

Second Sunday after Christmas

Second Sunday after Christmas – 3 January 2021

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Joanna Love, Resource Worker for the Wild Goose Resource Group, for her thoughts on the second Sunday after Christmas.

“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.”

National Worship Team

As the restrictions on our ability to meet in groups continue, worship leaders continue to deliver their services both online and offline.

We can help to facilitate participation from the whole congregation by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technology in the service in ways that suit both physical gatherings and video-conference style settings, such as:

- Opening and closing moments of worship that help people mark out a time set apart with God
- Introducing various parts of the worship service to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each one (framing)
- Enabling conversations or prayers in breakout groups
- Holding spaces that allow people to go deeper in worship
- Using the chat function and microphone settings to allow people to actively participate in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord’s Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of ‘holy chaos’
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship

Useful links:

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found [here](#)

Useful tips for creating and leading worship online 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](#)

Introduction.....	3
Jeremiah 31:7-14.....	3
Psalm 147:12-20.....	4
Ephesians 1:3-14	4
John 1:(1-9)10-18	5
Sermon ideas	6
Prayers	7
Musical suggestions	10

Introduction

I took as a starting point a raw recitation of each passage and the question – what first impressions come from each of today’s passages when they are articulated aloud? What did each storyteller seem eager to express? Put side by side, what picture emerged of the importance of these particular writings?

Firstly, they all struck me as confident words. There is no hint of arrogance in that confidence; neither is there any shame. There is no mention of deserving or undeserving; of whether things are earned or unmerited. Together there is an unwavering stream of testimony to God being the source and originator and initiator of all that is. They speak of what a privilege it is to know God, who is both powerful and good.

More than this, they speak of how we are known by God in intimate relationship – like a son; like a nation set apart from other nations; like those adopted; like children born of the spirit. In some places the “Wow!” at God is exuberant; in others it is quieter but no less sure. In some places the words come across like a rushed babble; in others, a more measured composition. Just like us, these ancient speakers and writers had their different styles and manners of putting across this deep confidence in God’s being. They invite us to look – to see what God can do; to see how no one tells God what to do; to see how we live constantly at the mercy of God and what a good place that is to be.

Jeremiah 31:7-14

These are powerful words of restoration to the exiled remnant of Israel. Their glory days are gone and they have been advised to settle, make the most of life in Babylon, pray for their foreign captors, and wait. Now the prophetic word becomes unapologetically hopeful. Like the philosopher Ecclesiastes saying, ‘there is a time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones together,’ so the time is coming when the people themselves, scattered far and wide, will be gathered by God for a great, emotional return home. This will be no triumphant army on the march, but a truly human motley crew of all ages and abilities, not stoic but openly both sobbing and singing. Prophecy is always poetry and needs to be read aloud in all its passion and pathos. This is the voice of longing and a daring hope, not unlike the poetry of Revelation 21 saying ‘mourning and crying and pain will be no more’. Jeremiah spoke as one in the midst of the Babylonian invasion, imprisoned himself though not deported. He spoke not as one outside the desolation but caught up in it, and bearing the lonely burden of having warned of what was coming and not been listened to.

How do these words feel for us as we imagine our own futures in a world free of Covid-19? People have stumbled, languished and mourned in this exile of our day, and like Israel in Babylon, we still wait. We have heard a succession of warnings and dire predictions which have not been universally heeded. When the time comes for togetherness and celebration, it will be through tears.

The food, plenty, radiance and watered garden of Jeremiah's poem may not have matched the reality of the actual return. But dreaming and imagining give form to hope and encourage us to be confident of God; to take heart simply because God is.

Psalm 147:12-20

What apt verses for winter days! Snow, frost, hail, cold, wind – God is in charge of them all! This psalm takes us back to times before the exile, with Jerusalem and her people the beneficiaries of God's protecting, blessing, feeding and peace building. A tender note is sounded with the mention of children, the little ones in society. In contrast to Jeremiah whose words were often rejected, here the word of God revealed to Israel is regarded as a gift solely for her. Israel alone among the nations knows God's laws and instructions. This is seen as reason for praise with no edge of pomposity.

