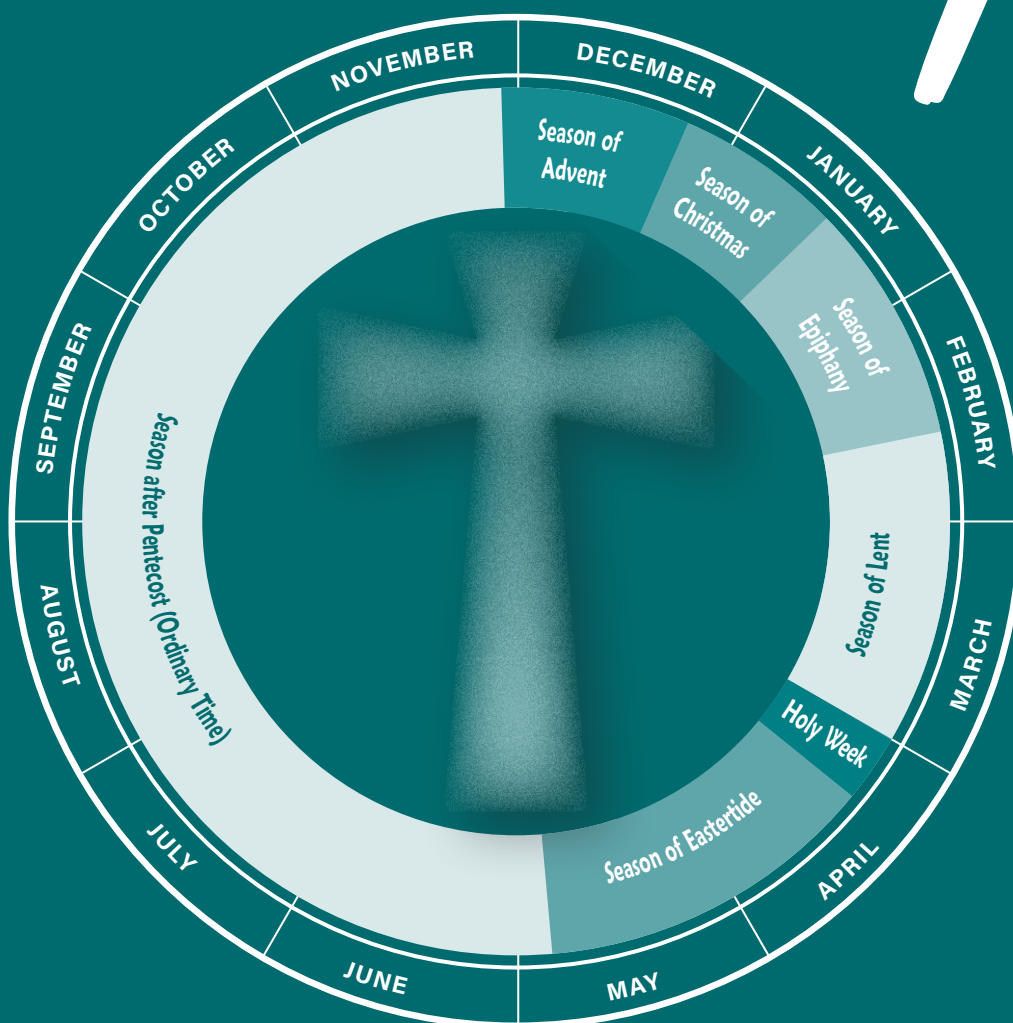


WORD & *worship*



Preaching Resources and Liturgical Material

Based on the
Revised Common Lectionary: Year A
Advent 2025 to Pentecost 2026

Based on the
Revised Common Lectionary: Year A
Advent 2025 to Pentecost 2026

ISBN: 978-1-0672561-0-4

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WORD AND WORSHIP

Acknowledgements

The Editors wish to thank the following persons and organisations who have given freely of their time and talents to bring this project to fruition:

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Writers were asked to use the New Revised Standard Version of Scripture.

Prepared by South African clergy from
various denominations under the leadership of Ekklesia,
a unit within the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University

Introduction to Word and Worship 2026

Dear Friends

This year we celebrate the 16th edition of Word and Worship. Word and Worship is a resource for both ordained ministers and laity who lead worship in their respective congregations. This creative tool is published as a strategic objective by Ekklesia, a unit within the faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University, in partnership with CLF Publishers.

Based on the Revised Common Lectionary and rooted in scripture, this resource provides a liturgical rhythm throughout the Church Year. This volume offers contextual exegetical insights and liturgical suggestions for every Sunday during divine worship. The content includes notes on sermon construction, interpretation of the Biblical text and suggestions for various elements of worship under the following headings: Gathering for worship, Reading and Preaching of the Word, responding to the Word, Celebrating together as people of God, and the Sending of the people as witnesses into the world.

Word and Worship serves as a tool for a deeper engagement with the Word of God and to encourage the creative and faithful proclamation of the Gospel. It is also a tool for planning worship and understanding of critical theological reflection and application in the local congregation.

At the beginning of this year, we established a new Word and Worship Executive Committee: Dr Natalie Barnard, Mr Newton Brandt, Mrs Anna-Marie Brink, Dr Pete Grassow (editor), Revd. James Gribble, Dr Desmond Lambrechts, Mrs Divine Robertson, Revd. Leon Smith, Ms Elanor Steenkamp, Mrs Charmaine Stoffberg, Dr Bruce Theron, Dr Mias van Jaarsveld and Revd. Rodney Whiteman.

We thank Mrs Billie-Jean Holt, Mrs Mary van Blerk, Mrs Chrisna van der Merwe and Mrs Brenda Weir our previous team of co-editors and proofreaders for their dedication and hard work over the past few years. We also express our thanks to Ds Tony Masent for his role as editor of the 2024-25 edition of Word and Worship.

A special word of thanks to the writers and new editorial team under the leadership of Dr Pete Grassow (Editor) and Revd. James Gribble for the 2026 Word and Worship Edition.

Dr Desmond Lambrechts
Director of Ekklesia

Table of Contents

About this book	1
<i>Introduction</i>	
Introduction to the Revised Common Lectionary, and Year A	3
The Revised Common Lectionary Texts	5
An Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew for Preachers Marius J. Nel	6
Planning the Christian Year	9
 Introduction to the Incarnation Cycle	 11
<i>Season of Advent</i>	
1st Sunday in Advent	30 November 2025
Word and Life James Harris	12
2nd Sunday of Advent	7 December 2025
Word and Life James Harris	15
3rd Sunday in Advent	14 December 2025
Word and Life James Harris	18
4th Sunday in Advent	21 December 2025
Word and Life James Harris	21
<i>Season of Christmas</i>	
Introduction to the Season of Christmas – 2025	The Editor
Christmas Eve	24 December 2025
Liturgy David Sylvester	25
Word and Life David Sylvester	27
Christmas Day	25 December 2025
Liturgy James Nicolson	30
Word and Life James Nicolson	33
1st Sunday after Christmas	28 December 2025
Word and Life James Massey	35
2nd Sunday after Christmas	4 January 2026
Word and Life David Sylvester	38
<i>Season of Epiphany</i>	
Introduction to the Season of Epiphany – 2025	The Editor
Basic Liturgy for the Season of Epiphany	The Editor
Feast of Epiphany	6 January 2026
Liturgy James Nicolson	44
Word and Life Carol Walsh	47

1st Sunday of Epiphany – Baptism of the Lord	11 January 2026	
Word and Life	Carol Walsh	49
2nd Sunday of Epiphany	18 January 2026	
Word and Life	Carol Walsh	52
3rd Sunday of Epiphany	25 January 2026	
Word and Life	Carol Walsh	54
4th Sunday of Epiphany	1 February 2026	
Word and Life	Craig Morrison	56
Feast of the Presentation	2 February 2026	
Liturgy for the	David Howard	60
Word and Life	David Howard	62
5th Sunday of Epiphany	8 February 2026	
Word and Life	Craig Morrison	65
6th Sunday of Epiphany, Transfiguration Sunday	15 February 2026	
Word and Life	David Sylvester	68
 Introduction to the Redemption Cycle	 The Editor	 71
 <i>Season of Lent</i>		
Introduction to the Season of Lent – 2026	The Editor	72
Basic Liturgy for the Season of Lent	The Editor	73
Information and Suggested Preparation for Ash Wednesday	18 February 2026	
Liturgy	Jenny Sprong	77
Word and Life	Jenny Sprong	80
1st Sunday in Lent	22 February 2026	
Word and Life	Jenny Sprong	83
2nd Sunday in Lent	1 March 2026	
Word and Life	Jenny Sprong	86
3rd Sunday in Lent	8 March 2026	
Word and Life	Brian Burger	89
4th Sunday in Lent	15 March 2026	
Word and Life	Brian Burger	92
5th Sunday in Lent	22 March 2026	
Word and Life	Jenny Sprong	95
 <i>Holy Week</i>		
Introduction to Holy Week	The Editor	98
Palm Sunday, Feast of the Palms	29 March 2026	
Liturgy	James Massey	99
Word and Life	James Massey	101

Palm Sunday, Feast of the Passion

Liturgy

Word and Life

Monday in Holy Week

Word and Life

Tuesday in Holy Week

Word and Life

Wednesday in Holy Week

Word and Life

The Triduum

Introduction to the Triduum

Maundy Thursday

Liturgy

Word and Life

Good Friday

Liturgy

Word and Life

Easter Vigil

Liturgy

Word and Life

Season of Eastertide**Introduction to the Season of Easter****Basic Liturgy for the Season of Easter****Easter Morning**

Liturgy

Word and Life

2nd Sunday of Easter

Word and Life

3rd Sunday of Easter

Word and Life

4th Sunday of Easter

Word and Life

5th Sunday of Easter

Word and Life

6th Sunday of Easter

Word and Life

Feast of the Ascension

Liturgy

Word and Life

29 March 2026

James Massey 104

James Massey 106

30 March 2026

Patty Edwards 109

31 March 2026

Patty Edwards 112

1 April 2026

Ian Booth 114

The Editor 116

2 April 2026

Rachell Hoogbaard 118

Rachell Hoogbaard 120

3 April 2026

James Harris 123

James Harris 125

4/5 April 2026

Rowan Rogers 128

Rowan Rogers 130

The Editor 132

The Editor 133

5 April 2026

Joey Naiker 135

Joey Naiker 137

12 April 2026

Khawuluzile Makubalo 140

19 April 2026

Ian Booth 143

26 April 2026

Khawuluzile Makubalo 146

3 May 2026

James Massey 149

10 May 2026

Peter Langerman 152

14 May 2026

David Howard 155

David Howard 157

7th Sunday of Easter

Word and Life

Pentecost Sunday

Liturgy

Word and Life

Season after Pentecost**Introduction to the Season after Pentecost****Basic Liturgy for the Season after Pentecost****1st Sunday after Pentecost (Trinity Sunday)**

Word and Life

2nd Sunday after Pentecost

Word and Life

3rd Sunday after Pentecost

Word and Life

4th Sunday after Pentecost

Word and Life

5th Sunday after Pentecost

Word and Life

6th Sunday after Pentecost

Word and Life

7th Sunday after Pentecost

Word and Life

8th Sunday after Pentecost

Word and Life

9th Sunday after Pentecost

Word and Life

Liturgy

10th Sunday in Pentecost

Word and Life

Liturgy

11th Sunday after Pentecost

Word and Life

12th Sunday after Pentecost

Word and Life

13th Sunday after Pentecost

Word and Life

14th Sunday after Pentecost

Word and Life

Feast of Creation Sunday

Word and Life

17 May 2026

Peter Langerman 160

24 May 2026

James Gribble 163

Ian Booth 165

The Editor 168

The Editor 170

31 May 2026

Kevin Sprong 172

7 June 2026

Kevin Sprong 174

14 June 2026

Kevin Sprong 177

21 June 2026

Kevin Sprong 180

28 June 2026

James Gribble 183

5 July 2026

Lynette Petersen 186

12 July 2026

Larry Ort 189

19 July 2026

Steven Lottering 192

26 July 2026

Newton Brandt 195

Newton Brandt 197

2 August 2026

Bruce Theron 199

Bruce Theron 201

9 August 2026

James Harris 203

16 August 2026

Michael Craig 205

23 August 2026

Craig Morrison 207

30 August 2026

Craig Morrison 211

6 September 2026

Rachel Mash 215

16th Sunday after Pentecost

Word and Life

17th Sunday after Pentecost

Word and Life

18th Sunday after Pentecost

Word and Life

19th Sunday after Pentecost

Word and Life

20th Sunday after Pentecost

Word and Life

21st Sunday after Pentecost

Word and Life

22nd Sunday after Pentecost

Word and Life

Liturgy for the Feast of All Saints

Word and Life

24th Sunday after Pentecost

Word and Life

25th Sunday after Pentecost

Word and Life

26th Sunday after Pentecost (Reign of Christ)

Liturgy

26th Sunday after (Reign of Christ)

Word and Life

13 September 2026

James Gribble 218

20 September 2026

Ken Leverton 221

27 September 2026

Ken Leverton 223

4 October 2026

Leon Smith 225

11 October 2026

James Gribble 228

18 October 2026

Newton Brandt 231

25 October 2026

Neil Vels 234

1 November 2026

John Goliath 239

8 November 2026

Jenny Sprong 241

15 November 2026

Ian Booth 245

22 November 2026

Rachell Hoogbaard 248

22 November 2026

Rachell Hoogbaard 250

About this book

In this sixteenth edition of *Word and Worship* supporting material is offered for preachers and liturgists in their preparation for worship and preaching on the Sundays and Feast days of a new Christian Year. Sermon material and liturgical suggestions are offered for every Sunday as from Advent Sunday (30 November 2025) until the 26th Sunday after Pentecost ('Reign of Christ', 22 November 2026). The material is based on the readings from the internationally recognised Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) for the Year A cycle. In this cycle of RCL the gospel lections are drawn primarily from the Gospel of Matthew, with some readings also coming from John.

It is important that users are aware from the outset that *Word and Worship* does not provide sermons for preachers. Preachers must do their own hard work. We aim to offer material that can assist preachers in their reading, thinking, praying and writing. Our hope is that the material offered can spark a preacher's imagination, perhaps prompting thought in directions not considered before. A significant departure, introduced last year and repeated here, is that separate liturgies are not being provided for most Sundays in the year. Instead, writers of sermon material (*Word and Life*) have been asked to offer liturgical *suggestions* that come to mind in their engagement with the RCL readings for the day. However, fuller Basic Liturgies are still offered for each of the seasons of the year and also for the significant feast days such as Christmas, Epiphany, the Presentation of Christ, Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Vigil, Easter Day, Pentecost, All Saints and Reign of Christ (aka Christ the King). Decisions regarding sermon and liturgy for local worship occasions must ultimately rest with preachers and their teams. The application of the readings and the participation of the congregation will depend on the situation, needs and choices of the local church community.

The writers contributing to this volume come from a wide range of church traditions in Southern Africa. They offer ideas and suggestions that users of this book are invited to explore further. Our writers are active and retired ministers from the Anglican, Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches and also one from *Die Volkskerk van Afrika*. Most of these men and women actively lead worship and preach week by week in local congregations. The different settings within which they work and worship ensures that *Word and Worship* provides a resource that reflects a wide diversity of situations within which we are called to proclaim the good news for this generation.

Principles that inform this publication

- It is an ecumenical endeavour that seeks to develop liturgical and sermon resources for use in the Church in Southern Africa.
- It recognises that many ministers in local ministry do not have ready access to resources that can assist them in the exegetical work essential for the preparation of sermons, nor the liturgical resources from which to draw as they prepare material for worship week by week.

- The use of RCL provides a framework that can assist local congregations in the renewal and development of their corporate worship.

In addition to these foundational principles there is a vital ecumenical dimension to the publication.

- Helpful bonds could be fostered between congregations within a local community as they engage with the same Scripture readings Sunday by Sunday.
- It could serve as a tool that promotes co-operation and fellowship among ministers from different denominations and traditions, who could meet from time to time to discuss the common texts and share ideas.
- It provides opportunities for ministers in a local community to share its common joys and tensions and to build support systems to sustain and encourage ecumenical co-operation in ministering together to that community.

Seasonal Introductions and Basic Liturgies

The material for each of the liturgical seasons of the Church Year starts with a brief introduction to the season, a general survey of the listed texts, followed by a basic liturgy for the season. The intention is to provide an overview of the season to facilitate holistic planning and a vital sense of continuity as the season progresses.

Using the preaching material – 'Word and Life'

The material as presented is deliberately not written as complete sermons. The range of situations faced by individual congregations and communities is such that sermons need to be prepared by those who address the life-situation of a particular congregation. What *Word and Worship* provides is material mined from the texts, and suggestions of themes that could be developed for the congregation. There are also ideas offering practical direction for addressing the pastoral needs of the community.

Comment and exegesis is offered for each of the four readings for the day:

1. from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and
2. the complementary Psalm,
3. the reading from the New Testament other than the Gospel, and
4. the Gospel reading.

The comments offered will help the sermon writer to discern what is of key importance in the readings. A useful rule of thumb is that the readings from the Old Testament dominate during Advent, the Gospel readings from Christmas to Pentecost as the story of Jesus is told, and other New Testament readings during the post-Pentecost period. But this outline is by no means cast in stone.

Additional series in the Season after Pentecost

During the Season after Pentecost the RCL texts also provide scope for preachers to offer sermon series based on successive readings from particular books. Continuity of this kind could encourage worshippers both to follow a series on Sundays and perhaps continue the exploration in weekly study groups. It is left to preachers to note these sequential readings and to respond as they see fit.

Using the Liturgical material

The liturgical material is presented in three forms that are interdependent and complementary:

- **Full liturgies** are presented for the following major feasts of the Church Year:
 - Christmas Eve and Christmas Day
 - Epiphany
 - Feast of the Presentation
 - Ash Wednesday
 - Palm Sunday – Palms and Passion
 - Maundy Thursday
 - Good Friday
 - Easter Vigil
 - Easter Day
 - Ascension
 - Pentecost
 - All Saints
 - Reign of Christ
- **Basic liturgies** are presented for these main Seasons of the Church Year:
 - Advent
 - Epiphany
 - Lent
 - Eastertide
 - The Sundays after Pentecost
- **Brief liturgical** suggestions are offered (as a sub-section in the 'Word and Life' material) for Sundays in the year that are not major feasts. These are not full liturgies, but ideas and material suggested by the writer's engagement with the readings for the day. These could be considered for inclusion in the worship material developed week by week for the local congregation.

Ministers using the liturgical material are free to adapt it so that it fits seamlessly into the particular tradition being followed or any denominational prayer/worship book in use.

The intention is that as users become familiar with the way in which the material has been developed, they will not only use it on the particular Sunday but also find ways of adapting the ideas for use on other occasions. Worship can be enriched by the different approaches that are possible.

Using Word and Worship ecumenically

It is hoped that the ecumenical approach in developing this material will encourage and strengthen ecumenical relationships among ministers serving local communities.

Word and Worship is offered as a resource for stimulating discussion and fellowship within regular local gatherings of ministers and is based firmly on the texts they will be using on Sundays.

Word and Worship is offered as a resource whereby ministers may learn something of the riches that each tradition brings to the focal questions of scripture, worship and pastoral care within the community.

As relationships between different ministers develop, *Word and Worship* is offered as a resource that could provide a secure platform for local ministers to address social and other issues together within the community that they serve.

Feedback and a call for volunteer writers

It is in this spirit that we offer this publication to the churches. We welcome responses and, in particular, suggestions from users that could help make the material more accessible and helpful to those (both ordained and lay) seeking to proclaim the gospel in Southern Africa today.

Please send your comments and suggestions to Ekklesia at the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University. Contact details: Ekklesia, PO Box 3322, Matieland 7602; tel 021 808 2827; email: dr@sun.ac.za).

We are always looking for new writers. If you would like to contribute in this way please contact Ekklesia.

Introduction to the Revised Common Lectionary, and Year A

Lectionaries across the centuries

A lectionary has been described as ‘a book containing the extracts (“pericopes”) from Scripture appointed to be read at public worship’.¹ The linking of particular extracts to specific days in the Christian Year had its origins as far back as the 4th Century. At first the beginning (*incipit*) and ending (*explicit*) of each pericope was noted in the margin of the church Bible, and a ‘capitulary’, or table of *incipits* and *explicit*s, was drawn up for reference purposes. In the course of time lectionaries were compiled with the actual text of the appointed pericopes incorporated in full.

The concept of the lectionary is thought to go back to the Jewish faith tradition, which also had designated readings from the Hebrew Bible for the important feasts, while pericopes chosen on the principle of *lectio continua* were specified for ordinary Sabbaths. To this the early Church added readings from the gospels and the apostolic writings. This was initially only for the major feast days and other special observances. For ordinary Sundays the principle of *lectio continua* was used, a book being selected at local discretion and read aloud in successive pericopes until completed.

Early lectionaries included several readings, from both Old and New Testaments, interspersed with psalms. Later the use of three readings (OT, epistle or other apostolic writing, and gospel) was widely standardised. A further development saw the readings being reduced to two: epistle and gospel. This became the standard shape of denominational eucharistic lectionaries. In the modern era such lectionaries have met with dissatisfaction because of the minimal use of the Old Testament writings, the haphazard selections for Sundays on which there is no major feast, the non-use of many significant parts of Scripture, and the lack of inter-connection between the pericopes on any given occasion.

This led to the compilation of lectionaries based on principles such as two- or three- or even four-year cycles, the inclusion of an Old Testament reading as additional, or alternative, to the epistle, more *lectio continua* in ‘ordinary time’, and the designation of one lesson, usually the gospel, as the controlling lesson for the day, with other accompanying readings.

The Revised Common Lectionary (RCL)

Released in 1992, RCL is the fruit of long consultation and collaboration by a wide spectrum of Churches in the USA and Canada. Since then, it has been adopted in many other countries around the world. It offers readings for each Sunday: a passage typically from the Old Testament or the Acts of the Apostles, a complimentary passage from one of the Psalms, a reading from either the Epistles, Acts or Revelation, and a passage from one of the four Gospels. It is cast in three cycles, each spanning one Christian year. The gospel readings in the first year (Year A) are mostly

from the Gospel of Matthew, those in the second year (Year B) from Mark, and in the third year (Year C) from Luke. In each year some portions of John’s Gospel are read throughout Eastertide and are also used for other liturgical seasons including Advent, Christmastide and Lent where appropriate.

Year A begins on the first Sunday of Advent in 2019, 2022, 2025, etc.

Year B begins on the first Sunday of Advent in 2020, 2023, 2026, etc.

Year C begins on the first Sunday of Advent in 2021, 2024, 2027, etc.

The major principle behind RCL is that week by week worshippers should be able to hear the characteristic voice of each featured writer rather than hearing readings that have been selected according to a theme. In any given year the writer of one of the first three gospels will be heard from beginning to end. Likewise, the rest of the New Testament is heard, in some cases, virtually in total, in others in large part.

That said: do note that the RCL does not include every portion of the Bible. Sometimes texts are cut short, and the four lectionary readings on any given Sunday may sometimes seem chosen at random and may or may not be closely related.

Year A

The readings for this year, beginning with Advent 2025, are based on RCL **Year A – the Gospel of Matthew**. Year A focuses on the Gospel of Matthew, with the Old Testament readings primarily drawn from the stories of the Patriarchs and the Exodus, the covenant with Moses, and the establishment of Israel in the Promised Land. The New Testament readings in Year A are primarily from Romans, Philippians, and 1 Thessalonians. In addition, the Gospel of John is read each year, especially around Christmas, Lent and Easter.

Year A, with its focus on Matthew and the Old Testament narratives leading up to the establishment of Israel, offers a rich and foundational understanding of the Old Testament and the beginnings of Jesus’ life and ministry. The Psalms are Typically selected to complement the Old Testament reading for the week.

Why use a Lectionary?

It offers the Christian community a rich resource for worship and preaching by helping worshippers to gain a broad view of the major passages and themes in Scripture. When used by whole denominations – and even across the ecumenical family of churches - it offers a sense of God’s family gathering around a common set of Scripture passages.

The use of the lectionary helps preachers to proclaim the whole gospel. Faithful observance of the Christian Year offers both preacher and people the benefit of ordered doctrinal instruction. This can keep the preacher from thumping the favourite drum by grappling with themes that might otherwise be avoided. It can help meet the varied needs of those we address. With all its different emphases, the Christian Year and the lectionary enable coverage of the wide spectrum of Christian teaching. Our work as a preacher should be to build members up in intelligent faith and commitment. The Christian Year, with its measure of reiteration and rehearsal, is a ready-made aid to serve this end.

The use of the lectionary adds value in terms of long-range planning. Too often preachers practice a last-minute scramble to find some text for Sunday's preaching. Use of the lectionary can save us from this by encouraging advance planning as we allow our minds to work slowly over the themes and passages for the coming weeks or months. Such long-term brooding over texts often leads to unexpected and fruitful insights and ideas for preaching.

Preachers and people can share in praying over and discussing the readings for the coming Sunday or season. Many churches publish the readings for the next Sunday in the weekly bulletin. Clergy from different local churches could agree to work and pray together as they share resources and insights while preparing for their preaching.

Please Note: The Revised Common Lectionary might best be described as "helpful but not sufficient." Occasions will arise when special circumstances or specific needs will prompt a departure from the Lectionary for a given Sunday. A sermon series on a special theme or biblical book can be a very useful way of meeting an identified need in the congregation. For this reason, please see the lectionary as a helpful tool, rather than a constricting fence.

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The Revised Common Lectionary Texts

Introduction

The Revised Common Lectionary provides one set of four passages or readings for each

Sunday and major Feast Day of that specific liturgical year. The sequence begins with Advent Sunday and runs through to the feast of the Reign of Christ (aka Christ the King). However, during the long season after Pentecost two sets of readings are provided - see *RCL Readings after Pentecost* below.

Versification

The numbering of the selected verses in the RCL table of readings follows the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible. Where other versions of the Bible are used in a local worship setting small adjustments may be required.

The readings from Advent to Pentecost

During the Seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent and Eastertide, RCL provides four texts for each occasion:

- a First Reading drawn from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament)
- a complimentary Psalm
- a Second Reading from the New Testament, and
- a Gospel Reading.

The Psalm is not intended as another reading as such but to serve as a means for congregational response and meditation on the first reading. But it is also possible to use the psalm, or part thereof, as a call to worship at the outset of the service or perhaps reworked as a litany for participation by the congregation.

Where a choice of First Readings is provided, especially on the Sundays after Pentecost, the matching psalm or canticle should be used with the particular First Reading chosen.

