

## Fifth Sunday after Epiphany – Year B

**Sunday 4 February 2024**

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev Dr Martin Ritchie, Pastor at the Presbyterian Church at Tenafly, USA, and former Church of Scotland minister, for his thoughts on the fifth Sunday after Epiphany.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the Sanctuary First website:  
<https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/daily-worship>

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

This week we're well into the arc of the season of Epiphany. When we stand back and consider the texts in the Revised Common Lectionary, it can be seen that the Hebrew Bible material takes us on a rather swift journey from the story of creation, through personal call (the boy Samuel), the call of Jonah (who is very reluctant!), to the need for "called" prophets to channel God's will for the world, which leads us to put all our trust in Yahweh. The Gospel passages craft a concise account of the ministry of Jesus: from the work of John the Baptist through to the calls of Nathanael, Simon and Andrew; and then through the teaching, preaching and healing work which culminates in the conversion of Levi the tax collector and the question of whether this new mission of God can be accommodated within old structures. The portions from the Epistles focus on another aspect of call, with baptism and the work of the Holy Spirit being seen to shape the way that we live. These writings are a challenge to consider how our lives might be distinctive within the wider context of our culture. Perhaps the Sunday themes are a little too hectic – although if tied to midweek study, prayer, worship, and discussion then there's scope for more reflection.

As I think on these themes from my vantage point as a minister in the Presbyterian Church USA, but having been a minister in the Church of Scotland until fairly recently, it struck me that this season of Epiphany is full of rich and challenging material for those working in the Church of Scotland at this moment. I have been very aware through colleagues and social media of the sensitive task of reshaping the Kirk to meet the challenges of the day. It is a very tough situation for many. However, God speaks through our engagement with these texts and the Epiphany scriptures help us to think through the 'point' of the Church in light of the experience of our forebears in the faith. Each Sunday in my church the scripture readings are introduced with "listen for the voice of God". How may God be speaking to us *today* and for the Church *today* through these words?

Like most ministers, I attempt to have good methods as I approach preparation for worship, but life intervenes! It can be untidy – however, I aim to read and reflect on all four passages and wonder about their relationship to one another. What did the lectionary compilers see in these readings that led them to place them together in relationship? Once I have a feel for that, then I can work on individual passages more closely. A walk in the woods or on the beach, or wherever, can do wonders for letting the themes emerge and unfold in my mind. God seems to speak in the 'spaces' after the initial burst of analysis and consultation of commentaries. Then contemporary connections start to emerge as I wonder about preaching on the Sunday. By the end of the week, the shape of the sermon has started to settle as my easily confused brain makes sense of things! There comes a point at which more information is no longer helpful. Have confidence to stop – otherwise there will be

too much material and the temptation to cram it all in, to the confusion of the message! A sermon doesn't have to include detailed reference to all four of the lectionary texts.

### [Isaiah 40:21-31](#)

Scripture passages studied in isolation rarely give us a full and rounded manifesto for faith. That's to be expected, given that each work was selected to be in relationship with the other works of the canon of scripture. That's why the lectionary cycle is so important. Isaiah is wonderful material, full of rich poetic imagery. It's a great place to sit in, but we may at times be open to challenge if we sit in it for too long! The interplay between calls to action, ethical living, and zones of 'wonder' is what makes a healthy life of faith.

Here, Isaiah is encouraging us to live in a mode of humble wonder at our smallness, God's greatness, and the limits of our knowledge and agency. Wonder and awe is not to be confused with fear and coercion. If we find ways to engage Scripture with a sense of openness and without expecting a particular type of response then we may be surprised by the experience. That's the kind of dynamic that Isaiah seems to be suggesting here. Stop trying to control the text, to wring out every textual and historical detail. Instead, let the poetry speak without grasping after data and agendas.

The imagery of waiting for God and being lifted up as if on the wings of an eagle is a word to those who have been in dark places of exile and dislocation – even there, God can speak, God can hold us fast. Wait for God and remember who you are waiting for – a covenant God, whose promises are faithful, true and eternal. This is a passage that counsels against anxiety and towards trust that, one way or another, God will come through for us. It just might not be in the way that we expect! Meantime, remember that you are 'held'.

