

## Seventh Sunday of Easter– Year A

### Seventh Sunday of Easter – 21 May 2023

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Rev Sally Foster-Fulton, Moderator Designate of the General Assembly, for her thoughts on the seventh Sunday of Easter.

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.

At the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 2022, the Faith Nurture Forum were asked to: *Call the Church to pray, and instruct the Forum to produce prayer resources to encourage and equip people to pray for the future well-being, peace and revival of the Church.*

We have asked people from across the Church to write prayers to help us respond to this call. Their prayers reflect the range of different voices across the Church of Scotland, and offer a variety of prayer styles that can be used in public worship, church gatherings and meetings, or in your own personal prayer rhythm.

[These prayers can be found](#) along with the rest of the May Weekly Worship materials.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the [Sanctuary First website](#).

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 no perfect way to prepare worship, but for me, there are a few things that help centre me. I sometimes get out of my usual space – sit in a café where there’s hubbub or go for a walk, take my laptop with me, and just find a place. Sitting with the texts, reading them several times (out loud) and having a conversation with them, joins up my ideas. Even if (especially if) the text is a familiar story, intentionally put down the baggage of tried and tested interpretations and let it speak to you like it was brand new. What surprised you? What question do you want to ask the story? Is there something you do not understand, or a turn of phrase or a detail to explore more deeply? Write those down and mull over them. Do some research and see what you uncover – it can be gold! The prayer I say before I preach is ‘throw open every window and every door by which Your word might reach us. Open our hearts, and our minds and our spirits to whatever You have to say to us today.’ It is a good way to approach preparation and writing – how do the texts and what is happening in the world interact? How do situations and events, challenges and current issues affect how you hear these texts? What new word can they bring to your listeners? One talk, one time of worship cannot say everything, so what is the word for today?

This week’s texts fall on the Sunday following Ascension Day, the story of when Jesus is taken up into heaven. It is a new chapter for Jesus’ disciples – how will they embody Him and keep His work, mission, life, lessons, love alive? How do we, also Jesus’ disciples, do that now?

### [Acts 1:6-14](#)

This is the story of the Ascension, when Jesus is taken into heaven and leaves the disciples to carry on His work. The imagery is powerful, and it is really tempting to use it all; however, to go deeper into the imagery requires some decision-making – what is for this time? Rather than skate on the surface, this text offers a chance to take a deeper dive. When I read the story this time around, a few thoughts lifted themselves higher than others and a few particular questions came to mind:

- Following the account of Jesus’ ascension into heaven, the disciples are standing there, gazing into heaven. It is reminiscent of the transfiguration, when they were rooted to the spot, but Jesus’ plans were always to go back down the mountain and get to work. This time, the disciples will take on that mantle without Him there in the same way.

- The comment by the messengers in white is rich (v11): “This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven.” People will see Jesus and know Jesus when you love, teach, feed, forgive, sacrifice your wants for others’ needs. Jesus will be there in the ways He always was.
- “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth” (v8b). Note the progression in this verse. You will be my witnesses in *Jerusalem*, where you failed. This is where Judas betrayed Him and they did not see it coming; where Peter denied Him and Thomas doubted; where they fell asleep and left Jesus alone, fearful and fretful in the Garden of Gethsemane; this is where they scattered when Jesus was arrested; this is where He died and they could not stop it. You will be my witnesses in *Judea* – where they know you well. It is where they grew up, made their mistakes, lived their normal lives before Jesus called them to follow. You will be my witnesses in *Samaria* – where they do not trust you. Jews and Samaritans were enemies – with hurt and mistrust on both sides, with rife injustice. And they were called to be witnesses there. Only then, when they have been witnesses where they’ve failed, where they’re known best, where they’re trusted least, can they be witnesses to the ends of the earth.
- Constantly praying (v14) – we do not take the time to re-centre ourselves. Although the disciples were called to action, they were also called to wait together for the Spirit. This is a good opportunity to explore how we discern, recollect and pray together.
- How long is a Sabbath day journey in the Bible? (v12b) A Jew was permitted to travel 2,000 cubits on the Sabbath (Exod. 16: 29 and Num. 35: 5), about 1.2 km. (¾ mile), and the Mount of Olives was within this distance from Jerusalem. ‘A Sabbath day’s journey’ was another way of saying a short walk. An interesting question to unpack could be, ‘what else is closer than you think?’

