

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany – Year A

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany – 5 February 2023

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank members of the team who contributed to the material for 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.

Introduction.....	3
Isaiah 58:1-9a.....	3
Psalm 112:1-9	5
1 Corinthians 2:1-12	6
Matthew 5:13-20	7
Ideas for worship	7
Prayers	9
Musical suggestions	12
Reflecting on our worship practice	12
Useful links	14

Introduction

The readings throughout Epiphany draw out themes of renewal, the universal completeness of God's love embodied in the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles, and of welcome, inclusion and acceptance into God's family, through the story of Jesus' baptism.

This year we invited contributors with a pioneering perspective to come together and discuss how they might creatively respond to the lectionary readings, draw together any emerging themes and imagine how they might use them in the different types of settings and contexts in which they worship with others.

Those taking part in the conversations were:

Rev Chris Blackshaw: Pioneer Minister, Ayr Farming Support

Isobel Booth-Clibborn: CofS Children's Development Worker

Michelle Brown: Youth/Children/Families Worker, Portobello & Joppa

Rev Stuart Davidson: Pioneer Minister, Paisley North

Olive Drane: Fellow at St John's College Durham University and Affiliate Associate Professor of Practical Theology

Lesley Hamilton-Messer: Mission Development Manager, Faith Action Programme

Rev David McCarthy: former CofS Fresh Expressions Development Worker and author of *Seeing Afresh: Learning from Fresh Expressions of Church*

Maggie McTernan: Mission Pioneer Team Leader, Presbytery of Irvine and Kilmarnock

Lorraine Orr: Ministries Development Staff, Linlithgow St Michael's

Darren Philip: CofS National Stewardship Consultant

Sue Thomson: Educational Resources Consultant, Scottish Bible Society

Rev Peter Wood: Locum Minister and Pioneer & New Housing Co-ordinator for Lothian Presbytery

The themes that emerged from the conversation for this week's readings drew on the pioneering approach: active, intentional, ongoing listening. The call for living service to the community; a sense of corporate and mutual accountability and discipling.

[Isaiah 58:1-9a](#)

From a Fresh Expressions perspective, this passage has an emphasis on getting back to the heart of what being church is and what is at the heart of being God's people. There is a focus on relationships – often the temptation is to focus on practice and shoe-horn in the relationships. While this may look pious, it is actually empty because we have lost the

content. We should be focused on practices that centre on the core relationships that God gives us.

Fasting was a key practice at the time, and really tough. We tend to see the religiosity, but often overlook the physical difficulty of fasting. Shouting out about it shows there was a real sense of seeking and yearning for change. We might be challenged to consider – where is our desire for that commitment? There is a dynamic tension between fasting and the current harsh economic climate – should we be asking people to fast? Fasting is only worthwhile if we get the relationships right. This also helps highlight issues of justice and needs.

Our trust that God will provide helps us to help others – we can give away, knowing that God will provide. Faith and trust lead to fidelity and relationship.

In the final verses comes the assurance that God will support us continually. An image of a well-watered garden; where our relationship with God began. This promise is not just for us, but for all generations.

There is something to learn from the idea of wells. Those who established wells often showed exemplary commitment to the poor: look for wells or pilgrimage paths to wells in your locality. Wells are deep sources of water that go beyond short-termism, with a profound historical or geographical context, and they demonstrate that God provides rain and growth in Gods' own time and way.

If the fruit of our worship is not evident, then something is missing (see Psalm 85, "righteousness and peace have kissed"). The temptation is to look at getting worship right, or caring for the poor, but the point is that a longing for enthusiastic worship brings about a recommitment to caring for the poor. Can we see this in the worship our churches?

Do we see a huge yearning for God and sacrifice in other expressions of individual and corporate worship? What is the connection between our worship, seeking God in the world and our willingness to live out the beatitudes?

