

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – 29 July 2018

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Grant Barclay, Minister of Orchardhill Parish Church, Giffnock, for his thoughts on the tenth Sunday after Pentecost.

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.

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Introduction

One of the lectionary's features is that it requires us to consider passages we might otherwise prefer to ignore. The account of the relations among David, Bathsheba, Uriah and Joab is one of these. Yet who hasn't relished the opportunity to encourage children (of all ages) to imagine themselves as one of thousands on a hillside, hungry and then satisfied as the Christ feeds all? And who hasn't sung with a sense of joy that 'Jesus' love is very wonderful' – and joined in with the actions? All these wonderful, rich passages are available to us this Sunday.

The familiarity of these texts may though, inhibit our reading them in ways which offer greater insight. Deep down, they may all be about relationships: both the ones we readily recognise, and those which are just as real and significant but sit beyond our present thinking, or fly under our ethical or spiritual radar.

These notes are written from a viewpoint which sees relationship at the heart of the feeding of the crowd and encouraging the disciples who strained against rough seas; from a perspective which encourages Christians to relate to the endless (in every dimension) love of God found in Jesus Christ, and which sees in the treatment of Uriah and his wife the debasing of right relations even by the king.

Seen from here, these passages may encourage us to consider the choices we make as we relate to others. How do we use our power in relationship with others, what relationships do we seek to nourish and sustain, and how does our understanding of our relatedness to God in Christ enable and encourage our developing self-understanding of the grace in which we stand?

[2 Samuel 11: 1-15](#)

This complex account of social and personal mores, relationships at the highest levels of state and the responsibilities as well as the privileges of authority, demands careful reading.

It is unlikely the central issue is that the king is taking another woman for sex. He has two wives (Ahinoam and Abigail) and after leaving Hebron he takes further wives and concubines from whom children are born (2 Samuel 5). It is also unlikely the central issue is Bathsheba's ritual uncleanness, for evening brings that to an end. Neither is there any suggestion she is acting provocatively.

However, too superficial a reading might be equally unhelpful. Is this merely a case of a man with wandering eyes who happens upon something he fancies for a night, and has her simply because he can? If that were the whole story, the moral of the tale might be a simplistic 'Don't look where you shouldn't,' or, 'don't do something just because you can.' Both are easier said than done. It's difficult for a certain generation not to read this passage without thinking of Leonard Cohen's poem-song *Hallelujah* and remember that Bathsheba's 'beauty in the moonlight overthrew you.'

A key issue, which will surface in the discourse with Nathan beyond this passage but which is implicit in it, is the use of power to the advantage of the powerful and the disbenefit of those under authority.

Bathsheba is commanded to go to the king and they have sex, even though David knows at that time she is married to Uriah. The primary issue is the taking of another man's wife, in the culture of the time something akin to the theft of his property. The stakes are raised when Bathsheba intimates she is pregnant and it is clear beyond doubt that Uriah cannot be the father.

David then goes to some lengths to concoct a way of covering his tracks. He arranges for Uriah to return to Jerusalem and, over not one evening but two, encourages him to go to his wife. Uriah has won a reprieve from military service so why not take the chance of an unexpected return home to enjoy conjugal relations? It seems as though Uriah's loyalty to his colleagues and, ironically, the king he serves, will contribute to David's undoing.

And this loyalty stands in stark contrast to the deceit the king is practising. Uriah is a foreigner, something David knows from at least the first time he set eyes on Bathsheba. The Hittites were a race to the north of Israel, skilled in military technologies and communications but subject themselves to social fragmentation. The Hittite Empire, at its greatest extent, came as far south as the northern border of Israel. It's not hard to imagine Uriah or his predecessors moving south, using their expertise and joining the Israeli forces. There's no suggestion Uriah under-performs or can't be trusted. But, still, he's a Hittite. Does that mean he is expendable, or that his property needn't be respected as it would if he were a Hebrew?

Scratching beneath the surface of this narrative, even slightly, reveals a tangle of attraction and sex, deceit and control, ethnicity and theft.