Relationship of Gospel and First Reading

From the First Sunday of Advent to Trinity Sunday of each year, the First Reading is closely related to the Gospel reading for the day. The exegetical notes provided in this book draw attention to such connections and associations.

The RCL Readings after Pentecost

During the season after Pentecost, the RCL provides two alternatives for the First Reading, each with its related Psalm. **The first set** is usually part of a series of semi-continuous readings from the Hebrew Bible, offering a preacher opportunity over several Sundays to work through passages from the Pentateuch, the historical books, a particular prophet, or one of the wisdom books, etc. This enables a congregation to become familiar with the ways in which God's relationship with the people under the Sinai Covenant was lived out in practice or, in many cases, not lived out as God intended.

In the **second set** the **alternate First Readings** are *thematically* connected to the Gospel reading for the day.

RCL refers to these sets of Readings as the *Semi-Continuous Track* and the *Related Track*. They have been offered since 1992 following an extensive, worldwide evaluation of the Lectionary. It was argued that typological connections between readings from the Hebrew Scriptures and those from the Gospels were best avoided, as the Hebrew Scriptures have religious and ancient integrity for Jewish people who do not read them through a Christological lens. Thus the subsequent provision of *semi-continuous* readings for the First Reading and the alternative set of *related* First Readings. It should be noted that the psalms for the Sundays are always related to the specific first reading, which means that I provided a second psalm. But note that the two psalms are not interchangeable.

It should be noted that the links between the Old Testament and New Testament readings in RCL are not necessarily typological but more varied and subtle. Preachers are not necessarily expected to discover a 'theme' to preach on, in this way possibly having scant regard for the different passages in their own right. The choice is to preach on any of the passages, sometimes even referring to them all as they are woven into the sermon. The choice may be to preach on only one of the readings; the others, as they are read during worship, will speak for themselves.

For all the Sundays between Pentecost and Advent, churches and denominations may determine which of the two patterns of readings best serves their needs. Some denominations will accept one or both patterns for all their congregations; others may choose to let local liturgy planners determine which set is preferable. The *Revised Common Lectionary* does not favour one set over the other but takes the view that the two patterns should not be mixed. It is desirable that the readings in a complete set is followed for the whole season without jumping from track to track. Users should note that *Word and Worship* provides notes (exegesis, interpretation, etc) based on both sets of readings.

Key Texts

In former years the editorial team designated one of the four readings for the day as a Key Text. This practice was discontinued in the previous edition (Year A, 2022-2023). However, our sister publication *Woord en Fees* continues the practice of identifying key texts. These two publications from Ekklesia, though both based on the same RCL readings for the year, cater for different constituencies and follow slightly different paths. They are produced by two different editorial teams and are not a translation of one another.

An Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew for Preachers

Marius J. Nel

The aim of this brief introduction is to identify the key factors that preachers need to consider when preaching from the Gospel of Matthew. It is thus not intended to be a comprehensive overview of all the historical, literary, or theological aspects of this Gospel. The first factor that preachers need to consider is that Matthew is one of the Synoptic Gospels, the second is its genre, the third is its literary structure, the fourth is its context, and the last is its message.

Matthew as Synoptic Gospel

If the four Gospels in the New Testament are compared to each other, it is apparent that Matthew, Luke, and Mark have more in common with each other in terms of content and style than with the Gospel of John. While they differ in length from one another (cf. Mark 11,078; Matthew 18,298, and Luke 19,448 words), they have a similar literary plot in that the main events in Jesus' life occur in the same order in their narratives. This correspondence was already noted by J.J. Griesbach in 1776 who referred to them as the Synoptic Gospels (from the Greek 'to see together') to indicate that they should be studied in relation to each other to determine their meaning. Their similarities and differences point to a literary connection between them and not just a familiarity with a common oral tradition about the life of Jesus. *The inclusion of all three Synoptic Gospels in the canon testifies to the value of their combined testimony about Jesus, but also to the importance of their individual nuances in the manner they narrate their understanding of Jesus and his ministry. When preaching on a particular text from the Synoptic Gospels, care must therefore be taken not to conflate the different versions of an episode of Jesus' life in the various Gospels into a harmonized story, since this ignores the unique perspective of each Evangelist's understanding of Jesus. It is therefore important that preachers pay attention to the specific way in which Matthew recounts the life of Jesus in relation to the other two Synoptic Gospels.*

It is commonly accepted that Matthew and Luke both had sight of a copy of Mark when they wrote their Gospels, but that they did not have access to each others' Gospels. There are good reasons why Mark is seen as their source, rather than Matthew and Luke being sources summarized by Mark. One is that more than 90% of Mark can be found in Matthew, which suggests that he utilized Mark as a source, thereby validating his account. The possibility that Mark was instead summarizing Matthew is unlikely since this would entail him omitting 40% of Matthew's Gospel (including the whole Sermon on The Mount). The observation that there are passages that occur in Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark, indicates that they both also had access to a literary source that was unknown to Mark. This source (which could have been more than one document) is called 'Q' by scholars (from the German *Quelle* meaning 'source'). *By noting the cross-references that most translations of the New Testament indicate, preachers can easily discern what material comes from Mark (if it occurs in all three Synoptic Gospels) or is*

unique to Matthew (if there is no cross-reference indicated) or comes from Q (if there is a cross-reference to Luke but not Mark). They can then compare Matthew's Gospel to the other two Synoptic Gospels by asking if he has added, modified, omitted, or moved material from Mark or Q to get a better sense of what Matthew wanted to emphasize in his story of Jesus. It is important that this emphasis is reflected in sermons on a particular passage.

The Genre of Matthew

A literary genre is a means of referring to documents that correspond in their form (length, style, and build-up), content (topics they address), and purpose (e.g., to disclose historical information) in a particular social context. The genre of a document (e.g. that of a letter) guides its readers in how they should interpret it. We, for example, read science fiction differently than peer-reviewed scientific articles. The first use of 'Gospel' as a book designation for the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John is in the writings of Justin in the second century. The Gospels in the New Testament all correspond to the genre of ancient Greco-Roman biographies in that they *combine* the words and deeds of their protagonist in a prose narrative. *The decision not to simply collect the sayings of Jesus into a 'Proverbs of Jesus' document, or to write a history relating the main events of Jesus' life without including his teachings (like we find of Israel in Chronicles and Kings in the Old Testament), but rather to combine his words and deeds in a biography, is of crucial importance for how these texts should be preached. Preachers should keep in mind that they should preach both the words and the deeds of Jesus as they occur in Matthew's narrative. The words of Jesus should not be emphasized at the expense of his deeds. The biographical genre of the Gospel of Matthew emphasizes that both are equally important for understanding Jesus.*

The structure of Matthew

Broadly speaking, Matthew's narrative follows the biographical-geographical structure of Mark. It narrates the life of Jesus by utilizing a geographical structure that assumes that Jesus only travelled once to Jerusalem during his adult ministry:

- The birth and childhood of the Messiah (1:1 – 2:23)
- Preparing for Jesus' ministry (3:1 – 4:11)
- Jesus' public ministry in Galilee (4:12 – 15:20)
- Jesus' ministry in the regions around Galilee (15:21 – 18:35)
- Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (19:1 – 20:34)
- The last days of Jesus in Jerusalem (21:1 – 28:20)

In using Mark as a source, Matthew adds a longer introduction (Mark tells us nothing of Jesus' birth) and a series of appearances of the resurrected Jesus at the end of his Gospel (Mark only mentions the empty tomb). Matthew

also inserts five long discourses (chapters 5–7; 10, 13, 18, 23–25) into his Gospel, each of which concludes with a similar formula (‘had finished saying these things’) (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1 and 26:1). Much of the material Matthew uses for these long discourses come from Q or his own unique sources and therefore provides a unique perspective on Jesus. *In interpreting Matthew as a Gospel, it is therefore important to note where a pericope occurs in Matthew’s narrative if it occurs in the other Synoptic Gospels and, as already mentioned, how Matthew interweaves the words of Jesus with his actions. Jesus’ miracles (chapters 8–9), for example, follow his Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5–7) to indicate that Jesus did not just talk about the Kingdom of God: he enacted it as well through his deeds.*

Context

Since Ignatius of Antioch, who probably died at the beginning of the second century, quotes from the Gospel of Matthew in his writings, it is generally accepted that the Gospel was written before the year 100. This dating is often linked to Matthew 22:7 (‘The king became angry and sent his army to kill those murderers and set their city on fire’) as a possible reference to the actions of the Roman general, Titus, who burned parts of Jerusalem in the year 70 during its capture. Since Mark has no references to the burning of the city (possibly Jerusalem) in his version of the parable it has been argued that he wrote his Gospel at the outbreak of the Jewish war, while Matthew wrote his for a community living after the destruction of the temple. The burning of cities, however, was a common Roman tactic, so it cannot be conclusively determined that the Matthean parable specifically alludes to the destruction of Jerusalem. Another hint for a later date for Matthew’s composition than Mark is its negative depiction of Jewish groups like the Pharisees. The anti-Pharisee tone in Matthew, as is evident from how Matthew refers to ‘their’ (rather than ‘our’) scribes and synagogues (7:29; 9:35; 21:43 and 23:34) could reflect the growing estrangement between the Church and the Jews at the end of the first century. *This separation, and even conflict, presents serious challenges for preachers not to make themselves guilty of antisemitism. It is therefore important to keep in mind that Matthew represents an intra-Jewish debate rather than an anti-Jewish diatribe (see below).* It is, for example, clear from the role played by the Old Testament in Matthew that a significant portion of its readers must have been Jews who were familiar with it. There are at least sixty references to the Old Testament in Matthew – more than double that of any other Gospel. Since Matthew presupposes an environment where there was a significant number of Greek-speaking Christians (he writes in Greek) who were former Jews, the city of Antioch in Syria is often suggested as the place of its origin. There is no conclusive way to prove this assumption since all major cities of the Roman empire had significant Greek-speaking Jewish communities. Matthew could thus have been written in any of the Roman cities located on the Mediterranean coast.

In view of the previous remarks, it appears that the intended readers of Matthew were a group of Greek-speaking Christian Jews that included a significant number of Gentiles. These readers of Matthew apparently had to defend their understanding of the Law, and that Jesus was

the Messiah as foretold by the Old Testament, against the criticism of mainstream Judaism. Matthew, therefore, opposes a possible antinomian mindset by highlighting the continuing importance of the Law. The Matthean Jesus, for example, expects those he had healed to go to a priest to meet the requirements of the Law (8:4), while Matthew states that Jesus had come to fulfill the Law and the prophets. *It is therefore important that preachers do not impose a Pauline understanding of the Law, which is often negative, in their exposition of Matthew. They instead need to explain Matthew’s more positive interpretation of the Law for his community.* For the Matthean Jesus, keeping the Law is about practising love and mercy and not just about the cultic manipulation of God.

Message

In this section, a few of the important themes that occur in Matthew will be highlighted. These are Matthew’s understanding of Jesus (Christology), his message (the coming of the kingdom of heaven), and the essence of discipleship (imitating Jesus by practising love and justice).

For Matthew, Jesus is the **Jewish Messiah** (1:1, 16, 17, 18; 2:4; 11:2; 16:16, 20; 22:42; 23:10; 26:63, 68; 27:17, 22) sent by God to fulfill his promises expressed in the Old Testament. This theme of fulfillment is one of the central themes of Matthew that is highlighted by at least twelve fulfillment citations (1:23; 2:6, 15, 18, 23; 4:14ff; 8:17; 12:17ff; 13:25; 21:5; 26:56 and 27:9ff). This raises the question of how Matthew’s readers would have viewed Jesus as the Messiah. While Matthew indicates that the title Christ (Messiah) has political connotations since it is associated with being the king of the Jews by Herod (2:2, 4, 13, 16) and Pilate (27:11, 29, 37), he instead connects it with Jesus’ suffering (27:27–31). For Matthew Jesus did not come to satisfy the political expectations of Israel and her leaders, but rather to deliver his covenant people from their sins (1:21). *Preachers should thus not separate Jesus from his role within the covenantal history of Israel.* Matthew is, for example, the only Gospel in which it is stated that Jesus’ mission was directed solely at Israel (15:24). The disciples are also initially only sent to Israel by Jesus (10:5).

Despite Jesus’ focus on Israel, Matthew makes it clear that they rejected him. In 2:3 Matthew provides a foreshadowing of the rejection that emerges pertinently in chapters 26–27 (see specifically 26:3–5; 27:1, 62) after earlier signs of opposition to Jesus (11:18ff and 12:24). *As mentioned above, the negative role played by Jewish groups and leaders presents a unique challenge to preachers to avoid anti-Semitic preaching that is often based on texts like Matthew 27:24–26, in which the inhabitants of Jerusalem accept blame for Jesus’ death.* This is not always easy to avoid since Matthew makes it clear that Jesus also rejected Israel (3:10; 8:12; 10:15, 11:20–24, 12:43–50). Texts like Matthew 21:41, 43 also suggest the replacement of Israel by a new covenant people, the Church. There are furthermore many references in Matthew to the persecution of the new people of God by Israel (5:10–12; 10:16–33; 22:6 and 23:29–39). *These passages should, however, be read by preachers in conjunction with passages (e.g. 11:28–30; 23:39) that indicate that Jesus had not yet finally rejected his people.*

A key aspect of the Matthean Jesus' message is how he inaugurated **the kingdom of heaven** through his ministry, suffering, and resurrection. The kingdom of heaven is God's rule through Jesus over all people. For Matthew, the kingdom of heaven is both *present* (6:33; 11:12; 12:28; 13:24–30, 36–43; 16:19; 23:13) and a *future reality* (4:17; 5:19; 8:12; 16:28; 25:1–13; 26:29). Jesus proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom (4:17: 'it has drawn near'), that it was visible in his miraculous deeds (11:2–6; 12:28), and clarified in the instruction he gives his disciples and others about the nature and demands of the kingdom of God (5:17–20). During his ministry Jesus indicated that he is the one who can forgive sins (9:6) and that as the Son of Man he would give his life as a ransom for many (20:28). The link between Jesus' blood, the forgiveness of sin, and the coming of the kingdom of God also occurs at the last supper (26:29). Jesus' resurrection results in the kingdom of God breaking into the present age. While Jesus acted as one with authority until his death (5:17–48; 7:29; 21:23, 24, 27) regarding sickness and demons (9:6, 8; 10:1), all authority is only granted to him after his resurrection (28:18). The final inauguration of the kingdom will however only occur with the second coming of Jesus. *Being aware of the present and future dimensions of the kingdom of God is very important when preaching from Matthew. Both the danger of preaching as if the death and resurrection of Jesus had made no difference to the present world, and of having an over-realized eschatology that claims that the present world has already been fully transformed need to be avoided.*

Being a **disciple of Jesus** for Matthew means that a person has radically conformed his or her life to the teaching of Jesus. Imitation of Jesus was for him about more than memorizing Jesus' words (7:21, 24, 46). Only those who do Jesus' words are in Matthew considered being his true family (12:49). However, doing good deeds may not be done in a calculated manner (i.e. done only to be rewarded) (25:40, 45). The essence of Matthew's view of discipleship is radical obedience to the teaching of Jesus. This obedience is at times linked to *justice* (5:17–20) and other times to *love* (22:37–40).

According to Matthew, because God *loves* all people Jesus' disciples are expected to do the same. God's limitless love is evident in the women included in Jesus' genealogy (1:1–17), the portrayal of the pagan wise men as the first worshippers of Jesus (2:1–12), the choice of Galilee of the Gentiles as the arena of the Messiah's ministry (4:12–16), the faith of the centurion (8:5–13) and of the Canaanite woman (15:21–28). The love of God is the motivation for Jesus' command to his disciples to go to all the nations (28:16–20). Love in Matthew also serves as the key to interpreting the Law (cf. 9:13 and 12:7, Hosea 6:6). The conclusion of Jesus' last discourse (25:31–46) also points to the importance of doing acts of love and mercy. The greatest demand of the law, then, is that of love (22:37–40). The final judgment will also consider whether the disciples of Jesus have acted with mercy toward all in need (25:31–46) and have forgiven others (18:23–35).

Matthew uses the Greek word (*dikaíosune*) for *justice* seven times, five of which are found in the Sermon on the Mount. For Matthew, justice is to comply with the will of God as revealed by Jesus. This righteousness is a requirement to enter the kingdom of heaven and surpasses that of the Pharisees and the scribes because it meets the demands of the new era that is introduced by Jesus' ministry (5:17–20). While righteousness is a virtue that Jesus praises (5:6, 10) disciples should not do their deeds of righteousness to be seen by others (6:1–18). Examples of those who lived by Matthew's righteousness are Joseph (1:19), Abel (23:35), those who respond correctly to the coming of the Son of Man (13:43), and those who perform acts of grace toward others (25:37, 46).

It is important that preachers highlight both aspects of discipleship (love and justice), as it is tempting to proclaim a form of Christian love that accepts people as they are without making any ethical appeal to them. Similarly, it is tempting to emphasize seeking justice to the extent that it could result in a form of Christianity that is experienced as being harsh and loveless. The emphasis of Matthew that love and justice should both be practised is, therefore, an important one.

Planning the Christian Year

The Christian Year differs from the calendar year in that it is essentially a commemoration in worship and proclamation of the major events of our Lord's life. Early on these were superimposed on the basic pattern of the observances already followed by the Hebrew people, and which Jesus, his disciples and the earliest Christians were familiar with and themselves observed. From this developed

- an Easter-cycle, stretching from nine weeks before Easter to Pentecost fifty days after, and
- an Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle.

Further refinements led to the observance of a **Christian Year comprising four distinct 'blocks'**:

- 1) A period of nine Sundays before Christmas, in which the movement from creation to incarnation reveals the on-going divine purpose and promise at key points in the historical revelation. During this period readings from the Hebrew scriptures are, naturally, of particular interest. In recent times this 'block' has been limited to the four Sundays of the Advent Season.
- 2) The period from Christmas to Easter, which includes the seasons of Epiphany and Lent. During this period there is a movement away from Christmas and a movement towards Easter. This period has a unity and progression which is very much rooted in the historical life and ministry of Jesus.
- 3) The period from Easter to Pentecost covers the events of the Resurrection, the new resurrection-life of the followers of Jesus, and it also includes the Ascension.
- 4) The period between Pentecost and Advent, variously designated as the 'Sundays after Trinity', 'Ordinary Time', or the 'Sundays after Pentecost'. As Pentecost itself witnesses to the launching of the Church on her world-wide mission, the Sundays after Pentecost unpack the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the early church. Here those who follow the way of Jesus are observed in a 'between the times' history, anticipating the return of the Lord.

George M. Gibson (*The Story of the Christian Year*, LLC, 1912) identified four guiding principles that emerged in the development of the Christian Year:

- **Reiteration:** faithful repetition is necessary for there to be religious constancy. Human memory is short and in need of periodic arousing to keep believers faithful. We need regular instructional return to origins and special occasions, for without them it is easy to forget.
- **Appropriateness:** in all of life there is the right and the wrong moment for something. 'For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven' (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

- **Separation:** while the viewpoints of God are in the world, they are not of it. They impinge on our common life but are not absorbed by it. 'Religion saves by not merely resembling the prevailing culture, which is the object of its redemptive concern, but by being unlike that culture and, while remaining in it, standing above it as high inspiration and moral criticism'.
- Religious **preparation** is a theme that runs through the Christian Year. Since the coming event is important, a proper preparation of mind and spirit is required. Lent prepares us for the events of the Passion and Easter. Advent is the spiritual preparation for Christmas. It could be said that the Christian year offers more time to prepare for the festivals than to the festivals themselves! Jerome Berriman, of *Godly Play*, calls this "The Great Green Growing Season", noting that the Church typically uses the colour green, symbolizing life, growth, and hope.

Another way to delineate the seasons of the Church Year is to think in terms of three major sections:

1 The Incarnation Cycle

This includes the Seasons of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany.

2 The Redemption Cycle

This includes the Seasons of Lent, Holy Week and the Triduum, Easter, Ascension and Pentecost.

3 Ordinary Time

This embraces the Sundays after Pentecost until the Feast of the Reign of Christ (or Christ the King) on the Sunday before Advent Sunday, which then marks the beginning of the next cycle of the Church Year.

Some denominations define a short period at the end of Ordinary Time known as *Kingdomtide* or *Season of End Times*. This period can range anywhere from just the three Sundays prior to Christ the King to a period of 13 or 14 weeks. Others observe this time between All Saints and Advent Sunday.

These cycles and seasons are convenient. They allow the Church to plan a worship programme that is based on an overview of the whole year, with each of the Seasons addressed as part of a cycle. In the long spell of Ordinary Time (Sundays after Pentecost) the semi-continuous texts of the readings provide opportunity for a number of short series that could focus on passages from the Hebrew Bible, the other New Testament books, or the Gospels. These short series could also be explored in Bible study and other such small groups within a congregation.

The need for continuity in preaching

There is need to proclaim the good news within the whole sweep of the Biblical narrative. It is important in reading the texts for the day to step back and locate them within the overarching story of God's relationship across the ages with all creation and particularly with humanity.

This process is much more productive if it can develop a sense of continuity from Sunday to Sunday and also give direction to weekly study groups and other congregational gatherings. In this way the use of the lectionary can feed the pastoral and catechetical work of the community. This process can build a rhythm that equips individual members of the congregation to use the readings of the Sunday to guide them confidently through the week.

This process is particularly important in situations where a congregation has a number of different preachers. Throughout the year a congregation needs some form of continuity in the flow of the proclamation from week to week. This happens easily through the Seasons of Advent to Pentecost, where the flow of the story is well-known and driven by the successive Seasons. However, during the long period of the Sundays after Pentecost the semi-continuous readings can help to provide the ongoing flow from Sunday to Sunday.

Planning the Preaching Programme

1 Advent to Pentecost

For the first half of the year, Advent to Pentecost, the discussions and plans will not be difficult, as the lessons from year to year will be covering a familiar pattern, with a movement towards and from Christmas, followed by a movement towards and from Easter. The concern should be to present the seasons in the year ahead in a way that is fresh, has clear focus, and yet manages the transitions from season to season.

2 The long Season after Pentecost

Planning the long Season after Pentecost to the Feast of the Reign of Christ is more difficult and requires more work. *Word and Worship* seeks to support this process by suggesting the development of sermon series that are based on the semi-continuous readings contained in RCL. In any one year, it might be helpful to have a series on some gospel passages, another series from the Hebrew Bible, and a third from the letters or other books of the New Testament.

3 Additional Seasons

In recent years different groups have developed Seasons of Prayer for Church Unity, Compassion, Creation, Stewardship and so on. These usually provide selected texts, background material and liturgical suggestions. In this volume of *Word and Worship* no additional seasons are being provided. It is left to individual ministers and preachers to consider devising such themselves.

4 Special Sundays

Other special Sundays that could be marked during the year are, for instance, Sea Sunday in July, Prisoners of Conscience Sunday, Refugee Sunday, Environmental Sunday, and several others linked to world-wide concerns in our common life such as HIV/AIDS, etc. Bible Sunday has been moved from the traditional Second Sunday in Advent and is now, appropriately, linked with Reformation Sunday at the end of October.

Introduction to the Incarnation Cycle

Introduction

The Incarnation Cycle includes the Seasons of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. These familiar Seasons of the Church year lead from one to the next and therefore may be regarded as constituent parts of a larger whole.

Locating the Seasons

The end of the Growing Season

The final Sunday of the season after Pentecost is the celebration of 'The Reign of Christ' (or 'Christ the King'). This feast day celebrates the promise that the One who was crucified and rose from the grave will come again in glory. Or, as Luke writes in Acts 1:11, 'This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven' (NRSV).

There is thus a clear connection between this promise on the final Sunday of one church year and the sense of hope with which we begin the new church year on Advent Sunday.

Advent

The Incarnation Cycle starts with the Season of Advent. Preachers should be aware of the link between the final Sunday of the previous year and the Advent Hope of the Lord's return. Without it the entire season can easily be limited to being simply a time of preparation for the Nativity. Our understanding of its focus would then be restricted to the Feast of Christmas that follows it.

The wider location of Advent within the Incarnation Cycle allows us, on the first two Sundays, to focus on the Hope of Advent that anticipates the final coming of the Lord that lies well beyond the immediate Feast of Christmas. It also looks back to the role of the prophets who, through the ages, pointed towards that final consummation.

Naturally the third and fourth Sundays focus on the world's need of a Saviour who is born to share our human condition. There is also a focus on the parts played by John the Baptist as the forerunner, and on Elizabeth and Zechariah, and Joseph and Mary.

Christmas

This season takes us directly into the celebration of the Nativity on 24/25 December. The world will have observed Christmas Day in different ways. Please note that while most of the Christian world celebrate Christmas Day on 25 December, for many of the world's 200 million Orthodox Christians, the birth of Jesus Christ is marked on 7 January. This is because they follow the Julian calendar, unlike Catholic and Protestant Christian denominations which follow the Gregorian calendar.

Epiphany

The Feast of Epiphany is celebrated on 6 January, the twelfth day of Christmas. In the northern hemisphere, a week after the celebration of the new calendar year, people will have returned to their normal pattern of life, albeit in mid-winter. In the southern hemisphere it is the height of the midsummer holiday season, with many people away from their homes. Consequently, it can easily happen that a major Christian observance is downplayed or overlooked. An option we have is to move the celebration to a Sunday, preferably the Sunday before the Epiphany, which this year is the first Sunday of the New Year. This ensures that on the first Sunday after the Epiphany the Baptism of Christ is appropriately emphasised and celebrated.

The Epiphany season has two underlying themes: (1) the welcoming of the outsiders, the strangers, to the new thing that God is doing. Here the visitors from the East come to the fore in their search for the one born to be King; (2) an emphasis on baptism as marking the inclusion of the believer in the new understanding of faith. Here the focus is naturally on the baptism of Jesus.

Where it is not possible to move the celebration of the Epiphany to the Sunday before the Feast of Epiphany, it is important that the baptismal theme is not lost sight of in our eagerness to focus on the Magi who arrive to replace the shepherds in the crib scene.

In this volume we list the Sundays after the 6 January Feast of Epiphany as 'Sundays *after* Epiphany', until Transfiguration Sunday is reached on the eve of Lent.

Word and Life the 1st Sunday in Advent – 30 November 2025

James Harris

Texts

Isaiah 2:1–5
Psalm 122
Romans 13:11–14
Matthew 24:36–44

Introduction

Advent is a period of anticipation and expectation. Our texts, however, are about the Second Coming of Jesus rather than his initial entrance into our messy human world. This season was established within the church during the mid-300s, and honed, changed, and developed over the centuries until the current four week arrangement.