Crisis is often the catalyst, but is not the sustainer of action. What is our core motivation? We gain nothing if we do not have love, even if we give everything away. There needs to be mutual accountability, we need to be reoriented by God to be a Christ-centred community. Are we leaning on and trusting God in times of hardship?

Where are we as a whole church? Do we have a sense of needing God's guidance? What is the ultimate purpose of restoration, of rebuilding the foundations? It is so that the streets can be lived in, and relationships built, nurtured and lived out.

[Psalm 112:1-9](#)

This psalm picks up the themes from Isaiah of worship, praise and generosity.

Generosity is described as an overflow of God's love; generosity in praise, sharing who we are, our time and our money. We might ask – what brings us richness? Where are the wells that we are drawing from? It seems that the people are not afraid because their hearts are firm in the Lord and this relationship means they are not afraid of scarcity.

In verse 4 we are shown the people rising in the darkness as a light for justice: generosity when under pressure. They are gracious, merciful and righteous (but not self-righteous), conducting their affairs with justice. It is often easy to overlook our biases, we must look for the good that others have done, to be willing to be unpopular and identify the good in others. This continues the notion of God's impartiality.

The theme of darkness and light can be a difficult one to navigate, especially if it is made binary and dark is made the characteristic of that which is bad, and light the good. We can gain much from a deeper understanding of how nature responds to darkness. In February nature does not look to the sun, the life is concentrated in the roots, into the earth where things are formed in darkness. It is by no means a barren time. We can highlight the problematic duality between light and darkness by highlighting the work that is done in the dark. Seeds need to be buried deep into the dark, nurturing earth in order to bring life.

Look at the tenses used in the psalm: past, present and future. Look at what they have been doing and continue to do. This involves past, present and future and bears fruit. What do the wicked see? Testimony, action, faith, word and deed. They see it and gnash their teeth – reminding us that not everything will be plain sailing, even if their anger comes to nothing. Do we notice how this affects us?

It is easy to look at these actions as individuals, but how does it relate to our corporate identity? This is important when considering resources, and the riches that can be shared to bless the wider community.

1 Corinthians 2:1-12

The importance of taking time for discernment as a way of actively listening to God as well as our community and the wider world is highlighted for us. The passages all show a pioneering approach, to adopt active, intentional, ongoing listening and a sense of corporate and mutual accountability. Who is involved in discernment in our churches?

Paul is urging us not to rely on words – to think about the spiritual rather than the religious. Do not tell me about your model, show me how it is lived out. We need the physical evidence rather than the theories. Worship cannot just be about the sermons, so what does that mean in our context?

God's wisdom is hidden. There is important work being done in the darkness, as in the psalm. It can be liberating to be assured that mission is the work of God; *Missio Dei* does not depend on our performance as Christians – God is at work and it is up to us to join in that work. The Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. There is a real call to radical integrity and honesty, both as individuals and as a community. We need to be really honest about our intentions and our temptations, showing purity and integrity.

There is a contrast between worldly wisdom and words, and the Spirit's guidance, direction and revelation. We get a glimpse of innate wisdom; a deeper knowing and wisdom. We are also given a reality check that we need to equip people with realistic expectations – not everyone will accept or rejoice in what we proclaim and live out. There will be challenges and resistance, what we do will be seen as foolishness.

We need to be mindful of the spirit of the world and the Spirit from God: Does the Church need to be *relevant* to our culture, or should we be *sensitive* to it? Sometimes being relevant is to deny the wisdom and call of God. We are encouraged to be countercultural – imitating Christ rather than merely giving information about Him. God is prepared for those who love God. We need to be motivated by love as well as hope, allowing us to share with confidence, not just gritting our teeth. Are we living out future holiness in the present? Is our sense of hope shared by other generations? We need to be true to ourselves when talking to others. Many young people have a general sense of hopelessness or sense of a deeper truth, while others are incredibly committed. How can their deep aspiration be understood within the framework of the love of God, and not be hijacked by a different philosophy? We need to talk about and demonstrate listening to the wisdom of the Spirit.

