

## **First Sunday after Epiphany – Year A**

### **First Sunday after Epiphany – 8 January 2023**

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank the members of the team who contributed to the material for the first 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 drew on the opening of the Season of Epiphany and the dramatic visual scene-setting that reveals God's upside-down kingdom.

## [Isaiah 42:1-9](#)

This is the start of the Season of Epiphany. There is no heraldry, no great fanfare, but we see God stepping in (v8). The tone is very gentle and personal – I have called you; I have taken you by the hand.

Things will not be quick or easy (“the coastlands wait” v4), but God will not grow faint or be crushed; God gives reassurance, reminding us of what has come to pass and looking forwards to the new things that are promised – for all creation. We are being given a preview of what is to come and the assurance of God’s faithfulness, support and guidance when we find ourselves in a hard place.

There is an emphasis on gentleness, fragility and care: there will be no crying out, God will not break the bruised reed or put out a flickering candle, we have been given breath, taken by the hand, the marginalised and outcasts have been cared for. God’s care encompasses all the earth, and all of creation is being introduced to the One who breathed life into it. The small and insignificant are recognised and things are set right for them. There is reassurance here.

Justice leaps off the page – sometimes we struggle to hear the message of hope, but if we are God’s people, we are God’s agents of justice – called to be the answer to prayer. God does not want gaudy parades (as it is described in The Message); our actions should be focused on bringing people to God, not on our own efforts. It can seem countercultural to be quiet in today’s society if you want to be effective rather than just being seen to be effective. How can we be quiet and still communicate faith? How can I be of any importance if nobody takes any notice of me? How can the quiet voice be heard?

## [Psalm 29](#)

The imagery in this Psalm encompasses all of creation – we see what is of God. It is common to use visual metaphors when we describe things, but here sound is used and we *hear* the power (repeatedly) in the voice of the Lord. The poetry of this psalm would lend itself to being read by two voices.

This passage seems to be in complete contrast to Isaiah – the terrifying imagery of the strength of God – but all of this incredible power is harnessed to fall on the final word, ‘peace’. This is the paradox of the upside-down kingdom and implies that something different is coming. There is no majesty or power, no ripping the place apart or shouting about it, but bringing about something new in a different way, that will bring blessing.

We need to recognise God’s glory and power (“Ascribe to the Lord” vv1-2) – it is almost as though God is saying, “Will you listen to me?” There is no doubt about God’s position – who is in control and who gives strength to God’s people, and yet this is the same God who nurtures the flickering flame. Might and power brings a balance of fear and awe, showing that God’s strength and power is more powerful than the politics of the age. The imagery of

devastation is prescient. Devastation of what we think our own strength is built on. We see here a cosmic God who cannot be reduced to something more understandable or containable. We need to live with a sense of mystery, not knowing all the answers.

### **Acts 10:34-43**

The strong opening statement that God shows no impartiality is in contrast to the arguments we may find ourselves getting into. Who do we show partiality to, intentionally or unintentionally? We all have our own biases, which are difficult to admit to, yet God loves all the people we find it hard to love or connect with and we need to recognise our difficult truths. How do we ensure that this passage does not become bad news for some people? We do this through the Holy Spirit, which is the ultimate resource to do good, heal, and to release from oppression. There is a sense of healing and wholeness in this passage and that message is universal – it applies to every nation. What might healing and forgiveness look like in this community?

We are called to witness and to testify – so how do we equip congregations to see themselves as witnesses by the way they live? We do not just see God in the big things outside of ourselves (see Psalm 29), the Good News is that we are all acceptable to God and as witnesses we also need to recognise God in us and in others.

There is always an action to take: we do not just receive, we have to go and do what is right.

During the Covid lockdowns people rediscovered the connection between God and creation and it was an essential element of many people's faith and spirituality, not just those in our churches. We need to look for and recognise the prophetic voices within and beyond the church (especially at this time, those who are speaking out about environmental issues).

### **Matthew 3:13-17**

What jumped out of this passage was the overturning of the old ways while remembering what has gone before, rooted in God's perfect law. We need to do what matters when it matters, to hold on to tradition when it is appropriate, but we can still push for change. In the Jerusalem Bible the translation in verse 15 is 'leave it like this for the time being'. This contemporary language prompts us to ask what is the right time (God's time) to say the right things? We need discernment in all things. What is God drawing to our attention now?

