

## Seventh Sunday of Easter

### Seventh Sunday of Easter – 1 June 2025

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Rev Fraser Macnaughton, former Minister of Kirkwall St Magnus Cathedral, for his archive material from 2022 on the seventh Sunday of Easter.

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

There are huge, sweeping themes of God's presence in this week's readings. Thus the readings can be used in ways that lift up and support courageous things that the church does for the community, and for the world, in Christ's name.

What ministries of your church – either your congregation or your denomination – suggest this kind of courage? What are some things that your church does that engender or could potentially engender public attacks for 'interfering' in other people's lives? How can the people in your congregation feel empowered to keep making a difference?

What thoughts or practices do group members fall back on to help them through challenging times? Consider the sources of support that they may seek from the faith community: friendships, past experiences of supportive relationships, verses from scripture, worship, hymns, prayers.

## [Acts 16:16-34](#)

The scripture story one is drawn to most, opens with an encounter between Paul and an enslaved girl. Her regular outbursts bear ironic witness to Paul's proclamation. They unexplainably 'annoy' Paul until he finally heals her. The passage also leaves unexplained how the healing changes this young girl's place in community. No longer 'marketable' for her owners, is the girl returned to the slave market? Does the welcome given to Paul and Silas by Lydia and her community find a way to embrace this girl? The story leaves open questions, perhaps to challenge how we offer welcome to those whose chains have been broken. What the story leaves no question about is the anger of her owners. They now act to ensure Paul and Silas pay for their action.

The city authorities charge Paul and the others with disturbing the city. They preface their accusation of promoting customs not lawful for Rome; they do not know Paul is a Roman citizen. That fact will come into embarrassing play in the close of this story in verses 35-40. This 'welcome' by the city leaders of Philippi strongly contrasts with the welcome provided by Lydia. The story testifies to the importance of ritual and tradition for Paul and Silas – and through them, for us. Prayer and song serve as the foundation for their response to imprisonment. Their actions support one another and give witness to those who listen. When an earthquake opens doors and breaks chains, Paul and Silas save the jailer from taking his life. The jailer tends the wounds of Paul and Silas. They baptise the jailer and his household. As with Lydia, Paul and Silas and the jailer engage in reciprocal ministry.

## **Psalm 97**

Psalm 97 confesses God as the sovereign who rescues the faithful. The Psalmist affirms that God's throne, a symbol of power, is founded on justice. Such foundations will stand, in contrast to the unjust foundations of power shaken by the earthquake in Acts.

## **Revelation 22:12-14,16-17 (20-21)**

The power in this passage lifts up the vision of God's imminent action on behalf of martyrs, who now will have new life. They will be welcomed into the city of God. Verses 20-21 are an invitation to follow in this way of new life and freedom with the One who is the beginning and the end. We are offered the daring invitation to participate in the Spirit's new realm by drinking the water of life, offered as a gift. Despite the violence of the times of Revelation, [the invitation is to] come now and take that drink and show this new era in its dawning.

When the lectionary pointedly leaves out certain verses of the scripture, as in this text, I read those with particular interest. Here they've chopped out two verses that come down with both feet on the folks who disagree.

Like most of Revelation, these words strain forward, looking for the return of Christ. I don't have any problem with that, though I think we'll quickly assassinate the Christ if we haven't done so already.

In the developed world, there is an increased awareness of global warming and a heightened sense that the economic growth we have been experiencing can't be sustained, especially if folks in other parts of the world aspire to that same standard.

What if the promised Christ came and told us in the developed world that we had to cut our standard of living by half?

## **John 17:20-26**

Today's Gospel reading invites us into the unity that comes from being with God, just as God is with us. This awareness of God in our lives and in all of creation, though understood in many ways by different cultures and religions, has one unifying outcome: shalom. As the former Presiding Bishop of the US Episcopal Church, Katharine Jefferts Schori describes it, shalom "has to do with the restoration of all creation to right relationship with God."

