

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost – 15 November 2020

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Rev Donald Scott, Minister of Edinburgh Priestfield, for his thoughts on the twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost and Prisoners Week Scotland 2020. Donald was full-time Chaplain at HMP & YOI Polmont from 2002-19.

“We may not 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 and uncertainty about access to church buildings extends through the autumn and into winter, 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 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](#)

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Introduction

November is a season of remembrance and this Sunday offers the opportunity to remember those in prison. During the lockdown prison staff, including some Chaplains, continued to serve the needs of what is often a highly vulnerable and volatile group of people, gathered together without social distancing from often the very communities on the margins of society where the virus took a firm grip.

This Prisoners Week the theme “Not Alone?” has been chosen to help congregations and others to think and imagine what it might be like to spend time in the facilities throughout the country where people are held.

Our thinking and imagining might lead to questions about why prison is used as it is, and whether there might be other more successful ways of keeping society safe, and rehabilitating offenders.

Headlines would suggest that overcrowding in prisons might make the theme a little redundant! However, when cell doors shut and lock – and prisoners are left with their own thoughts and no access to phones to gain support from family and loved ones – prison can feel a very lonely place indeed.

We are reminded of the verse, “Lo. I am with you.” In the midst of isolation, doubt, self-loathing, anger and recrimination God is with each and every one of us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God!

[Judges 4:1-7](#)

The book of Judges probably comes to us as a series of songs, poems and stories about the history of Israel and the ‘heroes of the faith’, known as the judges, one of whom is Deborah the Prophetess. Lovers of Marvel comics may be surprised to see similarities here! Very little is known about Deborah, and here her role is to motivate Barak to attack a much stronger force against a ‘super-enemy’, Sisera. The two verses following the lectionary passage are interesting in revealing Deborah’s role and the position of women in ancient Hebrew society.

Barak wins the day, against the odds.

There are echoes of Gideon (Judges 7) giving up numerical superiority in battle to prove Yahweh's superiority and certainly the story lends itself to a consideration of what can be achieved with God's help.

Psalm 123

The theme of turning to God for succour, support and mercy also runs through Psalm 123. The setting is probably post-exilic and it is a psalm of lament, put into the mouth of a pilgrim smarting under the insults and derision of foreign oppressors.

This is a psalm crying out for recognition and the return of justice to a land ruled by oppressors: "we have had more than enough of contempt".

The petitioner compares their life to that of a slave, looking for some sign of favour from an all-powerful master. It is a powerful psalm which looks for justice, but sees none. There is a sense of resignation and powerlessness, but also dependence on a God who will surely listen to the cry of God's people, as in Egypt. In the Christian tradition, we would echo, "Marantha! Come Lord, quickly come."

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18

The search for justice is also a theme within the alternative reading. Zephaniah appears to have been part of the royal court, perhaps even the royal family, whose criticism of society's ills are all the more powerful for that fact. "For the day of the Lord is at hand" (v.7) picks up on imagery from Isaiah 2 and Amos 5. God will come to judge God's people, and those who are greedy, complacent and refuse to believe that God cares had better watch out!

The imagery of the message is of a terrible and wrathful judgement on the wicked, which will be swifter than a champion runner and will wreak unavoidable destruction and desolation. There will be no bribe or ransom, no second chance, no exception or exemption. Although the lectionary leaves us dangling, neither Zephaniah nor the gospel leaves us without hope!

Psalm 90:1-8, 12

In a similar vein to Zephaniah and Psalm 123, Psalm 90 is another community lament, urging people to accept their fate.

Beginning with praise for the One who created time and space, it ends with a plea for pity. Wisdom lies in accepting our fate and recognising we can never live up to God's standards. The best we can hope to achieve is to understand our limitations before the One who is beyond time and space.

[1 Thessalonians 5:1-11](#)

The apocalyptic nature of the passage reflects the writer's belief that Christ's return was imminent. No doubt there were plenty of people, then as now, keen to work out the exact moment! Not important, they stress! What is important though is to live in the present moment, as if Christ's return *was* imminent. The last verse, (v.11) is a lovely reminder of the need for support and encouragement within the fellowship.

[Matthew 25:14-30](#)

The gospel lesson is an antidote for those who might have wished to sit around just waiting for Christ's return! The parable of the three servants makes it clear that God expects us to use what we have in service of the kingdom. The three servants might have different talents, but they are expected to use them fruitfully and not waste that which has been entrusted to them.