Before we jump too quickly to condemn David, let's pause to think what we might do if we had been in David's privileged position. Maybe we wouldn't be captivated by someone's

beauty –but who can say what we might do if overthrown by such powerful attraction? And, if we knew we could call them over, and get them to do what we wanted, and get away with it because of our position and the power invested in it, would we not be tempted to use such authority in this way? This story of abusive relationships is centuries old but, transferred from military endeavour to the media, it sounds frighteningly contemporary. And then, caught in the prospect of scandal with a convenient way out, might we not have arranged to give every opportunity to the very man whose physical expression of passion could be exercised entirely appropriately –and get us off the hook?

The narrative takes an altogether more chilling tone when Uriah, not falling for David's inducement to make love to his wife, is sent back to the front. David writes an instruction to ensure Uriah's demise and, in an act of desperate betrayal, sends the soldier's death warrant back with him. It's Uriah, whose loyalty to the king meant he didn't sleep with his wife, who carries the very note that will see him isolated in battle and hewn down. The king, whom he so faithfully served at the cost of some self-denial, is the one who betrays him. It's the kind of behaviour that wouldn't be out of place in a modern-day political thriller.

Uriah's commitment to his colleagues, to his commander and to the ark symbolising God's presence, was so influential that he wasn't willing to compromise his loyalty, even when he was so strongly encouraged by the Commander-in-Chief. What's interesting is that the awareness of God's involvement in any of this only comes from Uriah, and then only indirectly.

Of course there is a consequence to this story and it will be helpful, perhaps, to point to Nathan, where David's wrongdoing is laid against him (2 Samuel 12).

If we confine ourselves, though, to this narrative we have more than sufficient themes to consider: the power of attraction, not something for which we should apologise but something which needs to be recognised and controlled; the possibilities which power provide which need to be exercised with principle; the pretence of friendship which is entirely self-serving; and the morally repugnant attempt to cover up one disobedient incident by committing another, far more grievous one.

Yet it is not the practices but the players which give us greatest pause for thought. David does all this presumably because he can, and because at various moments in the story when his back is to the wall, these actions appear to him to offer a way to advance his own interests or save his own skin. The focus of his abominable behaviour, though, is an immigrant worker: is this part of the complexity of the king's motivations?

And when the pressure is on us, when we worry that there are too few people who ‘look like us’ in our community, or when we hear too many foreign voices; when our schools are populated by children from other backgrounds, or we worry that our ‘traditional values’ are under threat, do we behave to some extent like David? Do we encourage *these* people to go back to enjoy their own lives in their own place, forgetting that their home is among us and properly so? Worse, do we think deep down that they aren’t really worth as much as we are? There are ethnic as much as sexual or military tensions in this tale we would do well not to overlook.

[Psalm 14](#)

The comment on the 2 Samuel 11 passage above glanced at the moral effect of a lack of an articulated awareness of the presence of God in human relationships. Here, the Psalmist makes the same point more directly. The ‘fool’ is not simply an agnostic, one who finds it hard to believe in or commit to, God. This fool takes his foundation for living in the absence of God. The result? Corruption, vile behaviour which is described in terms of eating others up as wild animals might devour their weaker prey, and not least among them the poor whose already fragile plans are frustrated at the hands of those who do not care for justice and who do not recognise a God of justice.

But their perspective does not determine reality. They may have decided to live in a God-free way, but God is not absent and God has not abandoned those who suffer. Indeed, God is their refuge. Is the Psalmist, at the close of this piece, hoping that the people of God – whom he recognises as the victims of evil – will know God’s rescue? Or is the Psalmist suggesting that redemption from the evil which the poor suffer may come about through the actions of Israel, in other words that Israel (the people of God) will be a force for justice and advocacy in the world, particularly for those who are poor and fragile?

The ordinary sense of the passage places Israel’s rescue centre-stage, but any understanding of the universal justice of God suggests that a more theologically nuanced approach recognises the role of, and not the benefit to, the people of God in establishing justice worldwide as their proper response to the calling of a God of justice in whom they believe.