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

One of the challenges of using the Psalms is to handle the personal, particular, national, and religious messages contained within them. If we emphasise the nation as the people of God, without being too concerned with geographical or ethnic boundaries, then we are closer to the vision of Isaiah and Paul. Remember that Isaiah often stresses openness rather than narrow ethnic and religious identity on the return from exile. Paul's very narrow ethnic and religious focus was blown apart by his encounter with God in Christ – and his subsequent mission attempted to bring out the breaking of boundaries expressed in the prophetic writings. So, has God "not dealt thus with any other nation" (v20)? Perhaps that can be left as a question rather than a statement in any reflection on this passage. But a psalm like this

is for those have been in dark places of any kind, as individuals or communities. Can this be preached enough? God will lift you up, so sing to this Lord of all Creation – and what will our part be in that lifting?

### **1 Corinthians 9:16-23**

Within the bigger arc of the Epiphany season passages, this section from Paul strikes a chord as we consider the nature and vocation of the church. What is it that we go out to proclaim and how? Paul was navigating the relationship between the traditional Jewish culture and a new dimension of Judaism viewed through the lens of Jesus. Read in conversation with the Isaiah and Mark passages there is a powerful sense of finding new paths of faith – without overtly condemning or rejecting the old ones. Of course, we know that Paul had a pretty hard time as he dramatically transitioned from being a zealous keeper of traditional Judaism to being at the leading edge of the Jesus movement. Is there middle ground for us today as we navigate a pluralistic culture? Do we have to be all things to all people as we preach Christ today, or does that run the risk of too much compromise and dilution of the Gospel? Or is this simply a passage about adaptability and sensitivity? Does the Church have to look the same in every place and every time? Perhaps the diversity of today's passages reminds us that Christianity looks and feels different according to where it takes root and the social demographic of its communities. Nevertheless, we remain under God's sovereignty – assured that God is for us through everything. How can our communities embody this?

### **Mark 1:29-39**

This is such a powerful text. The action occurs at the end of the sabbath day, with Jesus holding out His hand and raising up Simon's mother-in-law, delivering her from an illness. The Greek "egeiro", used for "get up", is the same usage as for the resurrection of Jesus in chapter 16. There's a clear proleptic intention by the author – this action is a sign of what is to come in the Gospel. The reader or hearer knows the end of the story and can therefore hear this reference very strongly and concludes that right from the earliest part of His public ministry, Jesus was about resurrection – in daily life as well as His own cosmic resurrection.

Just as with Isaiah we live in our smallness within the epic reign of God, so too for Mark, we live in the epic reign of Christ. Yet the detail of the everyday is highlighted in this story. Unlike other healings, Simon's mother-in-law had a fever rather than something more obviously life-threatening. There is scope for imagination here, but we might consider that Mark is telling us that Jesus is interested in our daily challenges as well the occasional epic

issues that we may face. The Lordship of Christ is for the everyday as well as the extraordinary – we matter!

Healing and salvation are closely linked within Ancient Near East culture. So the healing in this passage is indeed about salvation. Saved from whatever is captivating us, whether the rival reign of aspects of ‘the world’ or from infirmity and frailty. Whatever it is, a change of perspective can lift burdens from us.

Isaiah speaks into the woundedness of exile and offers the salvation of return from exile. Mark’s exile is perhaps one of psychology rather than place. Come back to God, stop trying to control it all – God will hold you. Whilst the imagery of touch is powerful, it may not work if taken too literally. Instead, concentrate on the imagery of Jesus’s physicality – a real person, not a fictional character. Jesus here brings His whole person to the living out of His vocation. In preparing a service we might consider including sharing a physical sign of the peace of Christ in some way, ensuring discreet opt-outs for those uncomfortable with it. For someone who lives alone, or who does not have a close partner, touch may be absent in their life. The positive power of a handshake or embrace can have an impact beyond what we might expect. Embodying this in the service can reinforce the physicality of today’s Gospel passage.