[Matthew 5:13-20](#)

We need to recognise that the Church can be seen as self-righteous, that our 'body language' is how we are seen by others and we need to take that into account. We need to be visibly compassionate and generous and ensure the light we bring to the world is not seen as dehumanising, or shrill, and that we are not perceived as non-inclusive, or more 'anti' than 'pro' things.

Many people are reluctant to engage with services because they are held in the church. How can we respond with humility and show our intentions. Is the church the bushel basket or the lampstand from which the light shines and overflows into the community?

Testimony is important – we need to share our stories so that others may see and give glory. This helps to communicate a focus on God first, which gives us the reason to go to do good works. We are reminded that Jesus did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfil it. The current context of reflection in our society of our past and of how we look on our history – Empire, for example, and how to remember its controversial figures while not erasing our history. How do we acknowledge the shadows within the whole trajectory of history? And how do we look at things in a new light?

There are ways of welcoming people into worship and into doing social justice. We need to be reminded that we *are* the light of the world, and to have the confidence to know we are in Christ and are the people for this time.

How can we be authentic so that despite our frailty, our hope shines through? We have to be honest about our intentions from the start, not using our engagement with the community as back-door evangelism, 'doing good' just to create disciples. There is a fine line between saying who we are and living it out. We need to be honest about who we are and our beliefs, but not to push our view onto anyone. When we are comfortable with ourselves and our own intentions, our 'body language' improves, in both our Individual and corporate prayer. We must pray that God's Spirit picks up on our actions and opens people's hearts. We must be intentional, while acknowledging God's role, otherwise we are dislocated from our relationship with God.

Ideas for worship

The ideas below can be adapted for use in various formats – as prompts and questions to help you form a sermon or reflection; for conversation starters; or to encourage the sharing of stories and prayers. The practitioners involved in our Epiphany conversations meet in

many different contexts which invite new types of worship. We encourage you to think not simply about taking traditional church practices into different places and spaces, but to consider what imaginative responses to the lectionary passages might be inspired by the place and space in which you choose to gather. Experiment with taking the focus away from the sermon, encourage or ask specific people to share, participate and lead. How can we normalise worship that is not front-led? What new ways can we explore to experience the word when it is not written or read? How might you empower people to pray in different ways – not just with words, but through walking, or engaging with nature, or through creating together.

- Readings can become a story-sharing framework. A healthy response to the readings is to share small stories – everyone’s story is important; unfinished, or partial, all stories are important. Stories of hope, new beginnings, sharing bread with the hungry, clothing the naked, etc. Sharing how we are living out in the world
- What are we being called to be fasting from? How are we actually being hungry, not just helping the hungry?
- What wells are we drawing from? You could go to find a well, or well-tended garden and look into its background/history and how it has benefitted the community
- Darkness / light – What is God doing in times of darkness? As nourishment is drawn from the ground in the darker days of winter, what might we notice in terms of where we draw nourishment – in obvious ways like the sun, and in hidden or grounded ways, through our roots?
- **Table conversation**
Mapping your community – It can be helpful to draw a map of your area with a few landmarks or significant places included. Invite conversations about:
 - Where are the points of light in your community?
 - Where are things growing, where do things need tending?
 - How does this apply to us, how can we water, care, tend our communities?
 - Actively identify next steps and pray about what has been discussed.
- **Activities**
 - Make some candles out of beeswax – How can we be moulded by God to then go and be the light elsewhere. Hold an event such as a candle-lighting service outside the church so that people do not have to go inside if they feel uncomfortable doing so.
 - Body language – How can we, as the Church, show ourselves to be playful, creative, providing and accepting hospitality within our communities?

Themes from this week's conversation

During our conversations, the themes noted below began to emerge from the readings.