As the Psalmist looks forward, with limited perspective, to the restoration of God’s people, so Christians whose vision for justice has been expanded to a global extent both yearn and work for the restoration of all peoples that they may experience peace with justice. This, surely, is a pressing issue not least in the land from which the Psalmist wrote and which he had in view. For it is presently a land of injustice where a justice-enabling role for all people

could be the singular contribution of Israel to the fragmented and oppressive present reality and which, in turn, may lead to wholeness, reconciliation and healing for many –including Israelis.

Ephesians 3: 14-21

This passage starts and ends with relationship, though it is usually regarded as a hymn of praise to the extent of the love of Christ. ‘Deep and wide’ Jesus’ love certainly is, and wonderful, too; but this love is expressed in terms of inclusive relationship. The Father in heaven is the One from whom every family on earth derives its name, its essential nature. This theological insight means that humankind is not simply interconnected through family relationships nor our inhabiting of the same fragile planet or by sharing gene sequences in common, but through a common heavenly Parent. To subvert the motto of the United States, ‘From the One, one people.’

This, of course, doesn’t stop the children squabbling, but when did familial relationship mean sisters and brothers always got on? The author of this tremendous passage isn’t arguing that properly perceiving our relation to one another through God’s common parentage will bring us together. What will achieve that is the indwelling in people by the Spirit of God. The divine-human relationship is not simply a matter of theory founded in creation but is a present reality empowered by the Spirit of the living God who, motivated by love towards those who are not simply God’s creatures but in fact children, relates personally and intimately to them. Knowing the extent of this love not simply as a fact taught in Sunday School but as a lived experience as we know ourselves to be suffused by grace, filled fully with the love of God our heavenly Parent. To know that is to know the depth, height and breadth of the love of Christ; but such knowledge is imparted spiritually rather than theoretically.

The result of such a depth of experience of God’s relating to us in love in Christ, is that we may find ourselves called to tasks we had not dreamed of facing. If our vision is expanded through the experience of such a relationship, why ought our ability to love like this not be similarly broadened and deepened? So it may be that, in such a divine-human relationship of love, it will be through experiencing something of the depth of our commitment, our breadth of vision, our vision put into action, that people (and we ourselves) may come to grasp how deep the love of Christ is. In other words, the sort of relationships we have with others may influence those others to experience God more fully and deeply (or not). There again, it does always start and end with relationships, doesn’t it?

[John 6: 1-21](#)

The interpretive lens used throughout these comments has been about relationships and power. These aspects feature in this well-known passage, too. Jesus is away from it all with His closest followers, the disciples, with whom He has a very strong relationship. Many, however, follow –and in asking Philip about possible catering plans (*‘Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?’*)– Jesus is not merely setting the scene for a miracle: He is establishing a relationship with the many and not the few. Is Jesus responsible for feeding these folk? Would that not be an inordinate use of scarce resources? Half a year’s wages is not inconsiderable. How could it possibly be done, in any event? Perhaps Jesus wants Philip, and us, to look beyond the economics or the mechanics of such a feeding. When we do that, and take off the blinkers of scarcity of resources or ‘prudent economic management’ (which may simply be a fancy way of saying that we keep what we have to ourselves) we see a Christ who engages, person to person, with the needs of humankind. He acts in a priestly sort of way, seeking God’s blessing on the meagre offering of loaves and fish and reminding the people of the relationship of providence and love which God establishes with humanity. Jesus’ provision is sufficient for all. Here is a Jesus who relates to a crowd not only in its enormity (as one might when preaching to a large number) but who does not disregard the needs of each. This is, in other words, a Jesus who relates; a Jesus who either uses His power to multiply the food that it might go round or who so inspires those present that they share what they have and relate to one another in a new way. The relationship provides the foundation for the demonstration of power.

It is the same a few hours later. The disciples make for home across the lake while Jesus separates Himself from them, most likely to pray and relate to the Father. A bit of a storm arises while they still have some way to go (the Sea of Galilee in its northern wider section is about eight miles across). The Jesus, who related to the crowds earlier by enabling their needs to be supplied, is the same Jesus who comes to supply the needs of those with whom He has a continuing, close relationship.

In their fear Jesus responds not by telling them what He can do but by assuring them who He is. It is Jesus’ identity, and therefore the relationship they have with Him, that matters most.

