

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – Year A

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – 29 January 2023

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

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

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 consider the past, present and future, and give clear examples of how God wants us to live and act.

[Micah 6:1-8](#)

The focus in this passage is on what God really wants, not on what people *think* God wants. Mercy and humility are difficult concepts to understand, especially for children – we might need to begin by explaining what they mean, or exploring together a deeper understanding of what they might be. We also need to remember where we have come from and where we are now, so placing this passage in the bigger Bible story is a good way to help unpack ideas around it.

This takes place in Gilgal, before the Israelites reached the Promised Land. We are getting a glimpse of God's expectations / promises for us. We see the heart of God. Where are we just now, in this time of preparation before we see justice and equity realised?

The tone of the passage suggests that we need to stop waiting for God to tell us what to do – we already know what the expectations are, so we should stop looking for an easy way out and get on and do what we have been told. There are lots of active verbs: love, walk with, etc. We have to know and to do. This feels contemporary; stop trying to outdo each other, and look to see what really matters. We need to act to see justice. Loving brings kindness and generosity. Walking humbly and treading lightly involves us in the bigger picture, we are part of Creation, of the bigger picture – it is not just people who need equity, but all of God's Creation.

The reality is that God knows what is best for us and if we are not living the right way we need to talk about it. We also need to recognise that things are changing, but at the same time to remember, or perhaps rediscover the old ways.

The Lord is not interested in extravagant gifts – this feels very contemporary. We see what God values in us – not our achievements or accumulated wealth. This is a freeing but powerful message that all you have to do is to live and live rightly. But we also have to act, to step outside our comfort zone. It is not just about being a good person, it is a call to inclusion. We need to act and then look at the outcome of our actions.

[Psalm 15](#)

This is a very hopeful passage, starting with a very important question: Who can abide in your tent? We need to make space for everyone and all of Creation, for anyone who chooses to live in God's ways and once they are there, they can dwell there forever, they will never be moved. Where do we find God's presence? Where is the Lord's sanctuary? Are we tied to our buildings rather than expansive, flexible and moveable tents? Hills, mountains, nature are a focal point of Israelite worship. How often do we find that taking worship outdoors helps people to connect to God better/differently than in a church building?

We are reminded that our standards come from God. We must look at where our focus is and not allow our moral standards to become eroded by society. We can worship with God, we cannot be that close to God. We are given specific pointers; to small, everyday actions (gossiping, quarrelling with your neighbour), not life's big milestones. They apply to all of us.

They point to the commandment to love God with all our hearts, and living blamelessly points us towards Jesus.

The actions are simple, as in Micah, but not simplistic. They are active verbs, walk, do, speak – not passively abstaining from something. They are very embodied, recognising our humanity, and making it easier for us to understand and engage with. Lending money at interest is challenged. We often overlook how much money and the relief of debt features in the Hebrew scriptures. We should not let money stand in the way of our relationship with God, but it can have such a hold over us and provoke anxiety and fear, or make us act in ways we would not normally choose. It is very embodied and contemporary. How do we encourage people to embody generosity, moving beyond it being an abstract concept in our prayers?

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

This passage upends worldly expectations – Christ crucified looks more like defeat than victory, but it was so powerful. Power is found in the Gospel; we know our value in God's eyes. We must remember that God's way of thinking is not our way of thinking. God offers what the world cannot and questions the value we place on things. God considers to be foolish what the world thinks is wise.

There is playful language of wisdom and foolishness throughout this passage. We are invited by the text to imagine what is meant by God's foolishness, God's weakness. It overturns our usual expectations. The world's perception of vulnerability is in contrast with God's value system. It has nothing to do with our own strength or status, in fact simplicity is the key – we do not need worldly recognition, and this can be freeing and comforting.

Matthew 5:1-12

Again we are reminded that God's way of thinking and acting is different from ours, as we see the radical upside-downness of God's law. The beatitudes are descriptive of God's mind and Jesus' heart. These are the Kingdom values, giving us a view into God's world. The beatitudes provide a powerful example of how we should live and gives us a much-needed perspective on how the world should be and what we need to work toward. Jesus goes up a mountain for greater perspective, to be closer to God. There is clarity in both the withdrawing and the desire to be more in tune with God.

Note the different aspects / issues that Jesus describes: He refers to those who are in a particular situation, who are physically suffering, and those actively doing something. He describes circumstances that may have been made by choice or imposed. The blessings are both present and future. The kingdom is now and not yet. These words are calling us back to the OT message of heartfelt obedience. Jesus looks out into the crowd and sees people who were poor, oppressed, and He recognises and validates them.

It is also worth noting that the pure in heart can often be understood as pious, but it can also be translated as having as a purity of intention, an undivided longing after God. What might this understanding open up for us as we seek to live out our worship? The poor in spirit can equally be translated as the spirit of the poor – how might this understanding impact the focus of our mission and our response within our communities?