- Call to action – lots of verbs in the lectionary readings
- The knowledge of God's faithfulness sustains us and gives us courage to act
- Relationships – through Jesus, God, with one another locally, the church universal, the world, through mission. Relationships should set the agenda for our practice
- Lean first on God for strength: Do we get too caught up in our own worries to see God? How do we get relationships right to go out into the world with the light, to share our faith? This passage comes at the darkest time of the year, at a difficult time for our society
- Generosity – an overflowing of God's love and impartiality/even-handedness
- The pioneering approach: active, intentional, ongoing listening. The call for living service to the community; a sense of corporate and mutual accountability and discipling

As you consider the texts we invite you to notice:

What in the text really piqued your interest or curiosity?

Where did your curiosity lead you?

What questions arose that might help you to shape your material (and could they be helpful for those who are gathering)?

What context is worship happening in, and how might what you use to draw closer to God be shaped imaginatively by particular that context?

Prayers

The gathering and sending prayers throughout the Season of Epiphany have been written by Liz Crumlish, Assistant Curate at St Oswald's Scottish Episcopal Church, Maybole, along with a reflective prayer to use each week. We have included some points that you might like to consider when writing the prayers to use in your own context.

Finding the words to pray

My prayers often emerge as poems. When I sit with the texts, I try to discern how I have seen God at work – in the people around me, in the news stories I have seen or heard. And I reflect on how the texts speak into the work to which God calls, for this moment in time, in the knowledge that we are part of that great communion of saints – who were, who are – and are yet to come.

I also spend some time reflecting on what is the difference we are called to be in this moment in history?

Phrases from the poems then often find a place in the prayers that I offer in worship. I hope they will provide something to help you find words to pray.

Gathering prayer for the Season of Epiphany

May Your star pause over this place of worship,
illuminating Your truth and justice.

Confront us anew with Your call
to look for power in lowly places
and to bring our gifts to worship.
You, who are long gone from the stable,
but present in every place and time –
God with us.

Reflective prayer for 5 February

Following Jesus
is not about finding ourselves,
or even seeking the meaning of life.
It is about opening our eyes to the world around us,
to see the need of our neighbour,
to pick up on the unspoken cues
the longing behind the smile
the spark that is no longer there,
extinguished when hope took flight.

It is about recognising our kinship
with the man and his dog
begging on the city steps,
or the young woman
sitting in the shop doorway,

or the elderly veteran
whose once proud bearing
is now stooped and dejected.

Following Jesus
does not require us to travel far physically,
but to take huge steps
in our understanding
of our sisters and our brothers
who make this pilgrimage with us.
To bear their burdens
and lighten the load
with love and grace
lived out in mercy and compassion,
with steps more faltering than sure
and a hunger born of justice.

Is not this the fast that God chooses?

Sending prayer for the Season of Epiphany

May we follow Your light into all the darkness of the world,
overthrowing the old and tired ways,
fighting for justice,
forging paths to peace,
loving those it's hard to love,
knowing You go before us and call us to follow.

Creating the space for prayer

What does your worship gathering need in terms of prayer? Are there traditions or new or emerging practices during worship that act as catalysts for prayer or reflection, or that create spaces for confession and assurance, or praying for others?

Consider how you might create and hold the space for some of these prayers to emerge, as well as how this experience is framed for those present. Are there cues you can take from your context, whether in a particular environment (outdoors, café-style gathering, etc.) that would help people move into a particular moment or practice, or help them create something meaningful in this time together?

What words or actions might help those who are present to express something of their faith/spirituality to create a moment of praise, or provide an opportunity to pray for others and the communities they represent?

Might those gathered be able to share their story and experience, and hear the hopes and concerns of others? How can all of this be shaped into or recognised as prayer for the worshipping community?

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.

- A suggested [playlist of songs for the Season of Epiphany](#) can be found online
- You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

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'.
- While singing in our congregations is still 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., but reproduction for commercial purposes is not permitted.

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.