Perhaps this identification draws out from the disciples a corresponding desire to relate well, for they invite Jesus into the boat. We do not have to be too concerned for the mechanics of some possible travel in space or time to have to explain the apparently quick arrival on the western shore. What matters is that in the rough if not stormy waters, Jesus made Himself known to His friends as a friend. Jesus had done a similar thing on a broader

stage in making Himself known to the crowd as one who provides (and thereby prompting them to think of Him in terms of the Prophet, the Messiah, or their king). All of these terms do apply to Jesus; and Jesus relates personally to each of us. In the adventures of life, in our need and in our strength, when the waters are a little rough or in the midst of the storm, Jesus comes to us. And Jesus is willing, always, to be invited aboard.

Sermon ideas

A number of ideas have been suggested in the comments above, and a few of these threads are drawn together here.

The issue of ethnicity is a contemporary and problematic issue as it appears to have been in David's time.

The general current movement towards preferring national concerns to global community has, throughout the western world, appeared to strike at the heart of understanding humankind as somehow united. A serious reflection on relationship in the broad sense suggested by these passages offers a radical critique of such thinking.

There is, sadly, no shortage of illustrative material to elaborate the misuse of power, often (as with David) in sexual manipulation but also other forms of abuse. There is also no lack of material which shows what humans are capable of when they treat others as less than human: trafficking, unjust imprisonment and terrorism are but three.

Then there are themes emphasising the positive relationship God bears toward humankind in Christ. What does it mean for us to know in the depths of our hearts that the love of God is wonderfully inescapable? Does this prompt us to acts of generous self-giving, as we are affirmed of our security in Christ and understand the profound nature of Christ's call to us to serve, that others may be fed, and live?

The Psalmist offers us a stark choice and reminds us that our foundational thinking undergirds much of our present action. Do we live as though there is, in practice, no God? Or do we seek to discover, love and serve God daily and find that in the seeking we both find and discover ourselves to be found?

Time with children

All welcome!

There may be scope for re-imagining the feeding of the crowd not only by telling the story, but asking worshippers with whom they might share their food. An interesting route into this could be to invite worshippers to speak, with those sitting near them, about a time when they had unexpected guests or when they were unexpectedly invited to share food with people whom they didn't know. Children are sometimes more eager, or less inhibited, than adults to have friends round and so it might be interesting to hear their stories of being hospitable or going to visit their friends.

The imaginative time could continue by exploring the scripture narrative. What happened? How might people have felt? What might those in the crowd have done? What sort of people would have been fed? There would be families (sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers, and so on); people of different ages (children, parents, older people, and so on); and hair colour as well as much more diversity. Through the exploration and possible actual distribution of food (though without any unhelpful associations of 'magical' multiplication) the unreserved provision of the Jesus who fed everyone present could be stressed. This may lead to a short conversation on people we might overlook or miss out, deliberately or accidentally; and a renewed commitment to noticing others and practising generous hospitality.

Stretching, jumping, encircling

Children (and adults) are asked to see who can reach up highest, including their reach when they jump. A similar request may come about how far out they can reach if they stretch. These actions may enable Paul's description of God's love in Christ, which is beyond anyone to grasp or elude, might be described. But no single person could put their arms round an entire congregation. Depending on the number, seating arrangement and willingness of worshippers to move, it may be possible for the children (and some adults) present to form a circle round the whole worshipping community. This may be a sign to all of the call of God to the Church to embrace all and so to reflect Christ's love for all. This time might end by seeking suggestions for practical ways to do this through service, prayer, and acts of generous kindness.

Who's most important?

A selection of images of celebrities, political leaders and other well-known faces could be shown to the congregation in the form of a parade. It might be possible to have these faces printed almost full-size on A4 paper, cut holes for eyes and make simple masks which children and adults might enjoy wearing. Collectively, the congregation or children is asked

to work out who is most important, and why. Perhaps people could be ranked in groups on the chancel steps in ascending order of importance. It might be fun to have the Minister, or a suitably willing other member, also to have their face on a mask. On the reverse of the mask of what might be considered the most important person in the group is written the words, 'I am very important,' while on the reverse of each of the other masks is written 'I am as important as they are.' Once the ranking has been completed, explain there is an answer which will be revealed. The wearer of the mask with the first phrase is invited to take their mask off and read out the phrase; in no particular order the others all do the same. Conclude by explaining, or by having the final mask include the additional comment, 'because we are all made in Gods image.' If time permits it may be possible to pursue some consequences of valuing people equally as made in God's image.