By way of illustration, in March, 1984 there was a malfunction at the Pacific Gas and Electric Company in Northern California. It triggered a chain reaction of events that darkened the lights for millions of people in six Western states. The blackout occurred at rush hour and caused hundreds of traffic jams in all the major cities. The trouble originated in the Round Mountain, California sub-station, about 100 miles south of the Oregon border. A circuit breaker tripped and circuits all over the West automatically shut down to protect themselves.

One little circuit breaker, tripped in a remote rural area hundreds of miles away, changed the lives of millions of people. How dramatically that breakdown symbolises the interdependence of our country's power, transportation and even food production systems. We are one people in more ways than we think. What affects one, can affect all.

The unity of the Church is no different. The good one person does makes the task easier for us all. On the other hand, one bad example can set back the entire Church. God's people, wherever they live on earth, are linked into a grid of community interdependence from which we can never escape. The more we are one, the more we will be an effective Church in the world. This is what Jesus prayed for.

## Sermon ideas

*For the Acts story, you may wish to use a simple paper chain as a visual aid.*

Looking at the story from other perspectives may help us better understand its lessons for living in faithful relationship to God. Imagine Paul and Silas' travelling companions when they found out that the girl's owners and the city authorities were not pleased with Paul's and Silas's actions, and when they learned the two had been thrown into prison after being beaten. What might have been racing through their minds? What do you think they might have considered doing? Discuss ways that your church reacts in the face of controversial or catastrophic events. Identify ways in which today's readings might provide guidance for how to respond in the face of injustice, conflict, and/or threat. What are the resources you and your faith community might draw upon?

Have you ever felt like you were trapped in a situation? Have you ever felt overwhelmed by forces or powers that seemed indifferent or downright hostile toward you? Most adults understand the dynamics of such situations, whether in coping with them in their own lives or trying to support friends or family members facing such circumstances. Who in the worshipping group may be in the midst of such a situation right now – at work, in a personal relationship, or in a crisis of health? Challenging situations occur at any time. In

such times, where do we turn for support? The Acts story relates a testing of Paul and Silas. They do what seems right and faithful to God's ways, only to suffer for it. They do not lose faith or hope, and are able to draw on the resources of their faith for strength. Chains are broken, and bonds of ministry are forged.

Alternatively this could be looked upon as a story of freedom. While we may be tempted to focus solely on the freedom brought to Paul and Silas from prison, there are other freedoms: freedom from slavery for the girl; freedom into new life for the jailer and family; freedom that challenges slavery and all systems of exploitation – a very contemporary theme in many parts of the world. We may grow discouraged, but there is no constraining the Spirit of the risen Christ and the liberation Christ brings. Worship and prayer punctuate this story of liberation and freedom. It begins with Paul and Silas once again on their way to a place of worship and prayer. Worship is also in the middle of the story as Paul and Silas, undaunted by prison shackles, are found praying and singing hymns to God. The story concludes in worship with the baptism of the jailer and his family, now set free from the fear imposed on their lives by empire's domination exploitation, and brutality.

The one who sets in motion the liberating Spirit of Christ is a slave girl who Paul and Silas encounter on the way to this place of prayer.

As is so often the case, those who suffer most from domination and exploitation are the ones who recognise the liberating potential and power of the spirit, even before those who come in the name of Christ. In this case, it is the enslaved girl who continues calling out to Paul and Silas, seeing in them something familiar (they too are bound) and unfamiliar (they live with a freedom denied to her). It is a mark of the unfinished salvation at work in Paul and Silas that they only respond to the girl's plight out of annoyance rather than responding to her enslavement.

The exploitation of the girl is not the only way in which the domination of empire manifests in this story. Her enslavement is both physical and spiritual. The healing that Paul offers poses a material threat to the enslaved girl's owners, who profit from her oppression. Her owners then exploit their marketplace connection with the judicial system and bring charges against Paul and Silas, which leads to their imprisonment. The judicial system uses its legal power to brutalise Paul and Silas.

The brutality inherent in systems of domination is evidenced further when the jailer, discovering Paul, Silas, and the other prisoners missing, immediately concludes that his only option is to take his own life. After Paul, Silas and the other prisoners are set free, the jailer asks to become a part of such a life-giving and liberating movement. The story concludes

with the liberating waters of baptism extended to the jailer and his family. However, the one who continues to haunt this story is the unnamed girl, who recognises that she too is included in salvation's freedom and continues to call out to all who claim the name of Christ.

