

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – Year B

Sunday 28 January 2024

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev Bill Taylor, retired Minister and a Chaplain for the Presbytery of Edinburgh and West Lothian, for his thoughts on the fourth 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.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the Sanctuary First website:
<https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/daily-worship>

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

Two themes emerge from today's readings: one about knowledge and the other about who Jesus is. The gospel presents us with the first miracle recorded by Mark. Jesus brings healing, but the account is written as a revelation of the power of Jesus to overcome evil. There are many different revelations about Jesus in store for Mark's readers; each would be a good fit for the Season of Epiphany, in which Jesus is shown to be Light for the World. In ordinary conversation we sometimes use 'epiphany' to denote a moment of insight, when we see some things differently than we did before. An interesting debate could be had about knowledge, how it can dawn upon us, or how we acquire it through study and how we use it. Knowledge can equal power, but is it not best used for the good of all and, as Paul would suggest, by being mindful of those who most need support? If it's questionable that 'ignorance is bliss' – ignorance has led to much suffering – is it enough to think of knowledge as the antidote? Whilst enlightenment offers much, knowledge cannot by itself solve humanity's crises. And we are led to the Wisdom of God, made known in Jesus Christ.

When reading the scripture portions, I find it helpful to look at the chapters before and after the passage in question, to see if it's part of a series of teachings, miracles, or themes being addressed. It's good to sit with the passage for a while, work with it, let the words speak to you, and pray. I highlight the words and phrases that stand out for me, with which I connect and consider why. You may also find common threads between the passages. During preparation time I find it helpful to talk over ideas with friends/colleagues/worship group members. This helps me clarify the best way to express a theme, providing an early reaction in terms of how well what's proposed might connect. Sometimes, after the service, I have the opportunity with colleagues to reflect on how the material was received, adopting a 'what worked' approach and learning lessons from the experience.

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

A new prophet like Moses

Joshua, who has been acting as assistant to Moses, is to succeed him. But at this point, Moses does not yet name a successor. Moses provides the people with the assurance that when the time comes and he can no longer lead them, the journey will continue, it doesn't end here. "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people" (v15).

The context of Deuteronomy is that of a pause before entry into the Promised Land. The people are gathered in the Plains of Moab and Moses, though at times reticent, delivers three lengthy addresses to the people, reminding them of the Lord's presence with them on

the journey from Egypt and exhorting their continued faithfulness to the Covenant. Moses concludes by presenting the people with a choice: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him” (Deuteronomy 30:19-20a). It is then, in the sight of all Israel, that Moses declares Joshua as the successor, who will lead them into the land he will not enter.

Verse 16 expresses a fearfulness of God, the belief that God’s being is so wholly other, so far beyond us, so holier than us, that to see God or to hear God’s words directly, would be too overwhelming. For me, there is something here reminiscent of Peter’s call to be a disciple. As his colleagues struggle to land a great catch of fish, Peter falls on his knees before Jesus and says “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” (Luke 5:8). The Deuteronomy passage could be read as a job description for a prophet. A prophet, or prophets – footnotes suggest the plural may apply – are to convey the words of the Lord in ways that can be understood and received by those to whom they are speaking. They are to act in some ways as intermediaries, called to a ministry of presence, speaking God’s words, with nothing added or subtracted. They are to be accountable, as are those who hear the prophets’ words. Such a passage reminds those preparing worship services, reflections or sermons that our task concerns discerning the word of the Lord to the people amongst whom we are called to speak God’s message on that day or given moment. It’s a daunting task, which cannot be approached without God’s help.

For Christians the promise to raise up a prophet like Moses, resonates with another ‘Joshua’. ‘Jesus’ is a form of ‘Joshua’, which means ‘Saviour’. “I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet who shall speak to them everything that I command”. This sentence in the latter part of v18 is similar to Jesus’ words when Jesus prays for the disciples before being arrested and speaks about passing on to them everything the Father has said to Him. “Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me” (John 17:7-8).

There’s so much we can talk about, life is bountiful and rich, knowledge is unbounded. Yet we are also called to have a focus, and to ensure that the words of Jesus are given expression in our time as they were in the days of the gospels. Jesus is the key to what human beings need to know to share the abundant life of God’s kingdom.