Prayers

Approach

You relate to us as person to person,
God who is our Parent, Protector and Friend.
Not for You an eleven digit number which starts '07',
nor a string of characters with an 'at' sign somewhere in the middle.
In our world of National Insurance codes, tax references, payroll IDs and benefit numbers,
You come to us and You call us by our name.
But there again, You are the God to whom names have always mattered:
You invited our forebear Adam to name the creatures of the earth.
And today You call us to recognise that those whom we meet are each named.
You encourage us to establish genuine relationships,
to discover individual richness beneath too-quickly clutched stereotypes,
and unearth something of the spiritual depths
of those with whom we share homes and cafeterias and classrooms.
Let us open our hearts to one another,
even as we open them to you,
God our Companion;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Confession

We confess, Living God,
that we too often live as though You had taken leave of Your world and left us in charge.
Such belief makes us feel not lonely, but empowered.
We do what we want, constantly push the boundaries towards our self-interest
and don't think sufficiently about the needs of others.

We discover our planet polluted,
the weak exploited and justice which seeks profit more than truth.
We cannot rescue ourselves, nor our planet,
and our best hopes and plans are frustrated in a heap of good intentions never fulfilled.

Yet You come to us in Christ
not only to assure us of pardon and security,
but to encourage us to live in contentment, simplicity and generosity.
We turn from our grasping to accept what You give to us freely and without cost:
forgive us our falling-short.
By Your grace, may we turn to one another,
paying particular attention to those from whom we turn away most readily,
and know Your presence among us as we strive to live as pleases You;
for the sake of the One who became poor, though rich
that we, though poor, might share His riches – Christ our Lord. Amen.

Thanksgiving and Dedication

God of abundant blessing and generosity to match,
Your vision is not restricted to the available resources
and Your purposes extend far beyond our limited vision.
While we worry about retaining what we have,
those who have very little yield their all –
and thousands are enriched.

Teach us the economics of kingdom living:
a shirt-sharing,
extra-mile-walking,
have-my-lunch
way of life.

For then many shall be the richer.
And we shall be among them. Amen.

Intercession

I want it.

I can have it.

I will take it.

God whom we see in Jesus the Giver,
Your ways are constantly greater than ours.
The deep-rooted motivations which drive us
too often orbit around gaining, possessing, controlling.

And so we have crafted a world of sale and purchase,
price often detached from value,
ownership without responsibility.

Forgive us that, in this world of stuff,
we have made even human beings into commodities:
traded and trafficked, used and discarded,
fooled into imprisonment, and worse
as they are passed around men willing to pay the price.

Your ways, shown in Christ,
are to desire the good of others,
to develop a discipline of donation
recognising it is more blessed to give than to receive,
and to freely give that which we have freely received.

We pray for people whose names and situations
shall only ever be known to us in general terms:
as stories on the news, people grouped for convenience
but whose individual lives, hopes and needs
are each held in Your everlasting care.
We pray, too, for those groups whom we classify
with the definite article: the lonely, the weary, the sick, the grieving.
We remember that 'they' are just like us; and each one is loved by You.

Draw close in loving grace to
those who feel little sense of being loved, supported or accompanied in life;
people today who are at their wits' end, tired, almost defeated;
individuals who struggle with ill-health of all types
and those who bear the pain of having loved by enduring grief.

Hear our quiet prayers for those whom we know,
and name now in Your presence here;
and may Your presence with them strengthen and uphold them.

The waves which rock our small boat of self-sufficiency
are largely of our own making:
our anxiety, our lack of trust,
or unwillingness to give giving a chance.

