

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 1 October 2023

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev Barry Hughes, Minister of St Mark's Parish Church, Stirling, for his thoughts on the 18th 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.

Introduction.....	3
Exodus 17:1-7.....	3
Psalm 78	4
Matthew 21:23-32	4
Philippians 2:1-13.....	4
Sermon ideas	4
Prayers	7
Musical suggestions	10
Reflecting on our worship practice	11
Useful links	12

Introduction

The resources for the first four Sundays in October have been written by [Priority Area congregations](#) (those in the 5% most deprived parishes). This is a month with a particular focus on tackling poverty. October 2-8 is [Challenge Poverty Week](#); and October 17 is the United Nations' International Day for the Eradication of Poverty.

You will find more resources for Challenge Poverty Week on the [Priority Areas Facebook page](#), including stories about projects tackling poverty in congregations across Scotland. We would encourage you to share these with your congregation as a way of highlighting how the Church is engaging in anti-poverty work at a local level.

This is Challenge Poverty Week, launched by the Poverty Alliance in 2013, with the aim of highlighting the injustice of poverty in Scotland, and to show that collective action based on justice and compassion can create solutions.

This week's passages challenge us in our service and obedience to God. Psalm 78 talks of those who refused to live by God's holy covenant, whilst Exodus 17 talks of how the people of Israel (not for the first or last time) were willing to put the Lord their God to the test, being reproached by Moses for doing so. In the New Testament passages, we read one of Jesus' shortest parables in Matthew 21; the two sons who, in their different ways, are unwilling to commit to serving their father, and in Philipians Paul reminds his readers of the importance of continued obedience to God in the work God has called them to do.

[Exodus 17:1-7](#)

Exodus 17 is in some ways a foretaste of Jesus' own ordeal in the desert during his 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness. The Israelites, tired and no doubt rebellious from their wanderings, challenge the authority of Moses and, in effect, show that they have lost their faith in God to provide for them. Moses challenges them in verse 2: "Why do you put the Lord your God to the test?" – and to this they have no answer. And of course God does provide for God's people, and indeed does so at every point during their time in the wilderness. Jesus in turn was tempted by the Devil to put His father to the test and refused to do so – as we should trust in Him to provide for us in our times of need.

[Psalm 78](#)

Psalm 78 echoes this same theme of putting God to the test – verse 41 refers to the many times (including the time in Exodus) when the people of God lost faith and put God to the test. Yet we are also reminded in verse 38 of God’s great mercy and forgiveness – those who stray from God’s way, as the Israelites so often did, were welcomed back into God’s fold – again, a foreshadowing of some of the best-known of Jesus’ parables, such as that of the Prodigal Son.

[Matthew 21:23-32](#)

The parable of the two sons, both of whom are asked to do their father’s work, with one of them saying “yes” but meaning “no”, and the other in effect saying exactly the opposite, is one that shows how our obedience to God can often be tested. It is very easy for us to say “yes” when we really mean “no” – and vice versa! In Scotland we are often especially bad at saying what we really feel for fear of offending someone. But of course, as Jesus says, there is no pulling the wool over God’s eyes – and the sons’ deceptive answers to their father are similarly found out.

[Philippians 2:1-13](#)

The passage from Philippians strikes a slightly different tone, containing more encouragement for the disciple and less admonishment. Verse 1 speaks openly of this encouragement, with verses 5-11 almost acting as a handbook for the disciple wishing to emulate the mindset of Jesus Christ. Yet even in this passage Paul reminds his readers (v12) of the importance of obedience to the Word of the Lord, “with fear and trembling”.

Sermon ideas

Matthew 21:23-32

It is often said that we British are not very good at saying exactly what we mean. We skirt round the issue, often to avoid offending people with what we think (except when we are online, of course). A few years ago we had a Finnish exchange student staying with our family and to help her understand this I used a list I found of phrases British people say, and what they really mean. Some of my favourites are these:

- “It really doesn’t matter” – Nothing has ever mattered to me more and I will never forget this
- “Each to their own I suppose” – You’re wrong
- “Feel free to pop round anytime” – Please don’t bother me
- “I will try to come along to your party” – Wild horses wouldn’t drag me there
- “You’ve caught a wee bit of the sun” – You look like a lobster
- “Right I suppose I really should be making a move” – I can’t wait to get out of here
- And my favourite: “With all due respect” – You haven’t the slightest idea what you are talking about

And of course if there is one thing people really struggle with, it’s the old favourites, yes and no.

