

## **Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A**

### **Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – 23 July 2023**

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev Peter Nimmo, Minister, Cambuslang Parish Church, for his thoughts on the eighth 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](#).

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

There are hints of trauma and trouble in all our readings. Strange dreams (as with Jacob) are often a sign of psychological or spiritual uneasiness. The authors of both psalms need to know the presence of God. The prophet in Isaiah 44:8 feels the need to reassure the people of the reality and power of Israel's God. St Paul is worried about the temptation to 'fall back' in times of suffering. There is an enemy at work in the community for which Matthew has collected his parable.

Yet even in troubling times, God is at work, for even as creation groans, God's work of redemption is underway (Romans 8). There is uprooting, but there is also planting, and there are seeds of hope, even if there is judgement.

The Lectionary after Pentecost gives us an interesting choice – there are two sets of readings from the Hebrew Scriptures. One of the Old Testament readings is based on a 'semi-continuous' approach from week to week; the other reading, in a more traditional manner, is governed by the Gospel theme for the day. In both cases, there are appropriate psalms provided. The Gospel and Epistle readings are also semi-continuous.

So, the choice for this Sunday is:

Genesis 28:10-19 with Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24; or Isaiah 44:6-8 with Psalm 86:11-17  
and

Romans 8:12-25 and Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

The semi-continuous approach to the Old Testament readings allows a congregation to follow the sweep of the narrative. In the past I have used that approach, but paired it with another New Testament reading, usually from the main Gospel for the year (it is Matthew this year). There are no rules in this! For summer is often a time when we preachers perhaps enjoy a bit more freedom, away from the expectations of major festivals and congregational moments. The semi-continuous approach could help both preacher and congregation appreciate the sweep of the Genesis narrative, or, indeed, the argument of St Paul in the Letter to the Romans.

### [Genesis 28:10-19](#) and [Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24](#)

Last week, the Lectionary journey through Genesis began on a cycle of stories about Jacob. This story is the famous tale of his dream at Bethel. With the Coronation a recent memory, many Scottish churchgoers will be reminded of the Stone of Scone, which legend maintains was 'Jacob's Pillow'. There is, however, no king-making in our text. Instead, there is a

promised land for the nation to which Jacob belongs (the children of Abraham and Isaac – 28:13).

The name Jacob means ‘trickster’ – and Jacob has previously unashamedly stolen by trickery both the birthright and the father’s blessing which properly belonged to his brother Esau. It’s odd that the trickster is the one to whom this mysterious vision, with its promises to his descendants, is given. But God is always free to act as God will.

The freedom of God to do what God wills with any of us is a theme in the psalm. God pursues Jacob, not because of his character, but because God has a purpose, and will keep the promises to Abraham no matter what. Like Jonah, we may try to avoid God’s will for us (Jonah 1), but God will pursue us to the ends of the earth if need be. Am I humble enough to let God ‘lead me in the way everlasting’ (Psalm 139:24)?

### [Isaiah 44:6-8](#) with [Psalm 86:11-17](#)

The short text from Second Isaiah is a reminder of just who God is, addressed to a community which is coming to terms with war and exile in Babylon. Imagine the trauma of the millions around the world today who have experienced being uprooted in such a horrific way – what would we have to say, for example, to the Ukrainian children kidnapped by Russia? Israel is addressed here as ‘Jeshurun’, a rare poetic term for Israel, meaning ‘the upright one’ (Isaiah 44:2 NRSV – see Deuteronomy 32:15, etc.); but the people of Israel must have felt bowed down at this point. But their prophet tells them that their identity is not fundamentally that of a broken, exiled people. They are the nation chosen by Yahweh, besides whom the gods of the Babylonian oppressors are as nothing. It is a tremendous confession of the reality and power of God. And so, even in the face of scorn, oppression and violence, Israel’s God shows steadfast love and faithfulness to God’s people, offering healing and comfort (Psalm 86).

### [Romans 8:12-25](#)

Paul to the Romans uses his familiar antithesis of ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit’ – contrasting ways of life. He does not deny that we who claim to be ‘in Christ’ often find it a battle, especially in times of conflict and suffering. Paul is at one with the rest of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures in that he never denies the reality and power of suffering and evil in the world. Scripture is much more than fridge-magnet phrases!

But somehow, through all the pain and evil, God is redeeming this groaning world and all its people. With this move, Paul puts our personal, inner conflicts into a cosmic theatre – flesh and spirit are at war in the wider creation, too. Paul says that the creation is ‘in bondage to decay’ – what does that say about our role in the environmental decaying of the planet? And Paul also promises ‘the redemption of our bodies’ – what might that mean to someone living with chronic pain?

