

## Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

### Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 27 August 2023

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Faith Action Programme staff members Ashley Johnston, Naomi Dornan and Catriona Munro for their thoughts on the twelfth 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

When looking at this week's worship resources we were very aware of the balance needed in making sure that our three voices and understanding of the passages were heard when pulling together these resources. We each looked at the lectionary readings and discussed the themes and messages that became clear to us. While we did find that slight differences in how we approached the readings and themes, we found continuity in recognising a call for unity as God's people. People who are here by the grace of God, saved by God, loved by God and living for the glory of God.

We recognised also that the themes looked to could also well tie in with the back-to-school, starting college/university season that we find ourselves in, for which there are ample ways to involve all ages in worship.

We have looked to different sources for inspiration including commentaries, hymnaries, prayer and meditation when compiling this week's material. We hope that the thoughts and questions posed to you here can help you connect with what God is speaking to your congregation in this time and place through the scripture readings.

### [Exodus 1:8-2:10](#)

In this passage from Exodus, we find ourselves in an Egypt vastly different from the one where we left Joseph in Genesis. While only 70 members of Joseph's family came to Egypt we learn in verse 7 that, "The children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and grew exceedingly mighty; and the land was filled with them." But as the number of Israelites grew so did the fear, unrest and mistrust of the Egyptian people towards this growing population. Exodus opens with a picture of Israel under great oppression, ruled by a Pharaoh who does not know Joseph's solution to the earlier famine, nor indeed does he worship Joseph's God.

In an effort to ease his people's fear Pharaoh took a hard, defensive approach and enslaved the Israelite people in hopes that by limiting and curtailing their freedoms and forcing them into hard labour he would have control over them and limit the chance of a revolution or uprising. However, in verse 12, we read that Pharaoh's plan failed and that in fact their numbers continued to grow. Perhaps we can assume that Pharaoh expected their misfortune would lead to the loss of their prosperity. But he was wrong. While God has not yet been explicitly named so far in this book, those reading it now can clearly see God's presence throughout, in the hope and progress of the Israelite people.

When the enslavement of the Hebrew people was not an effective answer to his fears, Pharaoh instructed that all infant males be killed in order to further decrease the Hebrew population. While this is going on, we get an insight to the Hebrew midwives, who are ardent believers in God, and put their fear and trust in God before Pharaoh.

Upon hearing Pharaoh's command, "Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile", one Levite woman does just that. She takes her three-month-old son to the Nile, makes a basket and ensconces her child in the reeds of the river bank. Perhaps not quite what Pharaoh had in mind, and indeed were he to realise just what trouble this young baby might cause him in later years, we can reasonably assume he might not have been so welcoming of the idea that one of his daughters should give the baby to a Hebrew midwife to nurse.

While God's people have no earthly advantage against their oppressors, they did have a divine one. Pharaoh looked to himself for help, making his decisions out of fear and pride resulting in the failure of his plans. But the people of God revered (v21) and looked towards their defender and found hope and a future in God.

## [Psalm 124](#)

This psalm is entitled "The Song of Ascent. Of David" and imagines what would happen to the people of Israel if God wasn't their defender and refuge. The picture that David paints of a world without God is one of complete desolation. Throughout this passage, we hear David leading the people of Israel to recognise God's continuing help and to give their thanks for it.

In verses 1 and 2 David reminds the reader that God has been on Israel's side in the past and in doing so has seen their survival and existence as a people come through. Asking "what if God hadn't been on our side?" is a question that challenges people who have never had to experience a time without God, forcing them to imagine the alternative.

In verse 6 David commends that praise is given to God in recognition of God's steadfastness and blessings, encouraging the people of God to give back their thanks and gratitude.

Looking at this short psalm, the recognition of the necessity for us to turn to God in our time of need is clear; of the need for us to depend on God and look to our sustainer for guidance and protection. As God's people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we can take our lead in our times of uncertainty from David's advice in Psalm 124; recognising the difference that God

has made and continues to make in our lives, giving praise and glory to God for all that we have received, and to make God's impact in our lives known to others.