The sentiments of the whole psalm as well as this closing section, convey a sense of peace-time and relative security. The call to praise is addressed to the people, as the psalmist calls up many good reasons for such praise. Twice he speaks of God's word going out – like a swift runner, and able to melt hailstones! These are superb physical images – 'the word made flesh' as good poetry does it best!

What calls forth our praise at this year's beginning? Which of God's laws or commandments are a blessing to us today? You could invite people to write in their own words a short poem depicting God's word going out – what is it like? how does it behave? what effect does it have?

Ephesians 1:3-14

From the closing words of a psalm to the opening words of a letter, the exuberant tone here is up a gear! You can almost imagine the scribe scribbling away furiously, trying to keep up as Paul paces around with wild gesticulations as he delivers this outpouring, perhaps pausing only to suddenly laugh or gasp in wonder at what he hears himself seeking to communicate.

These verses could be summed up as “Wow, God!” or, “What are you like!” Paul’s joyous desire to write is fully focussed on his understanding of God’s intentions fulfilled in Jesus’ life and death, and what we gain from them. The list is extensive! We are blessed, chosen, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, loved lavishly, shown God’s will, given an inheritance... and all this is sealed with the mark of the Holy Spirit. What is more, God does all this *with pleasure!*

It's worth reiterating the complete lack of any note of unworthiness. Paul’s letter begins in gratitude and confidence, recognising and embracing the gifts and goodness of God. How many times he must have written in similar vein to fledgling Christian communities, going over the same ground of the good news as he understood it. What is it about the gospel that we repeatedly say or want to say? How does our appreciation of Jesus change or deepen over many conversations about him? What is it that we need to hear or say or teach each other again at this new year?

How does it feel to imagine that whenever we thank God for something, God says, “My pleasure!”

[John 1:\(1-9\)10-18](#)

This second half of the prologue to John’s gospel continues some of the threads running through our other readings. As Paul touched on, here again we find mention of the existence of Jesus since the beginning of time. As the Psalmist discerned, however, the revelation of God is not evident to everyone. And again there is no superior attitude or standing among those who see, receive, and come to know they belong to God, again described as like children to a loving parent. Another tender and intimate feel for this love is expressed in Jesus being ‘close to the father’s heart’.

Much could be gained today by dwelling on grace and truth, as fleshed out by Jesus. It is because of this lived life of grace and truth that the gospel writer testifies that he has seen the glory of God in this man Jesus. This is his starting point before going on to share with us stories of Jesus’ life; stories told to demonstrate that this man has indeed made God known.

How best should these words be spoken aloud? What if, in contrast to Paul’s gushing letter, this reading is slow, even hesitant, with deliberate pauses, almost hushed? Or you could have both the epistle and gospel read twice, varying the tone of each from exuberant to awestruck. What do we more richly hear and learn and appreciate from the readings by doing this?

Sermon ideas

Confident = firmly trusting. A bold trust in [the goodness of] God

Today's readings allow us to hear four voices of encouragement. Four voices from the past, addressing specific communities of faith living at different times, in different places and under different circumstances. "Take heart," is their common thrust. And why this conviction of trust? Because God is at work. The words of Jeremiah, the Psalmist, Paul, and John's community were spoken and written to inspire faith; to deepen people's knowledge of God and therefore their confidence in God.

What would we say of our trust in God at this new year? What has shaken or threatened that trust recently? What has helped us to 'take heart'? How do these ancient words of scripture – addressed to people who are struggling or secure, or young or developing in faith – speak to us and encourage us?

Whichever combination of readings is chosen for today, you could invite your congregation to consider what particular verse or phrase or idea they hear that they take heart from. It might be worth while taking some time to think through what 'tone' of voice is suggested by the words. What was the speaker/writer hoping would come of their words? What was the desired effect on the hearers and readers? Make room for the possibility that some of them, and some of us, may not feel uplifted or encouraged, and may not find our confidence return or grow. That's OK. These are not the voices of fair-weather friends, but of people who struggled and were persecuted and knew keenly their own doubts. What are our own stories of being able to trust God precisely because life has not been easy or smooth? What can we confidently say, without cockiness or hesitancy, about who God is and what God has done?