Psalm 111

The praise of God begins and ends this psalm – a pattern for our worship? The psalm is offered by an individual but the company of the congregation are never far away, indeed the relationship between the personal and the community of faith is a seamless one. We may be on our own but we are never alone, our relationship with God will be a personal one but it will also be shared with so many sisters and brothers. Each of us is invited with the celebrant to “give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart” (v1), words reminiscent of Psalm 103:1 “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.”

“The works of the Lord,” are celebrated in verse 2, “studied by all who delight in them.” The first reference in the psalm to study suggests that such knowledge is linked to joy. This reminded me of that question about humanity’s purpose, the first question of the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647): “What is the chief end of man? The answer: “To glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”

There follows a hymn to God’s glory, telling the honour and majesty of God’s works (v3). God’s faithfulness is celebrated: “His righteousness endures for ever.” GAF Knight, in his commentary on the Psalms, makes the point that “righteousness here in its feminine form means the power to love and recreate the lives of other people which God gives to those whom he has redeemed.” Striking a more pastoral note than Deuteronomy’s description of prophets’ work, here is a further insight into what it means to minister God’s grace.

The renown of God’s wonderful deeds (v4a) is told, this God who is “ever mindful of his covenant” (v5). Described as gracious and merciful (v4b) there is joy in knowing that God has seen the need and made provision for redemption (v9a). God is beyond us, “holy and awesome is his name” (v9b). God’s name, in the Bible, is an expression of God’s character. To ‘fear’ God is to find wisdom, at least the beginning of it. The psalm hints at a lifelong practice of wisdom which will bring us to a good understanding, a process. The Calvinists who developed the Westminster Confession would have described this as sanctification, becoming more like Jesus day by day. So it is we are invited to relate to God respectfully and with reverence, the meaning of ‘fear’ in this context, to know ourselves in the presence of none other than God, and to grow in the understanding which God alone can bring.

Is the Psalmist suggesting that theology, our knowledge of God, is never something that can be done truly apart from a living relationship with God and without the company of our sisters and brothers, the congregation gathered for worship who help us discern God’s voice?

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

This section of the Corinthian correspondence (there are likely more than two letters; 1 Corinthians 5:9 refers to an earlier letter) is concerned with practical Christian living, covering such topics as sexual morality, marriage, widows, lawsuits and food offered to idols. It is perhaps, at this distance, difficult for us to understand why this latter was an issue of such importance to the early Church, but food offered to idols was everywhere in a society where countless deities were worshipped. Paul gives over the whole of this chapter to these issues. Here and elsewhere, he offers a variety of perspectives. Shining through is Paul's concern for those whose faith could easily be knocked. "But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling-block to the weak" (v9). We might ask ourselves, in the issues that exercise us, and which may also be divisive, how Paul's consideration for the weakest might influence the way we act or present our arguments. Paul is concerned about the way knowledge is used. "Knowledge (*gnosis*) puffs up, but love (*agape*) builds up," begins Paul. Knowledge was greatly prized in the Greek society of the day, and who can dispute their legacy in diverse fields of mathematics, architecture, medicine, and the arts? There were those who claimed to have a secret or inner knowledge, who considered themselves to have access to specialist information not given to others. Paul takes the Gnosticism of his day to task in his Corinthian correspondence, here (v1) and most notably in chapter 13. "And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing." (1 Cor 13:2) Knowledge can easily lead to superiority and be used to provide an advantage for some over others; knowledge can equate with power. Paul, however, is concerned about a more ultimate reality, a wisdom dismissed as folly by the wise (1 Corinthians 1:18ff), the unconditional love or agape of God, "the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed" (Romans 16:25b-26a). The gospel makes an open secret of God's grace towards all people.

It's a valuable exercise to examine how self-aware we are. Is there sometimes a conflict between getting our own way and humility, between serving our own agendas and the agenda that is love? Paul is concerned that others are not destroyed by the way knowledge is used. How pertinent in our age of social media. He offers similar guidance in his letter to the church in Rome. "Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble." (Romans 14:20-21). As many re-consider our relationship to food we can ask ourselves what it might mean to "eat in honour of the Lord" (Romans 14:6).

We are to avoid an attitude of superiority, or seeking an advantage over others. Love matters more than knowledge, concern for our weaker sister and brother more than exercising our freedom to do whatever we choose. Paul's is not a polemic against the advancement of knowledge, it's about how knowledge is used, in the service of humankind. In recent times we witnessed how the advancement of science hugely reduced the development time to create a vaccine against Covid-19, saving many lives. Concerns about the use of Artificial Intelligence, however, warn us that when some knowledge is gained, it cannot be unknown. Paul would have been well acquainted with Psalm 111 and where wisdom is to be found.