We find it difficult to say yes sometimes – it seems like a big commitment. We often prefer to give a wishy-washy “well I’ll do my best” type of answer. How many times has someone asked you if you are well, and you can’t bring yourself to say “Yes I am very well!”, preferring a good Scottish answer instead, along the lines of “I’m no’ bad” or “I’m doin’ away”.

And as for the word no – how many times have we been asked if we are free on such and such a date, or asked to commit to a particular event, and we answer with the old favourite “I’ll get back to you” or “I’ll check the diary”.

We hate saying no – and often we hate saying yes just as much. I am tempted to put this to the test at the door at the end of the service one Sunday, and ask “did you like the sermon?”, but I may be setting myself up for a huge fall.....

And in this passage from Matthew we hear one of Jesus’ shortest parables, in which two brothers seem to have great difficulty saying either yes or no. A father asks his two sons – will you go into the vineyard and work for me? One says yes when he really means no; one says no when he really means yes.

So we see one son who said yes with his words but said no with his actions. The other son said no with his words but said yes with his actions. But whether they say yes to God with words or they say yes to God with actions, both are possible because God first said yes to us.

The very act of God becoming human in the person of Jesus Christ was the amazing act of God saying yes to humanity. And what an amazing way for God to say yes to us. To want to

know us and know our pain and our struggles that we have to suffer in world that has fallen away from God, and to want to know it so much that God would become one of us to feel the suffering first-hand. Because God certainly knew what humanity was like when we were created.

Which brings us back to the parable of the two sons – one who said yes with his words, but said no with his actions, one who said no with his words but yes with his actions. When we're honest with ourselves, we know there is a part of each son in each of us. There are times we say yes to God with our mouth, but we never follow through on what we say. There are times we say no to God with our words, but the Holy Spirit moves in our heart and we do what God asks of us in the end.

If we think we're already saying yes to God every time God calls us, we're probably not listening hard enough! If we think we're already doing everything God has invited us to do, we're probably not paying enough attention! If we are honest, we see some of both sons in ourselves.

So maybe we should wonder what would happen if the two sons had helped each other say yes. What if the one who said yes with his words had helped the other one who said no see the wisdom of his father's request? What if the one who said yes with his actions could encourage the other one who said no to follow through on his word?

Because as we have seen in the other parables which talk about the Kingdom of God being like a vineyard, when God asks you to come work in the vineyard, you know you're in for some hard work. Even when we find great joy in our work, it is still a difficult thing to do.

And certainly this is part of the task of the Church today – encouraging one another in the ways we say yes to God. Challenging one another to listen more carefully to how God is calling us. Holding one another to a higher standard of faithfulness than we could reach by ourselves.

And throughout the process, we remind ourselves that it isn't really us who encourage one another, but the Holy Spirit, allowing God's presence to burn within us and to spill out and touch all those around us.

It's not always easy to say yes to God. We will all find ourselves doing what the first brother did, saying yes but doing something different. And sometimes we take what seems to be the easy way out, saying no to God, or ignoring Him altogether, but the Holy Spirit is still at work in our hearts, calling us back to God.

God is calling us right now, inviting us to work in the vineyard. Inviting us to say yes to God with our words. Inviting us to say yes to God with our actions. And always, inviting us to say yes to God because God has said yes to us.

Prayers

To be used alongside CH4 189 – either after singing or during singing between verses

Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the holy one, is here

Lord, we still ourselves now as we come into Your presence. We put aside the cares of the week and focus on Your Word. We know that we are not worthy of coming before You, and that it is only by Your grace that we may know You.

