

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

### **Ninth Sunday after Pentecost - 30 July 2023**

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev Dr George Whyte for his thoughts on the fifth 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

The first thing to say is that I have gone with the alternative readings for this Sunday. In these Sundays in “Ordinary Time” the Revised Common Lectionary tends to run streams of readings from the Old Testament and the Letters, so apologies for breaking the cycle – but the Genesis reading in the Lectionary presented more challenge than I cared to accept.

This, of course, is a summer Sunday and depending on where you lead worship it may be characterised by the absence of the regulars and the presence of visitors. I would always presume that the people I address on 30 July might not have been there recently, if at all, and they may not be there the next week so this is, for me, a stand-alone Sunday rather than one for a series or a reference back or forward to other sermons. That is not to say it should be generic – an address on some topic plucked out of the air. This is still about preaching the Word and should be approached, as always, in our preparation with the question which asks of the sermon we write – “So what?”

## [1 Kings 3:5-12](#)

The Oxford Bible Commentary tells us that the books of Kings contain the history of the Israel and Judah from the time of King Solomon to the period of the exile, i.e., from the middle of the 10th to the middle of the sixth century BCE. Each King along the way is viewed through the writers’ favoured ‘lens’ – the first of the Ten Commandments: “I am the Lord your God .... you shall have no other gods before me.” They have taken such historical material as they had and ordered it in ways which reflect their point of view on what really matters. They pass on to us historical information, but seen from a particular perspective – the centrality of worshipping the one God (Yahweh) in God’s temple in Jerusalem.

Approaching this reading as a preacher it is important to remember its antiquity and its very distinct context. A summer sermon cannot say much about the setting into which we are drawn with this reading. Perhaps it is enough to note that great store was set by the recounting of Solomon’s dream/vision and the gift of wisdom for which he asked and then received. He also received all the other things which a king might have asked for and that may remind us of Matthew 6:33 – “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Jesus and Matthew would have been raised with the story of Solomon and the other kings.

It is perhaps also interesting to note that in Hebrew and Greek “Wisdom” is a feminine noun.

## [Psalm 119:129-136](#)

This is a section from the longest psalm. In its original Hebrew it is an acrostic – that is each of its 22 stanzas begin with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. We do not know why the author did this – it may be something to do with a sense of completeness, like the Alpha and Omega imagery of later times – but that is simply conjecture. This pattern is hidden in most English translations but it was printed in the Authorised Version (KJV) where the section set for this day is headed “Pe” פ and the translators of the Jerusalem Bible attempted to reflect the original scheme in their wording.

There will be some worshippers on 30 July who would appreciate knowing these facts but I am not convinced it would be a majority. What I take from these points is that this is a very carefully crafted piece of work intended for enduring use.

Psalm 119 is often called a Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) psalm – that is it focuses on the Law. There is a repeating pattern of eight words used to represent the Law. While clearly praising God you can see how the author has used the framework of the Law to write their material. Here is a psalmist who is looking for a firm grasp on God’s commands as they seek to find a way to live out their faith. For a Scottish congregation the words of the metrical version of some earlier verses from the same psalm perhaps say this well – see CH4 Hymn 79, “Teach me, O Lord, the perfect way”.

In passing, it is always worth reminding ourselves that the Psalms are the poetry and the worship of a very different culture and time to ours and need to be handled with carefulness and respect.

## [Romans 8:26-39](#)

This is part of Paul’s ‘letter’ to the Christians in Rome – a congregation which he did not found. In form it is less of a letter and more a piece of teaching which may have been used in small sections – the book is very dense as Paul sets out more thoroughly than in any other of his writings his theological beliefs. It is in many ways Paul’s *magnum opus* – his great work. It was probably written during Paul’s final months in Greece around 55/56 AD. It seems difficult to tie the letter to any specific targets but clearly Paul is anxious, ahead of his future planned visit, to set out the core of what he believed about the Gospel.

The section in the lectionary today is one of the best known and one of the most frequently read in public as a selection of verses appear in *Common Order* under the heading of ‘Readings for Funeral Services’.