Mark 1:21-28

This healing or deliverance takes place on the Sabbath. Jesus will turn out to be a repeat offender, if offence this be. The issues around Sabbath observance will be highlighted in Mark 2:23-27 when the Pharisees challenge Jesus for permitting His disciples to pick some heads of grain as they walk in a field – here Jesus is revealed as Lord of the Sabbath – and again in Mark 3:1-5 when, prior to healing a man with a shrivelled hand, Jesus asks the question: “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” (v4). Such was the strength of feeling after this that the Pharisees made common cause with their enemies, the Herodians, to plot how they might kill Jesus.

Mark offers his readers a number of epiphanies, showings forth, signposts that tell who Jesus is. Each revelation offers a clue concerning Jesus' unique identity. His healing work will be witnessed many times. Soon Jesus will be revealed as one who has the power to forgive sins (Mark 3:1-12). Later we will see how He settles a storm and wonder with the disciples “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey Him!” (Mark 5:41)

Mark's pacey style means there's little time to draw breath. He can't wait to tell us as much as possible about Jesus' identity, taking us supremely to the revelation of Jesus as God's suffering servant, the wounded healer, by whose passion upon the cross we are healed. Even then there's more to be disclosed!

But for now, the focus of today's text offers us two elements that build the picture of who Jesus is and they both concern His authority, as a teacher and as a deliverer.

When Jesus taught in His local synagogue people remarked about it. There was something about His approach. He was authentic, lived what He taught, knew what He was talking about from the inside out. The congregation were amazed as “He taught them as one

having authority” (v22). Jesus’ words were powerful and effective, doubtless His listeners were reminded of that text from the Servant Songs of Isaiah:

“so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:11)

Words are never just words in the Bible, and this is nowhere more the case than with the word of the Lord. Another gospel writer will reveal Jesus as the living Word became a human being. Mark has us wondering about that here: “I know who you are, the Holy One of God” (v24b). We too are in awe at Jesus dealing effectively with evil. It is notable following the man’s outburst, and immediately after the unclean spirit has left him, that again the congregation talk about Jesus’ teaching: “They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching! With authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him’” (v27). Jesus’ words are effective against that which disturbs, diminishes and destroys people’s lives. He is “the one in whose teaching God’s power is breaking through and new miracles are happening” (Anderson). A contrast is made with the Scribes (v22), who lack this authority.

The focus of our passage is undoubtedly Jesus’ engagement with the person suffering from an impure or unclean spirit, and we learn a lot about Jesus from them. With others considered ceremonially unclean, this person would not ordinarily have been permitted access to the synagogue. Their symptoms could not have been obvious until, with convulsions, they are impelled to engage with Jesus. The person declares: “I know who you are, the Holy One of God” (v24). This revelation about Jesus’ identity comes in the context of Jesus’ teaching and others listening to what He has to say. Jesus’ understanding, knowledge and wisdom come from God, and He uses it to bring wholeness and hope into people’s lives.

This is the first recorded miracle by Mark. The drama is not primarily presented as a healing miracle, rather a deliverance of an individual from the grip of chaotic forces that convulse and threaten their life. In the Daily Study Bible, Prof Barclay entitled this passage “The first victory over the powers of evil”. In the beginning of Genesis we find the Spirit of God moving across the face of the deep, pushing back the chaos and bringing life into being. Jesus is operating in this tradition. Indeed, it might be said, here is the intimation that the new creation has begun. “Have you come to destroy us?” the person with the impure spirit asks (v24). Prof Hugh Anderson comments, “The question really amounts to an

acknowledgement and expresses the standpoint of the gospel that the moment for the overthrow of the powers of evil has arrived”.

There is drama here in the synagogue. Sometimes we forget that worship is drama and it can be worthwhile considering how the different elements of our worship appeal to our senses and engage us. Did the person’s shouting cause an upset? (v 24.) When they were thrown into convulsions were those gathered, like Jesus, concerned for the person’s well-being? What was the stillness like when it came, the sudden, pregnant quiet, that told of how this person had been set free?

Jesus’ fame spread because of this (v28) but He didn’t want to be a celebrity, He wasn’t a wonder-worker or showman. There are hints in this passage of what has been called the messianic secret, a device sometimes deployed when Jesus asks people to keep His identity quiet in case His purpose is misunderstood.