### [Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43](#)

The reading is from section of his Gospel in which Matthew has gathered together a number of parables dealing with growth, together with some commentary on them. The structure of 13:1-43 is complex, and it’s useful to a preacher see the passages in context (I’ve put them in **bold**):

- 13.1-9        The Parable of the Sower – a parable told to a large crowd
- 13.10-17    Asked by His disciples. Jesus explains His use of parables
- 13.18-23    Still speaking to the disciples, Jesus explains the Parable of the Sower
- 13.24-30    The Parable of the Weeds**
- 13.31-32    The Parable of the Mustard Seed
- 13.33        The Parable of the Yeast
- 13.34-35    Matthew’s thoughts on Jesus’ use of parables.
- 13.36-43    Jesus explains the Parable of the Weeds**

Note that the Parable of the Weeds is unique to Matthew; that it is addressed to the disciples, and not the wider public; that there are other parables around and among the Lectionary texts; there is also reflection on parables generally and on the meaning of these particular parables in the wider section. While a preacher will probably not need to explain all this to a congregation, still we should be careful that in uprooting what we think are the good bits, we might be missing important context (see verse 29!).

Years ago, someone pointed out to me that nowhere does Jesus tell us that we humans are called to ‘build’ the Kingdom of God. These parables of growth remind us that the Kingdom (or Realm) of God is something which is all the work of God – although we might have a role in nurturing the growth. We are not so much builders as gardeners! (You could ponder hymn CH4 343, mentioned below)

However, alongside the shoots of God at work, there are weeds which often threaten to overwhelm. On God’s providence – and mercy – the weeds are allowed as well. Judgement will come one day, but it will be God’s judgement, an eschatological decision about who

and what was acceptable to God, solely God's decision, for justice is God's along (Romans 12.19f).

## Sermon ideas

Being uprooted can be a traumatic experience, as the people of Israel knew (see the notes on Isaiah 44 above). It will also be an experience known by many in our congregations. Who in your congregation has moved from their place of birth, voluntarily or otherwise? Do you have refugees or immigrants, or even people struggling to make it in the big city or in an unfamiliar part of their own country, having moved for work or study?

How many of your folk feel that, even if they have lived in the same community for a long time, that much has been uprooted and changed in their lifetime? I remember once someone from the East End of Glasgow trying to explain to me where the church they had grown up had been – but the very streets they once knew have now been swept away. That feeling of rootlessness and dislocation is what populist and extremist politicians often play on, encouraging people to feel that newcomers and social change that is difficult to understand is putting cultural identity and community cohesion at risk. Such rhetoric results in hatred towards people of other nationalities who themselves have been uprooted by violence or poverty, so that people already traumatised are further traumatised in a place they thought they would be safe. Sadly, such rhetoric even comes from people who profess to follow Christ.

So the man who sowed the seed in our parable cautions against harsh measures (Matthew 13:29). For does not the God we worship – the cosmic God who knows the trauma of all creation, and of all us people – want us to be gentle with one another? Our God is 'merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness' (Psalm 86.15) to all whom God has created. Those who know the depths of God's love, and the majesty of the God of all creation (which unworthy Jacob glimpsed in his dream) should be ready to put mercy and love first.

## Prayers

### Call to worship (*Romans 8.15 GNB*)

By the Spirit's power we cry out to God,  
"Father! my Father!"

Let us worship God.

**Prayer of approach and confession**

Lord of creation,  
who inspired the dreams of our mothers and fathers –  
we come to worship You today.

For You, God, existed before all creation.  
You, God, travelled with patriarchs and prophets and disciples,  
and with all our mothers and fathers in the faith.  
You, God, have travelled with each of us.  
Even when we turned away and ignored You  
Your creative power has supported us.

You are a loving God,  
and so, we can confess to You  
that we are not always faithful to You,  
and that we do not always love our neighbours as ourselves.

You offer us divine dreams  
of Your reign of peace and plenty for all people  
which too often seem overwhelmed  
by human nightmares of war and famine.

Loving God, forgive us our sins,  
and set us anew on the path You dream for us.

*Silence*

Scripture says that

the Spirit... comes to help us, weak as we are (*Romans 8:26 GNB*)

Send Your Spirit to fill us all  
with hope, love and joy  
that we might set free to be God's children in the world.  
We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

**Prayer of the Day/ Collect**

O God of Jacob,  
You speak in the light of day  
and in the dark of night  
when our sleeping is filled with dreams  
of heaven and earth.  
May Jacob's vision remind us to be open and watchful,  
ready to discover Your presence in our midst. Amen.