### **Romans 12:1-8**

This passage from Romans is a very well-known and well-used one within liturgy, usually focussing on the nature of teamwork that can, and should, be found within the Church and the family of Christ. However, outwith analogies of harmoniously working bodies there are other important points to notice within this rich piece of scripture.

In verse 2 we are encouraged as followers of Christ to live a renewed, transformed life; to think out of the box that society says we should stay in; to change direction and to discern and follow the path that God is laying out for us. This will not always be easy, and will surely challenge us at times, but it will lead us to an understanding of what is good and right, and pleasing to God.

In verse 3, we are reminded that we are no more worthy than any other. In fact, we have lived our lives in deficit, only being blessed by the grace of God and not through anything we have done to deserve it. In this verse we are asked to measure ourselves not in accordance to the world around us, but instead by God's measurements and the amount of faith that God has given us.

Verses 6-8 encourage us to recognise that which God has given us and to use it. Not in a way that will benefit us or the agenda that our world tells us we should be pursuing (wealth, fame or security). Instead, we should do what we have been called to do, whatever that may be, in a way that brings praise, glory and honour to the God who calls and sustains us. This might lead us into challenging or uncomfortable spaces. But in these spaces, we will be equipped by God with understanding of the right things to think, say and do; and we can, with skill and passion, be enough when measured by our faithfulness to the God who has called and sustains us.

### **Matthew 16:13-20**

In this passage, Jesus has moved with His disciples to Caesarea Philippi, an area away from Galilee and the crowds who have been following them. The location, as ever, plays a role. This was a significant area for a number of ancient and contemporary religions and was the site of a number of temples and caverns used for pagan worship. It is in this place that Jesus

asks the disciples how they define Him, to be assured that they recognise Him as the as the Messiah, Son of the living God.

His questions tell us it matters that the disciples should know Him. In Peter's response Jesus can see His teachings are safe as there is one who understands Him and will go out to spread these teachings.

A passage of firsts, this is the first time "church" is used in the Bible, and it is perhaps not insignificant that Jesus should chose this word, one which at that point had no religious connotations. (The Greek "ekklesia" means group, or called out group.)

Another first is that of Peter himself, the first believer, and upon whose understanding of the word the Church is built, with Jesus as the cornerstone.

There is a promise given in the passage, that Jesus will bring His people together in common, build a firm foundation, build something belonging to Him and build it into a stronghold. In this building, the forces of Hades and death will not conquer the Church. A striking promise in the discouraging times for the Church of today. If we look heavenward in our times of trial, the Kingdom keys will be ours.

## Sermon ideas

Throughout these passages there are many ideas to explore with our congregations, including identity – who we are as God's people and what that brings to our lives; God's deliverance – the need for us to turn to God in times of difficulty and uncertainty instead of other sources of help; unity – working together as God's people in the face of adversity; and journeying onwards – how we build a Church as a people who follow Jesus with our whole lives.

These questions might help you and your congregation to consider these themes more fully.

- What challenges are we facing today, as individuals or a church, that we can turn to God for help with?
- The Israelites were not living through particularly happy times. In the passage we get just a glimpse of the horrific circumstances they were living in. Can you imagine how it must feel to go through something like that alone? How much easier is it to bear bad times when you have your friends, family, and church family around you? The Hebrew women were women of great faith. They trusted in God, and in return, Moses was saved.

However great our problems may seem to us, that same God who saved Moses saves us too.

- Do we recognise that we are not alone in our struggles and that God is always with us and always in control?
- How do you identify yourself? Is that how others would recognise us? By asking His disciples how others know Him, Jesus is reinforcing the teachings He has been giving. He is assuring the Twelve of His confidence in them, preparing for the time ahead which will see them build the Church in His name.
- In the last couple of weeks some of us will have started school for the very first time. Others will be returning to school, perhaps with a different teacher or new classmates. Others yet might be preparing to start college or university in the coming weeks. In these places, how do we tell our friends, teachers and colleagues about ourselves?
- What did Jesus say Peter and the Disciples needed to build a Church? Is that the same for us in the Church of Scotland today? You may wish to ask your congregation to draw what these two churches could/should look like. These can be shared and discussed during or after the service.
- What are the paths and places that God is calling us to? Are we listening to God or are we resisting out of fear and ties to our society?
- Are we comfortable with measuring our lives against God's Grace and not against our World's expectations? How might this look in practice?
- Are we fully faithful to God, using the skills, gifts and blessings that we have been abundantly given for God's glory and Kingdom?