Following this passage (v29) is an urgent call to Peter to come home, his mother-in-law is unwell, and to be sure to bring Jesus with him. Jesus probably stayed in Peter’s house during his time in Capernaum.

Sermon ideas

I like the title *Reflecting on Scripture and Resting in God* for the sermon or reflection, with some space to absorb what’s been said. It’s helpful to have a musical interval, an extra hymn or a period of silence. Two short addresses can work better than one.

You might like to have someone shout out and interrupt, shortly after the sermon has started. That would help recreate the atmosphere in the Capernaum synagogue that day. It’s not something that happens very often in Scotland’s churches. You might like to invite questions, with maybe a few people ready to start it off. Depending on the setting (e.g. Café Church), a passage like today’s gospel lends itself to some small group discussion, with feedback to the congregation. Some contemporary Churches, perhaps from the African American or Pentecostal traditions, offer preachers words of encouragement such as Hallelujah! or Amen! when they find themselves uplifted by what the preacher has said. You might like to dramatise the Mark reading with different voices, to capture something of the drama involved.

Thinking of the contrast between the disturbance in the synagogue and the calm that followed the person’s deliverance or healing, you might like to suggest the benefits of taking time to still ourselves and enjoy, where possible, moments of quiet. I have had

positive feedback on a short time with the congregation following some simple breathing exercises, based on the guide [that can be found at NHS Inform](#).

When setting the context and the drama of the gospel reading, a slide with a Bible map can be helpful.

After spending time in the desert (Mark 1:13) Jesus has started building His team, calling His first disciples. Jesus has been preaching in the region and today we find Him in Capernaum, the fishing town by the Sea of Galilee, which becomes His home. Capernaum is situated on the left bank near the top of the Sea of Galilee. Capernaum was a busy commercial centre and its situation ensured not only bountiful supplies of fish but markets with goods from all over the world. The great Maritime Road passed through, connecting Capernaum with world markets on the Mediterranean Sea, Asia to the north and east, and Africa to the south. In this cosmopolitan place, Jesus' ministry moves into gear.

The first miracle mentioned by Mark takes place in Capernaum. It's an encounter that serves to establish Jesus' authority. He is teaching in the synagogue, and they are amazed at the way He teaches, not from textbooks, but out of lived experience of God.

Here follow a few thoughts on how a sermon/reflection might develop:

“Just then” (v23) – and you can feel the tension ramping up as Mark relays the drama – there is a sudden interruption, shouting in the synagogue, yelling and screaming, as a troubled soul is shaken by convulsions in front of the congregation. Jesus speaks with the man; his well-being is restored, he is of sound mind again, and all is calm.

Possibly this was the synagogue built by the Roman Centurion whose servant Jesus would heal (Luke 7:1-10). In today's encounter we see Jesus giving marching orders – be quiet and depart – to what has brought much torment and suffering into a person's life. Jesus can do this for troubled souls. He is able.

They were amazed, every one of them, and started asking, ‘What is this? Is it a new teaching? He gives orders to the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’ Soon Mark will show how Jesus' authority extends to forgiveness, when Jesus says: “My son, your sins are forgiven” to a paralysed man lowered through the roof of a crowded house by his friends (Mark 2:1-12). Not long after that a raging tempest is calmed and the rescued crew of a small boat ask: “Who is this, that even the winds and waves obey him?” (Mark 4: 35-41.) Moment by moment *Mark* opens our eyes to who Jesus is. He establishes Jesus' credentials as the one we can trust in all circumstances, especially when things go awry. In this season

of Epiphany – in which we celebrate the revelation of Jesus as the Saviour of the world – may our eyes indeed be opened, ‘to see Jesus more clearly, to love Him more dearly and follow Him more nearly, day by day’.

There is much can be said about ‘knowledge’ from the lectionary readings; how we might find it, and use it. You might like to explore the knowledge connections between the readings and pose some questions about how we can share knowledge to the benefit of humankind. With the advances in information technology – search engines give such easy access to vast amounts of knowledge – and in artificial intelligence, should there be limits? When the Online Safety Act of the UK Parliament became law in October 2023, some voiced concerns that it interferes with free speech, whilst others believe it will better protect people, ensuring Big Tech companies take steps to remove the worst of the internet. The first chapters of Genesis remind us that humanity has never fully embraced the idea of its reach being limited. Paul’s wisdom tells us that love matters most, the Psalmist shows us where wisdom starts and Jesus, the wisdom of God come among us, invites us to come and know Him. Knowing God is like knowing another person; our knowledge of God grows the more we trust and put that into practice.