Matthew uses several parables in this passage about the need for watchfulness. They may well have originated at a time when the early church had begun to lose some of its eagerness in waiting for the return of Jesus. Perhaps there was a laxness creeping in or even exploitation of power and authority within the fellowships. The parables serve as a warning to be prepared.

Sermon ideas

There are several themes which suggest themselves from these passages.

Preparedness

Prison is a time of waiting. One of the old saws often quoted to prisoners struggling with a sentence is, "If you can't do the time, don't do the crime."

Prisoners are encouraged to prepare for release, mentally, physically and spiritually. How do we prepare for life with Christ? Using the Matthew and/or Thessalonians passages a

number of avenues might present themselves, reminding people that we are “Not Alone”, but supported by fellowship in and with Christ.

Justice

The longing for God to bring justice into situations where it is absent is a common theme in our OT lessons. This could lead to an exploration of our own relationship with justice and whether we seek and pursue it in our lives. Again, the apparent absence of justice in various situations could be held against our faith that we are “Not Alone”. God will act and not leave us bereft.

Living with isolation

Use the OT passages to examine issues of dislocation and exclusion. The lockdown this year forced many to confront issues of personal loneliness and ask questions about where we find our strength and support. The theme of “Not Alone” could be explored through sharing personal stories of God’s presence in the midst of loss of community. This in turn could lead to an examination of how we use prison in society, and what the experience of being separate means for prisoners and their families.

Against all odds

There are many stories of personal faith being found in prison in the most unlikely of people and circumstances. Some people may be willing to come and share their stories, or it may be that online resources can be found which tell their tales. Finding hope in Christ in the face of some very bleak situations can be a profound demonstration of God’s power against the odds, and the fact that no matter what has happened, we are “Not Alone” in God.

Prayers

Approach, confession and supplication

God of all time and space,
You were with Your people of old.
You are with us now.

You have promised to be with us until the end of time.
We give You thanks,
that in Your presence we are not alone.
Your love has held us from seed to personhood.
Your grace has infiltrated our lives, never letting us go
Your hope leads us on, encouraging us to find You
in ever new and ever surprising ways.

We confess that sometimes we lose faith and trust.
We look at our lives and our world
and don't like what we see.
We are impatient, ungrateful and angry.
There doesn't seem to be a clear plan.
Our ideas come unstuck
and we question if there is any purpose to anything.

In this time of worship,
remind us of Your promise never to leave us or forsake us.
Help us to trust Your promise that You will be with us.
Teach us again about the power and folly of Your love.

We ask this in Jesus name
Amen

Thanksgiving and intercession

Loving Lord,
We give what we have.
We bring who we are.
Knowing that it can never be perfect
and never enough.

Yet
We bring our talents.
The gifts You have given us
The people You have made us.
Knowing that You accept us and love us.

Use our lives and our living to build Your people.
Use Your people to build a better world
Use this world to show the beauty of life with You.

When we get complacent or downhearted
teach us to count our blessings.
When we count our blessings,
teach us to pray for those who need Your blessing.

Today we pray for those held in prison.

We pray for changed hearts
for those who need to give up hate and hurt.
We pray for justice for those
held for their opposition to wrongful abuse of power
We pray for new love
where guilt and anger has soured relationships.

We pray for those who work in prison.
We give thanks for their commitment to making things better.
We give thanks for their dedication to carrying out thankless and difficult jobs.
We give thanks for the skilful use of talents to rebuild shattered lives.

We pray for those who make decisions about how we use prison.
Bless those entrusted with decisions about justice
and how it is enacted.
We pray for politicians, advisors, judges, and lawyers.
We ask a blessing on community and charity workers
striving to improve lives on the margins.
We pray for the media that they might ask questions
about how our communities do justice
and not seek vengeance and incite hatred.
We pray for ourselves,
that we might seek justice and pursue it.

A time to bring community concerns.

Now gathered together as the community of God's people,
not alone, but united we say....

Our Father...

Benediction

You are not alone.
Go into the world,
surrounded by God's love,
supported by God's people
and strengthened by the knowledge that God will be with us.

May the love of the Creator, the Saviour and the Spirit
sustain you today and always
Amen

Alternative Material

This material has been supplied by kind permission of Spill the Beans. It can be adapted in creative ways that include everyone gathering for worship both online and offline.

New material from Spill the Beans is provided in the latest issues available from their [website](#).

Children of Light – [1 Thessalonians 5:1-11](#)

Retelling for young people

Once there was a candle flame. It was very small.