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.

What does it mean to see God?

The passages all highlight the things that draw or invite us into the presence of God.

Today is the Sunday after Burns' Night, and you might like to refer to the poem, "To a Louse."

*"O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us!"*

How does God see us?

We read in Micah and Matthew that God sees both the positive and the negative in us. How powerful is it to know that we're *#Blessed*, regardless of who we are and where we come from?

- Have a selection of distorting glasses, old prescription glasses, or make some with coloured lenses, etc. and invite people to look through them – and imagine what the world would look like if we saw through God's eyes.

The Corinthians passage points out that God made us pure through Christ's death. Christ was blameless, and the best example of a human.

How does God want us to live?

How might you explore the different ways that fulness of life in God might be more than you ever imagined. The best life is one that includes and welcomes everyone.

- Have a conversation or make up a game based on *#LivingMyBestLife* or *#Blessed*. For example use pictures of what we might think of as living our best life and ask people to rank them.
- Lead an imaginative contemplation of what a community that walks humbly looks like.
- To demonstrate God's upside-down kingdom, try to do a handstand – it's difficult!

Themes from this week's conversation

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

- Are you living your life as God wants you to?
- How can we draw near to God?
- What is the result of living the best life God calls us to?
- Calls to action – an invitation to respond
- Remembering the law (looking back for wisdom) *alongside* the radical overturning of the old ways. God's way of acting and thinking is different from ours. God's upside-down way is higher
- Inclusion/inclusiveness
- Mountains and nature (for perspective) bring us closer to God, where God hears us
- The overarching theme of living life as God wants us to live

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

Additional resources

Stop and Go song: Yancy <https://youtu.be/uE6ilddzjd8>

Christian Aid Walking Humbly podcast <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/walking-humbly/id1611561523>

Sigur Koder – The Folly of God (Stations of the Cross)

Prayers

Liz Crumlish, Assistant Curate at St Oswald's Scottish Episcopal Church, Maybole, has written the gathering and sending prayers throughout the Season of Epiphany, 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 29 January

The Servant
bringing justice –
not by force
or by power,
but by gentle persistence.

Stealth that creeps in,
undoing centuries of wrong
overturning layers of tradition
unearthing goodness buried deep
ground down by harshness
lost in the depths of holiness
but there for the finding
and ready to be brought to the surface.

Grasped and gently nourished
coddled into fullness of life
unable to resist the pull of love
that elicits the response of justice held out.

Fragile
Vulnerable
Life giving
Life changing

Justice wrought not by force, but by love.

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.

Additional prayer suggestions

Prayer based on Micah 6:1-8

Create a prayer activity around the three parts of the last verse:
to do justice,
to love kindness,
to walk humbly with God.

For example, use three flipchart pads with these headings on them and a supply of that day's newspapers, inviting people to cut out stories or headlines of situations where we could act/pray for justice, give thanks for kindness and notice God's presence and stick them to the appropriate poster. This in itself is prayer, but perhaps what is created could be shaped into prayers for the gathering.

Prayer based on Psalm 15

Create an active prayer that uses the parts of the body mentioned in the Psalm:

Feet – perhaps an action that relates to walking/pilgrimage, or consider where you have been this week and how you acted and interacted.

Heart – perhaps consider how we are feeling, or how we have shown love.

Tongue – what might we say, how might we say it.

Eyes – what have we seen that we are thankful for, concerned about, or perhaps ask the Holy Spirit to help us notice what we might pray for.

Prayer based on Matthew 5:1-12

The following prayer is from the Stewardship Team's *Exploring Generosity: Vision* resource and might be useful:

Blessed are we when the weight of daily life becomes too much to bear. When our lack of money, time, or love keeps us awake long into the night. May God bless us with calm minds and still spirits and a sure knowledge of God's love for us.

Blessed are we when our bodies fail us. When our pain envelops us, when disease invades us, when our minds betray us. May God bless us with healing and comfort.

Blessed are we when our souls cry out in grief. When it feels as though the weight of loss will crush our very being. May God cradle us and bless us with love.

Blessed are we when we see the world as it is: filled with pain, and injustice, and suffering. When we feel despair at how far the world is from God's vision. May God bless us with courage and determination.

Blessed are we in our imperfection. May God bless us with the eyes to see each other as God sees us.

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.

Micah and the Psalm both mention walking with God. There are a number of good hymns where those who are able could be invited to walk around the sanctuary as they are sung, for example:

- CH4 539 – “I want Jesus to walk with me”
- CH4 516 – “We are marching in the light of God”
- CH4 803 – “Sizohamba naye / We will walk with God” (in One is the Body)
- 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](#)

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