Some further thoughts: We can take the dramatic event in the synagogue on different levels, as with many of the exorcism or deliverance stories in the New Testament.

- We all have our demons, it is sometimes said – things that are a struggle in our lives, with which we wrestle and seek to overcome. I know that’s me, and if that’s you, well, Jesus can help us.
- We live in vastly different times to the ancient or even mediaeval world where devils were thought to be in the air (*miasma*) and people faced pandemics with no hope of a vaccine. With the development of modern medicine and psychiatry we have a vastly different language with which to describe illnesses today.
- Yet Paul’s reminder is as relevant today as it was then: “Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh but against..., spiritual forces of evil” (Ephesians 6:12). Amongst these are the unseen forces that shape our lives, the pressures, the influences, the illusions, the addictions that deflect us from being the person that God intended. We need no reminders today of the evils of poverty and pandemic, of terrorism and war, that devalue every human being, a child of God. The reality of evil is not under dispute; Mark points to Jesus as the one through whom evil can be overcome – not by sowing the seeds of yet more destruction, but through the disarming power of love.

Perhaps it is hard to describe a micro-organism like a virus as evil. It is what it is, but unchecked it invades cells and destroys life. Such things, are they not part of creation's "bondage to decay" (Romans 8:20-21) from which one day we will be set free?

In *God and the Pandemic*, Tom Wright, writes, "Evil is an intruder into God's creation. Any attempt to analyse either what evil is, why it's allowed or what God does with it – apart from the clear, strong statement that God overcomes it through Jesus' death for sinners – is not only trying to put the wind into a bottle; it is supposing that we can imagine an orderly universe in which 'evil' has an appropriate, allowable place."

Evil is in this world. God in Jesus actively engages to loosen us from its entanglements. Mark moves so fast in his gospel because he can't wait to take us to the cross and resurrection, where Jesus defeats evil and death, steals its power, and overcomes it by good, by love, by forgiveness and by life.

"The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing." (Attributed to the 18th-century philosopher, Edmund Burke, but something similar was also said by John Stuart Mill).

Jesus is still building His team! God invites all of us to collaborate in overcoming evil, in its many forms: disease, injustice, oppression, greed, war, etc., by following Jesus, doing what we can each day, loving our neighbour as ourselves and working with others to care for those most disadvantaged, to promote wellbeing and justice in the world. "Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21).

References

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God and the Pandemic, A Christian reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath, Tom Wright, SPCK

The Daily Study Bible, The Psalms Volume 2, G.A.F. Knight, The Saint Andrew Press

The Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of Mark, William Barclay, The Saint Andrew Press

The Gospel of Mark, Hugh Anderson, New Century Bible, Oliphants

The Shorter Catechism Agreed upon by the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, Collins' Clear-type Press

Prayers

Call to worship (*Psalm 111: 1-2 & 10: NRSV*)

Praise the Lord!

**I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.**

Great are the works of the Lord,
studied by all who delight in them.

**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practise it have a good understanding.
God's praise endures for ever.**

Prayer of Confession/Repentance

Jesus, You sought out the still places.

In these moments set aside for worship we come to You.

Not with too many words, may we find refreshment and nourishment for our souls.

Still our souls, quieten our anxious thoughts,

as we gather in Your presence and re-focus our lives on You.

O God, our merciful Redeemer,
we who have sinned in word, thought and deed,
and in what we have left undone,
humbly ask You to meet us where we need to be forgiven
and set our feet again upon the path that leads to life.

Pause

Loving God,
may we, with a broken world, know Your touch of healing and restoration
as we thank You for sisters and brothers across the world
and every act of human kindness.

Set free to worship You with our whole hearts,
we sing and tell of the joy there is in You, God of new beginnings,
who leads us through the dark valleys to green pastures,
who offers us a foretaste of the new creation.

May all glory and honour be Yours,

faithful God of mercy, justice and love.

You may wish to include the Lord's Prayer here.

Our Father ...

Prayer of Thanksgiving/Gratitude

This might be said at a time when an offering is brought forward or when the giving of an offering is highlighted.

