

starters for Sunday

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

30 October 2016

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank the Very Rev William C Hewitt, former Moderator of the General Assembly, for his thoughts on the twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost.

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Quick Guide...

Helping people prepare for reading the Bible in worship can make a real difference. Overcoming nerves, reading in ways suitable to the text, speaking clearly etc.

You may wish to email these three links to the people reading Scripture on Sunday to support them in their involvement in worship: [Managing your nerves](#); [Creative readings](#); [Worship at the Lectern](#)

[Habakkuk 1: 1-4, 2: 1-4](#)

We do not know much about the prophet Habakkuk, for he is not mentioned anywhere else in the Old Testament. Habakkuk is called a prophet and it may be that he was a professional prophet who carried out his ministry from the temple in Jerusalem.

It seems clear from the situation Habakkuk described that he wrote this prophecy sometime after the decline of the Assyrian Empire and the rise of the Babylonian (or Chaldean) Empire.

During the earlier part of Habakkuk's life there had been wonderful spiritual reforms instituted under the leadership of the boy king Josiah. But Josiah died in 609 BC and spiritual decline set in and Judah reverted to ungodly, worldly ways. He was now living in evil times and called out to God - "How much longer will violence and injustice triumph?"

It appeared to Habakkuk that despite his many prayers to God nothing seems to be happening. We have to read on (verses 5 -12). When God responded and told him that he was going to use the godless military might of Babylon (verse 5) to bring judgement on God's own people it astounded Habakkuk. Using a godless people to punish a godly nation didn't make sense and Habakkuk was quick to say so.

That is part of our problem, God's answer to our prayers may be totally opposite from what we are looking for. We want an answer to prayer but we know the answer that we want. Although addressed in a particular age the questions that Habakkuk asked are often asked today, both in global terms and as individuals. Where is God in face of this evil? Why does God not act? Why do bad things happen to good people? In part Habakkuk is questioning the very nature of God – you can't condone evil, so why are you not doing something about it.

In the response of God to Habakkuk's complaints there are no simple answers. He provides some general perspectives and some advice as to how to hold on in times of adversity.



Habakkuk tells us that God does answer even although the evidence may not be apparent nor the timing fitting with our desires. (Chapter 2: 2-4). We live in a world of instant response and to be told to wait is not always what we want to hear.

Habakkuk's other problem was that his focus was too narrow. His concern had been about the trouble in his own nation. God was at work raising up the Babylonians and again Habakkuk was not looking for this response. Are we too guilty of not seeing the bigger picture?

And thirdly, God's ways are often mysterious. God sometimes uses strange ways to correct his people and his Church.

The final part of Habakkuk's vision 2: 4(b) revealed to him how he was supposed to live until God's promises were to be fulfilled. He was to live by faith.

In the end we are told that justice, righteousness and peace remain forever in God's control. Our response is to work toward these ultimate goals as best we can in contemporary circumstances.

[Psalm 32](#)

Attributed to David, the Psalm is a forgiven sinner's prayer. Instead of hiding his sin, the guilty man confesses in public that he is a sinner and uses his own experience of forgiveness that is helpful for us. At the end he invited everybody to celebrate with joy the forgiveness he has received.

Before acknowledging his sin he was filled with remorse - he confessed and found peace.

Notice that he takes personal responsibility by the use of personal pronouns - my sin, my iniquity, my transgressions. He doesn't deny, minimize, or blame someone else. He simply calls his sin, "sin". It's not an error, a mistake, or a lapse in judgment.

These few verses offer no hint of the nature of the sin for which forgiveness has been granted. They merely talk about the "joy" and "blessedness" of the forgiven person and commit them to a different path. Accordingly anyone who sincerely seeks the mercy of God, not merely to ease a burdened conscience, but place them in a right relationship with God can learn from the Psalmist's experience. For God does not hold our sins against us, as if keeping an account book of our failures and transgressions.



Psalm 32 has also been referred to as one of “Paul’s Psalms” because it is quoted extensively in [Romans 4: 6-8](#) to help establish that we are declared righteous not because of what we’ve done, but because of what Christ has done on the Cross.