Beside the brightness of the sun, it was tiny and she thought she wasn't very important or very good at being a flame.

"The sun is so bright," she thought as she watched it creep up over the horizon early one morning.

The candle's flame couldn't be seen as the day got warmer and the sun pulled itself up to the top of the sky.

"I'm not very good!" whispered the flame to herself, very sad and lonely.

And all afternoon she was sad and her wax wilted a little and she fizzed and sparked all afternoon.

She was so sad that she didn't notice the sun sliding down the sky and over the horizon. Suddenly she was pulled out of her sadness by a voice down below the window.

It was a mouse and it was saying, "Thank you."

The candle was surprised, "Why are you saying thank you to me?" she asked.
"Because it is dark and you were the only thing I could see to guide me home out of the danger of the owl."

The candle looked around her and noticed everything was shadowy and she could hardly see.

But the mouse said, “Even though you are a small flame, when the darkness comes, I can see you for miles. Thank you for helping me find my way home, little candle.”

The candle found a great big smile on her face and stood up tall and shone a little brighter knowing even though she was a small flame, even the greatest darkness couldn't hide her.

Activities

Glass lanterns

You will need: glass jars or tea-light holders (donations from congregation or available from Ikea/Asda), glass paints, outline stickers, permanent marker pens, tea lights.

Provide each child with a glass jar or with plain glass tea light holder and decorate with glass paints. Put a tea-light in jar/holder to make lantern.

You can either use outliner pens for children to paint their own designs and then colour these with glass paints – this can be quite time consuming as you have to wait for outline to dry before you paint in other colours, permanent markers can help; or you can use outline stickers, available in craft shops or online, and children stick them onto jars and can then paint straight away.

You can provide letter stickers too, so that children can include the word ‘Light’ or a message. It is best to leave these to dry and have children collect them the following week.

This can be used to talk about how much we take for granted having light always available (we just flick a switch), but in the past light in the dark was very precious and you had to work for it. We have to work at being people who do good things but when we do, we bring light into situations that sometimes feel hopeless.

Reflection

Living in the Light
Children of light
are not caught out
by the thief in the night.

Children of light
are not thrown off track
by sudden destruction.

Children of light
live life in the open,
sowing seeds of love
and peace and justice,
tending crops of wisdom
and mercy.

Children of light
are beloved of God
affirmed and built up
in love.

Prayers

Call to Worship

Leader: From the darkness of death,
All: God calls us into glorious light.

Leader: From the tumult of war,
All: God call us into the beauty of peace.

Leader: Children of light,
All: God calls us today to remembrance.

Leader: In light and in peace,
All: we will remember them.

Knowing ourselves loved by you, O God,
may we be preserved from smugness.

Rather, help us to be witnesses to your goodness.

May we build up and not tear down.
May we bring peace and not war.
May we bring love and not hate.

May we bring hope and not fear.

May our actions stand up to scrutiny
and may we be known
as harbingers of love and joy
and justice and peace,
the fruits of you Spirit.
Amen

Closing prayer

Let us go from this place
with minds that never forget,
with hearts that grow in hope,
with lives that shine Christ's light.

Let us go to serve,
to reconcile, to bring peace,
and to stand united
as children of the light.

And may the blessing of God,
Creator, Peacemaker, Peacebringer,
go with you(us) all,
this day and every day.

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Musical suggestions

Our online music resource is [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.

- CH4 54 – “Lord, you have always been our home” – two settings of Psalm 90, reminding us of God's care and our frailty
- CH4 118 – “Womb of life, and source of being” – a lovely Trinitarian hymn which uses imagery of God our home and the source of our being

- CH4 168 – “God weeps at love withheld” – a confessional hymn, yearning for justice which would complement the Zephaniah passage well
- CH4 263 – “God of freedom, God of justice” – possibly the most suitable hymn in the hymn book for Prisoners’ Week!
- CH4 264 – “Judge Eternal, throned in splendour” – complements the idea of yearning for justice in the Old Testament passages
- CH4 475 – “Christ is coming! Let creation” – picks up on the themes of Christ’s return in the Thessalonians reading
- CH4 479 – “View the present through the promise” – fits well with the reading from Thessalonians
- CH4 518 – “Lift up your hearts!” – complements the parable of the three servants with its imagery of gifts given and blessed
- CH4 566 – “When I receive the peace of Christ” – uses the theme of being alone and ending loneliness in Christ
- CH4 805 – “Your will be done on earth, O Lord” – can be used as a response during the intercessions

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