

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 19 August 2018

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Scott McKenna, Minister of Mayfield Salisbury Parish Church, Edinburgh, for his thoughts on the thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost.

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.

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Introduction

These diverse readings focus on the heart, on our inner relationship with the Eternal. What lies in the heart, the desires of the heart, is to be nourished and cultivated. Our spiritual life is to be given our utmost attention. While we will have people and things that are central to our life, the centre of our life is God. Each writer for today centres on the heart, on the inner spiritual life. Following Augustine, we are to look at life, at Scripture, with 'the eye of the heart and the ear of the mind'. God is not external to us but is 'seen' and 'felt' within us, in our divine intuition. Many of the great stories in Scripture are inner visions, including dreams. This is true of Adam, Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Jesus, the disciples and Paul.

1 Kings 2:10–12; 3:3-14

King David is remembered as a successful king, who reigned for 40 years. Forty is a commonly used biblical number. Moses and the people of Israel journeyed through the wilderness for 40 years. Jesus was tested in the desert for 40 days. The Church has carried on this pattern with its 40 days of Lent. The number suggests completeness.

The LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream. Dreams are common in Scripture. Typically, they describe an inner, mystical experience of the Sacred. We find dreams in Genesis (Joseph) and in Matthew (Joseph). Following the reading of Scripture or in deep meditation, people may encounter God in their dreams. Equally, dreams are a way of writing which suggests deep personal experience of God.

David is honoured because he walked in faithfulness and uprightness of heart. In so many ways, David failed morally but in the end, having journeyed through his personal wilderness, he found himself closer to God, intimate with the Divine. Solomon too desires to walk in the ways of God, to have an understanding and discerning mind.

This passage suggests a closeness between David, Solomon and God. Each in their own right, the kings were friends with God, companions. Their encounters (in dreams, at night in the darkness) suggest union, oneness. The kings desired to think the thoughts of God, to think those thoughts as their own. Elsewhere in Scripture, Samuel and Nicodemus also encountered the Eternal at night, in the dark. Taken together, these stories suggest the importance of reading Scripture at night, allowing ourselves to dream of God; letting ourselves enter the biblical scene and letting God enter in a fresh way our own story.

Psalm 111

In similar manner to Ephesians (below), we are to praise God with our whole heart. This psalm is to be sung with everything we have: the worshipper delights in the LORD. It expresses all that God has done for the psalmist and the nation; the psalm is both individual and communal.

It is an acrostic poem: in Hebrew, each line begins with the appropriate letter of the alphabet and most lines have no more than three words, four at most. It is a song sung at a festival. It is deeply personal. The term 'whole heart' may be suggestive of the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6: 4 – 6):

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.
You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your might.
Keep these words that I am commanding you today
in your heart.*

The LORD provides food for those who fear Him. 'Food' may suggest the Exodus story and the provision of manna and quails. Crucially, God provides for us, for His people, feeding us each day. This same sentiment is picked up in the prayer of Jesus: 'Give us this day our daily bread'. Food is provided for those who fear the LORD. In this context, fear means awe. This provides a link to the next verse, 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom'. The psalmist said that 'God is holy and awesome'. Our reverence for the Holy One, for the holiness of God, and our desire to live a life of holiness, to be filled with awe, is what we are to practise if we are to have a good understanding of God. Life for the psalmist is filled with joy; it is a life lived in praising God. As in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, we should not shy away from the call to holiness or be cowed by Burns' 'Holy Willie's Prayer'. Burns' lifestyle was hardly a Godly-model.

Ephesians 5:15-20

In this short passage, the apostle Paul encourages the church community as Ephesus to nurture a close, warm and dedicated life to the Lord. We are to understand what the will of the Lord is and be filled with the Spirit. We are to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, and so making melody to the Lord in our hearts. The passage is set within a wider context of facing down temptations and of allowing ourselves to be seduced by the attractions of this world. We are to commit ourselves to a faithful relationship to Jesus. In Leviticus and elsewhere in Scripture, we are called to be holy, holy as God is holy. God is

best understood as our Lover and the spiritual task we face each day is to nourish our relationship with God.

Praise is an important means of nourishing our relationship. It is a whole body experience: intellect, emotions and spiritual delight. We are to make melody in our hearts. Faith, then, is more than intellectual assent: it is emotional and spiritual. With deep passion, we are to sing of our love to the Eternal, to the one who gives us life. We are to let God saturate our lives, so that God's thoughts become our thoughts. We become one.

St John 6:51-58

Jesus said, 'The bread that I will give you for the life of the world is my flesh'. Here, we find the self-giving motif of Jesus: this is the embodiment of God. The God of Love, the God who created the universe, is Self-giving; sacrificial love is the nature of the Sacred. Hence, we read of the Lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world. The salvific work of Jesus did not begin at his death: He lived it every day of his life. Each day was a living and dying for others.