Augustine said that the beginning of knowledge is to know oneself to be a sinner. In order to be reminded of his depraved sinfulness and God’s gracious forgiveness, he had this psalm engraved on his bedroom wall as he lay dying in his bed. He read it all the time and when he was too sick, he instructed others to recite it for him.

[2 Thessalonians 1: 1-4, 11 -12](#)

The story of Paul’s stay in Thessalonica is in [Acts 17](#). He had been preaching on three Sabbaths and obviously he had upset some people because he had to be smuggled out. Even although it had been such a short visit he was desperate to know if his preaching had made an impact. William Barclay writes:

“It is impossible to overstress the importance of the arrival of Christianity in Thessalonica. If Christianity was settled there, it was bound to spread East along the Egnatian Road until all Asia [Minor] was conquered and West until it stormed even the city of Rome. The coming of Christianity to Thessalonica was crucial in the making of it into a world religion.”

Maybe Paul was aware of this and was pleased to hear the news that the Thessalonians were still strong in their faith and in mutual love for one another. He prayed for them to be worthy of their call to be God's people in their community. He asked that their every act might be motivated by faith and so show by their daily living in him that Jesus really is Lord (verses 11-12).

He would also be a little concerned because there was a misunderstanding around Paul’s teaching about the Second Coming. Some believed that it had already happened and some thought that it would happen soon, so they stood about idly doing nothing waiting for the day. Paul urges them to be patient but at the same time diligent in going about their work and doing what was right.

Not only would Paul have been in difficulty with the authorities to the extent that he had to leave, these new converts would also face threats. Despite persecution and difficulties Paul was pleased to hear that they were holding fast. Although some were questioning if they were good



enough, doubting that their faith was strong enough, Paul encouraged them by his prayers and in the notion that what they were doing would give glory to Jesus Christ.

Faithfulness in difficult times, continuing love for one another and service in Jesus name is the central message of this brief letter, and such was their strength of faith that Paul was able to use them as an example to others.

[Luke 19: 1 - 9](#)

The story of Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus is one of the best-known Biblical stories from the New Testament. As children, we sang a song about him, we drew pictures of him in Sunday School and made him to be a sort of comic character. Yet there are some who would suggest that this is one of the most powerful and provocative stories in all of scripture.

It introduces the very radical notion that God will stop at nothing less than the total transformation of who we are, and that God will use who he wills for his purposes.

In verse 2 we see that Zacchaeus was a man of some prominence. His name in Hebrew means, "pure and righteous," but he was not thought of as being anywhere close to righteous because of the job he had.

At the start of verse 3 we have the question why did he want to see Jesus? Was it simply curiosity because he had heard so much about him or was there a deeper need in Zacchaeus' life that he thought Jesus could meet?

As we know there were crowds of people who had turned out. They had come to greet him and then complained when he went to eat with this sinner. On another occasion when he went to eat with sinners and tax collectors ([Mark 2: 13 -17](#)), the Pharisees complained about his actions.

In the eyes of the people there was no doubt that Zacchaeus was unworthy. His name meant "the pure one" and "the righteous," but he was a person of disgust in the eyes of the Jewish people. He was despised and rejected. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem at this point and maybe this was a forerunner of his story too.

In verse 3 while we are told that he was wealthy, a wealth achieved by cheating and stealing there was obviously something missing.



We really do not know what happened at Zacchaeus' home. But the immediate commitment in verse 8 the, “here and now” indicates that he was not trying to negotiate with Jesus or just trying to buy Jesus favour.. Zacchaeus had changed his heart and now he wanted to demonstrate that change through his actions. As part of his repentance, he wants to right his wrongs. Something in that encounter with Jesus changed the way Zacchaeus saw the world.

Being with Jesus changes how we see, - how we see others how we see ourselves.

A commentator puts it this way:

“Jesus redeemed Zacchaeus' past, he transformed his present, and he re-directed his future.”

It is found only in Luke's Gospel, and it speaks in these few verses of the mission of Jesus, summed up in verse 10 “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” The mission of Jesus is very clear: He came to seek and save what was lost.

Sermon ideas

God can use us all to help in the mission of Jesus to seek and save the lost.