### [Psalm 68:1-10,32-35](#)

I love the Psalms for their realness, a beautiful mixture of poetry and pragmatism. I used this psalm as a basis for the call to worship, making the most of the imagery. When doing that, it is important to let the listeners in. It is also an opportunity to use the Psalms responsively, which adds a deeper level. When considering this text, a few ideas and questions raised themselves.

- This is what God looks like in real life – protecting and providing for and having a special relationship with the most vulnerable.
- It is potentially more helpful and challenging to take the person-centredness out of some of the text – rather than enemies being scattered and those who hate God fleeing, what does goodness and kindness cause to scatter, what flees in the face of love?
- Sing a song to the one who rides upon the clouds but comes close enough to be like a parent to orphans and a protector of widows. It is not an ethereal relationship, but a tangible and active one.

### [1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11](#)

When reading this text, it is important to understand the backdrop. Though the dating of this epistle cannot be exact, it would have been during a time when the early church was breaking away from traditional Judaism, and when their emerging practices were counter to the cult of the Roman Empire. Even if you do not date 1 Peter to the time of Domitian, when State-sanctioned persecutions took place, there would have been tension, and suspicion. They preached a message of liberation and equality across classes. Rather than maintain social boundaries, they shared all they had with each other. They proclaimed freedom to the imprisoned, good news to the poor and liberation to the oppressed. This was not going to go down well with the prevailing power structures. Arguably, the early churches were not persecuted for what they believed as much as for what they did. A question to ponder may be: are we, as a Church today, doing the same?

- One of my favourite books is *The Book Thief*, by Markus Zusak. In it, there is a definition for love, which resonates with this text:  
“A DEFINITION NOT FOUND IN THE DICTIONARY. Not leaving: an act of trust and love, often deciphered by children.”  
1 Peter reminds us that God does not leave when hard times come, that even in suffering, we are held in a love that is limitless. Struggles, hurt, fear and heartache are not permanent fixtures, but they are real, and they are painful. Be there for each other and where you can, ease the struggle. Sometimes all you can do is be there. Sometimes the best thing you can do is be there.
- One way to resist the temptation to retreat into your own safe space is to remember that you are part of a big, wide family – paradoxically, by empathising with, by standing with others who struggle, you strengthen each other and yourself.

## [John 17:1-11](#)

One thing that strikes me in this text is that Jesus is praying for the disciples with them there. It is after a long conversation and a meal together. They heard Him saying these things to God on their behalf. It offers a different dynamic and opens the door to exploring how the prayer would have felt, resonated, inspired, strengthened and challenged. Draw attention to this important difference and help the listener identify with the disciples who heard it. After all, it is being said for them too.

Jesus' final prayer is for unity – that we may be one, as God in Christ is one. That is the prayer the disciples heard said for them. How do we answer that prayer for Jesus? What can we do to bring that reality into being? Where are the places in the world and in our lives where we are blocking that vision? Use what is happening locally, nationally and globally to explore that question.

I also love the image of eternal life as 'knowing' God. And this is not a surface awareness of God, but relationship with – abiding in, surrounded by, completely informed and absorbed in that relationship. It offers a very different picture of eternal life. Finally, it is striking to note the number of times the word 'give' is used. God gives Jesus (and through Him, us) so many things: a name, words, work, life, others to love and claim, authority that is coupled with relationship.

## **Sermon ideas**

There are strands that weave throughout the texts this week and, for me, they spring most firmly from the story of the Ascension. Using that text as the primary story enables a cogent interweaving of the other texts. Here are two starting points to explore:

- A more intentional unpacking of the call to witness first in Jerusalem, then Judea, then Samaria and finally, to the ends of the earth. This lends itself to a sermon or short talk, but also to facilitating a smaller discussion group. Start by asking where you see parallels today. Where have you or the Church failed? Are there places or people or issues we need to be sensitive or accountable to? How do we authentically engage there? When you are intimately known, warts and all, what are the particular challenges and opportunities to being a force for good? Where are the places where mistrust or suspicion narrow our vision?