Jesus said, 'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life.....for my flesh is true food and my blood true drink.....Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.....The one who eats this bread will live forever'. Given that Jesus did not offer His literal flesh to His disciples and could not have hoped to do so after His death, it is clear that Jesus was not speaking literally. The Fourth Gospel is heavy with metaphor and allegory; the instruction about eating flesh and drinking blood is easily the most potent example of this.

This passage is intended for meditation: it is about union with God. In the Sacrament of Holy Communion, in meditation, we are to receive from the hand of Jesus the bread and wine which will nourish us. In the Orthodox tradition, the Church understands itself to be a hospital for the soul; Communion is medicine for the soul, for our spiritual nourishment. In meditation, we can imaginatively take ourselves to that Upper Room, allow ourselves to sit with Jesus at table, hear his words as if for the first time and, through receiving the bread and wine, allow ourselves to be filled with the Spirit of Jesus, the Word and Wisdom of God.

Sermon ideas

The thrust of the passages is on what lies in the heart.

The seemingly gruesome text from the Gospel of John needs to be understood in its cultural context. Eating the blood of an animal is prohibited in Judaism. This is because it represents the God-given life of the animal. More than that, however, there was the belief that if the worshipper ate the blood of the animal along with the flesh, the worshipper would take on the characteristics of the animal. Hence, it was prohibited. It seems that, by inviting His followers spiritually to eat His flesh and drink His blood, He wanted them to take on His characteristics: to live the self-giving life.

Much of John's Gospel is about union with God, about allowing the Spirit within us to be born again. Jesus said, 'I am the vine and you are the branches'. He prayed, 'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.' The imagery of the bread and wine is no different.

From *"Seasons of Your Heart: Prayers and Reflections"*, Macrina Wiederkehr. Pub. HarperOne, 1991:

Anyone who is familiar with wheat and grapes knows that the story of bread and wine is indeed a story of life and death. How wise of Jesus to use such already sacred signs to continue His presence among us.

We have been asked to break bread and share the cup in His name. Each time we do this we proclaim his death and rising until he comes again.

Are not our lives a little like the wheat and grapes? Doesn't a similar kind of religious experience take place in us: dying and rising, being broken and crushed, shared together, poured out for one another? Surely, as in that broken bread and that shared cup, it is the same Christ we are trying to recognise in the brokenness of our lives. The story of our Eucharist is, indeed, a mystery we have hardly begun to tap.

Bread too
like us
has its birth
in violence.

The seed that fell
into the ground
died, and came forth as wheat
is now ground into new form
and flour is sifted
and changed into loaves
for rising.

We break this bread
with reverence
and give it to each other
for eating
just as another person
once broke those loaves
with us
and asked us not to forget.
We haven't!

If there is any command
we have been
religiously obedient to
it is this command of
not forgetting.
Do this in my memory!
Do it again and again!
Jesus, we have.....
We have broken bread
with tears in our eyes
and we've broken it
when our hearts felt nothing,
but we have broken it
just as you asked us to do.
We are still trying
to understand

what it means.
But we haven't forgotten.

And the wine?
It too is born out of pain.
After days of ripening,
the grapes are crushed
and squeezed
into unfamiliar form
waiting in barrels and vats
and finally, bottles
to be accepted
loved
believed in.

And this wine also
we drink carefully
with more reverence
than usual.
It is in honour of
that same person
the One who asked us
not to forget.

And we haven't!
O God, if there's anything
we've been faithful to,
it's this
not forgetting request.....

It is especially
to remind each other
not to forget
that we meet.
It is especially
to celebrate the life
that comes
out of death.

Time with children

From *“Searchlights: Common Worship Year B”*, David Adam. Pub. Kevin Mayhew Ltd, 2008.

There was once a man who bought a beautiful box for his wife. The box had flowers on the top and they would glow in the dark. As it was for her birthday he hid it away in a drawer and left it there for several weeks. On her birthday it was given to her all wrapped in a pretty parcel. She was delighted and could hardly wait until the darkness of the evening. When it got dark she looked at the box but it did not shine; it did not change at all.

They both waited until it got really, really dark but the box did not shine. They felt disappointed and cheated. Then, suddenly, a note fell from the box. It read, ‘If you want me to shine all night, you need to put me in the sun all day.’ The box would only glow if it was left out in the daylight. So, they left the box out all day the next day and, incredibly, that night, in the darkest part of the night, the box glowed, and glowed brightly.

In faith, we are to soak ourselves in Jesus, in the message and life of Jesus, get to know Him and let His life and words and warmth fill our lives. So that, even in our darkest moments, our difficult times, when we might feel cut off from all help, Jesus will be within us; our memory of Him will be strong; our sense of His will be alive within us.

Prayers

Prayers of Approach

Call to Prayer

At its best, prayer is gentle communion with the Sacred: it is an opportunity to enter more deeply into the present moment, to step aside from the busyness and distractions of life, to bring our attention to the centre of ourselves, to the place where the Holy dwells in each of us.

Prayer of Adoration, Confession, Absolution, Supplication & the Collect

Let us pray.