In Habbakuk and Luke we have God using what some would class as godless sinners to fulfil his purposes. In Thessalonica those who at one time did not think themselves worthy of God's grace were being used to take the gospel into all the world. There is some dubious belief that Zacchaeus went on to become bishop of Caesarea. In contrast with the previous story about a rich man ([Luke 18: 18-30](#)) where the people asked “Who then can be saved?” in Zacchaeus Jesus demonstrates what is possible with God.

Labels

For, just as pious Jews made a habit of labelling people at the time of Jesus in order to define the boundaries of what was important to them, it wasn't long before Christians adopted the same type of discrimination.

Only people of good moral character and impeccable credentials could be welcomed into the church. What are the labels we use today- poor, rich, refugee, asylum seeker...? God does not want barriers and walls and asks us to help him break them down.



Waiting and working

There are also contrasting themes of waiting and working. Habakkuk teaches patience and Paul urges us not to be idle but to carry on with the task that has been given to us.

Reflection

(Flor McCarthy)

It was coming towards the end of October,
and in spite of days of gusting wind,
the trees refused to give up their leaves.
But then one morning the ground was covered with frost.
It was a perfectly calm morning.
There wasn't even a breath of wind.

As the sun rose an amazing thing happened -
the leaves began to fall in droves.
It was as if the trees were surrendering them voluntarily
under the gentle influence of the sun.
Long before noon the trees were bare.

We are all selfish by nature.
We cling to our comforts.
We do not give up things easily.
Love alone has the power to disarm us,
causing us to drop our defences,
whereas force only causes us to close up.

Through his gentle and loving approach
Christ disarmed Zacchaeus,
getting him to open up
and share his ill-gotten goods with the poor
People are essentially good,
But this good has to be awakened and called forth.



Time with Children

The day after Sunday 30th is of course Halloween. You could talk about the outfits people will wear or the masks that they will put on - pretending to be someone else. “Beware of fake fivers” was an old children’s talk and came from a headline in the news. You could talk about how the banks use intricate patterns and watermarks and the thin metal strip running down the centre to prevent people from making false copies.

Jesus talked about “ false” people. Those who pretended to be holy and good and kind. Jesus was angry and called them hypocrites. Zacchaeus knew that there was something wrong with his life. He didn’t pretend to be someone he wasn’t and Jesus was pleased to be in his company.

Prayers

Prayer from Prayers for all Seasons (Nick Fawcett)

Merciful God,

we remember today how you reached out through the ministry of Christ,

welcoming those whom society had rejected, accepting those whom the world considered unacceptable.

You have time for us, just as we are:

Lord, we praise you.

We remember how you called Matthew, the tax-collector, how you dined with Zacchaeus, how you touched the lepers, and how you showed mercy to the woman caught in adultery, time and again, breaking the mould, offering us, through his faithfulness, forgiveness and new life.

You have time for us, just as we are:

Lord, we praise you.

We remember that you forgave rather than condemned, built up rather than pulled down, encouraged rather than criticised, drew near rather than kept your distance.

You have time for us, just as we are:

Lord, we praise you.



Merciful God,
we rejoice that you accept us today, not for any actions on our part, nor through anything we may one day do, but simply by your grace.

You have time for us, just as we are:

Lord, we praise you.

We rejoice that you value us despite our many weaknesses and our repeated faults,
your nature always to have mercy, your grace inexhaustible.

You have time for us, just as we are:

Lord, we praise you.

Help us to express our worship through receiving the love you so freely offer,
and celebrating your gift of new life.

You have time for us, just as we are:

Lord, we praise you.

In the name of Christ. Amen.

Collect

Almighty God,
your servant Abraham obeyed your call,
rejoicing in your promise
that in him all the families of the earth
should be blessed.

Give us faith like his,
that in us your promises may be fulfilled;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.



The following are excerpts from People of the Way; page 32 and 84.

Identity

Meditation

The world walks past
as I sit in my chair and watch.
Every so often the light will change
and the large window acts like a mirror.
Not sure I like what I see.
Stories unfold throughout the day.
But which stories will I believe?

The light can play tricks,
tell lies about your age.
Makeup covers wrinkles and blemishes.
I judge you from my chair,
scoffing at all the disguises.