We know that in You no sin is found, whilst we constantly fall short of your glory. We focus on other things, we serve other masters, we adopt different values; as we come into Your presence today we pray for Your forgiveness for our shortcomings.

Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the holy one, is here. Amen

Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around

Lord, we pray that Your glory may shine like a beacon, not just in this place this day, but right across this land. We ask You to make us torchbearers to enable Your glory to be seen by all around us, so that the good news of Your Son, Jesus Christ, may be known to all people and that You may be truly seen as the radiant King of light.

We pray that we may be proclaimers of Your Word; we know that so often we fail to take the many chances You give us to speak about the Gospel to those around us. We pray that You will open the hearts and the minds of all who hear Your word, and that we in turn will have the wisdom and courage to proclaim Your name openly.

Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around. Amen

Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place.

We pray for a real sense of Your power in this place this day and every day Lord. We pray that we may feel the empowerment of Your Spirit in our lives every day. We know that no work is too hard for You, yet so often even the simplest of tasks seems too daunting to us.

We pray for Your power to be with us in all the tasks we are called to do so that we, too, may minister Your grace to those around us.

As we sing Your praise and reflect on the words we have sung, let us think about how we can put these things to work in our own lives. Help us to come into Your presence daily, to see Your glory always and to feel Your power constantly. All this we ask in the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ, as we join together and pray the words he taught us:

Our Father...

Additional prayers

Archive material from Weekly Worship 27 September 2020, written by Dr Pat Bennett, member of the Iona Community and the [Spirituality of Conflict](#) project.

Opening responses

I have split the responding voices into two; a male/female binary can be seen as excluding, so the voices may be allocated by different criteria as appropriate.

Leader: We meet in the name of God
Voice 1: whose speech began the story of life
Voice 2: whose words brought form into being
All: and who ordered creation in harmony and goodness.

L: We meet in the purpose of Jesus
V1: whose life was the speech of God,
V2: whose words show the shape of His Kingdom
All: and who draws those who hear into its unfolding story.

L: We meet in the power of the Spirit
V1: whose breath tamed the primordial chaos
W: whose tongue shapes the words of change
All: and who energises the ones who give them voice.

L: We meet in the name of the Triune God
the Source, the Sharer, and the Shaper,
**All: Who was, and is, and will be
as long as the Story of Love is told.**

Approach

I have included optional words [] which can be used if the service involves Communion.*

L: God, in the story of Your people
on their journey through the wilderness

**All: we see and hear many things
which we know and recognise.**

L: God, in the words of Your Son
as He journeyed through life

**All: we see and hear many things
which challenge our cherished ideas.**

L: God, in the passage of Your Spirit
as She journeys through history

**All: we see and hear many things
which show us that change is possible.**

L: God, constantly present in human story,
we open ourselves
to all that You would show us now
through worship and song
word and prayer,
[bread and wine]

**All: Meet us where we are
show us where we need to be
and then go with us as we move.**

Collect

God – Source, Sharer, Shaper –
though You have many names
Your story moves constantly and consistently
towards a world
in which all can flourish
as You intended.

Help us to grow in clear-sightedness
of how our own names or narratives
can hinder our understandings
of Your love and purpose,
that we may join more fully

in the story of Your Kingdom.

Amen

Blessing

May the God whose names are many
but whose nature is constant,
the One whose story is complex,
but whose purpose is clear,
enable [us] to deepen in love,
develop in understanding,
and be determined in action

that [we] and the world [we] inhabit
can move ever nearer
to that which God intends.

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 189 – “Be still” – for gathering in stillness in God’s presence
- CH4 374 – “From heaven you came, helpless babe” – a hymn of service
- CH4 502 – “Take my life , Lord, let it be” – a hymn of obedience
- CH4 531 – “My Jesus, my Saviour” – a declaration of faith
- CH644 – “O Jesus, I have promised” – following Jesus on His path

- MP 1 – “A new commandment I give unto you”

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](#)

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. If you would like to reproduce this material for commercial purposes, please contact the copyright holders, the Faith Action Programme, for permission: faithaction@churchofscotland.org.uk

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.

©Faith Action Programme