Prayers

Approach to God

Hovering Spirit,
because of You there was a beginning.
Heavenly Dove,
because of You there is a continuing.
Untameable Wind,
because of You there will be a completing.

From the emptiness before the birth of time
to the fullness of the new earth and heaven,
Holy Spirit, You breathe and blow,
dancing to our Creator's tune,
in step with our Saviour's purposes.

Fill our expectant hearts
as we stand on this threshold of a new year.
We have been here so many times;
and we have never been here before.

Source, Saviour, Spring of life,
refreshing and replenishing God,
all that pours from You is good and wise and true.
Soak us with the delight of Your surprising nearness
and let us splash in puddles of joy.

God in Community,
how privileged we are to be Your people,
chosen and known and loved by You,
here and now this morning
and in all our days gone by and still to come.
Amen

Thanksgiving and intercession

Lord our God, faithful and kind,
You have always been our help.
With and without our asking,
with and without our recognition,
You are the wind in our sails,
the compass for our walking,
the firelight for our resting.
It is Your pleasure to help,
and for this we thank You.

You never neglect us.
Even when we blame or berate You;
even when we are too despairing to ask
or too weary to find words;
it is Your pleasure to help,
and for this we thank You.

So we seek Your help again.
Bring deep rest to those exhausted and spent.
Bring deep solace to those bearing loss upon loss.
Bring deep purpose to those plodding on in unceremonious conscientiousness.
Bring deep release to those glad to see the back of 2020.
Bring deep wisdom to those leading and governing.
Bring to us all deep trust in what is possible in partnership with You.
For it is Your pleasure to help,
and for this we thank You, Gracious God.
Amen

Confession

Dear God,
why do we sometimes make You so small?
Why do we behave as if You are as petty as we can be?
Why do we lapse into vengeance as the answer to wrongdoing?
Your ways are not our ways.
Teach us again Your answer to sin and suffering.
You don't get mad; You get merciful.
You don't punish; You pardon.

So don't let us for another moment
go over our speech of self-recrimination
or insult Your grace with our grovelling,
because You are not listening.
Let us put down
what we need carry no longer,
and loosen our hold on the hurts we have received.
You know well our woundedness;
You understand and accept our regret.
Come close and tend to our pain and heal us,
for we long to be whole.
Extend Your love to those we are finding hard to love,
and set us free to love again.
In Jesus' name we ask it,
Amen

Blessing/Closing Prayer

Lead us on,
to learn willingly,
to love well
to live in trust.
Surround us with hope,
shield us from harm,
set us on our way rejoicing.
Let all God's people say
Amen

Musical suggestions

Our online music resource is on the Church of Scotland website [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. You will also find playlists for liturgical seasons and themes on the *Inspire Me* tab.

- CH4 103 – “Fill your hearts with joy and gladness” – based on Psalm 147.
- CH4 234 – “Tis winter now; the fallen snow” – a gentle song of confidence in God who keeps us through wintry days
- CH4 262 “For the world and all its people” a song of intercession with its affirming refrain ‘confidently, all can worship...’
- CH4 270 “Put all your trust in God” – a summons to walk in God’s strength.
- CH4 274 – “Comfort, comfort now my people” – although these words from Isaiah are usually sung in Advent, their theme of restoration is in keeping with the words from Jeremiah.
- CH4 317 “Before the world began” – a thoughtful setting of John 1:1-13
- CH4 555 “Amazing Grace” – no explanation needed.
- Hymns Ancient and Modern (and other sources) “O Christ the same, through all our story’s pages” – very apt for new year, addressing past, present and future – to the tune *Londonderry Air*.
https://hymnary.org/text/o_christ_the_same_through_all_our_storys#authority_media_flexscores

You are free to download, project, print and circulate multiple copies of any of this material for use in worship services, bible studies, parish magazines, etc., but reproduction for commercial purposes is not permitted.

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.