While it has no doubt brought considerable comfort to the bereaved it is, of course, set out as an encouragement to the Christians of the early church as they sought to live out their new faith. These Roman believers were converts from Judaism and they faced the double trial of community tension. Firstly, they continued to live beside their Jewish neighbours and would still seek to make a living as they had before. Now they have adopted new customs and set aside some of the old ones it would be understandable if they faced some hostility from their old friends who were offended by the new practices and beliefs of people they had lived and worked with for many years. As if that wasn't enough, at the same time the new Christian community also faced hostility from the Imperial authorities. St Paul himself would be executed by the Emperor Nero just a few years after he wrote today's bible passage.

### **Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52**

Matthew wrote as a Jew (and perhaps a Rabbi) for a church of Jewish believers in Jesus Christ. Writing some years after the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by the Romans who also brought an end to the nation state, Matthew is working in a time of great tension as the Jewish people rethought their identity in the absence of the place which had been the centre of pilgrimage and sacrifice for over a thousand years. It would be the Pharisees who would shape this new Jewish life focused on the synagogue, the biblical witness of what we call the Old Testament, but they called the Bible, and the continually growing interpretative material which they would trace back to the earliest days of Abraham and David. This is what made the practice of Judaism adaptable to new times and new questions. The creative work of the Pharisees is the direct precursor of the practice of the Jewish faith which we know today.

Matthew, of course, is going in a new direction while still claiming continuity with what had gone before – that is why his gospel starts with the genealogy of Jesus, tracing His roots back down the line of Jewish tradition, which is then followed by the story of Jesus' birth where the gentile magi come to pay homage to the infant Christ in Joseph and Mary's house in Bethlehem – the City of David. So, in verse 52: 'And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."'

While Matthew sets out the new insights and claims of the gospel he is working with people who are regarded with hostility by other Jews who do not see that Jesus was the Messiah. As the Temple lies in ruins and the old order is dragged down we can easily imagine that the last thing "the Jews" needed was a splinter group. In a time of huge upheaval Matthew

needs to sustain community cohesion in the church and provide it with a description of the life and work of Jesus set out in a way which speaks to His people.

It is widely accepted that Matthew when writing 'his' gospel started with Mark's Gospel (Matthew writes 10-20 years after Mark in last quarter of the first century). Commentators believe he edited Mark's material and then added some material from a source known as Q, that is shared with Luke along with some other sources which appear in those sections unique to Matthew e.g., the two short parables in today's reading which feature the treasure and the pearl.

## Sermon ideas

### Reading from 1 Kings

The reading from 1 Kings clearly holds up Solomon as someone who asked God for the 'right' gifts. There is a rich vein of thought around why we might ask God for less appropriate gifts and how we might develop in ourselves and in our shared life in the church a spirit which prompts us to have good priorities in our prayer requests. Romans 8:26 picks up that theme – “for we do not know how to pray as we ought.”

I would be very wary of saying anything along the lines of “Solomon asked for the right things and got all the other stuff as well”. That may have been Solomon's experience but it is not one shared by every believer.

Alternatively, the preacher might like to unpack how a “wise and discerning mind” would differ from minds which were not thus blessed. Solomon is remembered for his wisdom – how might we discover that wisdom for ourselves as we seek to live out our faith in a complex and often hostile world where there are many who say that they know best?

### Reading from Romans 8

8:28 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose. This is a very challenging verse. It was read first by Christians for whom “good” was not the day-to-day experience. Ever since it has been read to people in difficult days. There is something here about finding God's perspective either in terms of timing or in knowing something of how “the wounded” are often more of a blessing to those around them than the super-strong.

8:31-39 is one of the great affirmations of trust in God. “If God is on our side, who is against us.” Written with persecuted and ostracised Christians in mind, do these verses not have much to say today to Christians who find their beliefs mocked and their church shunned?

How do we stay on God's side? Who is against us today – and how does faith in Jesus Christ counter their hostility?