## **Sermon ideas**

In the current Church climate, especially where there are sensitive times of rebuilding relationships bruised by discussion of unions and reshaped parish structures, sitting within these passages may be helpful. It’s good to be reminded that the people of God have been through plenty of tough times over the centuries – does giving our own scenario some wider perspective help us to appreciate the ever-shifting expression of faith? When we consider the exile in Babylon, rebuilding community and temple after the exile, and Paul’s missionary work and the struggles over the fresh perspectives of faith through the lens of Jesus, does our Scottish situation look different? Messages of trust in God, listening and sharing perspectives on how our vocations and calls as Church, might be considered today.

Getting the right balance between reflection and action is one of the great themes that emerges from Scripture. I think it’s a variation on the ‘faith and works’ argument. How often do we either stick our head in the sand of prayer and reflection or get consumed in a practice of frantic works to prove our usefulness. Today’s Gospel includes both. The perfect balanced faith life, perhaps! Is there a message here for us about the Church in Scotland, and everywhere? Just as Mark’s Jesus seeks the calm of prayer and reflection, so He is on the front line of actions that heal and save from what is weighing us down. Might the image

of Jesus' hand in ours be an inspiration for our congregations to stand up, even in the midst of the challenges of reorganisation? In this account, resurrection is an everyday miracle.

## **Prayers**

### **Call to worship**

Come to this time of worship

**We bring our hearts and our minds.**

Come with your joys and your wounds.

**We bring them all before God.**

Come, trust that God will raise you up.

**We sing praise to the Lord of Creation.**

### **Gathering/Confession**

God of all times and places, our beginnings and our endings.

You are beyond what we can imagine.

Your majesty is greater than any monarch.

Kings bow down before You. All creation honours you.

Your light shines to us from beyond the farthest star

and through the everyday light of Your disciples

when we live Your Gospel of healing love.

Draw us into a moment of quiet now as we remember our frailty.

We acknowledge what has been difficult in our lives.

The things that we have done, the significant things that we have left undone.

The wrong paths taken, or the opportunities missed.

Help us to bring it all to you in a moment of quiet.....

*[Hold a moment of stillness]*

*Kyrie Eleison* (Lord, Have Mercy) such as the one found at CH4 777 could be sung here.

### **Declaration of forgiveness**

God's mercy is new every morning.

We are given the winds of grace beneath our wings.

So take flight on this new day with God, for God wants us to fly and to truly live.

In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen**

## **Intercession**

We're going to offer prayers now for ourselves, the Church, our communities and the world. During the prayers we will sing successively the verses of CH4 275: *Come Now, O Prince of Peace*, following sections of the prayers.

Let us pray.

Healing God,  
we give thanks for the ways in which You have brought transformation and new life and the exile of illness, estrangement, broken relationship, bereavement, loss of identity. Speak Your words of peace into our hearts.  
Help us to feel whole.  
Help us to bring that peace to others, so that all may be saved for fullness of life.

*Come now, O Prince of Peace (verse 1)*

We give thanks for the growth that can come after difficult times.  
For renewal of friendship.  
For the return of self-respect.  
For paths to peace that build respect rather than define winners and losers.

*Come now, O Prince of Peace (verse 2)*

We pray for the people and places of our world that are on our hearts.  
We name those for whom we have concerns in our family life,  
amongst friends, in our own congregation, the wider community and world.

We hold a moment of stillness now to think of them.

*Come now, O Prince of Peace (verse 3)*

God of new life,  
You hold out Your hand to draw us from the graves of doubt and despair.  
May we trust in Your power to transform frail flesh to the gold of faith.  
Give us confidence in the hope of Your salvation and resurrection life.

*Come now, O Prince of Peace (verse 4)*



And as we raise our prayers to You, we say the prayer that Jesus gave us for our journeys.

### **Our Father ...**

#### **Benediction**

May your strength be renewed this day,  
so that you may run into the world to live the  
gospel and never be weary.