God of grace, in whose company we are made whole,
we bless You for Your generous love.

Holy Spirit, may You teach us how to pray,
as we offer our thanksgivings,
all that You have given us and who we are,
in praise and service;
for Your glory and in Jesus name.

Amen

Here a doxology could be sung, such as "Praise God from who all blessings flow" (CH4 807)

Prayer for others / Intercession

With "Be still and know that I am God" (CH4 755)

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am God.

Gracious God,
as the disciples brought others to Jesus
that He might lay His hands upon their lives and bless them,
we offer our thoughts and prayers for people we bring to You now.
And, like the disciples, we bring ourselves as well.

We come to You who is able to do so much more than we can imagine,
we come to You because already, risen and ascended Jesus,
before the throne of God You pray for us and for all whom we would bring to You.

Receive our prayers O Lord:
some are for people we love,

others are for people we find hard to love,
some are for people who are happy,
others are for people in pain,
some are for people we know,
others for people known by You.
In quiet moments we pray.

Pause

*I am the Lord who saves and heals.
I am the Lord who saves and heals.
I am the Lord who saves and heals.*

Jesus, Saviour,
we pray today for a world so often in turmoil,
caught up in fear or war, injustice,
the neglect of the vulnerable, and of creation.

Teach us how best to use the freedom we have been given
to serve You and to make common cause with all who seek the wellbeing of others.
We pray for people in positions of influence,
remembering the Internet and other forms of mass communication.
May we have the wisdom to nurture what is good
and guard against what is harmful.
We pray for all who advance knowledge and extend the frontiers of science,
thanking You for the many benefits we enjoy as a result.
God only wise, may knowledge be used for good alone.

May we return often to the well-spring of wisdom,
that we may share what You have given us
to drink with a thirsty world.

*In you, Lord God, I put my trust.
In you, Lord God, I put my trust.
In you, Lord God, I put my trust.*

Saviour Jesus, Son of God,
we discover in You that already life has overcome death,
goodness has triumphed over evil,

forgiveness has won the victory over sin,
love has conquered hate.

In you we renew our faith and commitment
to Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.
Glory be to you,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
One God, now and for always. Amen

*Be still and know that I am God.
Be still and know that I am God.
Be still and know that I am God.*

Blessing / Closing prayer (*1 Thessalonians 5 21b-24*)

“Hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.
May the God of peace sanctify you entirely;
and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless
at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
The one who calls you is faithful, and will do this.”

Sung Benediction: “May the God of peace go with us” (CH4 786)

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 from CH4 throughout Epiphany](#) can be found on the Church of Scotland website.

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 112 – “God, whose almighty word” – The chaos and darkness fled when God engaged with it. Let there be light!

- CH4 132 – “Immortal, invisible, God only wise” – A stirring hymn about God and God’s character from whom flows life and light. This could be sung at the beginning of the service.
- CH4 189 – “Be still” – A hymn that celebrates the presence of God in the stillness and God’s power to cleanse and heal.
- CH4 404 – “I danced in the morning” – Sydney Carter’s hymn tells the story of the incarnation. See v3: ‘I danced on the Sabbath and I cured the lame, the holy people said it was a shame.’
- CH4 485 – “Dear Lord and Father of mankind” – John Whittier’s hymn invites us to find Jesus in quiet times or places and connects us with the stillness Jesus brought to the disturbed man in the synagogue.
- CH4 530 – “One more step” – Using words that appeal to all ages Sydney Carter’s hymn invites us to face the most difficult of challenges; see v3.
- CH4 537 – “We do not hope to ease our minds” – A hymn by Marnie Barrell that challenges easy answers and invites us to stand for human dignity: “we stand with Christ all through the night till Easter morning dawns again.”
- CH4 550 – “As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you” – Similar words are found in many of the Psalms, e.g. Psalm 42:1. The hymn’s lyrics bring to mind Solomon’s prayer at the start of his reign when he asks God for wisdom, not wealth
- CH4 755 – “Be still and know that I am God” – Verse 2 is particularly appropriate as we think about Jesus’ identity in the season of Epiphany: “I am the Lord who saves and heals.’ This simple hymn can be sung with bidding or intercessory prayers interspersed between its three verses.
- “Speak O Lord” – by Keith Getty & Stuart Townend, Thankyou Music. A hymn about God’s Word renewing our minds to help us see the expanse of God’s vision.

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'.
- If singing in our congregations is 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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