

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – 6 August 2023

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev Conor Fegan, Minister of Markinch and Thornton Parish Church, for his thoughts on the tenth Sunday after Pentecost.

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

There is no 'one size fits all' approach to preparing to lead worship. I find that as soon as one Sunday service finished, I am already fretting over the next. It can be daunting whether it is your first or thousandth time preaching. A good place to begin, however, is with the texts. By prayerfully reading them, maybe taking a few notes, we can begin to get an idea of what they are saying into our context and our time. Ask questions such as: what words jump out? What themes are clear? What have you never noticed before? What doesn't make sense? What questions would you ask the writer? What is the good news in this story?

If we have answered some of these questions then we will be well on the way to constructing a service which is challenging and comforting, is respectful and engaging, is pleasing to God, and relevant to God's people.

It is no secret that our Church, along with many others, is facing its share of challenges right now. And yet, as we see in this week's lectionary readings, we are not the first, and we will certainly not be the last. So, in a time of great concern amongst our congregations, whether this is about finances, buildings, people, or any number of crises facing the world, the readings appointed for this Sunday may be an opportunity for us to consider God's care, God's presence, and God's abundance. Even in the most difficult times, even when it seems that we should pack up and go home, in Jesus there is potential and sustenance. As always, God remains, even in these difficult days.

It is my practice to preach on one of the lectionary texts, and so I have offered individual reflections below, nevertheless the theme of 'abundance' runs throughout.

[Isaiah 55:1-5](#)

There is something arresting about the first word of this reading, 'Ho.' If we allow it to, it can set the tone for the whole passage: imagine the scene, a crowded area, a worried people, an uncertain time, and in their midst, a lone loud voice shouting: 'Ho!' This is a reading that should be shouted from the rooftops, preached in the marketplace, and plastered over social media. It is good news to the weary and tired, to the poor and the hungry, to the marginalised and forgotten. Into a busy world it shouts God's presence, it demands to be heard amongst the hustle and bustle. It is speaking to the hungry and the well fed, those burdened by exile and those revelling in it. This is a call to action amongst a people who might well think God has abandoned them, a reminder that God is there in their midst.

This portion of the Book of Isaiah makes references to the time of the Babylonian crisis, a time of exile. This short passage speaks into this reality, one of estrangement from land, from culture, from place, it is a challenge to those who believe they have been abandoned by God, that the Covenant between God and God's people no longer matters. It says that the relationship begun so long ago by God continues. These people, though facing challenges, have not been forgotten.

In an age of deep economic, political, social, and religious inequality, when some have more than they could ever want, and many have less than they could ever need, this passage resonates. Amongst the promise of abundance in God's gifts, which money cannot buy and from which poverty or exile do not exclude, it offers a template for how we might try to live. For with the Covenant between God and God's people comes an expectation that those people begin to live as God calls them to. In this reading we have an opportunity to look again at God's presence in our lives, to ask ourselves how we might not only see, but share the abundance of God with those around us. This reading tries to grab our attention; if we let it, our lives can begin to change.

Throughout the readings this week we see references to God's people being fed and cared for – how do we bring this to life in our own context today? What can we do to ensure that our churches and communities are the kinds of places where all can come together irrespective of wealth or rank or station, where God's abundance is obvious and tangible in the hearts, words, and actions of us all?

[Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21](#)

The lectionary verses of Psalm 145 continue the theme of abundance, care, and love from God for the world and all creation, as well as in the form of praise from God's people. This ancient prayer and hymn offers today's reader, hearer, and preacher the opportunity to revel in this abundance, to delve into the depths of what the psalm is trying to say both to God and from God. We see here the sheer breadth of God's love and care, as well as the reality of what God's presence in this universe means for God's people.

It would be difficult to read this passage without being struck by the repetition of certain words, in particular 'all', as well as 'every.' This repetition has the effect of reminding us that the God we speak of here is the creator of the universe, the Almighty, beyond all comprehension. This God created *all* and is set above *all*, and yet this same God loves and cares for *all*. This psalm reminds us that God's reach and provenance is cosmic, but God's compassion is local, is particular, is poured out on each of us.

If we are following the theme of God's abundance, even in the lean times, even in the times when it seems like the challenges are too great, there can be few texts that offer more succour and support to those searching. God is with the bowed down, the hungry, those in need, those crying out. God is present in these difficult days for our Church, urging us on, reminding us that we are never abandoned, so in that abundance of care and compassion, today we continue to praise God with our mouths, our actions, and our hearts.