Mystery at the centre of all life,
Spirit saturating the material,

Sacred Presence, elusive, hidden,
Eternal Now,
encountered in darkness and dreams,
in moments of emptiness and joy,
in the warmth of friendship and tenderness of intimacy,
in faith shared and Scripture read,
in the stillness of the soul,
with love,
we gaze upon You.
Father, Mother, Lover,
Triune God:
You are all in all;
our wholeness and protection;
You are everything to us.

By Your invitation of grace,
we lay down before You
the burdens we carry,
the suffering we endure,
the issues with which we wrestle, and
the memories of past wrongs, hurts, shame and failures.
May we know the touch of Your hand, O Christ.

We confess our wrongs:
our craving for earthly things,
our insatiable need for worldly status, power and wealth,
our words of malice and meanness,
our shallow thoughts, and
our pretence that we are better than we are.

Hear the words of Jesus:
'Go, and sin no more.'

May Almighty God have mercy upon you,
grant you pardon and remission of all your sins,
time for the amendment of life,
and the grace and comfort of the Holy Spirit.

We are made for heaven,
for life with the Risen, ascended Christ,
for fellowship with all the saints.
Bearers of the Divine image,
nourish us, Holy God,
with the peace and calm Your Silence.
May the darkness that envelops the universe
be to us a comfort,
a reminder that all things rest in You,
that we are at home in You,
and that You make Your dwelling-place in us.

The Collect

Almighty God,
You have taught us
that without love
all our doings are worth nothing.
Send Your Holy Spirit,
and pour into our hearts
that most excellent gift of love,
the true bond of peace and of all virtues;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
Who lives and reigns
with You and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Prayers of Thanksgiving, Intercession & Commemoration of the Faithful Departed

God of eternity,
who laid the foundations of the universe,
in whose hand the cosmos evolves
through matter pregnant with consciousness,
we give You thanks for life's beauty,
for radiant sunsets, erupting volcanoes,
for waters still and turbulent,
for sacred mountains and peaceful gardens
and all the fecundity of Earth's womb.

We praise You for all human life,
for humanity's diversity and differences,
for the rich texture of colour, creed and culture,
for the treasure of human love,
 for friends, family and loved ones,
 for the heartfelt joy and meaning they bring to us
and for the opportunities of caring and be cared for.
Above all, we thank You for the revelation of Yourself
 in the rabbi from Nazareth,
in the mystic narratives of Scripture,
 in the Spirit dwelling within each of us.
Holy God, You are everything, all in all:
You are in us and we are in You.

We pray for those whose life is marred or diminished
 by prejudice or poverty.
May we know and feel the pain and suffering of others;
guide us to all that we can do to help.
Help us to live as children of the Father,
 sisters and brothers who, with the eyes of faith,
see all people as bearers of God's image,
 temples in which the Sacred dwells.
May we be at peace with ourselves,
 live in a spirit of humility,
and deal with others, even those who oppose us,
with gentleness, honesty and respect.
Teach us dialogue, not conflict.

We pray for our leaders,
 for the Queen,
government ministers,
 and all who serve our country, *city* and parish:
grant them wisdom,
that they may seek justice in all things,
compassion,
that they help those suffering from disease,
and justice,
helping the most vulnerable.

We pray for all peacemakers,
for peoples and lands divided,
for families – and children – suffering because of war.
May there be a spirit of compromise,
an abandonment of ego, that lust for power and domination,
help all embroiled in conflict to see and cherish the humanity of others,
 see the Divine spark in the eyes of others.
We ask a special blessing upon the Holy Land,
 for an end to violence
and a new day, a new dawn, on the soil that Jesus walked.

Eternal Father,
we pray for those whose life is blighted by loneliness,
for those who are facing possible bad news,
for those who are anxious or hurting,
 unable to sleep, who find little comfort,
for those who are dying,
and for the bereaved.

We give thanks and pray for our loved ones departed,
for those who inspired us and shaped our life.
May we with them one day sit at Table, forgiven and restored,
at the feast in Your eternal Kingdom.

These prayers we offer in Jesus' Name,
and in His words we would sum up all our prayers,
saying.....**Our Father**.....

Musical suggestions

Joyous hymns of praise echoing the lessons:

- CH4 105 –“Glory to God above” (Wellington Hall)
- CH4 151 –“All you works of God” (All you works of God)
- CH4 173 –“Sing to God new songs” (Ode to Joy)

Children’s hymns of praise:

- CH4 169 –“Praise the Lord with the sound” (Praise the Lord)
- CH4 185 –“Come, children, join and sing” (Madrid)
- CH4 757 –“Come all you people”

Hymn of praise in our hearts:

- CH4 166 –“Lord of all hopefulness” (Slane CH4 500)

Giving thanks for all that God has done in our life:

- CH4 159 –“Lord, for the years” (Lord of the years)
- CH4 161 –“O God, our help in ages past” (St Anne)

The Bread and Wine:

- CH4 661 –“Eat this bread (Eat this bread)
- CH4 669 –“O thou, who at thy Eucharist didst pray (Song 1)

Hymn of trust in God:

- CH4 192 –“All my hope on God is founded” (Michael)