And the blessing of God Almighty,  
Our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,  
be with you and those you love,  
this day and always. Amen.

### **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.

A suggested playlist of [songs from CH4 for use during Epiphany](#) can be found on the Church of Scotland website.

#### **Isaiah 40**

- CH4 97 – “O God, you search me and you know me” – a setting of Psalm 139, which resonates with the sense of letting ourselves rest in God’s providence
- CH4 128 – “How shall I sing that majesty” – here we are in the realms of metaphysical poetry with a great hymn that ponders the wonder of God and finds the writer inspired by living within that zone of cosmic wonder, much like Isaiah and the Psalmist
- CH4 237 – “Look forward in faith” – a late twentieth century Scottish hymn with an encouraging text and an attractive and syncopated melody.

- Songs of God's People 106 – “Those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength”
- “On Eagles' Wings” (Michael Joncas) – this setting of Psalm 91 shares the imagery of Isaiah – it's very popular in the USA!  
<https://www.musicnotes.com/sheetmusic/mtd.asp?ppn=MN0168189>
- “Bring It All To Me” (Fischy Music) – a simple song that gently invites us to come before God and set down all of our cares and concerns. Good for all ages and interactive potential in a gentle way.  
CCLI song number 7025263  
<https://www.fischy.com/fischy-music-online/songs/bring-it-all-to-me/>

### **Settings of Psalm 90 also intersect with this part of Isaiah.**

- CH4 54 – “Lord, you have always been our home” – reminds us of the frailty of life and our smallness in relation to God's creation, but also that our lives are important and to seize the day in appropriate ways. This is a fresh version of the psalm using an iconic Scottish melody (Athchuinge) famous for its use as the melody of the theme song of the Gaelic Mod. Particularly effective sung unaccompanied.
- “Our God is a Great Big God” (Nigel and Jo Hemming) – this is a fun song for all age worship, adaptable for band or keyboard, even for adventurous organists, and with scope for actions!  
CCLI song number 3373437  
<https://www.vineyardchurches.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/greatbiggod1.pdf>

### **Psalm 147**

- CH4 103 – “Fill your hearts with joy and gladness”
- CH4 147 – “All creatures of our God and King” – this is along similar lines
- Psalms for All Seasons 147C – “Sing to God, with joy and gladness” – An Iona Community song

### **Mark 1:19-39**

- CH4 192 – “All my hope on God is founded”
- CH4 718 – “We cannot measure how you heal”

Because the metaphor of healing in this passage may be applied to new life in communities as well as personal life, perhaps songs and hymns that focus on Easter and new life/revival might be appropriate?

- CH4 417 – “Now the green blade riseth from the buried grain” – an adaptable melody which can be played convincingly in a range of styles
- Mission Praise 1183 – “Holy Spirit, living breath of God” (Gettys) – a gorgeous, gentle hymn, which here has an instrumental of Gabriel’s Oboe woven with the simple hymn CCLI song number 4779872  
<https://store.gettymusic.com/us/song/holy-spirit-living-breath-of-god-with-gabriels-oboe/>
- “Come, people of the risen king” (Gettys)  
CCLI song number 5232617  
<https://store.gettymusic.com/uk/song/come-people-of-the-risen-king/>

Settings of Psalm 103 also resonate today, and in the context of Isaiah and Mark, the notes of human frailty and God’s power to heal/save is are shared amongst all three texts.

- CH4 160 – “Praise my soul the King of heaven” – a traditional setting of Psalm 103

### **Mission of the Church**

- CH4 182 – “Now thank we all our God” – this hymn looks back with gratitude and forward at the same time
- CH4 251 – “I, the Lord of sea and sky”
- CH4 252 – “As a fire is meant for burning”
- CH4 257 – “Singing, we gladly worship the Lord together”

## **Reflecting on our worship practice**

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.
- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord's Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of 'holy chaos'.
- If singing in our congregations is restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?  
Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/  
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different "Spiritual Styles"?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?  
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?  
Did it function well as a whole?  
How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?  
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?

Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/  
community?

How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?

How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?

- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

## Useful links

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](#)

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