Romans 9:1-5

This week I have suggested a theme of God's abundance, which is apparent across the readings, from Isaiah, to the Psalm, to the Gospel reading, but does it appear in this short passage from Romans? At first glance, maybe not, but dig a little deeper, consider what is going on in these words, and we might be led to the same conclusion as we are with the other readings. In the pain of these words, it would be easy to get lost in the despair, but a glimmer of hope remains: the abundant love and presence of Jesus. This passage remains steadfast in its faithful witness to Jesus, even in those dark days (as in our own) He remains, even when people seem to have forgotten Him.

It might be thought that the beginning of Chapter 9, at best, sits uneasily with the ending of Chapter 8 (especially vv37-39), and at worst outright contradicts it. They are, however, born out of the same conviction and possibly the same emotion. Here we see a different way of approaching the belief that nothing separates us from the love of God: namely the lament that there are so many who do not accept, acknowledge, or are not aware of this. Here, as in the previous chapter we saw Paul wax lyrical about love, we see him do the very same about his anguish, not only at the seeming rejection of Christ, but also Paul's heartbreak that there are so many who do not feel or understand the same love as he does. In the midst of the pain, love remains, hope remains.

I wonder what the reaction would be in our churches if preachers began sermons or services with words akin to those we find attributed to Paul in this reading. What would the reaction be to someone baring their soul in our churches? In some this would be perfectly accepted, indeed celebrated. Nevertheless, I imagine, this kind of raw emotion, pain, grievance, anger even, does not appear in most of our regular Sunday Worship services. But what if it did? Would this be a more authentic way to worship God; to acknowledge that all is not always well, to say out loud that it pains us to see our Church in such difficulties, to see fewer new members and leaders? And then still be able to say that we have faith in God, in Jesus, in the abundance of God's grace and care. This reading is an opportunity to be honest, to recognise the sheer abundance of God's love, acknowledge the truth that the

world seems to ignore, and yet remain faithful and hopeful, even when our hearts might be breaking.

[Matthew 14:13-21](#)

This is one of *those* bible stories, the ones that were told in Sunday Schools, the ones that even those who never pass through the door of a church building know. There is a danger in these passages, a danger that familiarity leads to complacency. A danger that we read it and think, 'very nice,' and get on with our days without really considering its meaning, in particular what it says about Jesus' character and then what that might mean for us in our attempts to follow Him.

It may be worthwhile, therefore, to consider the broader picture we are presented with. Jesus is tired, the disciples are tired, the crowd is tired, it has been a long day. Jesus had hoped to go away to a lonely place, to a quiet place to mourn, to pray, to reflect on the brutal death of John the Baptist. The sun shining down, the dirt underfoot, uneven paths, sore feet, and sore backs. Evening comes, and the people are probably grumpy, and hungry. The disciples are likely more than ready for home...maybe even Jesus is ready for home. Nevertheless, in the abundance of love which He has for us all, Jesus looks out at a crowd of people – probably of all ages, all classes, all backgrounds – 'and He had compassion for them and cured their sick' (v14). Jesus saw their hunger, and with what little He had or could source, He fed them. In this moment and this story, we are shown a foretaste, an example of the abundance of God and the reality of the coming kingdom. Where generosity and love abound even in the barren places, even in the times when people are at their lowest, even when people are at their most grumpy or desperate, God doesn't turn away. Jesus opens His arms wide and the people are fed.

Even though He may have been tempted to send them away, to take time for his own grief and pain, Jesus' first instinct is to care, to love, and to tend to the people. There are lessons in this for us. First, in all things Jesus remains steadfast, and second, to truly follow Jesus we need to find a way to emulate that same compassion, love, and care for all those around us, even when it may feel most difficult.

Sermon ideas

The theme of God's abundance is one that can shape this week's worship. It is a topic which bears repeating again and again, and it is possible that in this time of great change and anxiety, by preaching on one or more of these stories, we may have the opportunity to

remind the Church that even now, God has not abandoned us. Even now, God's care, compassion and abundant love surrounds us. Furthermore, in it we can and must carry on for God's sake and the good of all God's people.

Prayers

Scripture Sentence

"Never again shall they feel hunger or thirst; because the Lamb who is at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd and will guide them to springs of the water of life."

Revelation 7:16, 17

Responsive call to worship *(from Psalm 145)*

The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

**The Lord is good to all,
and His compassion is over all that He has made.**

The Lord upholds all who are falling,
and raises up all who are bowed down.