*(Revised Common Lectionary Prayers copyright © 2002 Consultation on Common Texts)*

**Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession**

A congregational response may be used:

*Merciful and gracious God*  
***Hear our prayer***

Creator God,  
we thank You that You are closer to us than our next breath;  
that You know us better than we know ourselves  
that Your love for all of us, and for all Your children  
is deeper and higher and broader than we can ever imagine.  
We thank You for all Your blessings to us  
and that You are close to us in all our joys and sorrows.  
We thank You for Jesus Christ,  
that His life of care and mercy for those in need  
His preaching of forgiveness  
and His death and resurrection  
speak to us of Your love for the world  
and for each one of us.

Hear our prayers for the Church and the world.

May Your church be a place of mercy and forgiveness.  
May all who are distressed find in the Christian community  
the peace and comfort which You offer all people.

We pray for all who are seeking to plant  
new initiatives of faith and service in the Church.



We pray for those faithful folks  
who struggle to see green shoots  
amid the weeds which seem to often choke the work of the Church.

Merciful and gracious God  
**Hear our prayer**

We thank You for those who supply us  
with the necessities of life,  
especially, today, we pray for farmers and all who bring us our food.  
We pray for fair trading systems  
to ensure that those who produce food  
are given a just reward for their labours.  
We pray for those in our communities  
who struggle to feed their families  
and for an economic system which is fair to them, too.

Merciful and gracious God  
**Hear our prayer**

We pray for doctors,  
both those who look after our bodies  
and those who tend minds.  
We thank You for all who work in healthcare  
especially at this time of stress on the health service  
We pray for all who are ill  
or who have long term ill health:  
for those who suffer from pain in their bodies  
and those who suffer in mind and spirit.  
Bring them healing and a better quality of life.

Merciful and gracious God  
**Hear our prayer**

We pray for all victims of war and violence,  
and those driven from their homes because of hatred  
or uprooted by poverty to seek new lives elsewhere.  
May Your people always be welcoming  
to those who are new among us

even if they are very different from us.  
May those who claim to be Christians  
never stoke up hatred and division in our communities.

Merciful and gracious God  
**Hear our prayer**

We pray for those who have been recently bereaved  
for those who mourn for loved ones long gone, but not forgotten;  
and for those who feel that they have lost  
something else important in their life –  
a sense of belonging, an opportunity denied, a road not taken.  
May they all know that they can never be far from Your love.

Merciful and gracious God  
**Hear our prayer**

We pray for leaders, in our community, in our nation, and around the world.  
Give them wisdom, keep them honest,  
and may they care for all the people whom they are called to serve.

Merciful and gracious God  
**Hear our prayer**

Hear us as, in silence, we remember  
people and situations which are close to our hearts today.

*Silence*

Merciful and gracious God  
**Hear our prayer**

Faithful God  
may we all keep close to You, as You are always close to us  
looking for ways to nurture the coming of Your Kingdom  
and always faithful to our Saviour, Jesus Christ  
in whose Spirit we bring these prayers. Amen.

## Dismissal and Blessing (*Romans 8.14*)

All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

Brothers and sisters, we are all children of God.

So go in peace,

and be led by the Spirit!

The blessing of God,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

be with you all. Amen.

*Further Lectionary-based prayers can be found at*

<https://peterwnimmo.co.uk/category/lectionary-prayers/>

## 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 96 – “You are before me, God, you are behind” – Pitt-Watson’s much-loved version of Psalm 139 is an obvious candidate for this week’s praise list.
- CH4 132 – “Immortal invisible God only wise” – a traditional hymn of glory of God’s glory, reminiscent of Isaiah’s confession of who God is and the depths of God’s love in Psalm 139
- CH4 136 – “God’s will for creation” – a hymn about God’s promised renewal of creation (Romans)
- CH4 189 – “Be still, for the presence of the Lord” – a popular worship starter
- CH4 196 – “Come, now is the time to worship” – another popular worship starter which reminds us we can come to God as we are

- CH4 233 – “Come, ye thankful people, come” – not just for Harvest Thanksgiving!
- CH4 241 – “Isaiah the prophet has written of old” – another song about God’s renewal of creation
- CH4 268 – “O God of Bethel” – An appropriate starter if you are using Genesis 28
- CH4 343 – “The reign of God, like farmer’s field” – a song of those Matthean seed growth parables!
- CH4 623 – “Here in this place” – a song all about life in Christ, and the promise of the Kingdom
- CH4 691 – “Be still my soul” – another hymn of confidence in God
- CH4 737 – “Will your anchor hold?” – a more traditional affirmation of God’s presence in stormy times
- CH4 798 – “The peace of the earth be with you” – peace from God for all creation
- Complete Mission Praise 12753 – “Even though I walk through the valley (You never let go)” – affirming the constant presence of God even in times of struggle

## 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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