### **Alternative approach**

If your worship is not in the traditional style you may wish to think about a more imaginative/reflective telling of the theme using Jesus words about proclaiming liberty to the captives.

### **Proclaiming liberty to the captives**

The following is an imaginative contemplation. You are invited to put yourself into the story with Paul and Silas in prison, who themselves imagine Jesus reading the "set the captives free" text (Luke 4:17-21) as the memories come flooding back of His own friends who had been imprisoned by the Romans.

Can we imagine the scene for a minute?

We see Paul and Silas in prison, having been stripped and given a severe beating. We hear the door, that heavy door, thud as it closes and locks. We feel the darkness, the stone walls, running with damp. We hear a rough voice, asking who they are. Wrongfully arrested, stiff and bloody, every muscle-twitch painful, they must have longed for sleep, somewhere to lie down other than the cold stone slabs under their feet.

Paul and Silas recall the story of Jesus, when He took the scroll, and chose to read from Isaiah. Jesus lifted His *voice* to *all* those in this synagogue, whom He had known for years:

*"The Lord has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to set at liberty those who are in prison....."*

Those powerful words hang in the air ...

As he read, Jesus must have reflected on the times He had gone to the prison to visit His friends. Memories of the conditions and how many young people were thrown into the jail by the Romans, to rot away.

The faces of two friends who had spent 10 years as they lived caged in, as animals. Jesus' heart was moved during those visits when He watched how the guards treated the prisoners. Where was the compassion in the hearts of these guards? As He read the scroll,



Jesus remembered a good friend who was wrongly convicted of a crime he never committed and remembered seeing His friend's wife visit him. Anguish spread across her face as she spoke of the children. How hard it was to buy food. His friend would pound his hand on the table – frustrated, angry at a system that caged him in for something he didn't do. "Why?" He would whisper, "Why?"

The sadness that filled Jesus' friend's eyes, oceans of sorrow poured down his face, showing what sprang from the hours of being alone, thinking of the ones he loved. Jesus remembered that afternoon in the prison when He went over to His friend, sat down next to him and his wife. He remembered how He wanted to say so many things but couldn't find words for the anguish He felt; how He took their hands and prayed with them, asking Yahweh to free them from this confinement, that in the darkest moments they would reach out to find Yahweh's hand very close.

Jesus remembered praying that they would not lose hope. As Jesus prayed, large tears began to flow down the wife's face, showing so clearly how hard these years had been; separated from the man she loved, missing his presence. Seeing their children grow up without their father.

Jesus remembered telling her that He would visit her at home – would bring something for the children – maybe take them out. Jesus, knowing that Yahweh was found in visiting these people who had been thrust into this hopelessness, no doors open, no windows, no exit – only waiting, hoping against all odds.

Jesus remembered another time at the jail, seeing two young men enter. Their heads downcast. They had been sentenced that day, and were given the maximum number of years. They couldn't talk, they just silently buried their heads in their hands and you could hear their cries of sadness.

With all these memories, Jesus read these lines from Isaiah passionately, feeling the great injustices of the society of the Romans, of the high priests, the privileged classes who were given everything, all the advantages, the best education, trips, fine clothes. These people, who never found themselves in the situations where they had to commit crimes.

Jesus remembered torturous stories of children being abandoned by their parents, being beaten, having fathers who drank too much, not having enough to eat, wondering how they ended up in the prisons of the Romans. It was so clear that their lives had been hard from the start. Jesus, remembering all these faces of people He visited, wondered where Yahweh was in all this.



He just knew that to be locked up like this, in a place with no hope, was where He needed to be – to bring some hope, some light, some good news that God had not forgotten them.

*“The Lord has sent me to bring good news to the Poor, to set at liberty those who are in prison.....”*

Those powerful words hang in the air once more.

## Prayers

When leading prayer in public worship, I avoid using the first person singular. It is not “I” but “we” who are praying in this context. The speaker is hopefully merely expressing the reflective thoughts of the gathering.