Advent is not a ‘biblical’ idea in the sense that there are precise texts or stories within the Bible, thus giving it validity. It is ‘biblical’ in the sense that its character is drawn from some of the great Jewish festivals and then definitive Christian ideas are highlighted. In other words, Advent (and other Christian seasons throughout the year) is a theological interpretation of elements of scripture and history.

Advent is also a bridge guiding us from the end of the previous year (the feast of Christ the King, which reminds us that God in Christ is in control regardless of what goes on in the world) into a new season of reflection on the in-breaking of God in human history through the incarnation narratives. Thus, the initial reflection in Advent again links God’s sovereignty with the hope of the Second Coming of Jesus.

With this in mind let us now consider the texts at hand.

Hearing and Interpreting the Word

We must begin with the Gospel passage as it informs our understanding of the theme. The end of time is known only to God the Father, not even the Son has such insight. Our text calls us to be alert to the limitation of human knowledge, especially in regard to the end of history, the culmination of human existence, and the ushering in of an eternal age. The end comes when we least expect it, unannounced, and for the most part, unanticipated – except by the few insightful and prepared followers of the Son of Man. Why so? Jesus uses an illustration from the time of Noah, reflecting how people were prior to the flood. People lived their lives as we do today: eating, drinking, marrying, working, enjoying life with hardly a thought for the future. This is not a criticism, merely an observation of what is real. As our text (Mt 24:39) states: “they understood nothing until the flood came and swept them away!”

This is not a ‘scare tactic’ but rather a serious call to reflect on life having a *telos*, an ending, having purpose, meaning, completion. An unbeliever may well be sceptical about life having meaning and purpose, but the follower of Jesus knows full well that life is lived within the purposes of God.

The Apostle Paul approaches this idea from the perspective of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:19): “if we hope in Christ for this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied!” In other words Paul suggests that if there is no meaning in this life and nothing meaningful in the future after death, then Christian faith is useless, deceitful, and dangerous.

The timing of the *Parousia* is in the God’s knowledge and purpose alone. Even when the world seems to be turning upside down, when conflict seems like the beginning of Armageddon, when world leaders seem to be peace-makers but are really exacerbating the horrors already evident, we are not to conclude that the ‘end is nigh’! These are times in which we are called simply to be faithful, alert, and ready for whatever comes. Nothing more or less: just be faithful in doing the good will of God. In a sense, we seek to do what Jesus did when he walked in Israel: proclaim the kingdom of the presence of God, comfort and heal the sick, and bring compassionate hope to the disillusioned and despairing.

Isaiah 2:1–5

The critical issues do not help us here, as the Lectionary Framers are simply using this text to support the argument that Jesus is the “Prince of Peace”, and who brings true peace when believers are brought into the Kingdom, or when they come under the reign of the prince. However, if you decide to preach from this passage, it is wise to assess all the critical matters so to attain an accurate interpretation.

Having said this, it should be obvious that the Lectionary Framers, in including this passage for Advent 1, have made an interpretive commitment. Clearly this narrative offers hope for a future period where peace – every aspect of such, becomes a reality. We do need to be careful not to take every statement literally, though. We know that there are mountains which are higher than Jerusalem. Given this, vs 2 must be considered metaphorical, denoting significance. Remember Jesus telling the Samaritan woman in John 4, that neither Mt Gerizim nor Mt Zion, places of significance and honour, is more important than God, grace, and truth.

Isaiah is heralding a time when access to the presence of the Lord is coming – not only for Jews but also for all nations. For this to become a reality, people need to acknowledge God’s own reality, power, and purposes, and then to “walk in the light of the Lord.”

At a macro-level, the story suggests that weapons of war will be remade into non-violent agricultural tools, and that humanity will learn the sciences of war no more. For modern readers, especially those who have a sense of history, or who have studied military matters, this seems an incredible position to hold, especially given the huge economic factors involved in conflict and weaponry: this is very big business. Even the brightest of minds are called to apply their minds to the deployment and development of ever increasingly destructive machinery.

World peace seems impossible. Yet generations have believed with hope that the divine promise is true, and will become a reality. This is not a figment of imagination rooted in deluded people; rather it is based on the evidence of promises fulfilled in the Old Testament. But further, there is the record of Messianic promises being fulfilled in the New Testament in and through Jesus Christ.

Psalm 122

This psalm is one of a number of psalms titled “Songs of Ascent”. These psalms describe aspects of a pilgrim’s journey up to Jerusalem for worship in the presence of the most high and living God.

Immediately we note the joy anticipated in worship – for therein is the very presence of God almighty, the Lord (YHWH). The various descriptions of Jerusalem are metaphorical (pictorial), depicting the honour the Lord has bestowed upon this place. Note the dominant factor is “peace”, for such a state produces prosperity, security, companionship, and goodness in every way.

The reference to the “house of David” and its “thrones” suggest that the Messiah stems from the Davidic dynasty. Jesus and his family are spoken of as belonging to the house of David (Mt 1:1; Lk 10:27; Lk 1:32).

Romans 13:11–14

This short passage emerges from Paul’s summary of faith: “love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilment of the Law” (13:10). He follows on by emphasising that believers embody and practice love, aware that life and time are short, and that salvation (in its total and absolute sense) is near fulfilment. Paul uses the “night/light” metaphor which evokes a Johannine echo in its likeness, emphasising the need to consciously and deliberately put away “deeds of darkness” (he enumerates these earlier in vs 8–9). Note how Paul uses the term “armour” of light – it is not merely an illuminating process but clearly a protective instrument against repeated attacks of dark forces. Vs 13 calls us to realise how dangerous excess is.

“Putting on the Lord Jesus” is an interesting phrase. It suggests clothing oneself, covering oneself in the character and power of Jesus. This conscious act by believers enables them to protect themselves from wrong – like a raincoat protecting the wearer from the wet. Another way of seeing or understanding this picture is that of “covering” – like the OT story of the Exodus, whereby the Hebrews covered their door lintels with blood, thus protecting their household from the angel of death. Equally, some church theologies speak of the “blood of Jesus covering sin”, meaning that Christ’s death conquers sin and thus reconciles God to the sinner so covered. This metaphor also includes the idea that the blood protects the believer from the arrows of sin – like a shield or a coat of armour. In all cases there is an instruction to consciously and actively do something, ie, “make no provision for wrong”. Here is a call to refrain from anything that is clearly contrary to the Pauline understanding of Jesus’ moral teaching.

Preaching the Word

Any proclamation concerning “peace” is going to fall flat given the state of the world currently. And this notwithstanding the statements from certain world leaders that include peace as an objective to political intervention. Very little peace has been accomplished by world organisations or even by world leaders in our lifetime. To preach on this topic the preacher must refrain from platitudes, pious or political. Clearly the experiential reality of peace which comes to an individual is true – perhaps this is a good time to use testimony to illustrate it. But “peace” must be carefully explained and distinguished at both micro- and macro-level.

Allow me a personal illustration here: when preparing for this first Sunday in Advent, I try to link the idea of the Second Coming with the feast of Christ the King (as indicated in the Introduction above). I also seek to remind hearers of the sovereign purposes of God in human history. I think it wise to acknowledge the problems of the world and our own country, to stress the self-centeredness evident in every area of society, and then to point out the necessity of renewal for any real good to happen or to be effective.

Related to the above, another emphasis could be the centrality of worship to the life of a believer. Here a preacher can take any of the possible themes from the texts and work through them using the key idea of worship to enhance the idea. By “worship” I don’t mean method or liturgy but rather the emphasis on the power of the presence of the true and living God within the gathering of God’s people. Obviously such a service of worship will have structure (liturgy) to give order to the act, but all structures must focus on and have as its objective the experiential engagement with God by the Holy Spirit.

Given that Advent is an “anticipatory” season with regular calls to “be ready” or “be alert”, any and every sermon would benefit from including the challenge this invitation.

Living the Word

The Romans passage in particular, with its emphasis on moral virtue and moral living as expressions of “love”, has great value for the believer and for the preacher. Obviously we all have to be clear that, for the believer, such morality or ethical practice stems from divine love manifest in and through Jesus Christ, albeit such ethics are rooted in the Decalogue. Believer and preacher alike need reminding that morality and ethical practice gain us no favour with the Lord in terms of acceptance and reconciliation. However, it is true that such moral virtues are evidences of repentance, faith, and glad obedience to the Lord of life. Equally, we should consider the very negative descriptions of moral wrong that Paul makes. We really do need to draw people’s attention to what is clearly contrary to God’s will and purposes.

Although the Gospel text makes no reference to specific moral practice, there is an intuitive invitation to humility, to obedience, and to make Jesus our exemplar in all areas of life. We can never go wrong if we make a study of the life of Jesus, taking note of how he related with others, how he dealt with the good, bad, or confused. To be alert to the oft-times strange yet comforting ways and teachings of God in Christ is enhanced by careful reflection of the words of the Saviour.

The individual who studies the teachings of Jesus will find herself or himself asking how this can impact the world in which they live. I think most of us realise that whilst we may not change to ‘movers and shakers’ of the world around us, we often can influence others in small yet meaningful ways, many times not even being aware of such an influence. Our utter reliance on the Holy Spirit for our witness and compassionate help will produce its fruit in due time. We may not see that fruit, but we have confidence that it will be borne.

Word and Life for the 2nd Sunday of Advent – 7 December 2025

James Harris

Texts

Isaiah 11:1–10
Psalm 72:1–7, 18–19
Romans 15:4–13
Matthew 3:1–12

Introduction

Continuing elements of the theme from last week, this Second Sunday in Lent draws us ever into a reminder that the world is always chaotic in some way or other. Some country or another is struck by violence from a neighbour, a natural disaster occurs, an economic downturn in one part of the world affects the income and productivity of another, or a pandemic bursts into being creating all sorts of responses with concomitant attitudes and actions to medical advice.

Yet hope is there in the midst of anguish. Scripture is replete with stories of hope and the reality of God. Our texts offer comfort and challenge.

Hearing and Interpreting the Word

Isaiah 11:1–10

The context to this message of hope through the Davidic dynasty is the systemic invasion of the surrounding nations by Assyria (see especially Isaiah 10). The world was being shaken. Life as people knew it would soon be no longer. Everything changes and not always for the better. Since the World Wars of the 20th Century, most people across the world have experienced radical changes – not everyone, obviously, but very large numbers in both Western settings as well as the developing worlds. Yet those who are used to reading history, even historically oriented novels, recognise the differences between societies as in the past, and as they are now. This is a reality for multitudes in our own time (2025) because of what is happening in the Middle East, in the Ukraine, in the Sudan, and due to the changes the political administration in the USA is creating, which ultimately affects the world.

Into a chaotic world we have before us another link to last week's theme, whereby Isaiah refers to the Messiah coming from David's line. And Isaiah 9:1–7 is yet another passage with similar ideas.

Immediately we notice that it is “the Spirit of the Lord” who is the operative power at work. All the virtues and characteristics attribute to the Messiah stem from or emerge from the Spirit. This Spirit is the Almighty's executive operator. This Spirit is life-giving power. And note how these virtues correspond well with the Psalm for the day, Psalm 72.

In some ways, even though the text relates to David's dynasty, it is Solomon who comes closest to embodying the characteristics spoken of here. David certainly had some of these qualities, but Solomon outstripped him. Again, when the futuristic element is considered, it should be obvious that Messiah is in mind.

A devotional reading of this passage can be very challenging to a believer, asking whether these virtues should be applicable. However, the social application must not be overlooked. For this reason alone we should recognise that no earthly ruler would accomplish the reforms and righteousness mentioned here. Messiah alone will fulfil such longing. And that is part of the Messianic Hope. Social reform and harmony between human races, and even some kind of benign relationship with the animal kingdom, can never happen under any human authority. The idea of a fearless relationship between humans and animals might well be imaginative and poetic denoting complete peace, rather than taking it in a literal sense.

Psalm 72:1–7, 18–19

This Psalm is regarded as set in Solomon's time, thus well within the tradition of the Davidic dynasty. Yet it is clear that the heraldic character of the poem is idealising this king. Here is hope for the God of Israel to bless the king with all the virtues and characteristics of an ideal sovereign, especially justice and righteousness. Equally this paean of praise is applicable to the Messiah in time to come. In our African context, one can almost see in our minds the praise-singer preceding the king heralding his coming with singing and considerable hyperbole, yet an excess which longs for the actual reality of the virtues and graces expected in a leader.

It should be noted that this idealised king and his rule is to extend throughout the world, not merely benefitting Israel alone.

Romans 15:4–13

This portion of Romans is helpful, especially in light of the OT passages set for this Sunday in Lent. Paul reminds us that Scripture was “written to teach us”. The lesson is “patience and encouragement”. The source is God in Christ our exemplar. Thus in the context of political, economic, and societal upheavals, we are to be watching, waiting, and actively following Jesus with patience and faithfulness. In other words, no matter the social issues of the day, the believer should be, above all else, a careful and obedient follower of Jesus. This is not a passive thing. Instead it is actively believing and worshipping, with compassionate engagement in the issues of the day, yet patient with the outcomes, knowing the grace of God is often slow in being fulfilled.

This passage reminds us also that as a faithful Jew, Paul is ever aware that grace is given first to the people of Israel, then to Gentiles. This is not because one is better or worse than the other, but rather to reveal the faithfulness of God. God's faithfulness is always significant to Paul. If God abandons his ancient covenantal people, then there can be no trust in any of the promises or pledges God made in history nor therefore any made in the NT relating to Jesus, nor can any hope throughout the history of the church be trusted. I think the quintessential power of this comes to fruition in

1 Corinthians 15:12–20 where Paul expounds his view of the hope of the resurrection.

Matthew 3:1–12

Matthew gives us the story of John the Baptist as the promised forerunner to Jesus the Messiah, quoting Isaiah 40:3. The Isaian call to make the “road straight” is a call to repentance – straighten up or get onto the correct path, in other words. It is important to recognise that repentance is always a two-fold action: to turn away from wrong (things contrary to God’s Law) and a turning in glad obedience towards God and God’s ways. Too often repentance is portrayed as stopping doing something that may be wrong, the content of which is vague. New birth, preceding repentance gives an impetus to be sorrowful for specific wrongs, and also generates a sense of joy and wonder at the power of this new experience enabling a believer to be aware of God’s love and grace. This is experienced even within the context of being saddened by sin which has alienated the believer from God. Hence the glad obedience, referred to above, is recognised as a work of the Holy Spirit, motivating, almost impelling a believer to search Scripture, to attend worship, and to engage in fellowship and study, in a new quest for direction, meaning, and purpose.

This “new direction” is the point in John’s challenge to the Pharisees and Sadducees who came for baptism. For John, baptism was no mere ritual. It was a vital symbol and sign of something significant. Given that Jews practiced many types of washings (baptisms) for many reasons, it was possible for the more zealous folk to add a baptism for repentance to their list of practices. John was emphatic: there must be an outcome, some meaningful “fruit” evidenced as a change of lifestyle to those who want to make this baptism of repentance true and valid. Verses 7–10 are very clear that this baptism was a very different practice with very different results expected. No reliance on history or status would be countenanced. John was prophetic here when he states that an axe would cut through the very roots of current belief and practice. That axe was in part his message and practice, but also the challenge to look for and be alert to one who follows on from his ministry: the Messiah, the one who gives the Holy Spirit and fire.

The “kingdom of heaven” (Matthew especially) or “kingdom of God” is really about the entrance into human history and life of the direct rule of God. Jesus embodies this rule and becomes an exemplar for his followers to copy – at least in some ways! Having said this, Paul urges us to become “imitators of me as I am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). At the heart of imitating Jesus is his intimate relationship with God which is likened to that of a child and a parent. Often Jesus is recorded as going off on his own to commune with God. Whether it is to seek guidance for selecting the apostolic band, or to prepare for the agony of the cross, or simply to restore his needed intimacy, our Lord makes this time in the presence of God a priority.

By our Lord’s various actions and teaching, we note that God’s reign, or God’s presence, comes with power to the recipients. Healings, renewal, intellectual understanding, or even conflict centre on the awareness of “Presence”. The various controversies over the Sabbath are good examples

of how our Lord dealt with legalism, small mindedness, and even down-right deliberate blindness. Jesus used questions and Scripture to clarify accusations, but also to show how wrong some of his detractors were.

Preaching the Word

In terms of preaching from these passages, beginning with Isaiah, as I intimated above, there are devotional features which could be stimulating. More so, there is clearly the challenge to leaders of society, especially in the political realm, to emulate these virtues Isaiah speaks of, and within a secular environment, strive to find ways to influence laws and policies for the betterment of society as a whole.

Matthew’s text has so much to offer the preacher. Congregations need reminding often about the “kingdom” and what it entails. John’s message about meaningful outcomes from repentance and baptism is ever relevant. The dangers of self-reliance, on status, on longevity as believers, on service rendered to the Lord and church are always evident in the church. And, as hard as it is, there is a place for reminding hearers that judgement is a reality. Preachers do need to speak of accountability and judgement with compassion, gentleness, and caution, for the danger of seeming “holier-than-thou” or self-righteous is very real. Perhaps here is a case for doing careful research to find kindly ways to speak about a hard subject.

The Romans 15 passage affords the preacher an opportunity to consider Paul’s statement concerning the nature of Scripture. If Scripture is the compendium of examples or illustrations for Godly living and right doctrine, then this needs to be explicated as fully as possible. One could even consider a series on the theme.

One substantial study could well be on “patience and encouragement” about which the Scripture, Paul avers, highlights. Another, most appropriate theme, is the need for Gentile believers to appreciate their Jewish roots. Link this with Romans 9–11, Ephesians 2, and other texts and remind the church that Gentiles were once “nobody” but through Christ have become “somebody” inheriting the same history and promises as the Jews. The Gentile church is never to disparage, disdain, or look askance at their Jewish cousins because of this heritage.

Living the Word

Clearly the ethical implications of these various passages are numerous. I am convinced that ethics must be rooted in the doctrine and personal character of Jesus as the incarnated God. If we speak of ethics and morality in and of themselves, we end up speaking about morality *per se*. We might as well be utilitarian rather than convinced of the uniqueness of being Christian. I do feel very strongly about this, as the danger of becoming purely Christian moralists unattached to personal faith in Jesus is real in our day.

Given that our OT passages highlight “hope”, we need to ask ourselves how is “hope” communicated, and what constitutes “hope” in the 21st century in South Africa? We should be clear from these texts, and many other narratives within the Old Testament, that no human leader can give “hope” as the Biblical story offers it. Secular history,

church history, and the biblical narratives themselves give abundant evidence that no human leader, even the most dedicated and upright person, can bring about the kind of “hope” our current texts suggest. Obviously there are some examples of the effectiveness of godly people in leadership, but sadly very little is lasting. Equally, I think we ought to be wary of leaders claiming that they will bring peace to warring nations. Politicians are renowned for their venality when it comes to promises. Much depends on the policies of the leader or the party he or she represents, and what’s in it for the country they represent. Deals can be and are regularly broken. What is needed within the church today is a healthy cynicism about human promises in the political and commercial realms. God alone, through the mediation of Christ in the power of the Spirit, can bring into reality the hope, peace, and meaningful purpose to life that all humanity inherently long for. The disappointment and disillusionment expressed by many South Africans over the corruption and lack of delivery by successive governments

is telling. And this is a good example of the initial hopes of South African in the process of the journey from racially motivated governance to a more equitable democracy and the rule of law. It just didn’t happen. Now, even the most ardent supporters of the ruling government are calling for change. Nothing will happen because power is invested in an elite and as long as most people get a reasonable standard of living they will accept the status quo. Only the really poor will complain, to no avail.

Our Scriptures remind us that God alone can bring true democracy and equity and happiness! That will happen in the divine calendar. In the meanwhile followers of Jesus are called to be faithful in proclaiming the kingdom of the presence of God in Christ, the call to repentance and discipleship, and the compassionate sharing of true hope, justice, and peace that our Saviour alone offers.

Word and Life for the 3rd Sunday in Advent – 14 December 2025

James Harris

Texts

Isaiah 35:1–10

Psalm 146:5–10 or Luke 1:47–55

James 5:5–10

Matthew 11:2–11

Introduction

In some Christian traditions, the Third Sunday in Advent is sometimes called “Gaudete” (Latin for “Rejoice!”). Perhaps it is taken from the Isaian text which opens with “The desert will rejoice ...” This is in line with the other Sundays in Advent which these same traditions also celebrate Hope (1st), Peace (2nd), and Love (4th). Thus, the themes and texts interact and inform each other, enriching the celebrations.

Not all the texts are overt in this matter, though. However, as is often the case, the reader and preacher are given a multiplicity of opportunity to enjoy the varied possibilities of themes and sub-themes. This is created through the creative exegesis (please not eisegesis) and exposition of the narratives at hand.

Hearing and Interpreting the Word

Isaiah 35:1–10

Given that Advent is a season of anticipation, of expectation, and of promise, the poem found in Isaiah 34 roots the reader in hopeful joy: “The desert will rejoice ...” Many commentators draw attention to the similarity of ideas in this 34th Chapter with Chapters 40–66. Notwithstanding the historical interlude of Chapters 36–39, reproduced with small changes from 2 Kings 19–20, Chapters 35 and 40 onwards focus on renewal and growth under the good purposes of the God who cares and upholds Israel.

The poet uses evocative language to enhance the imagination of a reader, revealing just how complete this renewal and growth will be. Wilderness and desert, dry rivers and barren mountains will flourish beyond expectation. This is how the prophet envisages Israel, and the people of God, will blossom when emerging from their sad struggle.

Central to this rich evocation of hope and joy, is the “way of holiness”, a “road for the redeemed”. It is a pathway accompanied by God himself, for when God is present, no ill or adversity can ever really affect the believer in the ultimate sense. It could be argued that conflict, difficulty, or pain when inflicted on one who walks with God, actually only pushes the believer into an ever-increasing intimacy with God as Father. This adversity reveals aspects of redemption throughout the journey on the holy way.

Matthew 11:2–11

We must concede that there is very little “joy” in John the Baptist’s request to Jesus! John is stuck in prison – Machaerus (as Josephus asserts) – down near the Dead Sea, a terrible place to be. The last of the great OT prophets is having doubts; the one who stands in the shadow of Elijah is unsure if his earlier awareness of the Messiah is still valid. This is the same John who, on seeing Jesus, declared him to be “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”. Solitary confinement in a stinking hole of a prison has that kind of effect on you: it makes you question every certainty you ever had.

Notice that our Lord makes no rebuke to the messengers about John’s questions. He simply states that the messengers should take back to John what news they hear and evidence they see: the blind receive their sight; the lame walk; lepers are cleansed; the deaf hear; even the dead are raised to life; and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. These references are to be regarded as extra-ordinary events which, for those at the time, were recognised as coming only from God. But Jesus adds that there is a blessing for those who are not embarrassed by him or his claims. When we consider John’s confident declaration of Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”, his doubt inherent to his question tells of the state of his mind. No doubt prison and its attendant abuse played havoc with John’s earlier awareness of God’s power and presence in Jesus.

In turning to the crowds and commending John, Jesus adds to his message to his cousin, through the messengers, that there is none greater than John. Yet our Lord then reminds his hearers that in the kingdom of heaven even the least are great. This is not in any way detracting from John or his role; it simply is a forceful reminder that status has no place in God’s community. Gifts, calling, and unique abilities are all charisms from God for service to others and for the glory of the Father. Hence virtues like humility, simplicity, faithfulness, compassion, and obedience are more important than popularity and prestige.

Psalm 146:5–10 and Luke 1:46–55

There is an interesting parallel noticed immediately in these two readings: the concept of praise and thanksgiving. The Magnificat draws from Samuel, Job, Sirach, and the Abraham narratives in Genesis, and thus serve as sources for Mary’s paean of praise to God in her remarkable circumstance. Psalm 146 in turn centres in on the praise of God who provides in various ways no matter the circumstances.

Equally, the Psalmist urges the reader or worshipper of YHWH not to put any trust in human power – whether rulers or other powerful personalities. In 2025 this is such a contemporary concern. The Lukan narrative seems to parallel the Psalm by equating “the proud”, “the mighty”, and “the rich” with the rulers and power brokers of the Psalm, and who will receive their just desserts in due time. Luke

reminds us that the God who covenanted with Abraham will always be faithful to fulfil the divine promise.

Luke also highlights the power of God – the only real and true power, which affects hearts and souls rather than any external matter only. Luke reminds us that the God who covenanted with Abraham (as well as with Isaac, Jacob, David, and Jesus) will ever be faithful to fulfil the divine pledges and promises.

James 5:7–10

James does speak of “hope” in vs 8 although the RSV translates this as “strengthen your hearts”. “Be hopeful” or “be strong in hope” are equally valid translations. This is in the context of patience midst struggles. The inference is the patience of God, pictured in the reference to a farmer who patiently waits for his crops to emerge from the ground. He is reliant on the soils, the weather, and his nurture of the seed, weeding and tending during the waiting period. Throughout the NT and the Gospels in particular, these agricultural pictures are used to illustrate God at work.

The end result is not merely a bumper crop as the illustration suggests, but rather the “coming day”, the day of judgement or the day of the great resurrection. Whatever we call the end time, it is to be regarded as a day in which we give an account. Until that day, we should not be surprised nor complain about the reality of suffering for Christ. Thus, it is in the context of adversity that patience comes into its own as a virtue and comfort. This point links us to the story in Matthew 11 and John’s imprisonment with his concomitant apprehension as to Jesus’s legitimacy. So, we could say that Jesus would be encouraging John to patiently reflect on and consider the stories of healing, exorcism, and other remarkable signs of power, including raising the dead.

Preaching the Word

As always, for the perceptive preacher, there are many themes and ideas open to use from the texts. However, I want to encourage the preacher to consider the need for hearers to sense God’s presence in the here and now, in the act of worship they experience, of which the sermon is a vital part. Whatever else we may preach on, let there be, always, a signal focus on the person of God, ever present, in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. I draw attention to this because, as ever, there is a danger of falling into a religious, albeit Christian, moralism.

The Magnificat (Lk 1) is a wonderful piece of praise. It reminds us that God in God’s grace and purpose chose Mary to become the “God-bearer”. And “praise” as a theme in and of itself will be helpful in today’s milieu of superficial worship. Perhaps more important is a call here for preachers to remind congregants that Mary is more than the mother of God – she is the mother of Jesus, God incarnate. I say this because there is so much confusion about this matter. Those who are not Christian, whether secular, Islamic, or Jewish, find both Trinitarianism and Incarnation confusing, and even offensive. Now obviously we must live with such an offence, yet we need to explain as clearly as possible, in a rational way, what is really meant by Jesus being God’s Son, or the Incarnate God. Even within the Christian community

there is lack of clarity as to the difference between “mother of God” and “mother of Jesus”. Some may find this rather pedantic, but it is an important theological and biblical principle, which preachers really need to fathom and teach.