## Prayers

### Gathering prayer

Our hope is found in the name of God,

**Maker of Heaven and Earth.**

God's grace sustains us every day,

**Our God is on our side.**

We look to You and bring You praise,

**Praise be to God.**

### **Prayer of Confession**

God of kindness,  
We look to You when we are in times of trouble and difficulty.  
When we feel there is no one left on our side  
we pray that we remember our help is in Your name.

When we fall short of the mark,  
when our frustrations take over,  
and lead us to anger,  
help us to reach back to You,  
to find Your peace,  
and to know  
that our help is in Your name.

For the thoughts we have that go against You,  
for the words we use against others that cause hurt and bitterness,  
let us take comfort in knowing Your love is greater than all of our errors,  
and we thank You that our help is in Your name.

In times of distress,  
when our fears engulf us  
and we feel unable to cope with the challenges that lie before us,  
be our strength,  
Be our shield,  
be the reminder  
that our help is in Your name.  
Lord of heaven and earth,  
we give thanks that through everything we face  
You are on our side,  
we are not swept away,  
our snares will be broken  
because  
our help is in Your name.  
Amen.



## Prayer of Thanksgiving and intercession

*Before this prayer ask the congregation to write down a prayer, a worry, or a challenge that they have been holding, and struggling with onto a piece of paper. During this prayer they will be invited to physically hand this struggle over to God, in the understanding that God is with us in every high and low, and help can be secured when we look towards Heaven. You will need a receptacle for the prayers and you may wish to have some appropriate accompanying music for the interactive part of this prayer.*

Loving God,

You are a God of strength, of hope and of mercy.

You never leave or abandon us.

We thank You for the faithfulness You show towards us when we have not earned it.

We thank You that you are constant, good and true. You do not leave us.

We thank You that You have always been with Your people, giving them comfort and guidance.

You were with Your people in Egypt,

shining hope in the injustice of tyranny and hopelessness.

You were with Your people as they have struggled as a Kingdom, bringing deliverance and grace.

You were with Your people in the early church as they stepped out in faith, giving them courage and direction.

God, we thank You that You are the same God,

who walks with us in our challenging times giving us comfort, grace and hope.

God give us courage to step out in faith,

to live the lives You have called us to and not the one the world tells us to.

God give us the grace to recognise our need for support,

and not think we are better than others,

but rather to live fully embraced by Your undeserved grace.

God give us hope that no matter what we face,

or the difficulties that are dealing with right now,

that You are with us, holding us

and that if we turn our eyes on You we will find our way in truth and goodness.

*Invite those who have written prayers to hand their prayers and worries over to God...*

God, You are the same yesterday, today, tomorrow.

You here with us.

You carry us when we are weary, You give us rest, and You give us hope.

We pray that You take these prayers and the silent prayers of our hearts as we hand them over to You.

God, may we have faith in Your deliverance and timing.

Forgive us for when we pick up that which we have already laid at your feet.

You are good, and You are with us.

We thank You God.

Amen.

### **Closing Prayer**

As we leave this place, let us step out in faith,

Knowing that our ever-present God,

Creator of all, is on our side.

Amen

*or*

Living, loving God

We go from here, as people of Your church.

build us up as we go forth from Your holy word.

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 84 – “Now Israel may say, and that truly”
- CH4 85 – “Now let God’s people, let God’s Israel”

- CH4 161 – “O God, our help in ages past”
- CH4 204 – “I am the Church, you are the church”
- CH4 286 – “Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord”
- CH4 449 – “Rejoice! The Lord is King”
- “Joyful, Joyful, we adore thee” – Henry Van Dyke, 1907
- “You Never Let Go” – Matt Redman, 2006
- “Build Your Kingdom Here” – Rend Collective, 2012

## 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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