- A deeper dive into the powerful and provocative words from the messengers in white, when they challenge the disciples who “stand looking up towards heaven” (v11). This Jesus will return in the same way you saw Him go, they said. What might that mean? Jesus’ life embodied love, forgiveness, radical hospitality, peace-filled calls for justice and an unapologetic bias for the poorest and most vulnerable. So where will we find Jesus and where do we, as the body of Christ, need to be most active?

## Prayers

### **Call to worship** *(from Psalm 68)*

Using one of the texts as the basis of a prayer or call to worship embeds the theme and offers an echo that holds throughout the worship. This call to worship has a sung response, but can be used without it or with a different refrain. You can also use different voices to lead.

Sing to God,  
lift up a song to the one who rides upon the clouds,  
but comes close as a whisper  
to comfort the fearful and the fragile.

***Sung Response from CH4 761 ‘Gloria, gloria, gloria, in excelsis Deo.’***

Sing to God,  
love marches through the wilderness of our warring ways,  
scattering hatred and protecting peace.

***Sung Response***

Sing to God,  
lift up your hearts, your voices, your all-in-all.  
God gives the desolate a home,  
leads the prisoner to prosperity,  
pours rain over parched places.

***Sung Response***

### **Prayer of confession**

God of the get-going,  
when we stand idly by,  
forgive, challenge and change us.

When we stand looking the other way,

or overlook the needs of sisters and brothers  
because they are not right in front of us,  
forgive, challenge and change us.

When we use a microscope to pick someone apart  
because their ideas and behaviour make us uncomfortable,  
forgive, challenge and change us.

When we look immediately with suspicion,  
when we look askance and quickly close our minds  
because of what our eyes see,  
forgive, challenge and change us.

God of the stay and pray,  
Guide our feet and our hearts home to You.  
Sit with us, gathering us closer to You and to each other.  
Garner the ideas that flow  
and the questions that keep us searching  
and the love that lives deep within us  
and help us channel them well.

In all times, in every place,  
You are with us –  
forgiven, challenged, changed.  
Let it be.

### **Prayer of thanksgiving and intercession**

I usually combine the thanksgiving and intercessory prayers. To me, it feels right to ground what we are asking for by reminding ourselves of beauty. This prayer, especially, is of the moment, so I would encourage you to consider what is happening right now. I am writing these notes a couple of months ahead and am aware that some of the landscape will have shifted. What is in the news? Are there issues no longer in the news but that should be front and centre? Consider your local context and, if appropriate, incorporate local celebrations or issues within this prayer frame. Rather than write a prayer, here are a few prayer starters.

#### **Prayer 1:**

The hour has come to thank You for the love, the lessons, the life You shower on us.  
*(Thanksgiving)*



The hour has come to bring to You the needs of our world and the dreams hidden in our hearts.

*(Intercession)*

The hour has come to offer to You and to each other,  
all we have, all we are,  
all we dream we might become.

*(Call to committed action)*

### **Prayer 2:**

Beloved,  
we are surprised at the fiery ordeals that find us.  
The harsh words we hear, and sometimes say;  
the brick walls our ideas career into  
and the cracks through which our dreams disappear.

*(Acknowledgement of current challenges)*

Beloved,  
we are surprised at the ways You come and find us.  
In the people who love us,  
the strangers who bring kindness,  
the ideas and dreams that plant themselves  
in the smallest speck of fertile ground.

*(Thanksgiving)*

### **Benediction**

People of [...], why do you stand looking toward heaven?  
This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven,  
will come in the same way as you saw Him go –  
loving, teaching, feeding, forgiving.

So go and find Him.  
Go and be (like) Him.  
And may the God who called you into being,  
call you into the world to be a blessing there.

## Musical suggestions

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.

- CH4 444 – “Out of sight, the Lord has gone”
- CH4 456 – “Christ is the world’s true light”
- CH4 464 – “Though hope desert my heart”
- CH4 465 – “Be thou my Vision”
- CH4 479 – “View the present through the promise”
- CH4 502 – “Take my life, Lord, let it be”
- CH4 527 – “Lord, make us servants of your peace”
- CH4 528 – “Make me a channel of your peace”
- CH4 533 – “Will you come and follow me”
- CH4 543 – “Longing for light, we wait in darkness”
- CH4 685 – “For everyone born, a place at the table”

## 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'.
- While singing in our congregations is still 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

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 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](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

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.

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