Related to this, James has a forceful reminder about “the coming day”, the time of reckoning, of giving account. Hard as this is, it needs heralding – gently if possible (extrovert or passionate preachers should be conscious of their penchant for dramatic expression and reign themselves in somewhat). Marry patience with urgency in this setting; the agricultural illustration is apt: patience in allowing the crop to grow but urgency in faithfully tending and nurturing the crop so as the natural elements can do their work.

Matthew’s story of John the Baptist, his question to Jesus, and the Saviour’s answer, has much fruit for the preacher. Concerns about the fulfilment of prophecy, of the promises of God in general, of the purposes of Jesus’s healing miracles and the value of his other signs, offer a multiplicity of themes. More subjective ideas emerge, like hope, despair, the faithfulness of God, is the call to ministry real when suffering injustice (drawn from John’s imprisonment), how do we understand John’s call to repentance when his work was cut short through imprisonment and execution? Obviously, some of these ideas will need contextualisation into the settings of particular congregations.

Finally, Isaiah offers much for the preacher, especially in the context of Advent. One could join joy and hope and even touch on or refer to the Peace and love from the other Advent foci. Perhaps a sermon on holiness – the concept and practice, using the Isaian metaphor.

Living the Word

We could begin here by considering justice: the unjust imprisonment of John. Clearly the concept of Law and Order was different in Matthew’s day. The king held absolute power; life and death were in his hands regardless of the rightness or wrongness of the matter. Are there evidences of such abuse of power in our settings? Has the church colluded with injustice or with other forms of wrong?

When we Christians speak of “holiness”, what are we talking about? Is it a Victorian hangover inherited from our forebears? What is our source for such an idea as “holiness”? Is holiness a purely negative construct, or are there positive features? We do need to quantify and qualify this carefully because legalism is ever at the door waiting to thrust its “holier-than-thou” nose towards others! Thus, I suggest, humility is a holy virtue we could consider. Taking Jesus as a model is helpful, I think. He lived in a way that was utterly free, considerate, and compassionate, bound by the moral tenets he gave to his people Israel, yet without the burden of narrow-mindedness or legalism.

While not one of our texts for today, Paul’s guidelines in Galatians 5, what he calls “the fruit of the Spirit” are vital spiritual virtues, and marks of true holiness. Gratitude without grovelling is a virtue of holiness. Another way of putting this is to learn to generate a mind-set of thankfulness. Ungrateful, resentful, embittered people are a drain on one’s emotions and often upset the balance of life. Equally

cynicism lends itself to a general outlook which is largely negative. Spiritual virtues combat these negatives and replace them (yes, with considerable hard work) with a more positive, spiritual, and God-conscious awareness of the gift of life.

Let the preacher model these virtues.

Word and Life for the 4th Sunday in Advent – 21 December 2025

James Harris

Texts

Isaiah 7:10–16
Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19
Romans 1:1–7
Matthew 1:18–25

Introduction

For some, this fourth Sunday in Advent celebrates “love” – the love God has for his creation and its creatures, broken as they are through sin and alienation. This love redeems and renews through the Incarnation of God in human form and in human history.

Hearing and Interpreting the Word

Even though Matthew 1:18–25 does not mention “love” as such, the idea is pronounced in the narrative. Joseph loves his betrothed, Mary, by refusing to disgrace her, nor separate from her once her pregnancy was revealed. Joseph was sensitive towards Mary by not engaging in sexual intimacy until after her child was born, and thus showing love. Joseph responded to God’s love by obeying the message through a dream concerning Mary, her child, and the divine purpose being outworked in their lives. Both Joseph and Mary were conscious of the amazing nature of prophecy being fulfilled in their own lives, and were awed by God’s love for them in choosing them for this unique purpose. The quotations from Isaiah remind us of the pledge of God’s love to the world – a God who would be present and would reveal the Divine purpose for our world.

It is interesting that in Matthew “salvation from sins” is an integral part of Jesus’ birth narrative and related to his name. “Save” is a comprehensive word, and includes ideas like redemption, deliverance, forgiveness, renewal, meaning, purpose, and a host of other related terms. There is a sense in which the modern church has emasculated this concept by squeezing it into the limited box of forgiveness and going to heaven. This idea could be expanded to include both “sin” and “sins”: the sin of unbelief and rejection of God, as well as the things we do, say, or leave undone, which are wrong, alienating, or even destructive.

Turning to Isaiah 7, we must note the historical setting. Ahab was king of Judah (874–852), whose territory was under siege by Syria and Israel (the northern kingdom). The prophet draws the king’s attention that human power is like “smoke”, ephemeral, and the power of cities or kings all are equal, having limits, simply and solely because God is sovereign and has a purpose for human history. Isaiah illustrates this limit by stating that by the time a woman has conceived, given birth, weaned, and raised a child to the age of discernment, the invading, sieging armies and their kings would be no more.

It is fascinating therefore, in this historical context, to note how Matthew uses Isa 7:14 to highlight the uniqueness of Jesus as the prophesied “Immanuel”. Whilst the issue of

“virgin birth” has become unnecessarily controversial, the real point is the unique manner of Jesus’ birth: through a remarkable intervention of God in actual human history and in the actual experience of a young woman. Just as in Isaiah’s time, significant changes in the fortunes of nations came about through God’s mysterious yet real intervention, so too with the in-breaking of the Messianic promise into human history. From beginning to end our texts show that God is not absent but very present in times of trouble.

Matthew’s use of Isaiah (and other NT writers who also use the OT), taking it completely out of its historical context, raise most interesting and important hermeneutical questions, if not serious problems. The main issue, surely, is the word “use”: how does the NT use the OT? Obviously, the NT uses the OT creatively and theologically. By this I suggest that the writers recognise the double meaning of some key texts: Isaiah 7:14 is one such. Perhaps the doctrine of inspiration should be brought to bear on this matter. To what degree can we claim legitimacy for an over-riding divine guidance in the use of Scripture and its Messianic interpretation? Our Lord himself, in Luke 24:27, took Scripture, then beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, showed Cleopas and his wife how they related to himself as Messiah. Thus there is a sense that when we read the OT and note how the NT uses it, we should accept the legitimacy of the interpretation. However, the problem occurs when, for instance, a writer uses a wrong name! Matthew is indeed the culprit here. In Mt 27:9–10 he attributes to Jeremiah a quotation that is actually in Zechariah (Zech 11:12–13). There are answers, of course, but let the interpreter be aware! My point is simply that biblical interpretation is a delicate and fine-edged practice. To be faithful to the text in preparation for proclamation is hard work.

The verses from Psalm 80 introduce us to yet another historical setting and another conflict. While there is nothing explicit in the text about the exact time, scholars suggest that the period of Assyrian ascendancy under Tiglath-Pileser III and Shalmeneser V (774 to 722 for both reigns) is the most likely. Of course, the historical setting could also be that of Isaiah.

The poem reflects an appeal to God for God’s personal intervention and leadership to bring an end to conflict and humiliation. Clearly the peoples’ prayers are unanswered and nothing but bitterness is the experience of life itself. The poet’s inclusion of the refrain “Restore us, O God of Hosts, show us the light of your countenance, and we will be saved”, is a telling indication of the heart-felt anguish of reality. As an aside, I think the RSV’s “... let your face shine ...” is much weaker and less powerful in terms of the prophetic meaning.

God’s intervention requires the choice of a particular person, one made strong in divine power (the right hand of God is always regarded as a hand of power or authority). If so led, the psalmist argues, there will not be, there cannot be, any turning away from the Lord. This statement is crucial, for it

reminds the reader that it is not the turning to other powers or armies, but to the Lord himself, in intimate relationship. This indicates that physical victory is not as important as devotional obedience to the one true God.

Paul begins his letter to the church in Rome, by reminding the believers that the Gospel is God's. This Gospel concerns Jesus, who is declared "the Son of God", through the resurrection from the dead. This Gospel was promised long before through the prophetic preaching and recorded in Holy Scripture. Paul gives no details as to which prophets he's talking about, nor exactly where in Scripture these references can be found, although later in the letter Paul refers to Abraham and the Law of Moses in particular, so Genesis, Exodus, and Deuteronomy are inferred.

Preaching the Word

From the Matthew passage the preacher can draw some exciting themes to speak on. One is the way the Isaian texts are interpreted, and how prophecy can be understood. Historical contexts can be illustrative – but not giving exact representation, for our own time.

Preaching on the virgin birth in the 21st century needs careful assessment. This theme should be set in its historical and cultural setting and not merely stated as a fundamental doctrine. Tease the idea out, show the relevance in terms of Isaiah's prophecy, and the theological meaning of incarnation.

The "blessing of obedience" illustrated by Mary and Joseph could be a rich and evocative sermon.

Just how "salvation" works and how it relates to the name of Jesus is an important matter, for it could clarify many confusing elements for hearers. Differentiating between "sin" and "sins" is equally critical, as it will help listeners realise that just dealing with "sins" is inadequate, since they emanate from the alienated state of unbelief ("sin")

Isaiah is valuable for sermons on God's sovereignty in history which can be drawn from this passage. Perhaps a provocative talk can be given on the fact that even though Ahab was one of the least faithful kings, Isaiah shows the faithfulness of God by fulfilling God's promises, both in history and in the Messianic message. For an "obedience" sermon, as it relates to Ahab's false piety in refusing to "test God", and his rejection to follow the prophetic invitation to "ask" of God (note the change from "ask" to "test" here [GNB]).

Psalms 80 is a very fruitful source for sermons on prayer, God's sovereignty, restoration, true intimacy, and related themes.

One of the ideas that can be fruitful for the preacher from Romans 1, is to discuss and to tease out just what Paul means by "the Gospel of God ... concerning Jesus, who by the resurrection was declared "Son of God". I think this is important because in the Gospel narratives the "good news" seems to be centred on Jesus as the presence of God in this world. Yet many evangelists, pastors, and others, regard the Gospel merely as going to heaven and having sins forgiven. Obviously, having our sins forgiven is valuable, and being with our Lord in glory is a wonderful hope and anticipation.

But is that all redemption is? Clearly, much more is included. Related to this is the question of what "obedience of faith" means? Such an idea can become a powerful sermon.

Paul states that Jesus was "declared son of God with power by the resurrection", and in vs 16 speaks of "the gospel which is the power of God for salvation". In other words, the power which raised Jesus, proving his Sonship, is the same as that which raises people from spiritual slumber or death through the proclamation of Jesus and his resurrection. I think it necessary to point out that "power" is a catch phrase that is grossly misused in many church circles. If the preacher plans on preaching on this topic, I appeal for careful evaluation and consider all the contexts in which the word is used.

Living the Word

Any ethical emphases drawn from the Matthew 1 text will have to be rooted in the obedience of both Mary and Joseph to the God who was so present in their lives. Also, Joseph can be seen as an exemplar for gentle, supportive, sensitive masculinity. Joseph is a model too of imaginative spirituality – accepting that dreams are used by God to communicate important directions.

Isaiah has its ethical implications rooted in its historical context. Obedience, honesty, true piety, hope, are all possibilities. Again, it becomes necessary to remind readers and preachers to contextualise carefully all reflection on ethical matters. Social patterns in both Testaments are different to our own, and yet while some moral tenets are the same, application and nuance should be considered.

Paul, in Romans 1, is clear that he received grace and apostolic calling through Jesus. Perhaps this is shorthand for his experience on the Damascus Road when he encountered Jesus in such a powerful manner, see Acts 9 for Luke's record and Paul's testimony.

Paul's reference to "the spirit of holiness" (vs 4) is a result of the power of God at work through the resurrection. But here "holiness" can include "righteousness" – the putting of life right by God's power. We are faced again with what Christian holiness or righteousness really is. Paul, I would suggest, is using this as shorthand for pleading with believers to recognise that Jesus is our example and exemplar in life as the ethical standard. His holiness or righteousness was not narrow or legalistic or fussy or weird. Jesus spoke the truth, lived compassionately, was connected daily with the God, and engaged simply but meaningfully with those around him. Jesus was not influenced by celebrity, fashion, or status. In the world of TV, movies, and 'fashionista' magazines, younger believers are prone to find guidance and inspiration there, rather than through the Scriptures and church. Pastors, priests, and other religious leaders (including parents) need to engage regularly and faithfully yet with sensitivity and a willing, listening ear to how our young people think today. Without throwing Scripture at searching youth, perhaps get them talking openly about their concerns and interests, then apply Scriptural principles to their concerns. Deal with the issues not the person. Sometimes the best form of love is listening, then to ask questions for clarity, and then, perhaps, give some directions.

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Introduction to the Season of Christmas – 2025

Introduction

In our annual celebration of Christmas congregations in their contexts develop appropriate patterns for worship that they are comfortable with. Influencing this are factors such as the location and context of the church premises, the mobility of the members, how and where they spend their holidays, and the number of visitors who join us in worship at this time.

Thus, different services may take place on particular days during the season, often using the same readings, hymns, carols and songs. The pattern could include:

- A service of readings and carols modelled on the traditional *Nine Lessons and Carols for Christmastide*
- A crib-building service on Christmas eve
- A midnight service on Christmas Eve
- Family services on Christmas Day
- Services on the Sundays after Christmas – this year there are two (28 December & 4 January) before the Feast of Epiphany.

The annual repetition of an established and cherished pattern can lead to a comfortable assumption that this is the only appropriate way to celebrate the feast of Christmas. Recognising that the world around us is constantly in flux, it may be helpful to assemble a small representative group from the congregation or parish to consider how best to reach out in witness and worship in serving the local community during this season.

Meaningful services of worship can be supplemented with carol singing in the community, and at homes for the aged and hospitals. Christmas meals, and flowers from the church to sick people can also open space for moments of worshipful presence in the community.

The Unique Character of the Season

The sharp focus during the months immediately before Christmas is on shopping for gifts, planning travel to holiday destinations, arranging menus for family meals, and taking care of the many other details that go hand in hand with what the commercial world has usually called the ‘Festive season’ and now, increasingly in a secularised world, the ‘Holiday season’.

The reality may be quite different for many people around us and perhaps more in line with what the Holy Family experienced long ago. Travel then was a hazardous, time-consuming and uncomfortable undertaking. Today it is speedy and usually comfortable, but perhaps even more dangerous, as is reflected in the usual high death toll on our roads at this time. Joseph and Mary were obliged to undertake their unwelcome journey to Bethlehem in the cold of winter. On arrival they were in desperate need of a safe and private place where she could give birth to the Child. Not long afterwards they were a refugee family, fleeing to Egypt to escape Herod’s cruel decree, before returning when it was safe to do so to their home in Nazareth.

Thus, some pertinent questions for a local congregation to face might be:

- who will go hungry on Christmas Day in our area?
- who will go hungry in the weeks that follow?
- who will be alone during the Festive Season?
- how do we welcome the visitors who come to worship with us especially those who are ill at ease and unfamiliar with what happens ‘in church’?
- How do we respond to the refugees who live near us or the homeless on our doorstep?

These are some of the uncomfortable questions that arise, and call for answers, if we are to be true to our understanding of the Nativity of the Lord and the call to offer worship that honours him.

Liturgy for Christmas Eve – 24 December 2025

David Sylvester

Introduction

Christmas is a joyful time for Christians and one of our major festivals. Advent and the season of waiting is over. The prophecies are fulfilled. Jesus Christ is born, and God assumed a human nature in this long-anticipated child who was truly God and truly human. Through his life, teaching, crucifixion, and resurrection Jesus conquered death bringing salvation and eternal life to all those who believe and trust in him. The season is white, the liturgy is joyful and as visitors, children, and entire multi-generational families are usually present the services should be inclusive to reach all on this holy day. Be mindful of the many bereaved, single, and lonely people who may find Christmas a difficult time due to absence of family and friends and try to draw them into the celebration meaningfully. The shopping is done, the meals prepared and now it is time to turn to God in praise and worship.

Texts

Isaiah 9:2–7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11–14

Luke 2:1–14, (15–20)

Gathering in God's name

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion: “your God reigns!” Isaiah 52 verse 7.

Call to worship

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.

Sing to the Lord **a new song**; sing to the Lord, all the earth.

Glory to God in the highest!

Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day.

Glory to God in the highest!

Ascribe to the Lord, all you families of nations, ascribe to the Lord **glory and strength**.

Glory to God in the highest!

Worship the Lord in the splendour of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.

Glory to God in the highest!

Act of Penitence

Jesus, you came into the world in obedience to God. You were born as the sacrifice to redeem us from our sin. You came to be our role model: to teach us how to live, how to serve, how to love, how to care, and how to share. To teach us how to interact with God our Father and with our neighbours. You were born to a working-class family living in a semi-urban area and not in a ruling class palace or the temple, as we might have expected. Your humble birth was announced with rejoicing in the heavens and with angelic fanfare to lowly people in society, the shepherds who represent the world – the marginalised, the oppressed, the poor and the hungry – and not to the ruling classes. Please help us to receive you in the same Spirit. We ask for help in being obedient to you and for forgiveness for our failings and pray that you open our lives to your light in our broken world. Give us the assurance of your grace, forgiveness, salvation, and healing.

Absolution or Assurance of Forgiveness

Almighty God, your Son Jesus Christ was born this happy night and was received with heavenly fanfare and earthly amazement. May we receive the Saviour, Jesus Christ, into our hearts. Almighty God, who forgives all that truly repent have mercy on us, pardon our sins and keep us in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Proclaiming the Word of God

Lord, your Word looks back at past events yet addresses our present times. The events of Christmas are timeless and have a major impact on our spirituality and our faith. Jesus, you are the light of the world, shine on us now and reveal yourself to us. May your Word come alive in our hearts through the working of the Holy Spirit, so that through the food of the Eucharist we may grow in holiness and in love for your people who we serve in your name. As we grow in holiness use us to shine as your light in this broken world and to serve as your feet, mouth, hands, arms to bring your Good News to all your people as we nourish them spiritually and share and feed them distributing the bounty that you have blessed us with. Amen

Prayer for Illumination

Almighty and Holy God, Word made flesh and light of the world, let us come to your word open to being surprised. Silence our agendas; banish our assumptions; cast out our casual detachment. Confound our expectations; clear the noise from our ears; penetrate the corners of our hearts with this word. We know that you can; we pray that you will; and we wait with great anticipation. Amen

Responding to the Word of God

Prayers that embrace the themes of our God of: humility, grace, restoration, comfort, joy, love, the nations, and the marginalised and oppressed can be offered to God through Jesus Christ your Son. Some congregations may wish to respond more specifically to the Word of God by hosting a community Christmas lunch; taking gifts to orphanages; arranging carol singing in old age homes; or visiting the sick and lonely to bring joy, peace, and the message of salvation to those who need it. Be mindful of the many bereaved, single, and lonely people who may find Christmas a difficult time due to absence of family and friends and try to draw them into the celebration meaningfully.

Celebrating at the table

Sharing of the Peace

Our Saviour, Jesus Christ, in the Prince of Peace; of the increase of his government there shall be no end. The mission of Jesus Christ and his church is to serve all peoples regardless of their government, ideology, place of residence, or status. At Christmas when we celebrate the birth of Christ, more than ever, we, the church, are called to look beyond human boundaries of nation, race, class, sex, political ideology, or economic reality and to proclaim the demands of social righteousness essential to peace. We remember your commandment to love one another as we love ourselves – and to show this love to the community.

The Peace of the Lord be with you.

Invitation to Communion

(This service may have people who are not regular church attenders, and they should be made to feel welcome and invited to share in the meal that Jesus offered freely to all.) During his earthly ministry, Jesus shared meals not just with his followers, but with sinners, the outcast, and many whom society deemed unacceptable. Holy Communion is a joyous act of thanksgiving when we receive the presence of Christ and trust the love of Christ present in us and in the world for the redemption of creation. Come and receive the gifts of God for the people of God.

Sending

The Song of Simeon (Nunc Dimittis)

Now, Lord, you let your servant go in peace: your word has been fulfilled.

My own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people;

A light to reveal you to all the nations and the glory of your people Israel.

Post communion Prayer

This Christmas Day loving God, you graciously feed us with the bread of life and the cup of eternal salvation. May we who have received this sacrament be strengthened in your service; we who have sung your praises tell of your glory and truth; we who have seen the greatness of your love see you face to face in your kingdom; in the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen

Amen

Sentence of Scripture

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.¹² It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age,¹³ while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ,¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

Benediction

May God who fulfilled God’s promise in the birth of God’s only Son Jesus Christ to conquer death and bring peace and salvation to humankind bless and keep you always in God’s abiding love. **Amen**

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- “Hark the herald Angles sing”
- “Joy to the World”
- “O come, all ye faithful”
- “O little town of Bethlehem”
- “Angels from the realms of Glory”

Word and Life for Christmas Eve – 24 December 2025

David Sylvester

Texts

Isaiah 9:2–7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11–14
Luke 2:1–14, (15–20)

Introduction

Do not allow the sentimentality, the commercialism, and the holiday mode of modern-day Christmas distract you from the real meaning of today: over two thousand years ago Jesus Christ was born. There is a place for the nativity plays and pageants, the Christmas Carols and even the commerciality of what is now called the ‘festive’ or ‘holiday’ season – but the message is very real and life transforming. It ushered in a new era of God calling back God’s people.

The liturgical colour for this season is white, the liturgy is joyful and as visitors, children, and entire multi-generational families are usually present the services should be inclusive to reach all on this holy day. Be mindful of the many bereaved, single, and lonely people who may find Christmas a difficult time due to absence of family and friends and try to draw them into the celebration meaningfully. The shopping is done, the meals prepared and now it is time to turn to God in praise and worship.

Hearing the Word

Isaiah 9:2–7

Isaiah was an 8th century BCE prophet and an important contributor to the Jewish and Christian Scriptures and traditions. His call to prophecy coincided with the westward expansion of the Assyrian Empire which threatened Israel, and which Isaiah proclaimed to be a warning from God to godless people. He became agonizingly aware of God’s need for a messenger to the people of Israel, and, despite his own sense of inadequacy, he offered himself for God’s service: *“Here am I! Send me.”* He was commissioned to give voice to the divine word. It was no light undertaking; he was to condemn his own people and watch the nation crumble and perish.

Much of the writing of Isaiah involves calamity, doom, darkness and anguish, but this a positive passage that begins: To us a Child is Born. *“Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who are in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honour Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along with the Jordan.”*

Isaiah was preaching and writing for the people of Israel at a time when they had hardened their hearts to God and were disobedient. The people of Israel all those generations later in Roman occupied Palestine shared many of the characteristics of their predecessors. Over the years God had sent many messengers to God’s people – angels to individuals and small groups; prophets to the nation; and kings when the

God’s people wanted to be ruled like other nations. Now the time had come to send a new kind of messenger to show the people of Israel how to be faithful to God.

Isaiah spoke to a people walking in darkness having been defeated by the Assyrian Army, but they will return to witness the arrival of a redeemer who will bring to the world the dawning of a new day. The geographical areas named in this passage were devastated when the Assyrian Army moved in, but these same areas would be honoured and restored by the birth of a child, born to be King. ‘For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given.’ Historically this could be read as King Hezekiah, who was one of the very few rulers who “did what was right in the sight of the LORD just as his ancestor David had done” (2 Kings 18:3). This quote speaks of a child already born, yet read by Christians as one still to come – in the person of Jesus Christ, who will live amongst us as God incarnate.

This passage has also been interpreted by Christians as looking to the second coming of Jesus and the establishment of his righteous Kingdom. Instead of protecting a small remnant of ‘chosen people’, God would enlarge the nation to include all people. Instead of experiencing sorrow, the people would rejoice like reapers after a great harvest, soldiers after a great victory, or prisoners (of war) after being released from the yoke of incarceration and bondage.

Some of this occurred when God defeated the Assyrians and delivered Jerusalem back to the people of Israel, but the ultimate fulfilment is still in the future: all military material will be destroyed because the nations will learn no more war (v 5). In verse 6, Isaiah declares both the humanity (‘A child is born’) and the deity (‘A Son is given’) of Jesus Christ.

Psalm 96

Some theologians believe that Psalm 96 was used in the dedication of the second temple, when the Jews returned to Judah and Jerusalem from their exile in Babylon. This would have been a very special occasion of great celebration. It proclaims that God is ‘the Lord Most High’ in heaven and on earth and has all things under God’s control. It is a joyful psalm (song) of praise and worship appropriate and befitting the celebration of Christmas (Eve) when we celebrate Jesus as God’s exalted King.

The psalm looks ahead to the Kingdom Age when the Messiah shall reign, and the gentile nations will worship the God of Israel. The psalmist gives four commandments to God’s people – sing, praise worship and rejoice. Sing (vv1–3) the good news and experience the blessings of God and a new beginning after a period of crisis for all people, including the gentiles, when Jesus reigns on earth and all nations worship him.

Praise! Our God is Great (vv 4–6). God is to be praised because he is the true and only God – worthy of praise, honour, and worship. The idols of the pagans are nothing. They are weak and worthless. Worship! The Lord is worthy!

(vv 7–9). The invitation goes out to all the world to come to God's sanctuary, bring a sacrifice, and worship God. Rejoice! The king is coming! (vv 10–13).

Titus 2:11–14

“For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.” Titus is a Greek Christian under the guidance of Paul. They are working for the unity of the Greek and Jewish Christians on the island of Crete and teaching the people to counter false doctrines. Paul, in this letter to Titus, contrasts faithful leaders with false teachers and leaders. In this brief passage we are reminded that humans cannot save ourselves – it is only the grace of God that redeems us. God's grace had to bring salvation to humankind. This salvation was not earned or discovered by us sinners. It was brought to us and given to us via the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This salvation is given freely to all who invite Jesus into their hearts and believe and have faith in Jesus – their reward is to receive salvation and eternal life. There is a universal need, and God provides the universal remedy for all those who will believe in Jesus Christ and accept him as Lord and Saviour of all – who was born on this Christmas evening to continue God's mission on earth.

Luke 2:1–14 (15–20)

Mary's time had come, her baby was about to be born. She was in a Bethlehem, and Joseph could find nowhere for them to stay. There was no room in the inn, but they were able to find shelter in a barn – that would have to do. The baby was coming at last, and Mary must have been in a real state, perhaps even terrified. No mother to assist her with the birth; no friends with all the baby shower gifts and comforts; no idea where the next meal was coming from; just lots of questions, uncertainties, and worries.

And the shepherds, too, were terrified. Like Mary and Joseph, they weren't sleeping inside that night: They were out in the fields, when suddenly this Angel of the Lord was confronting them, and this glory of the Lord was nearly blinding them, and this multitude from heaven was declaring peace on earth. There had not been peace for a long time; how was this baby lying in a manger going to bring peace now? It did not make sense.

