments about his authority and the interest in his actions.

Mark tells us that Jesus retreated and prayed. Is this a clue as to the source of his authority? According to Malina and Rohrbaugh (*Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Fortress Press, 1992), people of New Testament times and places conceived a hierarchy: God Most High > lesser gods, archangels > angels, spirits, demons > humans > creatures lower than human. Each could influence those below them. As an agent of God, Jesus overcame unclean spirits with the clean or holy Spirit of God. He restored people to their proper place in their social world.

Matthew, Mark and Luke are united in testifying to Jesus and his authority over unclean spirits or demons. What do we make of this today? Have we a straight either/or choice between reductionist and supernaturalist explanations? Can the narrative allow us to touch the light, even if it feels other-worldly?

Retelling the story for young people

This short retelling (which can be expanded) uses a chorus that everyone can join in with actions fitting the rhythm:

Work, work; (hit one fist on palm of other hand)

Care, care; (open up each hand as if giving something)

Help, help; (clasp hands)

Pray (praying hands).

Here is a day in the life of Jesus.

Work, work;

Care, care;

Help, help;

Pray.

After the synagogue, Jesus went to Simon's house with the four disciples he had just invited to follow him. Simon's mother-in-law was ill and in bed and they told Jesus who came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. The fever left her and she began to make them a meal.

Work, work; ...

As the sun set that day people brought all who were sick and ill to be cured by Jesus. Soon the whole town was gathered round the door to Simon's house. And Jesus cured all sorts of people.

Work, work; ...

There were people who couldn't walk, many who had been ill for years, some just who wanted to see who he was and hear what he said. It was always a busy day for Jesus.

Work, work; ...

In the morning, after a long busy night, Jesus got up before everyone else when it was very still outside and found a place that was empty and there he sat down and prayed.

Work, work; ...

Then the disciples came for him. They had been searching everywhere. Jesus said, let us go and speak in the other towns. He was quite sure the next day was going to be the same as the last.

Work, work; ...

Activities/Reflection

Gathering

Invite people to ask themselves what clutter they want to let go of in their lives. How would they do that?

Ask them to take out keys or credit cards or diary or other item that symbolically binds them into the speed of life and lay it down on the pew in front of them or on a seat. What does it feel like to let go?

Kind Hands

You will need: paper plates, poster paint, basins of soapy water, towels, baby wipes.

Provide children with a paper plate. Have some paper plates on a table with a thin layer of poster paint on each (different colours). Get children to choose a colour and place hands in the paint and then onto their own clean paper plate to make hand prints.

Quickly get those hands clean in a basin of water or using baby wipes!

Talk about how we use our hands to help others and that sometimes when we are sick we are not able to do that and how we have to let others help us. Talk about the story of Simon Peter's mother in law.

When hand prints are dry put: 'Jesus hands were kind hands' on the plate and attach a loop of ribbon or wool to the back so that it can be hung up and displayed.

Looking at the Evidence

Read the passage from Mark's gospel. Note that there is a lot of healing going on, both of people that Jesus would have known (Simon's mother-in-law) and total strangers that came to Jesus. Jesus does not discriminate or say he will only help some and not others in this passage.

What reactions come from the story?

Reflection

Listen to Elton John's song *Healing Hands*.

The bridge and chorus of this song are quite apt both in talking about our ability to bring healing and our need for healing, but also in the commitment we need to make to bring light into dark situations.

*But giving into the nighttime
Ain't no cure for the pain
You gotta wade into the water
You gotta learn to live again
And reach out for her healing hands
Reach out for her healing hands
There's a light,
where the darkness ends
Touch me now and let me see again
Rock me now
in your gentle healing hands*

Discussion

- Could the words in Elton John's song also apply to Jesus? In what ways?
- How do you think people might have felt who were healed by Jesus?
- If we see someone who is hurt, what is our first reaction? Do we run to help or hope someone else will help?
- We all have the power to heal in our hands, if we learn how to use them. How can we do this?

First Aid

Take some time to go over some basics of first aid, the things that anyone can do. It would be great to have a trained First Aider to lead this part, but if that is not possible, you can find websites that give you simple details of basic first aid practices that anyone can do.

Encourage the young people to think about being properly trained as First Aiders. This can be done from the age of 12 up.

Prayers

Call to worship

Beforehand create a clutter of religious symbols on the communion table, waiting as people arrive. Remove whatever is on the communion table except the candle. Light it at the end.

Let us rid ourselves of all the clutter,
removing the symbols
that stand between each of us
and the holy.

Let us take away those things
we prefer to speak to,
like some holy middle person,
rather than directly to Godself.

And may we find faith enough
to leave ourselves
raw,
exposed,
fragile,
pared,
ready before God,
as we really are,
and find God
before us,
as God really is.

Come to the quiet centre
where God is waiting.

Light the candle

Sending

May you find grace
in the moments you need it most.

May renewal bind itself around you
and lead you on.

May you hear the word speak your name
into every silence.

And may God fill you
with the possibilities
you bring to the world.

Alternative Material ©2011 issue 2 Spill the Beans Resource Team

Musical suggestions

Our online music resource is on the Church of Scotland website [here](#): 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 liturgical seasons and themes on the [Inspire Me](#) tab.

- CH4 63 – “All people that on earth do dwell”
- CH4 64 – “Sing all creation, sing to God in gladness”
- CH4 103 – “Fill your hearts with joy and gladness” (*based on Psalm 147*)
- CH4 120 – “God, we praise You. God we bless You”
- CH4 122 – “Let all the world in every corner sing”
- CH4 127 – “O worship the King, all glorious above”
- CH4 128 – “How shall I sing that majesty”
- CH4 132 – “Immortal, invisible, God only wise”
- CH4 153 – “Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father”
- CH4 190 – “Art thou afraid his power shall fail”

- CH4 348 – “Praise the One Who breaks the darkness”
- CH4 352 – “O for a thousand tongues to sing”
- CH4 363 – “We have a gospel to proclaim”
- CH4 718 – “We cannot measure how you heal”
- CH4 721 – “We lay our broken world”

You are free to download, project, print and circulate multiple copies of any of this material for use in worship services, bible studies, parish magazines, etc., but reproduction for commercial purposes is not permitted.

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.