It might be worth considering avoiding overly wordy and technical language that may have been heard in the past, but goes way over the heads of most folk. So I use the expression ‘Gathering prayer’ to scoop up what might be traditionally known as Adoration, Supplication, Confession. This allows people to throw off distractions occupying their minds before they arrived and settle to feeling part of the worship and a chance to lay their cares down for a while.

Similarly, Intercession is replaced by ‘Prayers of concern’, which should be on general themes such as, for example, praying for ‘areas of war and conflict’ rather than country X, Y and Z, because you can’t cover every specific conflict zone without folk wondering if they will be home in time for lunch! The use of silence is a great tool to give folk space to reflect on their own thoughts about, say, areas of conflict which they know of.

Included below is an opportunity to have a sung response after each section of concern, which, with a range of suitable short songs in CH4, provide a focus and a space between the said words.

### Gathering/Calls to worship

Each of us arrives from all the ordinariness of living.

We come to centre ourselves once more.

To touch again that place inside.

And to choose again our better selves.

Let us celebrate the richness and diversity of life in the presence of God.

We bring our hopes and anticipations.  
We bring our joys and celebrations.  
We bring our sorrows and lamentations.  
We bring our faith and adorations.  
We bring to this hour of worship  
all that makes our lives real and meaningful,  
that they may be blessed by communion  
with the lives of others.

From the fragmented and often chaotic world of our everyday lives,  
we gather together in search of wholeness.  
We bid you welcome,  
those who come with weary spirit seeking rest.  
We bid you welcome,  
those who come with hope in your hearts,  
those who come proud and joyous,  
those who come to learn and explore.

We enter into this time and this place  
to join our hearts and minds together  
to remember what is most important in life.  
To be challenged to live more truly, more deeply,  
to live with integrity  
and kindness and with hope and love,  
to feel the company of those who seek a common path,  
to be renewed in our faith in the promise of this life,  
to be strengthened and to find the courage  
to continue to do what we must do,  
day after day,  
world without end.

### **Gathering prayer**

The light is spreading.  
It started off one Easter  
when tombstones rolled and graves were found empty,  
Jesus was alive.  
The news spread from disciple to apostle,  
from followers to strangers.  
It spread like a fire among us, this news of new life.

It spreads still today here in this place, among us  
who dare believe that life and death is not all there is.  
In this place new light is streaming,  
the Good News still has power to unfold and renew.

We come to re-weave the unravelling fabric of community.  
To re-connect once more with the larger human family.  
To find once more that place of calm.  
To remind ourselves that we belong.  
And to remember what it is we belong to.  
We are many, as the stars that fill the night,  
as the cluster of the grapes upon the vine,  
as a flock of birds in flight,  
as the branches of a tree,  
as the waves upon the ocean.  
We are also one body, and the work of Christ is done  
when we learn to live in true community.  
We come –  
To centre ourselves,  
to open ourselves,  
to remember ourselves.  
And to celebrate the life we share together.

We enter into this time and this place to join our hearts and minds together.  
To remember what is most important in life.  
To be challenged to live more truly, more deeply,  
to live with integrity and kindness and with hope and love,  
to feel the company of those who seek a common path,  
to be renewed in our faith in the promise of this life,  
to be strengthened and to find the courage  
to continue to do what we must do,  
day after day,  
world without end.

### **Prayer of concern (i)**

May we hang around for people,  
may we linger with intent... to care,  
may we breach the peace... with justice.  
May we not just look for a new thing, but follow it through,

not just have an idea but make it happen,  
not complain about this and that, but do something about it.

In all our joys and in all our concerns, may we be ever mindful  
**Of the presence of God among us.**

May we turn our words into acts,  
our thoughts into reality,  
our intent into a way of life.  
May we move beyond the word,  
becoming the word  
and move with the word,  
becoming flesh.  
May we walk the talk,  
speak of good things,  
and find ourselves living them as well.