We have heard this story before, and we are probably not terrified tonight, as Mary and the shepherds were. But maybe we should be, because if Christmas really comes, the way we say we want it to, things will have to change. The world will be reborn. The Kingdom of God will come on earth, as in heaven.

Still, like Mary, we have been waiting, and praying, and hoping for this night. When the Angel Gabriel told her she would bear God's Son into the world, Mary's response was, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Mary agreed to do this, despite the strange and unusual circumstances. She knew people would think the wrong thing and look down on her. She knew that Joseph might not understand. Even knowing how hard this would be, she said yes.

We also have a choice. We are not here merely to remember what happened so long ago on a cold night in Bethlehem. Like Mary, God is asking us: Will you bear Christ into the world? Will you carry Jesus in your heart?

Our road is different from Mary's, but it is challenging in its own way. A new baby always changes things. Your life is no longer your own. If you agree to let Jesus be born again tonight, your life will change, maybe in ways you do not expect. So be careful how you answer.

The Christmas story can so easily be lost under a sentimental blanket of snow, with cows gently lowing and stars brightly shining.

Interpreting the Word

Our readings today are selected for the festival of Christmas and reveal the love, caring, and grace of God and God's plan to offer us salvation which comes to fruition today with the birth of Jesus in humble circumstances. **Isaiah** is delivering God's word to the Hebrew nation at a time of great despair amidst military defeat. He reminds them that God is still with them and will deliver them from this position and restore them to the promised land. But he makes a much bigger promise than this, God is going to send a Messiah, the Saviour of the World, who will be born as a child and bring the good news of salvation for all the people of the world.

The psalm is a song of praise and worship to God that was written for the celebration of a very special historical occasion, and today we use it in our special celebration of the birth of Jesus. It calls for jubilation, joy, and rejoicing of our God as we ‘worship the Lord in the splendour of his holiness’. It proclaiming the salvation offered by God and God's righteousness judgement.

Paul contrasts true and false leaders in his letter to **Titus**. Humans do not have the capacity to save themselves from sin. This can only be done through the grace and sacrifice made by God of God's only Son, Jesus Christ. The series of events that led to the death of our Lord Jesus Christ began today with his birth in Bethlehem.

We believe that Luke, a companion of Paul, was writing for a predominantly gentile audience and depicts Jesus as deeply compassionate – caring for the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalised of his time such as Samaritans, Gentiles, women, and the poor. Luke's account of the birth of Christ is a rich account of the events that we celebrate at Christmas. It begins telling us Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the City of David, because of a Roman census which places the Hebrew nation under the yoke of foreign rulers. While in Bethlehem Jesus, the King and Saviour of the world, was born in very humble circumstances with great rejoicing in heaven and the announcement of the birth was given to shepherds, not as one might expect the religious and civic rulers of the Jewish nation. This good news continues to reverberate around the world today over two thousand years later.

Preaching the Word

All the readings today provide rich material for preaching and teaching. Key themes in Luke's account of the birth of Christ are the stark contrast between the pomp and power of the Roman Emperor and the humble and domestic setting of the birth of Jesus, his first visitors people of low social rank and importance. The humble circumstances of the birth of Jesus stands in stark contrast to the glorious predictions for the coming of the Messiah that we find in the Old Testament. This is partly why Jesus was rejected by most Jews. They were expecting, or put more simply, wanted, a warrior king, like king David, who would win back their freedom.

This is perhaps the paradox of the Gospel because God works in ways that are mysterious to humankind who did not expect, or even believe, that God would stoop down to become one of us and meet us in our lowly fallen humanity. We see here the 'unmerited grace of God' on which our salvation depends. The focus on Mary, an unmarried woman, is perhaps also unexpected and gives us the opportunity to explore the position of unmarried mothers in our harsh and unforgiving world in the light of God's selection of Mary to be the mother of Jesus. There is deep significance in this fact. It was not a random act, but the will of God and it must have important implications for our view on the matter.

Speaking of Mary, it could be interesting to consider that she was a young woman thrust into a prominent role. Just imagine for a moment what she must have been feeling, despite her encounter with the angel, Gabriel, that set all these events in motion. The social pressure of not being married; the reaction of her family, friends and the 'amazed onlookers'; her reaction to the accounts brought to her by the shepherds; the thrill of giving birth to her first born, a strong healthy baby boy that she knew was not really hers; and her concerns for the uncertain future. Here we find scope to explore the nature and happiness of family life; the wonderful celebration of the birth of children; and the glorious nature of our God that is so graphically portrayed in the other three readings that provide abundant material for a very uplifting message of the salvation offer by Jesus Christ this Christmas. It is our joy to show that the 'Good News' still speaks loudly in today's context despite secularisation of our society and the commercialisation of Christmas.

Living the Word

Psalm 96 provides us with the words of a new song to sing to the Lord rejoicing and praising God's name and proclaiming God's salvation. Isaiah gives us the confidence to trust and depend on God who is active in the world. He speaks honestly of the challenges that we face but gives confidence to those faithful to God. God is seen to protect God's people, but more than this, Isaiah points to the birth of the Messiah and of the age that is to follow. In Titus we read: "*For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.*" We are taught to reject ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled and godly lives in this present age. Jesus accepted the mission that God entrusted to him, with all the joy, but also the pain and suffering that it would entail. Jesus identified fully with the struggle of ordinary people and very importantly lived an exemplary life that we should strive to emulate. Nobody is excluded by from the love of God and the salvation offered by Jesus. It is ours to embrace this Christmas and every day of our lives. The fact that we are Christians should shine through our lives into this broken world and positively impact on all who interact with us.

Liturgy for Christmas Day – 25 December 2025

James Nicolson

Introduction

This Sunday is the climax of the Cycle of Light. Through Advent we have waited and longed for the light and now as Christmastide dawns we celebrate the light with us. In Epiphany this light of Christ reveals itself as the light of the world. On this day we celebrate the incarnation, God taking on flesh, in Jesus Christ. The light of Christ has come into the world. We must be sure that our prayers for today reflect the incarnational nature of God. The prayers are born into our reality, reflecting our world's real pain, its real suffering, its real needs. Be careful of over spiritualising this event. The texts speak of exile and oppression, the poor and dispossessed, those who wander without a welcome place of rest. The prayers reflect the texts set for today and are largely inspired by them.

Texts

Isaiah 62:6–12
Psalm 97
Titus 3:4–7
Luke 2:(1–7) 8–20

Gathering in God's name

Call to worship

Let us go, in heart and mind,
to see what has come to pass.

Let us go with the shepherds:
Let us go to find the Savior!

Let us go with the wise ones:
Let us go to find God's promise, born for us!

Let us go with the poor and humble:
Let us go to find our King, born in a lowly manger.

Let us go with all the world, with all the peoples of the nations.
**Come, let us worship; come, let us adore him:
Christ the Lord!**

~ from "The Gift of Joy: Isaiah 12"
posted on the Calvin Institute of
Christian Worship website. [http://
worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-
library/the-gift-of-joy-isaiah-12/](http://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/the-gift-of-joy-isaiah-12/)



Candle-lighting Litany for Christmas

After counting the weeks of Advent,
we have come to Christmas Day.
The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light,
those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light
has shined. (Isaiah 9:2)

(Four coloured candles are lit first and then the white
candle, then reading continues.)

The true light, which enlightens everyone,
was coming into the world. (John 1:9)
**And the Word became flesh and lived among us,
and we have seen his glory,
the glory as of a father's only son,
full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)**

– written by David Beswick, and posted on David
Beswick's Home Page.

Act of Penitence

Absolution or Assurance of Forgiveness

We were heavy with sorrow, but joy interrupted.
We were deep in the night, but a star appeared.
We were silent with sadness, but the heavens rang.
And the splendour shone around them
When the time had fully come.

We were hardened by conflict, but love intervened.
We were frightened by shadows, but light took them away.
We were haunted by fears, but a child brought us hope.
And she laid him in a manger
When the time had fully come.

We were dismal and defeated, but faith set us on fire.
We were weary and complaining, but our hearts discovered
praise.
We were doubtful and confused, but a door to life was
opened.
And the guiding star went before them
When the time had fully come.

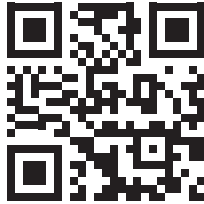
We were arrogant and angry, but his innocence disarmed us.
We were cruel, crude, and clumsy, but his grace made all
things new.
We were selfish, narrow, greedy, but his joy we had to share.
And they offered him their treasured gifts
When the time had fully come.

We were sheep who had lost their way, but the shepherd
knew our names.
We were strangers without a country, but our kingdom came
to us.

We were children far from home, but God sent his Son to guide.

And the Word was flesh among us
When the time had fully come.

~ written by Kenneth I. Morse, from
"In Straw and Story;" p.80, Brethren
Press, copyright 1977. Posted on
the **Long Green Valley Church of the
Brethren** website. <http://rockhay.tripod.com/>



Responding to the Word of God

Jesus Christ, born in a stable,
Be with the poor and homeless this Christmas time.
As we pray, live and give,
shine your everlasting light.
(silent prayer)

Jesus Christ, born of Mary,
Be with young mothers across the world this Christmas time.
As we pray, live and give,
shine your everlasting light.
(silent prayer)

Jesus Christ, visited by Shepherds,
Be with all who have to work this Christmas,
and those who long to work.
As we pray, live and give,
shine your everlasting light.
(silent prayer)

Jesus Christ,
who became a refugee,
Be with those who fear for their lives,
and those who have left homes and families this Christmas.
As we pray, live and give,
shine your everlasting light.
Amen.

~ written by Sam Hargreaves, and
posted on the EngageWorship website.
<http://engageworship.org/>



Celebrating at the table

Sharing of the Peace

May the peace of the Christ Child be with you,
And also with you.

Invitation to Communion

In these latter days, God leaned toward the earth
and spoke to us by a Son, Jesus the Beloved.
Born of our sister Mary and the Holy Spirit,
guarded by our brother Joseph with fatherly care,
Jesus came among us as a baby, humbly born,
cradled beside the beasts and warmed by their breath,
human as we are, in need of human love.
Yet kings bowed down before him, bringing gifts
and emperors were troubled by his reign –
this Child in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to
dwell.

This Word of God made flesh and full of grace
was sent to deliver us from our sin,
from the power of evil and the fear of death.
As a servant, Jesus emptied himself of might upon the cross,
and as the risen Anointed One is enthroned at God's right hand
to bring mercy and justice to all the earth at the end of days.

And so, rejoicing in all God has done for us,
we proclaim the mystery of our faith:
Christ has died.
Christ is risen.
Christ will come again!

Holy God, as you visited us in the birth of Jesus,
visit us now by the power of your Spirit
in these creatures of bread and wine,
making them for us the Body and Blood of Christ,
the banquet of heaven here on earth,
as we remember how Jesus took bread and blessed
and broke it and gave it to his friends, saying,
"Take, eat, This is my body, given for you.
Do this for the remembrance of me."
and after supper, took a cup of wine
and blessed and gave it to them, saying:
"Drink this, all of you.
This cup is the new covenant in my blood,
poured out for you and for many
for the forgiveness of sin.
Do this for the remembrance of me."
Blessed God, shed your grace brighter than starlight on us
that we may bear your good tidings to all
and renew the weary world in your name:
the name of Emmanuel – God-With-Us,
to whom we give honour and glory in joy, now and for ever.
Amen.

– written by Jennifer Phillips, at the time Vicar of St.
Augustine's Episcopal Church in Kingston, Rhode Island.
Posted on the Worship Well website.

Sending

Post communion Prayer

The child is born! Alleluia!
Our God has come among us!
Let the whole earth rejoice!
Let us leave the manger and return to our daily routines,
knowing that we have seen the Lord,
and glorifying and praising God
for all that we have heard and seen.

Alleluia! Our God is now here!
In the name of our God,
Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit,
we cry out with the angels in the heavens
and the shepherds in the fields:
Alleluia! Our God is now here!
Amen



Word and Life for Christmas Day – 25 December 2025

James Nicolson

Texts

Isaiah 62:6–12
Psalm 97
Titus 3:4–7
Luke 2:(1–7) 8–20

Introduction

This Sunday is the climax of the waiting and expectant season of Advent. We celebrate the incarnation, the taking on of flesh, in Jesus Christ. The texts for today encourage us to see this as a real flesh and blood moment. Be careful of over spiritualising this moment. It is an earthy story of birth, animals and a manger – all in the context of a real world. The texts speak of exile and oppression, the poor and dispossessed, refugees, those who wander without a welcome and secure place of abode. The story of the Gospel text should be allowed to speak for itself.

Hearing the Word

Isaiah 62:6–12

This passage speaks of the returning exiles (from Babylon). In their return to Jerusalem, they shall be restored. They shall no longer live in oppression. The crops that they harvest will be for themselves and not be for their oppressors. The sentinels who give the Lord no rest are probably the prophets. Salvation is coming (referred to as 'he'). This passage seems to speak both to those returning to Jerusalem and to the ones already in Jerusalem who must 'open the gates' for the returning exiles. Their reputation will be restored, and they will be admired among the nation.

Psalm 97

This psalm exalts the Lord as the one who come to reign over all as King. The Lord's entrance is dramatic (clouds and thick darkness). In describing the foundation of the Lord's throne as "righteousness and justice" the psalmist is affirming that the Lord has what is needed to restore God's people. The Lord's ways are right and just. Fire and lightning bring transformation. All see the King's glory. Those who look to idols will be disappointed. The righteous will be vindicated. This psalm has echoes of the ancient belief of a supreme deity defeating chaos to bring about order and prosperity.

Titus 3:4–7

One of Paul's main objectives in writing this letter is to promote and grow Christian character. He describes the former lives of Christians: foolish, disobedient (overcome by passions), and deceived (led astray). Paul then contrasts this with God as the one who is directed by "kindness" and "love". This kindness and love direct God's actions towards creation. God's love and kindness are revealed to us in the life and actions of Jesus (see 2:11). The fact that this appearance of love is mentioned after a description of our short fallings

is an indication that it is not merited by us in any way but is rather the gracious action of God's love and kindness. The washing of rebirth would refer to baptism. The renewal is a radical new order of living. Again, the grace of God is emphasised by the generosity implied by "poured out". Justification is the beginning the Christian life in the now as we find ourselves heirs of God's life.

Luke 2:(1–7) 8–20

Luke chapter two tells the story of God moving into humanity's life in a decisive way. At the beginning of this chapter, Luke seeks to place the birth of Jesus in a historical context. However, there are some difficulties in how he does this. Caesar Augustus was the Roman Emperor from 26 B.C. to A.D. 14. Quirinius was appointed governor in A.D. 6 and called for a census (a registration of the population) about two years after his appointment (approximately A.D. 8). Herod the Great is identified as being in power at the time of this unfolding story (*Luke 1:5*). We know that Herod the Great dies before Quirinius was appointed governor. It is difficult to match up the timeline and the result is that we are uncertain as to the exact year of Jesus' birth. In the face of the difficulties, we must not miss what Luke is seeking to do: he places the birth of Jesus in the midst of a real historical context, in the midst of a real humanity. Joseph, being a descendant of David would have been required to journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem (meaning: *House of Bread*) as this was the ancestral home of David's lineage. Mary and Joseph travelled together, and Mary was expecting the child, Jesus. In the context of a census the town would be filled to overflowing and there 'is no place in the Inn', so the holy family are wanderers with no secure, comfortable place for the child's birth. It seems that all that was left for them was to share a shelter with animals, which the manger (a feeding trough for animals) suggests. They follow the custom of the time of wrapping the baby in bands of cloth. Jesus, referred to as firstborn suggests that other children were born to Mary and Joseph in later years.

Some have taken the fact that the shepherds 'were living in the fields' to indicate a specific time of year but this is not so. Shepherds moved about looking for the best pasture in what could be dry and arid conditions. They were nomads, but when finding pasture, could camp for a while. For this they might carry tents but would often sleep under the open sky. We romanticise these shepherds, but they were community outcasts. Their nomadic lifestyle made people suspicious of their trustworthiness and integrity. The fact that they were excluded from the expected religious requirements (they could not leave the flocks unattended) led to them being despised. They were not even allowed to be witnesses in court. But here they are under the open sky, a place of revelation (*Psalms 19, 23*) where an angel (*angelos*: Greek meaning messenger) of God appears. It is an awesome moment, and the shepherds are filled with fear. In the birth stories fear is the most common response to God's revelation (*Zechariah in Luke 1:12 and Mary in Luke 1:29*). But, in the

face of our fear is the Gospel, meaning: “Good News”. What is this “Good News”? Here we see this “Good News” in a wandering, homeless couple giving birth to a child who is identified by three important titles: Saviour, Messiah and Lord. The title “Lord” is the same word used to translate God’s holy name from the Hebrew Bible into the Greek Septuagint. This Saviour, Messiah and Lord is the one born for each one, a personal Saviour (to you...vs 11). The host of heaven break out into what is known as the “*gloria in excelsis*” (highest glory). This is to offer God the highest praise. The shepherds rush to Bethlehem as they urge on another to “go and see” and find it just as they have been told. All who hear their story are amazed. Mary treasures all this in her heart. The shepherds return to their fields and sheep, offering God “highest glory”. What should our response be to this ‘Good News’? We go and see and are transformed into lives of highest glory!

Interpreting the Word

Isaiah 62:6–12

God is acting for our salvation and restoration. We are called to co-operate with this restoration (open the gates). In this restoration our dignity and freedom will be affirmed. Note again, it is interesting that this salvation is personified in the use of ‘He’. History is repeating itself in Jesus Christ.

Psalm 97

This is a dramatic picture of the Lord entering our lives and world. The Lord is the one who brings that which can restore us: righteousness and justice. If you look anywhere else, you will be disappointed. If you connected with the Lord’s righteousness and justice, you will be vindicated. Again, history is repeating itself in Jesus Christ.

Titus 3:4–7

This passage from Titus affirms the nature of God as loving, kind, and good. Our hope is in this love and goodness. Jesus among us reveals this nature of God. We fall short, but, thanks to God, this love, kindness and goodness flows from God despite our shortcomings. This offers us a radical new order of living.

Luke 2:(1–7) 8–20

As we hear this story, we need to let it speak to us. As we do this, God’s chosen orientation towards humanity becomes clear. God reaches into our real world with its real issues in love. It is a story from below. All of creation is involved in this drama. God’s reaching into the lives of those who are outcast, those who are wanderers, those who are homeless, those who are fearful. To them is brought the announcement of ‘Good News’. This “Good News” will bring about transformation, finding expression in, and giving God the ‘highest glory’.

Preaching the Word

Themes for preaching:

- 1) God will always come to our rescue. God will always enter our lives and world. In fact, God already has done so.
- 2) God’s nature is the antidote for our condition and shortcomings: loving, kind, good, righteous and just.
- 3) God reaches into our real world with its real issues. He touches the outcast, the refugee, the homeless, the fearful.
- 4) God coming into our lives and world is always “Good News”.
- 5) God’s coming to us is not merited by our condition, actions or achievements. It is an act demonstrating God’s love and care for us, an unconditional love (grace). Our lives are characterised by foolishness, disobedience and deception. Yet God’s love and kindness act on our behalf and in our best interests. It is generous beyond measure
- 6) In this loving action of God lies our hope. A hope that will transform us to make our lives express ‘highest glory’.
- 7) We must live lives of “go and see”.

Living the word

These stories are “Good News” – for our world and lives. In a world that reflects foolishness, disobedience and deception; in the world of the outcast, of despair, of feeling lost and alone, God is always coming to us. In a world that lacks justice, fairness, righteousness, belonging, love, kindness and goodness, these stories tell us that we have a powerful and able ally. One who hears our cry and this world’s cry. One who will not disappoint us, but will act in our real and ordinary lives, bringing transformation and ultimately “highest glory”. God is always announcing this “Good News” in our world. When we become aware of this announcement, in any call to the love, kindness, justice and righteousness of God, we must always “Go and see” like the shepherds did, and allow the journey to transform us, making us part of this “Good News” in our world.

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Word and Life for the 1st Sunday after Christmas – 28 December 2025

James Massey

Texts

Isaiah 63:7–9

Psalm 148

Hebrews 2:10–18

Matthew 2:13–23

Introduction

Having celebrated Christmas, we're now brought down with a bump. Following the birth there is anger and murder, weeping and wailing, moving and resettling. The Gospel reading especially tells us how closely Christmas is linked to Easter, how the joy of Christ's birth is tempered with the dread of Christ's death, and so how for all humanity light is accompanied by darkness. Together, our lectionary passages testify that even in such dark days, God is actively and lovingly working. So here is good news not only for comfortable people, but also for those who are experiencing the dark side of life. This good news is about God's continuing action in both our personal experiences of pain and loneliness, and in the often grim political and social context in which we are living.

Hearing the Word

As a brief preface, in order that you might best benefit from all that follows, let me share how I approach writing for Word and Worship. I'm very conscious that I can readily write simply from my own perspective: that of an eighty-year old, middle-class, white man. To balance and correct that, I re-read the complex history of how the Bible has been interpreted, from Jewish *halakah* and *haggadah*, to Jesus and Paul, to Origen's allegorising, to Augustine and Aquinas' preference (often insistence) on the literal meaning, to the Reformers and to the modern analytical methods of interpretation. As a further balance to my subjectivism, I try to stay aware that we live in times of unprecedented violence, and that much of the biblical commentary that people see (especially on the web) seems to carry reflections that violence. So, I do my best to express a 'hermeneutic of compassion' as a counter-narrative to all that.

Isaiah 63:7–9

This pericope dates from the early part of the Exile (587 – 538 BCE), as shown by the references to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 63:18 and 64:9–10 ("a wasteland ... burnt to the ground ... lying in ruins").

Verses 7–9 testify to what God has done in the past and ascribe those actions to God's *hesed* (v.7). It expresses God's loyal love, God's unchanging and undeserved activity in reaching out to humanity. Look at the context in which this *hesed* is offered: verse 10 shows how God's people "rebelled", and how God was "vexed" and became their "enemy". Here "they rebelled" (*maru*) expresses how serious this is: violent and open resistance to established authority, defiance and disobedience. We tend to limit this "sin" to acts which

involve our bodies, but the textual context makes it clear that "sin" also expresses itself in social rebellion – in greed, corruption, lust for power – and timid failure to challenge those social, public acts. The root word for this rebellion is *mara*, to be bitter or to cause bitterness.

Psalm 148

This is a cosmic hymn of praise. Heaven, earth and all creation are called together to praise God, who is full of saving mercy, who restores the chosen people (v.14) and "heightens their strength". God "raises a horn for them (*wayarim keren*)", where "horn" symbolises an aura of power, a source of radiant strength.

Hebrews 2:10–18

Hebrews is perhaps best understood as an early Christian commentary on the book of Leviticus. It works out a Christian response to the central question of Leviticus: "How can unholy humans approach the holy God?" Leviticus offers the way of sacrifice, whereby people give up something that is very precious to them, and God responds with forgiveness, with rescuing grace, so that there is restoration of the Covenant relationship. And the sacrifices are facilitated by priests, who function as the bridge between people and God.

The book of Hebrews claims that all of this has been fulfilled, completed in Jesus, the Son of God. He has made the perfect, complete sacrifice to end all sacrifices (chapter 10), and he is the perfect Priest who makes all other bridges redundant (chapters 3 – 9). Hebrews claims that Jesus Christ has achieved all that is ever needed to restore our relationship with God. Christ is the mediator of a completely new Covenant (chapters 8 and 9).

From the start, Hebrews categorically declares the full divinity of Jesus Christ. Here in chapter 2, the full humanity of Jesus is asserted: "he shared equally the same human nature as us" (2:14). So, it is by Jesus' suffering that our relationship with God can be restored (v.17). And it is by that same suffering that we are helped in our dark times (v.18).

Hebrews testifies to what God has done in the Incarnation. Here is a confirmation of the central truth of the Isaiah message: despite our rebellion and weakness, God has acted decisively and mercifully to save us from the consequences of our sin.

Matthew 2:13–23

In chapters 1 and 2, Matthew focuses on the identity of Jesus. In chapter 2 he relates Jesus to Moses in both suffering and deliverance, clearly to show the Christian community the fulfilment that has come through Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection. In this lectionary reading, Matthew shows us the depths of human sin and rebellion, and the mercy of God's actions.

A study of Matthew seeks to show the parallels between the stories of Moses (in Exodus chapters 1 – 4) and Jesus: Egypt

constructed the ultimate system of top-down power. Pharaoh was god and the priests enforced his power. The Israelites had known nothing else for four hundred years. Moses had to bring them from dependence on a false saviour to faith in a God who was compassionate, always acting in love. They had to understand the inner meaning of the decree of death, the slaughter of innocent children and the assumption of absolute power. So Matthew shows the Christian community who Jesus is by presenting Jesus as a New Moses, one who is associated with suffering and death, and yet is preserved by the gracious actions of God.

Herod the tyrant had already killed his wife, her mother, and three of his own sons. He hears from the wise men that this child might be the Messiah, the long-promised King of Israel. He is so threatened by this that he kills every baby boy in Bethlehem. In this narrative, Matthew points the Christian community both backwards to the past and forwards to the future as we seek to understand who Jesus is. The Christians of Matthew's time would have related instantly to all of this. Today we usually must work quite hard to see these connections and the implications.

In this way Matthew teaches what Luke teaches by means of the prophetic words of Simeon to Mary: *A sword will pierce your soul too* – Luke 2:34. Matthew uses the traditions around Moses to show us that just as God was at work through Moses in the desperate situation of slavery in Egypt, even more so was God at work in Jesus in this situation of horror and cruelty.

Interpreting the Word

Perhaps a case study might be the best way to contextualise all this exegesis. Nuraan Davids (in her book *Out of Place*) tells how her choosing to wear the hijab still causes her to be held in suspicion everywhere. She is searched and intimidated at airports around the world. She climaxes her story by telling how she was passed over for promotion at Stellenbosch University, even though at every level she was rated as the top candidate – she is literally 'Out of Place' in her own country. The lectionary readings tell us how Jesus, too, was 'out of place'. He was a refugee, an experience that foreshadowed his crucifixion. So it is that people suffer badly because tough tyrants apply unfair policies irrationally. Here's how, ultimately, babies are killed, and Palestinians are bombed and starved into submission. As I write this, the newly-installed President of the USA suggested that his country take over the Gaza Strip and deport 1.5 million Palestinian people. Everywhere and always, the Pharaohs and Herods of this world want to pretend that they are gods – to intimidate small people by acts of power and terror. This is the context in which we must do our interpretation.