Paul Tillich (*"You are Accepted"*) says that to be told you are accepted is one of the most fundamental human needs. You are accepted, recognised, named as my [God's] child. As a whole community we can express acceptance that we are part of something bigger. God wants all of us to be present – the Imago Dei is incomplete if we are excluding people or parts of creation. What do our individual journeys bring to the greater whole? If God were looking at you, would God say: "You are my beloved and I am pleased with you?" We are being invited to be present in the present – complicated matters will be dealt with later, but for the time being, just come into God's presence.

Here we also see the supernatural of the Trinity breaking through: the Holy Spirit in the form of the Dove, as we hear the voice of God (linking to Psalm 29) speaking to the Son. What does it mean for us to be part of this trinitarian community? In the baptism of Jesus we hear our story too – Jesus came to create space for us to be part of God's community, not through any action of our own. Our design and our purpose is to be part of this beautiful community.

We must be honest and accept that we have work to do as the Church. How welcoming are we to the bruised reeds, or to the quiet voices? We must embody this good news, both individually and corporately.

## **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.

### **Different ways of telling the story – through sound, imagery, etc.**

What is our response to the visual imagery in the passages, such as the skipping calf, fire, lightning, storms, etc.? Identify some more of the sounds and images and allow time for people to respond to them on their own and to then share their experience.

## Taking action

Everything in the passage points towards action: to receive the word and to act. Hold a space for people to reflect quietly on this and then to share their stories with each other, and consider what they might take away with them into the world. The time can then be closed by inviting people to pray, arising from what they have shared with each other.

- Where do we see signs of God already (in our personal life and relationships, locally in our communities, and globally, etc.)?
- Baptism is an invitation to be part of something bigger – invite people to reflect on how we invite people into our community:
  - What / who are we uncomfortable with?
  - What does it mean to be accepted in a group or community?
- Where do you see injustice, or where is God prompting you to step in, to be a witness (beyond the Church of Scotland)?

There are many options for creating your own visual references within the service, and as they are created, use them to worship individually and corporately. For example:

- Make some origami peace cranes, or doves
- Light a candle as you pray for particular people during the service, and then take a candle to them afterwards so that they know they are held before God
- Hold a space for people to explore ideas together and to pray for each other as the main focus of your gathering. Invite people to sit in groups of three to share and pray together:

Person 1. What do you want to ask God to do for you? / Ask something of God

Person 2. Think of a bible story/example on that subject

Person 3. Say a short prayer for Person 1

Then invite the second person to start the process and share and repeat the process with each person taking a turn with each element

Ask people to prepare in advance or to respond after the gathering by suggesting one or more of the following activities:

- Take a picture / find an image relating to the passages

- Take photos of examples of where you see God in the world
- Engage with someone / a group that you wouldn't normally spend time with

When you next come to church, allow time for people to share stories of their experience, to share the images and use them as prompts for prayer. Or, if you are responding after the service, invite people to post their pictures and experiences on your Facebook page, or to share in their home groups.

### **Themes from this week's conversation**

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

- Remembering the law but overturning the old ways and expectations. Choosing to live by God's way brings freedom and justice for all
- Justice is for all people and all of creation. God loves the ones we find it hard to (and find it hard to admit to)
- Gentleness / strength / impartiality
- Peace
- Receiving the Word and call to action/witness / prophetic voices – both within and outside the Church
- Are we the Good News? We're called to action

### **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**

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 8 January**

We give thanks today – that the Holy Spirit always shows up  
and Her presence is as disruptive today  
as it was when Jesus was baptised by John.  
Baptised in the face of oppression and despair.  
Baptised in the grimness of life.  
For Baptism always proclaims the love  
and the mystery of God  
and the presence of the unquenchable Spirit.

Whenever baptism is offered –  
at the beginning of life  
as a symbol of hope and promise,

as a rite of passage, building on family tradition,  
as a response to faith that has grown slowly and surely,  
at the bedside of a beautiful 93-year-old saint  
embarrassed to admit that she had never been baptised,  
or with parents anxious about their new-born's hold on life –  
whether sprinkled,  
dunked,  
immersed,  
or with the gentlest whisper of a touch;  
always, always, always,  
the Holy Spirit makes Herself known  
as angels gather to sing a Gloria,  
declaring the wonder of God  
who calls us Beloved.

### **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](#)

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