As You come to us in the midst of our struggle to share,
accept our invitation and come aboard our small, bobbing craft
to lead us closer to Your ways, and to Your peace.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen

Musical suggestions

- CH4 206 – “Break not the circle of enabling love” – This hymn by Fred Kaan almost stands as a counter-argument to the possible manner of David’s disregard for Uriah’s rights, and life. It is a hymn of challenge and great hope that people may see ‘eye to eye’.
- CH4 724 – “Christ’s is the world in which we move” – In some ways this hymn goes beyond the call to recognise the image of God in each person, but also to be moved by the compassion of the Christ, who is with all people everywhere, that we might co-create among ourselves and with Christ a touching-place for all.
- CH4 262 – “For the world and all its people” – This hymn offers a not dissimilar sentiment, challenging us in worship to recognise the world-changing nature of faith which is stronger than human frailty and violence and which will prevail as God’s justice triumphs for the benefit of all.
- CH4 682 – “Go in grace and make disciples” – I like to think that, as a result of seeing the challenge Jesus posed to the disciples on the hillside, those who observed were

encouraged to place their faith in Him. The task of enabling others to respond in faith to Christ's invitation is not ours to undertake alone, but is carried out in partnership with the Pentecostal Spirit.

- “God's love is the best love that the world has ever, ever known”* – This bright and cheery children's chorus makes a similar point to the “Jesus' love is very wonderful”
- CH4 195 –“Here to the house of God we come” – This hymn, too, echoes the feeding of the crowd but in a contemporary setting and challenges us, as the disciples were challenged, to provide for the needs they saw clearly around them.
- “Jesus' love is very wonderful”* – The direct reference to the imagery of the epistle makes this potentially relevant.
- CH4 510 –“Jesus calls us here to meet him” – The personal, relational engagement we are privileged to have with Christ is emphasised in this hymn which is also useful to introduce the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.
- CH4 553 –“Just as I am, without one plea” – As Jesus invites us to relate to Him in a personal way that our needs may be met, so this hymn articulates something of the response we may make.
- CH4 289 –“Lift up your heads, eternal gates” – This hymn usefully combines the multi-dimensional love of God with a critique of human attempts to aspire to control through power and violence.
- CH4 543 –“Longing for light, we wait in darkness” – This hymn by Bernadette Farrell calls us to offer ourselves to meet some of the needs of those with whom we share this planet.
- CH4 532 –“Lord, you have come to the seashore” – This simple hymn has a deeper edge than might at first seem; as we invite Jesus to take us and use what meagre things we have to offer, and to broaden hugely our view that we might ‘seek other shores’.
- CH4 165 –“Praise to the Lord for the joys of the earth” – The breadth of the scope of this hymn makes it profound and appropriate for worship in the ‘real world’.

- CH4 608 –“Spirit of truth and grace” – This hymn, which may well serve as an approach to God, also contains the sense of going to serve with compassion.
- CH4 18 –“The earth belongs to God alone” – This may be a suitable Psalm with which to open worship for those whose tradition encourages this approach.
- SoGP 101 –“The God of heaven is present on earth” – This hymn reminds us of the almost sacramental nature of compassion expressed towards others, and of the pervasive presence of God in our world today.
- SoGP 104 –“There’s a spirit in the air – As the disciples were invited to ‘step up to the plate’ and respond to the need they saw around them even though the resources they believed they had were inadequate, so they discovered that with Christ they were much better equipped than they believed. We, too, are called to recognise the spiritual riches which are ours through Christ and accordingly to live boldly for Him.
- CH4 188 –“Thou hidden Love of God, whose height” – This hymn has a touch of the epistle about it, but also the gospel suggestion that we should strive to serve Christ in the strength the indwelling Spirit of Jesus provides. The language is, perhaps, slightly old-fashioned but not excessively so.
- CH4 512 –“To God be the glory, great things he has done!” – This well-known and uplifting hymn may offer a suitable conclusion to worship.
- CH4 291 –“When out of poverty is born”– Kathryn Galloway’s hymn reminds us that the miracle on the hillside is an attitude of life for Christians everywhere, that the lowly are highly regarded and that sharing with those in need become an integral approach of our Christian living.

*Particularly suitable for children