Isaiah 63.7–9:

The Isaiah passage expresses how God experiences and responds to our wilful sin and rebellion. It is bitter, unacceptable, and sour-smelling. It "grieves" God. We would say, "It grieves the Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 4:30). So God "wages war" on sin (63:10).

But the Isaiah passage equally dramatically shows how powerful is God's saving, forgiving, rescuing *hesed*. 64:3 expresses this: "no ear has heard, no eye has seen any god

but you act like this". Central, then, to the hermeneutic of all our lectionary passages today is this theme of God's holiness, and God's love as God acts concretely in history to rescue and deliver humanity, no matter how desperate those historical situations might be.

Psalm 148

This Psalm bears witness to the cosmic reach of God's redemptive grace. The song of the "heavenly hosts" (vv 1–6) is joined by earthly choirs (vv 7–10), and then by human voices (vv 11ff). The hermeneutical significance is that God's saving actions extend to and influence everything that is.

Hebrews 2:10–18

Here there is a further daring testimony: Hebrews claims that what is true of Jesus is also and always true of God. Just as Jesus became vulnerable to our human actions, so God must also be affected by what we do. There is real "bitterness" for God, just as there was (and still is) for Jesus. And the good news is that our repentance actually pleases God. God responds in mercy in precisely the same way that Jesus did (and still does). And then comes the climax of this passage: *For the suffering Jesus himself passed through while being put to the test enabled him to help others when they are being put to the test (v 18)*. In this way the book of Hebrews draws us further in this post-Christmas time towards the seasons of Easter and Pentecost and the work of the Holy Spirit, who strengthens and empowers us, especially in the dark times.

Matthew 2:13–23

In this condensed and dramatic narrative Matthew shows us how lethal unredeemed human nature can be, and how seemingly powerful and untouchable are those who do these horrific, politically expedient deeds.

And yet the narrative goes on to say that within a few short years, Herod the Great is Herod the dead. And God yet again acts directly to call Jacob and Mary and the child back to their homeland. Our gospel passage again lays before us the glory and completeness of what God achieved in sending Jesus, the Son of God. Yes, there would be suffering. There would be the humiliation and sacrifice and the bloody death given by Rome's political power to a condemned criminal. And Jesus' followers would be bewildered and scattered. But here and throughout his gospel, Matthew gives testimony that God would always be taking action, even – and especially – in times of devastation and desperation and death.

Preaching the Word

In virtually every one of our congregations there are displaced people and refugees. And there will be many who have suffered because the 'powers' have made proclamations and pretensions. Many families are bereft and grieving because loved ones have had to go to the other side of the world to find jobs. (I was speaking to a 70-year old granny who is working in a cruise ship for that very reason. And my own beloved daughter has gone to the UK for the same sort of reasons as Nuraan Davids). And world-wide there are no less than 10 million refugees, 13 million internally displaced persons and 6 million stateless people. (www.unhcr.org).

So what will all our exegesis and interpretation and fine preaching say to such people?

Firstly, of course, we must proclaim the good news of what God has achieved in sending Jesus Christ. We seem to forget as preachers that we are not offering good advice or laying out rules or laws or even guidelines about how people should live. Advice itself can never give people the power to overcome years of habit and selfishness and sin. Only God can give that power.

Our first task is to declare what God has done, and how it has changed the course of history for all humanity. The Church's claim from the start has been that what God did in the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus objectively changed history

A specific theme could be that God has always worked and is always working in history to make this new life accessible and effective for every person on earth. This is especially relevant where people are in personal distress, or in difficult political or social circumstances – or both.

Given the orientation of the readings against tyranny, another theme might be the role of the Church in identifying and resisting that. There are always plenty of examples close at hand in the particular communities we are ministering to, from political corruption (causing diversion of much needed funds and poor local service delivery), to family breakdown (abuse of women, rampant murder of little children), to social disintegration (gang violence, gratuitous murder, highjacking), to educational issues (underfunded schools and teaching shortcomings). The list is endless. We simply need to locate our declaration of the good news in the real, experienced context of the community where we are ministering.

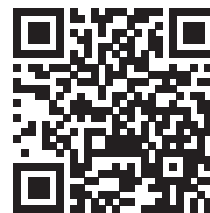
Living the Word

Engagement with the communities in which the congregation(s) live might centre on forced moves: the elderly whose health or financial situation forces them to move from their home place; the young whose jobs and transfers force them to move from town to town; the expanding families who need to find larger housing. The Church could initiate programmes which help wider communities understand and care for refugees and displaced people.

Liturgical suggestions

Prayers

(The following and more at <https://sacredise.com/liturgies/> by John van der Laar)



O God, who is always on the side of those
who are broken and suffering,
Wherever the powerful, the wealthy
the most resourced and most connected
exploit, betray or ignore those who suffer;
And wherever the least, the most vulnerable,
the poorest and weakest,
the most neglected and ignored,
lift up their cry to you;
And whenever we join our voices with these suffering ones
to pray for healing, justice, restoration and peace,
Great God of mercy and compassion,
Hear our cry...

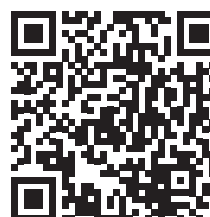
Sending out

Enter the New Year with expectation. There is nothing that God is not prepared for, and nothing that can outwit the ingenuity of divine grace.

Suggested Songs/Hymns

“The tyrant issues his decree” (Church Hymnary 330)

A voice was heard in Ramah http://www.carolynshymns.com/a_voice_was_heard_in_ramah.html



Word and Life for the 2nd Sunday after Christmas – 4 January 2026

David Sylvester

Texts

Jeremiah 31:7–14 or Sirach 24:1–12
Psalm 147:12–20 or Wisdom of Solomon. 10:15–21
Ephesians 1:3–14
John 1:(1–9), 10–18

Introduction

The days after Christmas Day until the Epiphany traditionally form a unity of days of special thanksgiving. Many congregations will probably choose to celebrate the Epiphany today rather than on Monday tomorrow

Hearing the Word

Jeremiah 31:7–14

This passage represents a strikingly positive and hopeful tone that is found throughout chapters 30 to 33 that represent a radical departure from his otherwise overwhelmingly gloomy message. This section is some time called ‘The Triumph of Divine Redemption’ or the ‘Book of Consolation’ It prophesies a future restoration and reunion of the exiled Israelites, offering hope and comfort with promises of a safe return, a flourishing land, and God’s unwavering love and care.

Key Themes and Exegesis

- **God’s Unwavering Love and Covenant Faithfulness**

The passage emphasizes God’s enduring love and faithfulness to God’s covenant with Israel, even after their exile and suffering.

- **Restoration and Return**

God promises to gather the scattered remnant of Israel from the farthest lands and bring them back to their homeland, a place of abundance and peace. The imagery in verse 9 is very much along the lines of a shepherd and his flock of sheep.

- **Inclusivity and Compassion**

The return will include even the most vulnerable, such as the blind, the lame, pregnant women, and those in labour, demonstrating God’s compassion and care for all God’s people.

- **Imagery of a Flourishing Land**

The land will be restored to its former glory, with streams of water, a level path, and an abundance of grain, wine, and oil, symbolizing a time of prosperity and joy.

- **Rejoicing and Celebration**

The return is described as a time of rejoicing and celebration, with the people singing and shouting for joy, and the young women dancing and the young men and old men merry.

- **God as a Nurturing Parent**

The passage uses the imagery of God as a father who cares for God’s children, demonstrating God’s love and concern for God’s people.

- **Hope for the Future**

The passage offers hope for a future beyond exile, where the people can live in peace and prosperity, and where God’s covenant love will be fully realised.

Sirach 24:1–12

To give some context to the Book of Sirach which may not be familiar to all preachers here is a brief explanation. The Book of Sirach is found in the Apocrypha which is a collection of twelve biblical books that are included in the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican canons that bridge the gap, or missing years (200 BCE to AD 90), between the Old and New Testaments but are excluded from the Protestant canon. They are often considered “hidden” or “of dubious authority” and were originally written in Greek and were part of the Septuagint, an ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, but were not included in the Hebrew Bible.

Sirach 24:1–12, titled “The Praise of Wisdom,” presents Wisdom as a personification, praising herself and her glory among God’s people, emphasizing her divine origin and role in creation, dwelling in high places amongst God’s chosen people Israel, and seeking a resting place in Israel, and highlighting her role as a gift from God to humanity.

The objective of Sirach is to demonstrate to Jews and Gentiles that wisdom comes from God and not Athens or Jerusalem. God is the source of all wisdom and God gives wisdom to all whom seek it, Jews and Gentiles alike. The Purpose of Sirach 24 is to draw us into a loving relationship with the Holy Spirit from which we gain wisdom, understanding and knowledge; and to get us to delight in seeking her – Wisdom that is often thought of as the Holy Spirit.

It is important to understand that Wisdom is never portrayed as a separate entity, but as a manifestation of God’s own attributes, particularly God’s power, wisdom, and compassion.

Psalm 147:12–20

This Psalm is a hymn of praise. The Greek Old Testament, known as the Septuagint, designated our verses today, 12 to 20 as a separate psalm. It highlights the unique blessings enjoyed by the nation of Israel because of its divinely established covenant with God – national protection, symbolised by the strong defences of Jerusalem, the peacefulness of its borders, agricultural abundance, and knowledge of God’s laws. What God’s reveals in the Law is simply the right way to live in the creation that God made and maintains with such splendour and majesty. Who knows this creation better than the Creator?

Wisdom of Solomon 10:15–21

The Wisdom of Solomon is another book found in the Apocrypha (see the notes on Sirach above). It is important to understand that Wisdom is never portrayed as a separate entity, but as a manifestation of God's own attributes, particularly God's power, wisdom, and compassion.

Wisdom 10:15–21 recounts how God, through Wisdom, delivered a holy people from oppressors, empowering a servant to stand against kings, guiding them through trials, and ultimately drowning their enemies, emphasizing God's power and care for God's people. Wisdom is seen here as the agent of God's intervention rescuing God's people from an oppressor; empowering individuals to oppose injustice and tyranny; not only delivering from hardship, but providing direction, purpose, protection, care and guidance. The theological significance of this passage is that it emphasizes God's faithfulness and God's ability to guide and protect God's people, even in the face of adversity. It also highlights the importance of seeking wisdom and trusting in God's guidance. This section of Wisdom draws parallels with the biblical narrative of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, emphasizing God's miraculous intervention and deliverance.

Ephesians 1:3–14

This is a powerful passage declaring God's grace and plan for believers, emphasizing that we are chosen, redeemed, and sealed with the Holy Spirit for a life of praise and inheritance in Christ, all from God's eternal grace and purpose. In introducing himself to an ethnically mixed, but predominantly Gentile audience, most of whom he has probably never met, Paul identifies himself solely in terms of his apostleship to Christ. His signature greeting, "Grace and Peace," strike a chord with both Gentile and Jewish Christians. Paul celebrates God's grace, God's salvation for eternal life as initiated by God's extravagant grace, which humankind does not deserve, but which is a gift and spiritual blessing from God, mediated by the redemptive self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and guaranteed by the gift of the Holy Spirit to believers. Key themes and concepts in the passage are: we are blessed in Christ; that we were chosen before creation; that God predestined us for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ; that God has made known to us the mystery of God's will; and that we are sealed with the Holy Spirit.

John 1:(1–9), 10–18

The prologue, introduction or preface, to John is arguably the most important passage in the entire Gospel. It opens the core symbols and central themes that provide the key to the meaning of the Gospel right at the outset. Unlike the characters in the narrative, we as readers know the truth about Jesus in a way that they do not. Practically every section of the Gospel can be headed with a phrase or verse symbol from the prologue because it so succinctly sums up the Gospel message.

John 1:1–18, a foundational passage in the Gospel of John, presents Jesus as the eternal "Word" (Logos), co-existing with God, the source of life and light, and the revealer of God to humanity, ultimately becoming flesh and dwelling among us. In contrast to Matthew and Luke who begin their

Gospels by recounting the miraculous conception and birth of Jesus, John begins with a reference to the pre-existence of God and Jesus. *"1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made."* As the divine Word, present with and distinct from God the Father, the Word served as the agent of creation and source of both physical and spiritual life. Verses 6 to 8 and 15 summarise the role and ministry of John the Baptist as a witness to the light of Jesus Christ, whom the world nevertheless failed to comprehend or recognise.

Interpreting the Word

Our readings today give us the assurance that we are not alone in this world. God is always with us, and we are constantly the recipients of God's help through Jesus, the living Word, and the Holy Spirit, 'Wisdom'.

The readings are rich in themes: God's unwavering love; restoration and return; inclusivity, compassion and provision; hope for the future; God as a nurturing parent; being rescued from injustice, tyranny and oppression; and rejoicing and celebration. Key themes in the readings are that: we are blessed in Christ; that we were chosen before creation; that God predestined us for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ; that God has made known to us the mystery of God's will; and that we are sealed with the Holy Spirit.

God is the creator of the universe and of humankind and is active in the world taking an interest in each of us. All believers are invited to invite Jesus into our hearts and enjoy a righteous relationship with God that has been made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Preaching the Word

We live in an increasingly secular world dominated by a desire for possessions and position. We aspire for the pleasures of this world, rather than having faith in God and depending on God. In South Africa we have many people who live on the margins of life, without access to land or the ability to earn a living for themselves and provide for their families. The scars of Apartheid run deep; the broken promises of service delivery cause anxiety and resentment; grinding poverty destroys self-esteem and confidence; continual disappointments and unemployment fuel escapist alternatives as the youth turn to gangsterism and violence in their desperation and the older generation to alcoholism and despair in response to their hopeless state.

We are preaching to people longing for a message of love for themselves and forgiveness and generosity from others. Our readings provide a solid foundation for preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ which will resonate with our people in their distress.

Living the Word

Living the word has many facets. We need to show that, as ministers and Christians, the light of Jesus shines through us. It can be in the small things like assisting with a soup kitchen or feeding programme; giving some money or food to people standing on the road at traffic lights looking for work or assistance; supporting NGOs with our time and resources; often just a kind word in a queue in a hospital, shop, or SASA office. We understand that God does provide, but that provision often comes from we Christians – those who emulate and follow Jesus. Nothing is accomplished through inertia, so it is imperative to start making those small steps towards helping others in ways that we can.

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Introduction to the Season of Epiphany – 2026

The Feast of the Epiphany is the oldest of the Christian festivals and originally the most important. Epiphany is celebrated 12 days after Christmas on 6th January (or January 19th for some Orthodox Churches who have Christmas on 7th January). It points to the epiphany, or theophany, the manifestation, or the revelation of God to the world in Jesus Christ. The word ‘epiphany’ derives from the Greek word ἐπιφάνεια meaning ‘shining forth’ or ‘manifestation’ or ‘revelation’.

In the ancient Greco-Roman world an epiphany referred to the appearance to mortals of one of the gods. As Hellenistic kings and Roman emperors were often regarded as gods, the term ‘epiphany’ was also used as a term for ‘divine majesty’. The Christian use of the word when referring to the Epiphany of our Lord points to the many ways in which Jesus was revealed to the world as Christ, as God incarnate, and as King of kings. This revelation has come through signs, miracles and proclamations.

Christmas Day has come to overshadow 6 January in the Western Church, with Christmas being a united feast embracing all elements of the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus, including the visit of the Magi. Only in recent times have liturgical revisions in the West built the theme of the baptism of Jesus into its Epiphany-tide celebrations in the choice of Gospel lections for the first Sunday after the Epiphany.

The date of 6 January will obviously most often fall on a weekday. As a consequence the Feast of the Epiphany may be observed on the preceding Sunday. The feast day is followed by a liturgical season that lasts until the beginning of Lent and reaches its climax on the final Sunday of that Season with a possible focus on the Transfiguration of our Lord. The Epiphany season may encompass between four and nine Sundays, depending on the date of Easter.

During the Epiphany season the Church has traditionally commemorated three particular incidents: the visit of the Magi (Matthew 2:1–12), the baptism of Jesus (Mark 1:9–12), and the miracle at Cana (John 2:1–11). The last of these appears only in the Year C readings. Nowadays most liturgical Churches emphasize the visit of the Magi on 6

January or the preceding Sunday, and mark the baptism of Christ on the first Sunday of the Epiphany season

The scriptural passage Matthew 2:1–12 is read at the Feast of Epiphany in each of the three RCL

“The Season after Epiphany is bookended by the Baptism of the Lord (first Sunday after Epiphany) and Transfiguration (last Sunday after Epiphany).”
Burton Edward

years. It tells the story of the mysterious visitors from the East, an account that is unique to this Gospel.

In Year A of the RCL the Gospel readings for the Epiphany season are drawn principally from Matthew.

During the other weeks of this season, the reading from the Hebrew Bible is chosen to correspond to the Gospel reading, and the Epistle reading is semi-continuous (a series

of readings from the same book). The Epistle reading is intentionally not related to the other readings.

Burton Edwards notes the two distinct tracks of readings that are offered for the bulk of the Season - Hebrew Bible/Gospel as one, Epistle as the other. “*In this way the Revised Common Lectionary helps worship planners, pastors, and discipleship leaders hone in on what the congregation needs most to get ready for its Lenten work*”. The Hebrew Bible/Gospel track focuses on Jesus calling his disciples and inviting others to hear the good news of God’s kingdom drawn near. The Epistle track focuses on selections of one of Paul’s letters that address significant points of challenge or struggle in the early Christian communities he nurtured.

On the Feast of Epiphany, Matthew 2:1–12 tells how Magi following a star travelled from the East in search of the child they believed was to be born ‘king of the Jews’. This opens up a whole new understanding of God’s vision. The implication is that this child is born to be King for all peoples. The ‘one born to be King’ will attract seekers from well beyond the traditional Jewish boundaries to welcome them into God’s plan for all humankind.

The last Sunday of Epiphany we are told how Jesus was seen by some of his disciples in a glorious blaze of light pointing to his greater identity and his significant place in the unfolding purpose of God for the salvation of the world. Here, too, is heard the voice from heaven affirming Jesus: ‘This is my own dear Son; listen to him!’ (v 7).

Thus at both the beginning and the end of the Epiphany Season we read how Jesus was affirmed by the voice from heaven. All the world is called to listen to him.

The Feast of the Presentation occurs on 2 February during the Epiphany Season. It marks the fortieth day since the birth of Jesus, when Joseph and Mary take him to the Temple in Jerusalem to observe the Law’s requirements both for their own purification and for their first-born son’s presentation as belonging to God.

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Basic Liturgy for the Season of Epiphany

Introduction to the Season of Epiphany

The Feast of the Epiphany is celebrated on 6 January and will most often occur on a weekday. Thus it could be observed on the previous Sunday, 4 January 2026 rather than on the first Sunday after Epiphany (January 11) when the baptism of Christ is the focus.. Users of this book should consult the Introduction to the Season of Epiphany for more detail regarding this season.

Liturgical Features for the Season

The Liturgical colour for Epiphany

The options for the Season are white and green.

If a *Season* of Epiphany is observed, it would extend from the Feast of Epiphany to the Feast of the Presentation on 2 February. To mark this approach, the liturgical colour would remain white throughout the period. After The Feast of the Presentation the liturgical colour would be green until the final Sunday before Ash Wednesday (11 February in 2024), which is Transfiguration Sunday, when the liturgical colour is white.

The Feasts and Special Days during the Season

- The Feast of Epiphany (Tuesday 6 January 2026), for which a liturgy as well as preaching material is provided.
- The Baptism of Christ (11 January 2026) is the first Sunday after the Epiphany and is dealt with in the same way as other Sundays of the year, with provision of some liturgical suggestions in the *Word and Life* pages.
- The Presentation in the Temple (2 February 2026) for which liturgical and preaching material is provided, as for all major Feast Days of the year.
- Transfiguration Sunday (15 February 2026), which is also Epiphany 6 and the Last Sunday before Lent. Provision is made for both emphases in this volume.

Decorations

The Christmas crib, or nativity scene, is traditionally left in churches until Candlemas, which falls on February 2nd. In this approach it makes sense to process the Magi to the Crib on 6 January, or the Sunday on which the Epiphany is celebrated. It might be appropriate to remove the shepherds at that time as the two groups were probably not there together.

It would then make sense to process all of the remaining figures out of the church at the end of the service on 2 February or the Sunday on which the Presentation is celebrated.

Symbols of the Season

In some traditions candles continue to provide symbolism as they have done throughout the Christmas Season. But this, too, is inherited from the northern hemisphere, where it would still be dark through February. In the southern

hemisphere we continue to enjoy long, warm days. The Feast of the Presentation is also referred to as Candlemas, which might be a reminder of the words of Simeon set for that day in the lectionary, ‘... my eyes have seen your salvation, ... a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel’ (Luke 2:30–32).

A Basic Liturgy for the Season

Gathering in God’s name

Call to worship (based on Isaiah 60:1-2)

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD is risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Prayer of Invocation

Eternal God,
by the shining of a star you guided the Magi
to behold your Son, our Lord;
show us your heavenly light,
and give us grace to follow until we find him,
and, finding him, to rejoice.
As they presented precious gifts,
may we now bring him the offering of a loving heart,
an adoring spirit, and an obedient will,
to his honour, and for your glory.
Amen

Invitation to Confession

The grace of God has dawned upon the world through our Saviour Jesus Christ.

He comes to be the Light to the nations,
and to save people from their sins.

With confidence in the grace of Christ, let us confess our sins.

God of all mercy,
we confess that we have sinned against you,
we have opposed your will in our lives.
We have refused to see your image in each other.
We have denied that this is your world and not ours.
We repent of the evil that enslaves us,
the evil we have done,
and the evil done on our behalf.
Forgive, restore and strengthen us
through our Saviour Jesus Christ,
that we may abide in your love
and serve only your will and purposes;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

If desired a familiar form of Confession may be used instead.

Assurance of Pardon

The true light that gives light to everyone
has come into the world.
To all who receive him,
he gives power to become children of God.
This is Christ's gracious word:

'Your sins are forgiven.'

Amen. Thanks be to God.

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer for illumination

God of light and life,
open our eyes and our ears,
that we may not only hear your Word proclaimed today
but also faithfully live by it in your world every day.
This we ask through Christ our Lord,
the Light of the world.

Amen.

The readings for the day.

The sermon.

The intercessions.

Celebrating at the Table

Sharing the Peace (from Ephesians 2:17)

[Christ] came and proclaimed peace
to you who were far off,
and peace to those who were near.
The peace of the Lord be with you always.

Peace be with you.

Great Prayer of Thanksgiving

Use the familiar form for your denomination.

Sending out the People of God

Benediction/Dismissal

May he, who by his incarnation
gathered into one things earthly and heavenly,
fill *your/our* lives with his light and joy and peace;
and the blessing of God,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
remain with *you/us* always.

Amen.

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- "As with gladness men of old"
- "Brightest and best of the sons of the morning"
- "Hail to the Lord's anointed"
- "O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness"
- "The race that long in darkness pined"
- "Christ, whose glory fills the skies"
- "Christ is the world's true light"
- "Hills of the north, rejoice"

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Liturgy for the Epiphany – 6 January 2026

James Nicolson

Introduction

Epiphany can be seen as the final segment of the Cycle of Light. In Advent we wait for the light. In Christmastide we celebrate the light. In Epiphany this light of Christ reveals itself as the light of the world. It is all about light (enlightenment) and God's glory revealed for all. The word "Epiphany" has roots in the Greek word "*phanein*" which can mean "to appear" or "to bring to light". Jesus is revealed as God's glory shining forth on all humanity. This is the season of searching and discovery, noticing and following the signs that reveal more about the Light of the World. The visit of the Magi and their distinctive gifts, the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, and the miracle at Cana when Jesus turned water into wine all shed light on who Jesus is and what he came to do. In Epiphany, like the first disciples, we are asked to 'come and see!' the nature of Jesus, his activities, miracles and teachings, but then we need to 'go and tell!' It is through our words, deeds and worship that the rest of the world receives the good news of the gospel. The last Sunday of Epiphany is designated Transfiguration Sunday. The glory of God is quite dazzling, and the voice of the Lord reiterates the words proclaimed at Christ's baptism, once again confirming his purpose, but this time just as he sets his face towards Jerusalem.

The liturgy for this Feast seeks to express these themes of Epiphany and draw us into them. You will find the texts set for this day reflected in these prayers.

Texts

Isaiah 60:1–6

Psalm 72:1–7

Ephesians 3:1–12

Matthew 2:1–12

Gathering in God's name

Call to worship

Blessed are you, O Christ, our God;

you were before time began,

and came to the world to save us.

Blessed are you, Sun of righteousness;

you shine with the Father's love

and illumine the whole universe.

Blessed are you, Son of Mary;

born a child

you shared our humanity.

Blessed are you, son of David;

born to rule,

you received gifts from the wise men.

Blessed are you, Son of Man;

baptised by John,

you saved us from ourselves.

Blessed are you, heavenly King;

teaching and preaching, healing and comforting,

you proclaimed the kingdom.

With all the voices of heaven

we celebrate the coming of our Saviour.

Let heaven and earth shout their praise.

With all the creatures on earth

we sing and dance at your birth.

Praise and glory to you, O Lord Jesus Christ.

— written by David Beswick, and posted on **David Beswick's Home Page.**

Act of Penitence

The prophet speaks of the coming light of God

which calls all the people of the earth to come together in God's realm of shalom.

Let us confess the ways in which we have rejected God's vision of wholeness.

God of light and darkness,

we have seen the glimmer of your star-light beckoning to us,

but we have turned away and followed other paths.

We confess that we have not loved you with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength.

We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

Forgive us, Holy One.

Strengthen our faltering steps

and guide us in your holy way of peace.

Amen.

Absolution or Assurance of Forgiveness

Light up your eyes and see the grace of God poured out into your lives.

The light of God shines through the darkness.

Our hearts rejoice for Christ is in our midst.

— Rev. Nancy J, on her blog,
wonderings through life and other such nonsense.

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer for Illumination

Light of Christ, shine upon us

Light of Christ, enlighten our minds.

Light of Christ, be a light unto our paths.

Responding to the Word of God

People of God, arise, shine,

for your light has come!

The light of Christ has come into the world.

Immanuel.

God with us.

So arise, shine, for your light has come!

And we will follow the light—

when it shines brightly in the night sky

when it glows dimly on the horizon.

We will follow the light—
when it leads down familiar paths to expected destinations
when the road is unfamiliar
and the star rests above a dubious-looking home.
We will lift up our eyes and look around.
And when we see the Christ child,
may our hearts be overwhelmed with joy.

When we are in the presence of Immanuel,
may our knees bend in worship.
When our journey brings us, finally, to the heart of God,
May our hands open in generous sharing;
May our mouths open in generous praise.