It's not as if my scars are there for all to see.
I wonder, would a heart on my sleeve be more honest
than the ink on yours?

But then,
in between your lines,
a story –
a story, that needs to be read with care,
a story that needs to be told,
heard,
shared.



Morning Prayer

O God,
help me to remember
that others have looked in the mirror this morning,
and prayed for strength.
The strength not to cover up their scars,
the marks that perhaps define them,
but to wear them with pride.
Hopeful that, as others see them,
They, too, may have the courage
to be honest,
to be open
to a new story
and a new truth this day. Amen

Evening Prayer

Lord,
as I wipe away the memory of today
and put my layers back into the wardrobe,
help me to shed the false ideas
of who I am.
Let my lullaby
be Your voice of love.
Help me to rest
in Your arms of peace, O Lord,
knowing that I am fully known.
And let me, when I wake
remember who You ask me to be. Amen



Blessing

May the marks we leave
on each other this day,
be those of love, peace and grace. Amen

Inclusion**Meditation**

The greater the divisions we create,
the greater our efforts at unity.

You will be stakeholders in society
and pay off our luxurious debt.

When cracks widen to people-size,
we press for low-budget repairs.

What isn't improved by a smile,
by the appearance of tolerance!

Come on in! The door is wide open!
We'll be sure to bolt it behind us.

We stretch out our palms
to push you back to sea.

We dump a doormat, raise a sign.
You know you've been welcome.

Morning Prayer

This morning, as with all mornings,
I have power to discriminate
between love and hate,
between right and wrong,



between lesser evil and possible good,
between grey and grey.
It is impossible for me
never to make judgements.
It is often undesirable
to remain safely balanced
or cling to a rocking fence.
But may my choices be informed
by Your forgiving love;
may my prejudices be clear
and be overcome;
may my compassion be real
and not merely appear that way. Amen

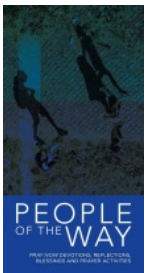
Evening Prayer

I wanted to include everyone.
I wanted to make room in the inn,
to unlock doors, to love the hateful,
to embrace the least embraceable.
But while it's easy for me to include
people like me and to use exactly
the right words of invitation,
my churchy welcome has sometimes
made people feel more alone
than when they really were alone.
Forgive me; give me warmth, integrity
and the courage to risk welcoming
all those whom people like me
would rather kept their distance. Amen



Blessing

All who gather
crumbs from Your table;
all who see themselves
as dogs, pigs, scroungers;
may Your words of love
be a blessing
as they sit down at Your feast. Amen



In addition to the above prayers, prepared by our contributor, other prayers may be found in *People of the Way* which is the theme for this year's Pray Now. It was also the theme for Heart and Soul 2016. *People of the Way* is available from [St Andrew Press](#).



Musical Suggestions

| | |
|---------|---------------------------------------|
| CH4 21 | Lord teach me all your ways |
| CH4 88 | Up from the depths I cry to God |
| CH4 485 | Dear Lord and Father of mankind |
| CH4 461 | How sweet the name of Jesus sounds |
| CH4 360 | Jesus Christ is waiting |
| CH4 710 | I have a dream |
| CH4 542 | Lord speak to me |
| CH4 500 | Lord of creation to you be all praise |



Additional Resources

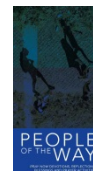
Resourcing Mission



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#). Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. If there is something you'd like to see on this new site, please [contact us](#) via the website.

Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. [People of the Way](#) is available from [St Andrew Press](#).



Music Resources

The hymns mentioned in this material are ideas of specific hymns you might choose for this week's themes. However, for some excellent articles on church music and ideas for new music resources, please check out our online music pages [Different Voices](#).

Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might preach this Sunday. [Preachers Perspectives](#) is a resource where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly.

Scots Worship Resources

[The Kirk's Ear](#) - Scots in the Kirk series for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other times of the year

[Wurship Ouk bi Ouk](#) - Metrical psalms, hymns, prayers and words for worship

[Scots Sacraments](#) may give you helpful material if you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism.

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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.