**My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord,
and all flesh will bless His holy name for ever and ever.**

Collect for the day *(from Common Order)*

Almighty God,
Your Son Jesus Christ fed the hungry
with the bread of His life and the word of His kingdom.
Renew Your people with Your heavenly grace,
and in all our weakness sustain us
by the true and living bread,
Jesus Christ Your Son our Lord,
who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Prayer of adoration and confession

Gracious God,
creator of all that we perceive,
we join today in the abundance of Your love,

in community, in the joy that comes
through Your love;
through the nourishment of Jesus,
our shepherd and our guide,
the one who feeds us in mind and in body;
through the sustenance of the Spirit,
and the knowledge that You are with us
as we face the highs and lows,
the struggles and joys of this life.

Ever-present God,
strengthen us today in faith
as we each struggle, hope, and pray
for the steadfastness to follow You
in these difficult times.

When the world
is hungry for Your presence,
is in need of Your care,
is crying out for Your love,
where spreading Your word
and your mission is harder,
yet ever more necessary,
guide us, God of abundance, we pray.

Merciful God, forgive us
in Your abundant compassion, love, and grace,
though we each strive to live up to
Your commands we often fail,
so renew within us the reassurance that
through every time of trial,
through every time we fall,
You hold us in the palm of Your hand;
supporting, strengthening, and loving always.
Forgive us, merciful God,
for all that we bring to You now:

Silence

Out of an abundance of grace,

love, and mercy, God forgives you.
Accept the peace that this brings
in hope and faith.

Silence

Guide us today and every day,
as we seek to do Your will
in this ever-changing world.
open our eyes to great variety of
of blessings and opportunities which
You have poured out on us.
Make us aware of the pain of others,
drive out our own sense of helplessness.
Free our minds to love and be loved.
In Jesus' name and for His sake,
we pray,
Amen.

Prayer of intercession

Loving God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,
we come before You in awe,
searching and seeking, doubting and hoping,
trying to follow You, to understand You, to know You.
As we gather, hearts and minds turned toward heaven
and the abundance of love, grace, and joy
to be found in our Saviour, we pray:

We pray for our country and all those who call it home,
especially those who have been forced to
come here through violence, strife, economic hardship,
or some other reason.

Help us, God of abundant, unimaginable love,
to be a neighbour to all, to see the humanity
of our sisters and brothers before we see labels,
nationalities, skin colour, sexuality, or gender.

We pray for our world,
which continues to be ravaged by disease and war,

while still struggling with age-old problems
of poverty, isolation, and fear.

In particular, we pray for
all who know the pangs of hunger,
who fear for what tomorrow brings,
who go without to help others.

We pray for those who staff, support and use
foodbanks and charities which attempt to alleviate poverty.

Help us to remember even on His most
difficult days, Jesus gave all He had to nourish others,
and give us the boldness to follow His example in whatever way we can.

We pray for Your Church,
all over the world, and here, at home,
as we continue to discern its place in this world,
as we continue to seek to do Your will in this difficult time
for this and all churches.

Help all those who try, God of abundance,
to work and to decide the path forward
based on the good of Your people,
the furthering of Your mission
and the coming of Your kingdom.

We pray for ourselves, all those gathered here
(in this building and online), that we may have our hearts and minds
turned ever towards heaven,
towards our neighbour and towards You, abundant God,
our Creator, our Redeemer, and our Sustainer.

Hear all our prayers said and unsaid
as we pray in Jesus' name,
Amen.

Offertory prayer

Gracious God,
in Your love and in Your grace,
You have given the whole world to us,
for our pleasure, to our safe keeping,
everything we have and everything we

could want, You have provided.

In dedication, in praise, and in worship,
we offer back these tokens,
as a sign of our commitment
to Your Church and Your mission,
and in thanks for Your constant
presence in our lives,
Amen.

Benediction

Into a world of plenty, we go to speak charity,
Into a world of pain, we go to speak healing,
Into a world of hunger, we go to feed,
Into a world of need, we go to bring the good news and abundance of our Saviour,
so we go now,
and the blessing of God almighty,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
descend upon you, and rest with you
today and forever more,
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.

- CH4 100 – “O Lord, Thou art my God and King” (Psalm 145)
- CH4 153 – “Great is thy faithfulness”
- CH4 167 – “Guide me, O thou great Jehovah”

- CH4 187 – “There is a wideness in God’s mercy”
- CH4 348 – “Praise the One who breaks the darkness”
- CH4 540 – “I heard the voice of Jesus say”
- CH4 550 – “As the deer pants for the water”
- CH4 622 – “We sing a love that sets all people free”
- CH4 655 – “For your generous providing”
- CH4 675 – “Now let us from this table rise”
- CH4 685 – “For everyone born, a place at the table”
- CH4 691 – “Be still, my soul: the Lord is on your side”

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’.

- When 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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