~ written by Joanna Harader, and
posted on the Spacious Faith blog.
<http://spaciousfaith.com/>



Celebrating at the table

Sharing of the Peace

The light of God be with you
And also with you

Invitation to Communion

We have come asking for the child –
Wondering where that light might be born,
Seeking that joy that might satisfy our thirst,
Wandering through the darkness of so many mistakes.

We have come to this place where
wise-people and shepherds and young women met.
We have come to this place called Bethlehem –
to this place where our hearts rise like yeast;
to this place where we meet our newborn hope;
to this place where we taste our deepest joy.

In Bethlehem, where we assumed the worst,
imagining that no good can come,
we somehow missed its name.
Bethlehem: *Lehem* meaning bread.
Bethel meaning house.

There is something here that will satisfy our hunger.
No matter how long we have wandered,
here our hearts arise.
Our light has come.

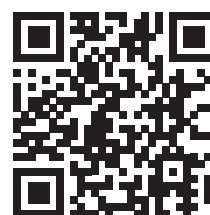
In this bread and in this cup,
We celebrate something we can't quite understand.
Because God has made a house at this table.
Because God satisfies our hunger in the most unlikely
places.
Because God comes to be with us.
Now and always.

It is with this expectation that we come to the table
to taste and see that God is here.

Prayer at the Table

Holy Spirit, come into this bread and this cup.
Transform these ordinary objects
As you change our hearts
To shape and form your world
With the joy you promise.
Pour your grace upon us,
so we overflow with your love.
Help us to remember how
A newborn baby might grow
Into a little child that would one day
Turn to his hope-filled friends
In an upper room ...

~ written by Rev. Elsa Peters, the
United Churches of Olympia, WA.
Posted on LiturgyLink. <http://www.liturgylink.net/>



Sending

Let us long for, and pray for, the light of God in Christ Jesus
to drive back the darkness of human error, misery and evil.

Where people are lost and jaded in contemporary
consumerism,
where addiction to alcohol, other drugs, and gambling is
causing ruin,
we pray for the hope of epiphany.

Where dictators rule without mercy or wisdom,
where democracies are manipulated by the rich and powerful,
we pray for the justice of epiphany.

Where youth see no prospect in the future and so
contemplate suicide,
where the long-term unemployed exist without hope,
we pray for the light of epiphany.

Where the church dodges its evangelical mission,
where the church evades its social and political responsibility,
we pray for the truth of epiphany.

Where the terminally ill face death fearfully,
where people without purpose face life despairingly,
we pray for the love of epiphany.

Most holy Friend, to you all souls are precious; please take
from our eyes the scales of prejudice or indifference,
that we may increasingly share your awareness of the
neglected and abused people, and do all we can to make
your love real to them. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen!

– Bruce Prewer, on **Bruce Prewer's Homepage**.

Post communion Prayer

The deeper the darkness
the brighter the light shines.
For love refuses
to be extinguished by despair.
Resilience and hope cannot be quenched
while the light of love burns steadily,
fuelled by courage and by compassion.
Look for the light
and there you will find love.

Amen

~ posted on RevGalBlogPals. <http://revgalblogpals.org/2015/11/24/narrative-lectionaryre-discovering-the-text-2-kings-221-10231-3/>



Sentence of Scripture

Isaiah 60:1 Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. (RSV)

Benediction

Go now as a light to the nations.
Honour the Lord;
preach what you know of the risen Christ,
and fulfil all righteousness.
And may God strengthen you and bless you with peace;
May Christ Jesus bring forth justice for you and among you;
And may the Holy Spirit alight on you
and affirm you as God's beloved ones.
We go in peace to love and serve the Lord,

In the name of Christ.

Amen.

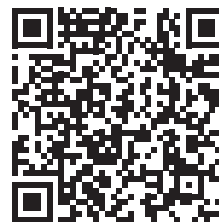
~ copyright © 2001 Nathan Nettleton. Posted
on LaughingBird.net

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- “Shine Jesus, Shine” (Make Way Music, 1987)
- “There’s a light up the mountain” (Public Domain, 1840-1930)
- “Arise, shine, for your light has come” (Jamie Harvill & Rita Baloché, Integrity Hosanna, Integrity’s Praise, 1994)
- “We three kings of the orient are” (Public Domain, 1820-1891)

References

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Word and Life for the Feast of Epiphany – 6 January 2026

Carol Walsh

Introduction

We have moved into the season after Christmas which is marked by a sense of discovery – Epiphany. We have an opportunity to discover the person of Jesus afresh each year. The realisation that the glory of God is contracted into the person of the Christ imbues each of the Jesus stories with something of more significance for us.

Liturgically while the colour for the Feast of Epiphany is white, the colour for the season is green and when the last Sunday in this season is reached (Transfiguration) we once again utilise white.

Hearing the Word

Isaiah 60:1–6

Invitation, celebration and promise exude from this passage despite the reality of darkness over all the land. The nation is assured of God's presence (verses 1–3) and then from V 4 on there is the reminder to look around to see the new possibility that has emerged. There is the promise of restoration and also abundance beyond imagination. The experience of such a homecoming is when sons and daughters will once again flourish. This is joyous and exciting to contemplate. And all of this is because of who God is.

Psalms 72:1–7, 10–14

This Psalm reads almost like a prayer as the writer pleads that God teaches the King the responsibilities of such a position of power. It is very clearly a pivotal role in the life of the nation and the writer is concerned that the poor and marginalised not be neglected in order that the nation prosper. The fact that such a hope needs to be articulated suggests that there has been experience of kings who have not acted in the best interest of the land and people. A sense of trust in God's ability to mould the king comes through in verses 10–14, for they suggest that such a King shall be honoured by others. His focus is not on what is offered to him in terms of gifts and wealth, but his focus is rather on what he does for his people as it is 'their lives (that) are precious to him.'

Ephesians 3:1–12

Paul speaks about God's blessings and special gift and power even from within the context of suffering and difficulty. He speaks about having received and understood an eternal purpose which has been achieved through the Christ (Jesus). It is the understanding that God's favour is not limited to the Jews, Gentiles also are held within God's grace. Such an assertion has required a considerable shift in Paul's world view and he happily attributes that change to God's power. For Paul it is a deep privilege to share the infinite riches of Christ. Despite what might seem difficult for others, Paul speaks only of benefit, riches, wisdom, privilege. The presence of Christ for him is indeed transformative. He has recognised that God's plan and world is bigger than his initial imaginings.

Matthew 2:1–12

We have here one of the stories of the Birth Narrative. It is the story of the visitors from the East. When Herod (the King) heard about them and the questions they had been asking, he consulted with his advisors who confirmed the old prophecies for a significant leader for the people of Israel. After that he invited them to meet with him to procure information about where this might have taken place. The star gazers found their destination, saw the child, offered gifts but then returned home via another route as they had been directed in a dream. Their experience of the whole event was one coloured by joy, excitement and deep reverence and they bring to this moment an extravagance as referenced by the gifts they offer. As we read the story, we are also aware of a darkness that surrounds the event.

Interpreting the Word

Isaiah 60 :1–6

The Book of Isaiah was written over an extended period generally believed to span 700 BC to 500 BC, a period that encompasses the Babylonian exile and also a post exilic period. It therefore speaks into several experiences. What we are looking at now is part of Trito- Isaiah, which would be a post exilic period. So, the promise of returning has already happened and what may be referred to here is not an historical event but a psychological and spiritual transformation. Chapters 60 through to 66 would seem to form a unified piece of writing in terms of its themes of restoration in the fullest possible way. Salvation is well and truly proclaimed. Indeed, it is so powerfully expressed that we hear its poetry and imaging once again echoed in the book of Revelation with the promises of the New Heaven and New Earth.

Psalms 72:1–7, 10–14

A Psalm attributed to Solomon's time, whether by him or for him. In the ancient Israelite understanding of the King, he was the channel for God's blessing, less about the divine right of kings and more about the divine channel of grace. The brilliance of Solomon's reign would seem to be an authentication of such a view. The Psalm also describes many of the ideas about kingship that would exemplify the later Messianic world view linking us with an expectation of hope in the person of the Christ.

Ephesians 3:1–12

The essence of the Letter to the Ephesians is that of the reconciling nature of God – and by extension the inclusion of the Gentiles into this new relationship. This also becomes the focus within the church. While traditionally it is part of Pauline literature there is a different style in both tone and content suggesting that perhaps it was written by an admirer of the apostle seeking to further the work of Paul and the mission of the church. Paul's letters often offered correction and this picks up a particular direction that would seem in keeping with what Paul had advocated.

Matthew 2:1–12

Matthew's gospel seeks to let the Hebrew community know that in Jesus the prophecies of God's Messiah are fulfilled. For this reason there is constant reference and allusion to those passages of scripture that were speaking about the one whom God would send. The story tells of powerful people, both local and from afar. The gifts that are brought hold deep significance as well as being enormously valuable. The story itself reeks of extravagance to the original reader in ways that we don't immediately connect with. Within the story we can see the contrasts abound – power for gain versus power to serve, truth seekers versus deceivers, and even the realisation that a story needing to speak powerfully to a local constituency needs to utilise 'foreign' characters. Much of this story is shrouded for us in additional layers and assumptions. We are not told how many visitors; we only guess because of the number of gifts. The magi for us have become kings and we have even attributed names and ethnic histories to them even though nothing of this nature is found in the passage. We would do well to let these few verses of scripture remind us to read a text carefully.

Preaching the Word

There are several themes that we can take when looking at what to preach from these passages. Perhaps the most obvious is the EXTRA-VA-GENCE of God's promises and God's presence. The passages have all alluded to this both figuratively and practically. If choosing this path, we must be careful not to confuse this with the preaching of a prosperity gospel. It is not about a simple transactional relationship where if we do what God wants then God gives us what we want. The preacher must have the capacity to recognise other nuances at work here- e.g. God has already provided abundance within creation; adherence to God's Will should create space for a more just environment.

If we lean into the Ephesians theme of the extension of the reconciling nature of God that leads to INCLUSION then we can certainly reference the Gospel where the 'foreigners' play the more significant role while the other two passages offer the reaction of those who are 'other' to the presence of God. These musings can offer insights into our response to Xenophobia as the people of God. Again, a world at peace with people who are different is a world more likely to flourish and allow itself to be enriched by what each brings to the table.

Within the too often realities of unfinished business, unrealised dreams, dark moments the presence of God is nonetheless present. The writers of each of these passages were fully aware of that reality. An exploration of this truth would be a useful sermon. Questions to be asked could be: what did it achieve during the dark days of apartheid, what can it achieve in today's world? Many are looking for HOPE IN A HOPELESS WORLD. With this theme there is a temptation to deliver an over simplified world view (It'll be alright in the end, if its not alright its not the end, or It'll be alright when Jesus returns). The object of such a sermon should not be a simple reassurance but rather an inspiration to reengagement despite what might seem like overwhelming odds. Remember: preaching passivity is not preaching the Good News

Living the Word

In a South Africa which has become one of the most economically divided in the world an examination of wealth distribution and wealth utilisation would be a useful exercise. Oxfam tells us that 1% of global population owns more wealth than 95% of humanity. (Oxfam International press release 23 September 2024). How do we utilize our resources as Christians? What have we bought into? Who are we funding?

Within wealthier communities we could advocate the support for local small business. But there is the realisation that this can be a more difficult route for more economically pressurised communities. What do we advocate here and how do we support these choices?

I suggest that our projects should be emulating self-sustainability rather than charity.

Liturgical Suggestions

God of extravagance, come to us in our poverty.

The poverty of our worship and our commitment to you,

Open our eyes to see the abundance of your provision for us
and for the world

Open our hearts to the possibility of sharing extravagantly
as you do

Transform us from self-seekers to servants of the living God

God of inclusion, bring us into your household

A household that embraces all

Let us find kinship with those who we do not understand

Let us find kinship with those who differ from us

Transform us from a divided people into a safe space for all

God of all hopefulness, shine your light into the dark corners
of our world

Banish the terrors that lurk in the darkness

Remind us of your promise to walk with us, even through
the valleys

Remind us of our call to reflect you and let our light shine

Transform us from fearful souls into a community of light

AMEN

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- Westermann, C. 1978. *Isaiah 40–66: A Commentary*. SCM Press Ltd, London.

Word and Life for the 1st Sunday of Epiphany – 11 January 2026

Baptism of the Lord

Carol Walsh

Readings

Isaiah 42:1–9

Psalm 29

Acts 10:34–43

Matt 3:13–17

Introduction

During this season we have an expectation to be introduced to something new and fresh. The first week of Epiphany focuses on introducing the person of God. This second week focuses more on the one who is called. The terms of reference are outlined as well as reminding us of who the source of strength and stability is.

Hearing the word

Isaiah 42:1–9

An introduction is made to the people of the one whom God has chosen. The servant is affirmed as the one who God will strengthen and with whom God is pleased. Because of God's presence with him the servant will be committed to a particular task and demeanor. (V1b –3). Justice to every nation is what is promised, and it will be achieved without the usual posturing that one expects, no shouting or attention seeking (v2), no casualties of war (v3). Then from v5 as we are reminded of the breadth of what God has done. God speaks to the servant affirming his call and giving clear direction as to what is to be achieved and what loyalty is expected. The parameters of God's justice have just been expanded beyond what was normally expected by the original audience.

Psalm 29

The title that is given to this psalm is 'The Voice of the Lord in the Storm'. It is signaling already a message of reassurance during an anxious event. Its tone is confident and jubilant as it commands that the heavenly beings praise God. We are told that 'the voice of the Lord' is to be heard in, above and through so very much that was considered powerful within the natural world, the ocean, the cedars of Lebanon, the mountains of Lebanon, the desert of Kadesh. God's power and authority over even the deep waters is affirmed. What otherwise would be overwhelming or terrifying is now, because of God's presence, a cause for awe and praise for those who are in temple. It is this God who gives strength to people and creates peace.

Acts 10; 34–43

We have Peter affirming God's extensive plan for humanity. The idea of a local deity is shattered as Peter announces in v 5 'Whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him, no matter what race he belongs to'. This is a big step for Peter to have taken, he himself had to be educated to this truth through his vision where God reminded him that human distinctions and divisions have no place in God's

world. So, Peter reminds his listeners about the origin of the Good News – located initially in Galilee, Israel; manifest in the person of Jesus; incorporating the work of John the Baptist and then as he chronicles the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus we can see how he expands the listeners understanding of the breadth of God at work. It is the understanding of all this that lays an obligation of call on the listener. The implications are huge – v 43 'All the prophets spoke about him, saying that everyone who believes in him will have his sins forgiven through the power of his name.'

Matt 3:13–17

The Baptism of Jesus – when Jesus was desirous to be baptised by John, initially John was hesitant claiming that he was the one who needed to be baptised by Jesus. The advocate for humility understood humility. Jesus understood God's will (v5 'Let it be so for now. For in this way we shall do all that God requires'). This baptismal moment was when Jesus was affirmed – he saw the heavens opened he saw the spirit of God like a dove. The voice from heaven claims Jesus. (v13 'This is my own dear son, with whom I am pleased'.)

Interpreting the word

Isaiah 42; 1–9

We have here the first of a set of passages in Isaiah that are traditionally called the Servant's Song (42,1–4 and 5–9; 49,1–13; 50,4–9; 52,13–53) While we tend to read these passages with a clear understanding of the 'Servant' being Jesus, within their context there is much less clarity. We are unsure about who the servant is and what the exact nature of the task is. Yet what we read outlines for us in detail all that we have come to associate with the ministry of Jesus. The Messiah that was expected was generally imagined as exuding a traditional revolutionary power, exercising domination, but this servant of God exudes compassion. The shift is seismic. The words of v7 are words that Jesus uses about His ministry and mission, and so for us there would appear to be a clarity, but the text itself is unclear if it is speaking about the nation (v6b) or indeed an individual (v1–4)

Psalm 29

As the first two verses extol the glory of the Lord, we would do well to note that within its context glory (*Kavod* Heb.) is both a physical manifestation and an intrinsic aspect of God's nature. The word holds within it an idea of weightiness and heaviness. This is no light airy-fairy idea, but is rather it is palpable and tangible. Thus, the imagery of the thunder, the ocean, the majestic natural occurrences serve to remind us of the immediate and powerful presence of God. For us they are tangible manifestations of power and presence and yet it is the voice of God which towers above all of them. We are reminded that when God spoke creation was established.

Acts 10; 34–43

In a world where the relationship between sin and holiness could only be resolved through transaction (animal sacrifice, temple business) then the promise of forgiveness and absolution through relationship was radical and revolutionary. Peter's account of the good news is less concerned with the details of Jesus' ministry than the extraordinary events that surrounded his life. He attests to a God-given life, a spirit-filled life and an unprecedented place in history. We are aware that we are moving in the world where good and evil battle but ultimately a world where God triumphs. That is a world we can access as we respond to Jesus. Peter is aware that his task is to proclaim this truth and invite his listeners to trust it.

Matt 3:13–17

The account of the baptism is recorded in all 3 of the synoptic gospels. Its worth as an 'objective' verification of who Jesus is, is immeasurable. John's gospel also has a version of it but is framed there as John the Baptist recounting what happened. While we always read these stories with an understanding that Jesus is the main character, within the context at this point in the story John is the more prominent personality. His endorsement of Jesus in the public eye gives the ministry of Jesus huge credibility. The recounting of the heavens opening and the dove descending are important in that the dove is often regarded in Jewish literature as the symbol of Israel. We have come to view it as symbolic of the spirit of God, but remember that the thrust of Matthew's gospel is a conversation with the Jewish community in order to convince them that Jesus was the fulfilment of prophecy.

Preaching Themes

Call While the idea of call comes through most clearly in the Isaiah passage and the Gospel reading, the Acts passage does recount how Peter enacts his calling and his growing understanding of what God desires. The Psalm tells us that God's voice can be heard over everything and determines everything. (We would do well to remember that God's voice has also been described as a still, small voice, but it is also a voice that has birthed creation) So, an exploration of the notion of call would not be inappropriate as we look at these passages. There is individual call and corporate call, and our scriptures allow us to speak of both.

The extensiveness of the project It is the habit of many to pray before a competition or project for God to give victory. We still hold on to the notion that God is on our side and are therefore happy to invoke God's favour. It is not untrue that God is concerned for us, but we should not fall victim to the notion that we are all that God's cares about. That which is outside of us is also within God's purview. In exploring this theme, we can look to people and experiences outside of our normative gaze: how do we welcome people of another ethnicity; how do we embrace within our community those who obviously struggle with mental illness and remain untreated; what are the implications of this revelation for patriotism, xenophobia, national identity?

Witnessing An old-fashioned word which denotes the telling of the Gospel story. Within our scriptures creation gives witness, the prophet gives witness, Peter gives witness, the Spirit gives witness, the affirmation of God's presence is loudly affirmed. In today's world, which is multi-cultural, largely agnostic, but peopled also with religious extremists – how do we give witness to our understanding of God? Faith conversations are not normative. In the TikTok world serious discussion is diminished, truth is personal and over recent years we have seen a rise in narratives that are unfettered by fact or respect. How do we engage such a world in meaningful conversation? Our trite affirmations and evangelical zeal seem inadequate to such a task. Even though we may be unable to persuade people to faith in Jesus Christ how do we keep Him in the public discourse in meaningful ways?

Living the word

Within our South African context, we live in areas with a plethora of religious organizations and for our purposes of reflection we note that many are Christian. Each carries their own flavour and emphasis. Our scriptures tell us that the plan and hope of God is an extensive desire for justice and righteousness throughout all nations. The question might be asked: Have our faith communities grasped this or are we parochial in our faith practice? Wesleyanism and the Holiness Movement emphasizes both personal holiness and social holiness – inward growth and outward action. This perhaps offers us a way of taking our spiritual pulse. We can ask if our prayer life, our devotional life find resolution in our ability to reach out into the world with grace and compassion? Are we concerned not only about our own welfare but also about the welfare of others? Are we comfortable reaching beyond our own boundaries and bigotries? Is our engagement with the world confined to our own circle or are we prepared to move beyond? Perhaps now is the time to 'step out in faith' to a bigger world.

Liturgy additions

God who has called the universe into being

Your call is upon us now.

A call to live fearlessly in the face of those things which threaten to overwhelm us

A call to live courageously in the face of powerful forces

A call to understand the one who trusts us to reflect that which is holiest into the world.

God who is the source of all wisdom and our strength

Affirm within us your presence

Teach us how to feel connected with the great purpose of your perfect will

Teach us how to understand our connection to all of your creation

Teach us how to connect with all who seek you and with all who don't.

God, whose word created life

Let our words reflect You.

May our words speak truth in a world of lies

May our words speak hope in a cynical world

May our words guide the listener to life, to love, to redemption.

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- Black, M. & Rowley, H.H. (eds.) 1987. *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*. Van Nostrand Reinhold (UK) Co. Ltd, UK
- Westermann, C. 1978. *Isaiah 40–66: A Commentary*. SCM Press Ltd, London.

Word and Life for the 2nd Sunday of Epiphany – 18 January 2026

Carol Walsh

Introduction

In the past two weeks we have focused on the one who calls, then the one who is called, and now we can look at how to flesh out the call in circumstances that may not be ideal

Hearing the word

Isaiah 49:1–7

The writer calls the listeners to attention. He is speaking not to individuals but to nations beyond his own. (v1a) He introduces himself with confidence and a clear sense of purpose affirming that his authority comes from God's calling on his life, a life that was known before he was born. (v1b) His words will have clarity because God has specifically directed him. Nevertheless, he is uncertain (v4). Even his clearly articulated call has come into question, but he remembers that all he needs is God. And so, God reminds him that he is called but now suggests that the task was too small, it had only been to return Israel to the truth. The task will be greater – to be a light to the nations, to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. (v6)

Psalms 40:1–11

A tale of 2 Psalms – we are dealing with the first part which speaks words of trust and affirmation. The writer has found himself in a difficult place, whether physically or metaphorically. The description of the place where the writer finds himself is wonderfully graphic – (v3) 'He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire.' Anyone trapped in mud will remember the sensation. Having been rescued from it and being set on firm ground the writer finds himself possessed of a new song – one of praise and thankfulness. He then extols the virtues of the one who has saved him and recommends him. (V6) is interesting as after he has commended his saviour he documents that no special offerings were required, no payment was required. All our writer has done is to be patient, wait and trust and his discovery is that he is seen and acknowledged. He commends his saviour to the assembly, what he has experienced is not a private thing. He asks only that the Lord will continue to protect him.

1 Corinthians 1:1–9

The opening of the conversation with the people of Corinth confirms the relationships that exist between all parties, Paul is called by God and so termed an apostle of Christ Jesus; Sosthenes is called a brother to Paul; the community at Corinth is called by God and linked with God through Jesus and also linked to all who worship him. It is an expansive group. Paul then offers thanks for the gifts the community possess because of the Christ (grace, knowledge, speech). They have so fully embraced the message about Christ that their lives have been profoundly enriched. They wait for him, He will be their encouragement in the days to come, and so they will succeed in their calling. There is encouragement for them as they continue in their faith and Paul assures them that they will be judged blameless (v8).

John 1:29–42

Here we have John's account of the Baptism of Jesus. In this account John immediately introduces Jesus. He acknowledges him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and admits that he initially was unsure who that would be, but trusting what God would do he had offered baptism to the people. John then gives detail of what happened at the baptism where he saw the Spirit like a dove descend and stay on Jesus and then he heard God confirm who Jesus was,

The passage continues with John introducing Jesus to his disciples who then went with Jesus. One of those disciples was Andrew who after spending the day with Jesus then invited his brother Simon to join them. This contrasts with the stories of calling disciples in the synoptics. It is John's recommendation that creates the connection and subsequent commitment.

Interpreting the word

Isaiah 49:1–7

This is the second of the so-called Servant Songs. Within this song we have a clearer sense that the servant is an individual. While v3 names the servant as Israel, v 5 names the task as bringing Israel back. But what we have heard is also clear in terms of v5 as Yahweh formed the servant in the womb. This certainly allows us to read v4 with more empathy with the servant's sense of failure in meeting the challenge. Despite the sense of failure, the challenge is increased. This would seem to suggest that the outcome of any challenge does not lie with the capacity of the servant but with the capacity of God. Taking the passage as a whole – even setting aside its importance as a Servant Song – the thrust of this piece speaks to the individual awareness of being created and called by God to be involved in the great work of salvation. This is achieved not in our own strength but relying on God to work out the perfect purpose as we simply say yes.

Psalms 40:1–11

The first two verses speak of a dire situation, a near death situation. The phrasing can denote a sinking into the netherworld, *Sheol*. Within ancient Near Eastern thought even sickness was touching with death. We are aware that lepers were banished from the community, cut off from life as they knew it. So, this 'rescue' takes on more profound significance. The Psalmist is then brought to a place of safety and has a new song to sing. Because of what has happened the testimony of the Psalmist has been refreshed, renewed and that will change the lives of many. V6 which seems to repudiate sacrifice, can be seen as part of that developing understanding of the nature of God (note 1 Sam 15:22 where human sacrifice was no longer necessary to now where sacrifice is not deemed necessary).

1 Corinthians 1:1–9

Corinth was a bustling, rich, thriving city. It was, a centre of commerce, government, military occupation and sport. It was part of a sea route and boasted a cosmopolitan population. It also developed a reputation as a city where pleasures could be indulged. Money and ideas were in abundance, but morality was a fluid and often absent concept. The church within this context would not be immune from the pressures of conformity to the world around. It is therefore important that Paul affirms their calling, their capacity to understand and enfold the gospel values and encourage them in their faith. Paul in this introduction tries to remind and encourage Christian believers as he writes to them. His letters are generally letters to correct behaviour but his tone here is warm and encouraging. He will be addressing division within the community, but here it reminds people of their connectedness. He is aware of the temptations that surround them but reminds them of their groundedness in the person of Christ.

John 1:29–42

This is part of historical transition. John and his disciples have held the moral and spiritual space with his ministry of repentance and baptism. John himself (he tells us here), has been unsure who would follow, so his affirmation regarding Jesus and the fact that he draws the attention of his disciples to Jesus begin to suggest a moving forward of this ministry, a handing over if you will. There is speculation that there was tension between the disciples of John and the disciples of Jesus. We can infer this from the question that Jesus asks them ‘What do you want?’ The difference in style between the two men did not necessarily mark an obvious ‘successor’. They then spend the day discovering who he is and what he does and are convinced. As John has already endorsed him, so do they as Andrew speaks to his brother Simon and introduces him to Jesus.