### **Reading from Matthew**

I am particularly interested in the two parables at the start of this passage. Notice Jesus does not say the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Instead, He goes on to say that “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed *that someone took and sowed* in his field.” It is the *sown* seed that will illustrate how the Kingdom, which began so small and so secret but will one day bloom. Equally in 13:33 the parallel is not simply between yeast and the Kingdom but instead it is yeast that “*is taken and mixed with the flour*”, which forms an illustration of this new community which, when mixed through, leavens the whole.

It is the taking and the planting that allow the tiny seed and the pinch of yeast to do their work. How do we, metaphorically, get hold of the seed or the yeast? What practices equip us with these the raw materials of the Kingdom to come? What does planting and mixing mean for our situation?

### **Prayers**

For the Call to worship my preference is for the four-word phrase, “Let us worship God”, after which there would be an appropriate ‘big’ hymn.

The opening sentence or call to prayer given in *Common Order* for this Sunday is Philippians 3:10 – “My one desire is to know Christ and the power of His resurrection.”

### **Approach/ Confession / Repentance**

Loving God,  
who gives wisdom to those who are wise enough to ask for nothing more,  
we gather in Your presence  
seeking to discern what You would do through us in the Kingdom's cause.

We confess that too often we turn to You with impossible demands.  
We ask the God of justice for more than our fair share.  
We drain from others that which they need to survive.  
We put our trust in the passing, flimsy things of this world when we should trust You.  
For selfishness pressed home and for selflessness unexplored –  
We seek forgiveness this day in the sure and certain hope that Christ intercedes for us.

As a new week opens may we take from this service

small seeds of insight to plant them in the world  
that in those places where our feet pass there may be signs of the Kingdom's growth.  
We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### **Thanksgiving / Intercession**

O God, if You are for us, who is against us?  
You have given us Your Son and through Him You give everything else as well.  
We have a shelter from the storm,  
we have nourishment for body and soul,  
we are held for ever in the love of Christ from which nothing can separate us.  
So, for all the signs of Your care and favour  
we bring our thanks in word and gift and promise.

We pray for others.

We pray for our wonderful and troubled world.  
In some places the violence of war tramples and crushes the seeds of peace.  
In others the bread may rise but it is not shared and people go hungry.  
We seek the growth of reconciliation and the flowering of justice.

We pray for our Church in these days of stretching and straining.  
Afraid of the future and of those around us  
we sometimes keep the seed of the Kingdom rather than planting it,  
sometimes we store the rising yeast instead of stirring it through.  
Help us to be the sowers of the word and the sharers of blessing  
that in our place and our time all whom we meet might encounter the living God.

We pray for our nation in all its diversity.  
We ask for those who must make decisions on our behalf, wise and discerning minds  
that the right paths may be chosen and the whole people may be served.

We pray for those we know the best and love the most.  
For some of them these are days of fretfulness or fearfulness, confusion or despondency,  
emptiness or addiction.  
Help us, where we can, to ease their burden and share their load.  
Even when it seems there is nothing we can do  
we still hold them before You in the silence of our hearts.

Eternal God, throughout the centuries You have called people into service



and have equipped them with gifts for using and sharing in the Kingdom's cause.  
We give thanks for their faithful service  
and we remember in particular those who sowed the seeds of faith in us.  
Keep strong our faith and enliven our witness  
that the Church of Jesus Christ may prosper  
and that many come to find for themselves the love of God  
from which nothing can separate us.

We ask things through Jesus Christ our Lord and in his words we pray together and say:  
*Our Father, ....*

### **Benediction**

May the love of the Lord Jesus draw us to Himself;  
may the power of the Lord Jesus  
strengthen us in His service;  
may the joy of the Lord Jesus fill our souls:  
and may the blessing of God almighty,  
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,  
be with you and abide with you always.

### **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 79 – “Teach me, O Lord, the perfect way”
- CH4 119 – “O God, thou art the Father”
- CH4 343 – “The reign of God, like farmer's field”
- CH4 358 – “The great love of God”
- CH4 425 – “The Saviour died, but rose again”
- CH4 599 – “Holy Spirit, hear us”

- CH4 603 – “For your gif of God the Spirit”

## 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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