In all our joys and in all our concerns, may we be ever mindful  
**Of the presence of God among us.**

So may we dare to speak of setting people free  
and find ourselves working towards a freedom  
bound up in each other.  
May we dare to speak of justice  
and find ourselves proclaiming that justice here,  
in everyday acts of compassion.  
May we dare to speak of welcome towards the stranger  
and find ourselves among strangers here,  
and loving them into community.

In all our joys and in all our concerns, may we be ever mindful  
**Of the presence of God among us.**

May we pay Christ more than lip-service  
but serve Him with our whole lives. Amen

### **Prayer of concern (ii)**

Make in us a captive conscience, quick to hear, to act, to plead;  
make us truly sisters, brothers of whatever race or creed –

Teach us to be fully human, open to each other's need.

May God bless us with a restless discomfort about easy answers,  
half-truths and superficial relationships,  
so that we may seek truth boldly  
and love deep within our hearts.

*Sung response* ([Hymn 263](#) verse 3)

May God bless us with holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,  
so that we may tirelessly work for justice, freedom,  
and peace among all people.

*Sung response*

May God bless us with the gift of tears  
to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation,  
or the loss of all that they cherish,  
so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

*Sung response*

May God bless us with enough foolishness  
to believe that we really CAN make a difference in this world,  
so that we are able, with God's grace,  
to do what others claim cannot be done.

### **Prayer of concern (iii)**

Jesus prayed, "that they all may be one"

We look for the time when the whole world will be one,  
in concern for the weakest and poorest, for the very old and the very young.  
We pray that we will find a role in this huge task;  
a gift, a message an active form of participation.

Jesus prayed, "that all may be one"

We pray that the communities of faith will unite in sharing their beliefs and working for  
common goals.

We pray that we might play a part in this task, a contact, a discussion, a work project.

Jesus prayed, “that they may all be one”

We pray that neighborhood groups will get together to care for those most vulnerable and at risk.

We pray that our faith community may join with others,  
to offer a meeting place,  
to provide leadership,  
and be the focus for expressed hopes and just demands.

### **Blessing (i)**

Love is our doctrine, the quest for truth is our sacrament, and service is our prayer.

May we dwell together in peace, seeking knowledge in freedom, and making the wholeness of others the heart of our concern.

May all grow into harmony with their divine essence, truthful to self, faithful to others and in balance with nature. Amen

### **Blessing (ii)**

May the Lord of life embrace us with His wondrous love.

May we come to know the trust that is complete in Him. Amen

### **Blessing (iii)**

We go now for the Spirit of God is alive in the land.

We go in the power of love,

with the blessing of God upon us. Amen

## **Musical suggestions**

*God Welcomes All* (GWA) is the new supplement to Church Hymnary Fourth Edition. This exciting new collection features over 200 hymns and songs in a wide range of styles by writers from Scotland and around the world.

The full music version and words-only versions are now available; and digital resources, including the expansion of the existing Church of Scotland music website, will be published in due course, with streaming functions and further information on each song; backing tracks; and lyric videos. *God Welcomes All* is available to order from

<https://chbookshop.hymnsam.co.uk/books/9781786225573/god-welcomes-all>



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.

When picking appropriate hymns, a simple formula might be: a rousing beginning to warm folk up; a more contemplative/quieter middle that touches on the theme; and a rousing finale to send folk home with.

NOTE. People will sing most, even different, words if they know the tune!

To start...

- GWA 149 – “When Miriam’s daughters rise and sing”
- CH4 184 – “Sing to the Lord a joyful song”
- CH4 192 – “All my hope on God is founded”
- CH4 565 – “My life flows on in endless song”

To reflect upon...

- GWA 221 – “Lord, you hear the cry of the widow weeping”
- CH4 396 – “And can it be”
- CH4 561 – “Blessèd assurance, Jesus is mine!”
- CH4 577 – “Christ be beside me”
- CH4 580 – “Abide with me”
- CH4 553 – “Just as I am”

To finish...

- GWA 224 – “Sing a new world into being”



- CH4 570 – “When the storms of life are raging”
- CH4 352 – “O for a thousand tongues to sing”
- CH4 512 – “To God be the glory”

## 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](#)

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](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

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