Preaching the word

The state of the world

The more things change, the more they stay the same. It is tempting to think that the past was a simpler time but many of the same issues remain with us today. Our texts have offered a remembrance of a world of factionalism, moral decay, despair, disease and legacy issues. An exploration of how these scriptures offer solutions would be helpful. We are not looking for 7 highly effective steps to the redeemed life, but rather an indication of how to connect with grace and conduct ourselves in ways that reflect our trust and commitment to God’s ways.

Relationships

While this will focus us more primarily on the New Testament passages, the Old Testament passages are by no means redundant in this topic. Both our New Testament passages have a context of what might be or become strained relationships. Ultimately within God’s world the call is to kinship. Who do we talk to? How do we talk to them? In a world which has seen the breakdown of international conversation that leads to just and peaceable relations, what are the clues within scripture about how to interact with people and especially with people who may not agree with us.

Count your blessings

In a difficult world, during a difficult time, with difficult people, what is our focus? Generally, our focus remains stuck on the difficulty. All these passages have strong affirmations of hope, goodness, rightness throughout them, despite the prevailing situation. What does this tell us? Scripture would appear to be an antidote to such difficulty. Indeed, neuroscience suggests that a more positive approach to the world enables us to find more helpful solutions to any difficulty. As a pastoral sermon this allows us to explore calling, failure, doubt and faith. Any or all these topics are real human experience. To help congregations navigate some of the bigger issues of their lives by holding perspective, keeping open-hearted and learning to trust a future that holds what they need is no small thing. It is the stuff of hope and healing, the pathway back to life.

Living the word

The Isaiah passage spoke about being a light to the nations. Are we a light within our own communities, and indeed what does that mean in our particular circumstances? To cast a light on something is to reveal what is, to cast a light is to make safe, to cast a light is to signal presence. Within our local communities are there things that need highlighted (both good and bad) and are we speaking out about them? There are things that need to be kept safe, have we tried to do that (creches and children’s programmes, CPFs, soup kitchens). Do we offer a ministry of presence, both in being where people are and in offering our facilities so that people can meet (pastoral visitors, seniors clubs)

Suggested Songs/Hymns

Raise A Hallelujah

I raise a hallelujah
In the presence of my enemies
I raise a hallelujah
Louder than the unbelief
I raise a hallelujah

Oceans

Spirit lead me where my trust
Is without borders
Let me walk upon the waters
Wherever You would call me
In Christ there is no East or West
Blessed Assurance Jesus is mine
Great is thy faithfulness

References

- Black, M. & Rowley, H.H. (eds.) 1987. *Peake’s Commentary on the Bible*. Van Nostrand Reinhold (UK) Co. Ltd, UK
Westermann, C. 1978. *Isaiah 40–66: A Commentary*. SCM Press Ltd, London.

Word and Life for the 3rd Sunday of Epiphany – 25 January 2026

Carol Walsh

Introduction

The journey of discovery of being God's called – as unpacked over the past three weeks – now moves to the next level. The God we worship is at work in a world beyond our normal spheres of influence

Hearing the word

Isaiah 9:1–4

A promise of better things to come for those who were in distress. Places of significance will change. Changed times are coming, darkness is turning into light. Even the nation has grown in stature. There is a sense of rejoicing similar to the type of rejoicing experienced by those who have gathered a harvest or to the victor dividing the spoils. A victory is remembered, and its success is attributed to God's strength in breaking those things which oppressed and bound the people

Psalm 27:1, 4–9

The Psalmist has a simple desire – to be in God's presence, to be surrounded by God's beauty and to be safe. He knows that in difficult times he will be safe with God. God will be active in his protection and because of that the Psalmist is aware that he will be exalted, hailed as a favoured one of God, a more significant person than his enemies. Because of this he is committed to offering sacrifice and praising God. He calls on God to listen to him, his whole being knows that he needs to seek God

1 Corinthians 1:10–18

Paul comes to the crux of what he wants to say. He wants to speak to a church that is divided, he wants to urge unity. In a city renowned for its sophistication there are likely to be large personalities and strong opinions. Word has reached Paul that factions were forming each with their own personality heading it up. This situation involves people who are known and so the tone is intimate in terms of recognizing people. Paul then gives his own history of involvement with the community, and one senses that this is important because there might be some politicking involved. Paul's desire is to help refocus the community on Christ, on the gospel and on the task to which they were called. It is important that the gospel is not diluted by the ways of the world.

Matthew 4:12–23

We now begin to hear about the ministry that Jesus is moving into. It is motivated by a number of things but the catalyst to action here is the news that John has been put into prison. Matthew tells us that Jesus went to live in Capernaum, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali – connecting Jesus to the Isaiah prophecy and so confirming Jesus as the one who was foretold. Jesus' next task is to assemble those who will become his disciples. He walks along the shore and invites two brothers to follow him, Simon and Andrew. He then moves on inviting two more brothers, James and

John, to follow him. We are not told if he knew these men prior to calling is them or not, but we are told that they all immediately left what they were doing and followed him.

Interpreting the word

Isaiah 9:1–4

Isaiah was written during a time of turbulence in the region. While Israel and Judah had flourished for a time (787–743 approx.) Assyria was becoming a regional dominant power and its expansion throughout the region caused instability in national alliances. Fates of nations changed and it was the reign of Tiglath Pileser III of Assyria (and Babylon) that defined the era. So, then the opening phrases of this passage have a resonance for the people who have lived through turmoil. The promise of the end of 'gloom' is a welcome affirmation. To hear that darkness has been overcome is the signaling of a new time of peace and cause for celebration. The words of the prophet, imagining the level of excitement at this prospect, are deeply vibrant for his listeners. Food security at times of uncertainty is precarious, so the people know how precious the harvest is, and after the time of battle when the spoils of war are being divided is a moment of relief that the job is done, the terror is over, and there is some reward. Such imagery is potent to people who have been deprived and at war. The reminder then of the day of Midian speaks to a complete victory that will end this time of upheaval.

Psalm 27:1, 4–9

Psalms is a book which does not easily allow us to give categorical date and author to any particular song. There are trends and patterns which speak to our capacity to group some together, but their usage is perhaps more important than their origin, because they have been able to transcend their initial purpose and became songs, liturgies and poems to uphold the people of faith. This Psalm interestingly hints that it might have come from a time of violent turmoil. The reference to 'dwelling in the house of the Lord' (v4) and then again in v 5 '*For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock*', speaks into the idea of sanctuary. This is an ancient understanding that sanctuary afforded someone asylum, protection and was of itself sacred.

1 Corinthians 1:10–18

In this passage we begin to have a sense of those who were part of the church at Corinth. We normally hear the names of such people during the introduction or in closing of letters when Paul commends or offers prayer. Some of the names we hear now are names of people who intentionally or unintentionally have caused division within the church. They have amassed followers, disciples. We are aware that some members of Corinth trusted Paul enough to inform him of these issues and then Paul reveals the names of people with whom he has had dealings, clearly for the sake of transparency. It reminds us that conflict is messy and can draw in even those who are not involved.

Matthew 4:12–23

As always Matthew is careful to ensure that his listeners are made aware of the links between Old Testament prophecy and the person of Jesus. The proof texts set the backdrop for us. It is time for Jesus to take up his ministry and v17 tells us that he took up the call of John the Baptist preached – “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*” V 23 then indicates that the ministry of Jesus went beyond this, he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom and healed every disease and sickness among the people. Matthew also tells us that Jesus preached in the synagogues, bringing the message from the wilderness to the heart of the religious community.

Preaching the Word

- 1 The passages for this week speak to a world in turmoil. The Old Testament context is one of international power play, alliances and changing borders. The Psalms hint at the need for asylum found in God’s presence in this instance. The Epistle is of the local power games within small communities and the Gospel is about the transfer of power and the preparation for that. This invites us to look at the nature of power, legitimate and illegitimate. It offers opportunity to reflect on the power of God’s world and how we are to exercise it. It opens up the notion of responsibility.
- 2 With this we are also offered the opportunity to explore what it might mean for the church to be a place of safety and sanctuary. Within the South African context and its high levels of violence against both children and women do we as church actually offer a place of safety? With reference to the church’s work with children we are, by law, required to follow certain procedures, but how seriously have we taken this? In terms of our preaching, do we both elevate the role of women and affirm them in terms of a fullness of humanity and equanimity of call? What will it do for us to become a place of safety?
- 3 The backdrop to these passages is a backdrop of conflict. How do we as church cope with conflict, both our own and that which surrounds us? The temptation is to avoid or deflect by saying that it’s not our problem, The temptation is to view it simplistically, with an obvious good side and an obvious bad side. While we are always required to take the side of justice and the marginalized, much of the conflict that we encounter is more nuanced. Conflict resolution needs both sides to be heard. Holding to this principle, how do we navigate calling out that which is truly wrong?

Living the Word

Within our South African context, we live with the legacy of conflict unaddressed. It leaks into much of who we are. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of some 30 years ago tried to address something of this. Yet we continue to live with the echoes of division and the violence it can unleash. As Christ followers how do we live as ‘peacemakers’ of is it all too late? In this chaos of unresolved conflict, how can our church become mediators, offer prayer walks, provide community safe spaces, and be truth tellers?

Prayer

All powerful and everlasting God
We speak of you so easily using these words.
Yet our lives do not reflect always our trust in your power.
Teach us to never fear the powerful but understand them
Teach us to understand your power at work in every
situation and
Give us wisdom to understand the true nature of power and
the nature of true power.

In a world where danger lurks You are a safe space
In a world where many cannot be trusted You speak truth
In a world where laws cannot protect Your ways offer
guidance
God who has loved us for ever
We turn to you our Rock
We trust your promise to be with us to the end of the age
We are unafraid to walk through the Valley for you are with
us, your rod and staff protect us.

Peace, I leave with you, my peace I give to you, not as the
world gives.
Jesus, we hear your words and we long for that peace.
A peace that passes all understanding, but we remember it
is not a passive gift.
It has been bought at a price, your sacrifice and your
commitment.
In a world that longs for peace we acknowledge that for it to
be realised
It might require our commitment and willingness to
sacrifice.
God give us strength.

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- Black, M. & Rowley, H.H. (eds.) 1987. *Peake’s Commentary on the Bible*. Van Nostrand Reinhold (UK) Co. Ltd, UK.
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Word and Life for the 4th Sunday of Epiphany – 1 February 2026

Craig Morrison

Texts

Micah 6:1–8
Psalm 15
1 Corinthians 1:18–31
Matthew 5:1–12

Introduction

Sunday, 1 February 2026, is a day brimming with spiritual depth and renewed devotion. As the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, it holds a special place in the liturgical calendar. For some church traditions, it is Covenant & Commitment Sunday, a cherished tradition where believers come together to reaffirm their faith and renew sacred promises. With the new year still unfolding, this moment offers a powerful opportunity to realign hearts, strengthen bonds, and step forward with fresh purpose and unwavering commitment.

Hearing the Word

Micah 6:1–8

Micah emerges as a fiery prophet in the second half of the 8th Century BCE, speaking to a Judah brimming with religious activity. But something is deeply wrong in Judah. Despite the outward displays of devotion, beneath the surface the piety of the elite is barren, and Micah sees right through the pretence. He calls out the wicked and delivers a shocking judgment against the very people who believe themselves to be faithful to YHWH.

Psalm 15

This Psalm serves as a fitting companion to the prophetic call of Micah. It asks a central question: Who may dwell in God's presence? The answer is not found in outward displays of religion but in a life marked by integrity, justice, and truth. It is a Psalm about truth-telling as a spiritual imperative.

1 Corinthians 1:18–31

St. Paul asserts that the message of the cross defies conventional wisdom, provoking different reactions. Some perceive it as irrational and nonsensical, while others recognise it as a profound expression of divine power. In this passage, Paul links the proclamation of the Good News with truth-telling, presenting the cross as a revelation of God's transformative work in the world. At its heart, Paul's message challenges the very foundations of worldly values. In human society, victory is often associated with conquest, success is defined by status, and wisdom is measured by intellect and persuasion. However, the kingdom of God operates on an entirely different paradigm. It is one where victory comes through surrender, greatness is found in humility, and true wisdom is rooted in faith rather than human reasoning.

Matthew 5:1–12

In Matthew 5:1 Jesus goes up the mountain with his disciples. Matthew's *evangelical* community presents Jesus in the role of authoritative teacher. The Sermon on the Mount follows a passage summarising Jesus' activities, which include teaching in synagogues, proclaiming a message about the kingdom of God, and healing various illnesses (Matthew 4:23). This context highlights Jesus' role as both a teacher and a healer in the narrative.

It is important that the preacher remembers that the preaching of Jesus must always be understood as centred in the proclamation of the kingdom of God. The "kingdom of God" is a concept with multiple layers of meaning. A better translation than 'kingdom' is the idea of "the embracing reign of God". Since the kingdom is not a place, like "Johannesburg", it is not a proper noun and thus always takes the lower case.

A good interpretation considers its theological, social, and eschatological (future-oriented) dimensions:

- i. Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God as both already present and still to come.
- ii. Jesus' teachings describe the kingdom as a place where the marginalized, the poor, and the meek are valued, overturning conventional power structures.
- iii. Rather than just some distant, heavenly reality, the kingdom of God is something that people are invited to participate in now: it is a call to actions of loving one's neighbour, caring for the poor, forgiving others, and living in alignment with God's justice.
- iv. In Jewish thought, the kingdom of God is connected to the hope of God restoring the world to its intended goodness.

Interpreting the Word

Micah 6:1–8

In Micah's Judah, the religious leaders flaunt their piety with grand gestures and loud proclamations, but their faith is little more than performative (cf. Micah 3). Underneath, corruption thrives and the powerful remain firmly in control, comfortably insulated by a religion that serves their interests. Micah's voice shatters the illusion. Micah calls out the wicked and delivers a shocking judgment against the very people who believe themselves to be faithful.

The prophecy is written in the form of a legal dialogue in a court of law. The prosecutor brings the charges against the people, "What shall I do to satisfy the LORD?" The answer is given, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" Micah's message is clear: Empty rituals or self-serving spiritual leaders do not impress God. True faith demands justice, humility, and a heart aligned with the divine.

Psalm 15

This psalm serves as a powerful reflection on what it means to live in faithful relationship with God. Framed as a question-and-answer dialogue, the psalm opens by asking who is worthy to dwell in God's presence. The response is not about rituals or sacrifices but about the character of one's life. Those who walk with integrity, speak truthfully, and practice justice are the ones who belong in God's holy presence.

We are reminded that true worship is not just about what happens in sacred spaces but how we live with honesty, compassion, and righteousness in everyday life. The psalm paints a picture of the kind of character God desires, viz. those who speak truth from the heart, refuse to exploit others, and live with unwavering honesty. Like Micah's challenge, Psalm 15 prompts us to see that true worship is reflected in how we live, not just in what we say.

1 Corinthians 1:18–31

Paul argues that the gospel defies human expectations and overturns conventional ideas of wisdom and power. Rather than enabling Christians to dominate by worldly standards, God's work comes as an unexpected revelation. What seems like weakness or foolishness by human measures is, in reality, divine wisdom and strength. In this way, the Gospel is a reversal of the world's economy of values. At its core, Paul's argument is that the gospel turns the world's values upside down.

In the economy of the world, victory is achieved through conquest, success is measured by status, and wisdom is demonstrated through persuasion and intellect. But in the kingdom of God, victory comes through surrender, success is found in humility, and true wisdom is revealed in faith.

Matthew 5:1–12

In Matthew, the Beatitudes become a foundation for teaching and ministry. The Beatitudes outline key values that shape Jesus' approach to the law and his ministry. Up to this point in Matthew, Jesus has prepared for his public work: he has been baptised, faced temptation, called his first disciples, and begun the ministry of teaching and healing. Now, he turns to instructing his disciples, with the crowds observing in the background.

Each Beatitude highlights a different group of people and the promise of a transformed reality:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit” refers to those experiencing hardship and struggle, assuring them of a future where their needs will be met.

“Blessed are those who mourn” acknowledges grief, including personal loss and suffering under oppression, with the promise of comfort.

“Blessed are the meek” reflects a theme from Psalm 37:11, offering hope to those who face injustice, promising they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” speaks to those longing for a more just society, where resources are shared equitably.

“Blessed are the merciful” emphasizes kindness and care for others, in contrast to systems that prioritize power over compassion.

“Blessed are the pure in heart” highlights sincerity and integrity in following divine principles.

“Blessed are the peacemakers” distinguishes between peace through force and peace achieved through justice and mercy.

The Beatitudes challenge those in positions of comfort to consider how they can contribute to justice and equity in their communities. Rather than being purely spiritual ideals, they encourage active engagement in making the world more just.

Preaching the Word

Micah 6:1–8

At the start of this passage, God brings a legal case against Israel, calling all of creation to witness. The mountains and even the Earth itself will hear the charges and Israel's response. Micah suggests this is no minor dispute but a cosmic trial. God declares a dispute with the elites of the land.

This section doesn't list their wrongs but in chapter 3 and chapter 6 their sins become clear: violence among the wealthy elite and their deceitful words (v.12). With deep emotion, God repeatedly calls, “O my people” (vv. 3, 5) searching for answers to what went wrong. As God recounts past faithfulness, the contrast between divine goodness and Israel's failings becomes unmistakable. The preacher can contrast our pious performances with God's steadfast Covenant faithfulness. But note, this complaint is not about mere moralism but calls for social justice for the poor and marginalised in the land.

Psalm 15

This Psalm is a loud call for truth-telling in our politics. Today, some politicians – spurred on by some religious leaders – often deny compassion for the poor and marginalised in society, spread lies and untruths in the media, especially on social media, and are sometimes corrupt and dishonest. Psalm 15 condemns the corrupt and lying elites in society and judges them as unspiritual.

1 Corinthians 1:18–31

Paul presents his defence of the idea of the “foolishness of the gospel.” The apostle places his interpretive key front and centre: It is the cross that is foolishness and weakness to outsiders.

At the heart of Paul's message is the cross, which appears irrational to outsiders but is central to God's plan for salvation. He warns that traditional ways of assessing power and wisdom can be misleading, as God's true power often looks like weakness to the world. If St. Paul's words are taken seriously, they call for a radical shift in how believers think and live. Rather than striving to prove the superiority of Christian thought or power in worldly terms, the call is to embody the wisdom and power of the cross, through service, humility, and faithfulness.

This means:

- i. Prioritizing love over status, even when it seems impractical.
- ii. Choosing self-sacrifice over personal gain, even when it is costly.
- iii. Trusting in God's wisdom, even when it contradicts cultural expectations.

Paul's message is as countercultural today as it was in the first century. The cross remains a challenge to the way the world operates, and it invites those who follow Christ to live according to a reality that often appears foolish but is, in truth, the deepest wisdom of all.

Matthew 5:1–12

The Beatitudes in Matthew's gospel occur within the literary context of inauguration of the new community of God's people. Here, Jesus has just announced that the kingdom of heaven has come near (Matthew 4:17) and invited people to repent. The Greek word *metanoia* has the connotation of "changing one's course of action" and "transformation" and "renewing one's way of thinking". Jesus has also invited the first group of disciples to partake in the new movement (4:18–22). Within this literary context, the Beatitudes should be read as Jesus' manifesto for transformation in the community he has just inaugurated.

Living the Word

Micah 6:1–8

We live in dangerous times. Political leaders and powerful elites have divided people and erected barriers that God requires we break down. Barriers like race, class, wealth, gender, sex, language, age, sexual orientation, those in urban areas pitted against rural dwellers. Micah's call for social justice is one we must hear today and proclaim ourselves to our society.

Psalms 15

The Psalm is a powerful call to social truth-telling. Sadly, many of us have come to accept that there are politicians who are the proclaimers of untruth. How people use social media irresponsibly to spread harmful disinformation can be a key theme here. We should be sure of what we pass along on social media. We have a responsibility to verify information before we share it to others.

The riots in Durban, South Africa, that occurred in July 2021 were part of a broader July unrest that affected KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng provinces. The unrest was largely planned triggered and promoted on social media. This is an example of the destructive use of social media. In other places of the world, social media has been the curator of social revolutions that have changed the course of countries onto a trajectory of freedom. Social media, if used responsibly, can be a positive force in society. However, we have seen how easily it can become a platform for disorder and conflict, especially it is used to spread harmful disinformation.

1 Corinthians 1:18–31

St Paul presents an alternative vision of power and wisdom for the world. His message challenges the way believers engage with society. Too often, religious movements try to demonstrate that God is the best at the world's game, that God provides superior logic, greater strength, or better leadership than human institutions. However, Paul does not argue that God outshines the world at its own game; rather, he proclaims a completely different game altogether. The cross overturns conventional values and introduces a new order in which humility, self-sacrifice, and dependence on God replace ambition, dominance, and self-sufficiency.

This means that the gospel does not merely compete with worldly wisdom and power, but it redefines them entirely. True wisdom is not found in intellectual achievement but in recognising the self-giving love of God. True power is not about controlling others but about sacrificial service. The very things that seem weak or foolish to the world are, in fact, the ultimate expressions of divine wisdom and strength.

This is the heart of the message of the cross. It is not a call to seek worldly power under a religious banner, but an invitation to embrace a different kind of greatness altogether, the greatness of love, self-giving sacrifice, and trust in God's transforming power.

Matthew 5:1–12

Matthew 5:1–12 serves as an introduction to the Sermon, setting the stage for the themes that follow. The kingdom is underscored by kingdom-values. Jesus acknowledges that those who seek justice may face opposition, but perseverance in these values leads to true fulfilment. While modern followers may not face the same dangers as early believers, living out these principles often meets resistance from those benefiting from the status quo. The call remains to pursue justice, extend mercy, and work toward a more compassionate world.

Liturgical Suggestions

Recite the Covenant after the Eucharist

We believe in God, our heavenly Parent; We confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour; We depend on the guidance of the Holy Spirit; We seek to live together in God's presence according to all that God has made known to us, or will make known to us. We covenant to worship, work, and witness together in the fellowship of the ecumenical Church, for the building up of the body of Christ, and the manifestation of the kingdom of God on Earth.

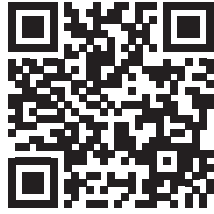
Exercise

Invite worshippers to write down their own specific Covenant commitments and bring them forward to lay it on the altar. (Needs paper and pens and a basket).

References

See:

<https://re-worship.blogspot.com/>



<https://worship.calvin.edu/>



<https://www.workingpreacher.org/>



Liturgy for the Feast of the Presentation – 2 February 2026

David Howard

Introduction

The Feast of the Preparation is the final Feast Day of the Season of Epiphany. It is celebrated 40 days after Christmas, on 2 February each year. It celebrates the events recorded in Luke 2:22–40 when Joseph and Mary faithfully observed the purification rites and presented the Lord Jesus in the Temple. Bringing Epiphany to a close, this Feast commemorates the great revelation that Jesus is the “light for revelation to the Gentiles” and the Saviour of all humanity.

Texts

Malachi 3:1–4
Psalm 84
Hebrews 2:14–18
Luke 2:22–40

Gathering in God’s name

Call to worship

Family of God, let us rise to bless the Lord
(*The congregation stands*)

Lord Almighty, Saviour of the World
How lovely is Your dwelling place
How beautiful are Your courts

**Our souls have yearned for You, O Lord,
We have longed for Your salvation
and watched for Your coming**

As the sparrow waits for dawn,
so we have taken our place
in holy expectancy and steadfast hope.

**Blessed are all who seek Your face,
and watch for Your coming, O Lord.**

And now You have come,
as the first light of dawn,
as the radiance of the breaking Day.

Your light has shone on us

Your glory has been revealed

And You have drawn near to us

Right here,

Right now.

Better is one day in Your presence
than a thousand anywhere else

**Blessed are You, Lord God Almighty,
our Sun and our Shield.**

In You the light of our salvation has dawned.

Blessed are You, Saviour of the world,

And blessed are all who trust in You.

Now and forevermore. Amen.

Act of Penitence

Let us pray

Lord Jesus, Light of the World,
Shine the purifying light of Your holiness
into every corner of our lives, we pray.

Refiner of our hearts,

Purifier of our souls,

in the light of Your perfect holiness and steadfast love
we examine our lives in silence,
and ask You to minister Your gentle correction,
and Your merciful conviction of sin.

We examine our lives in silence ...

Together we pray,

Lord Jesus,

**You were tempted in every way as we are,
yet You were without sin.**

We humbly confess

that we have all too easily given in to temptation;

we have taken the easy way out;

we have compromised the beauty of Your holiness

and fallen short of the measure of Your love;

we have paid lip service to Your Word and Your Ways,

and proven our hypocrisy by our lives.

We humbly repent of all our sin.

Lord have mercy,

Christ have mercy.

Purify and refine us by Your grace.

Lord have mercy,

Christ have mercy.

Amen.

Absolution or Assurance of Forgiveness

Jesus Christ came into the world
to call us from darkness into God’s marvellous light.

As we have stepped into the light
through confession and repentance,

we hear God’s gracious words:

“Your sins are forgiven,

Go now and sin no more!”

Amen. Thanks be to God.

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer for Illumination

O Lord,

Better is one day in the Light of Your presence
than a thousand anywhere else,
for here we drink deeply the refreshing Water of Life,
and here we eat freely the sustaining Bread of Life.

May our meditation on Your Word

enlighten our minds, enliven our souls,

refresh our hearts and sustain our resolve

to live our lives to the glory of Your Name.

Amen.

Responding to the Word of God

After the Ministry of the Word we pray:

Saviour of all,
Giver of Life and Light,
we receive Your revelation.
May the flame of Your grace and truth
burn so brightly in our lives
that all the world may be drawn to You.
Amen.

Celebrating at the table

Sharing of the Peace

The peace of the Lord be with you
And also with you.
No matter who you are,
where you're from, or what you've done:
The peace of the Lord be always with you.
And also with you. Amen.

Invitation to Communion

Our Covenant-making God has come.
Our sins have been forgiven,
and no good thing has He withheld:
He has laid down His life;
He has poured out His love;
His grace is free for all.
Come now and receive by faith:
His Body broken for you
His Blood poured out for you
And all that He would give to you.
Amen.

Sending

Post communion Prayer

We thank You Lord, that You have fed us in this sacred meal,
shone the light of Your love on us
and filled us with Your life.
We go now in peace and in the power of Your Spirit
Amen

Sentence of Scripture (Psalm 84:11–12)

“For the Lord God is a sun and shield;
The Lord bestows favour and honour;
No good thing does He withhold
from those whose way of life is blameless.
Lord Almighty,
Blessed is the one who trusts in You.”
Amen.

Benediction

Our eyes have seen the beauty of Your saving grace
Send us now to be Your light in this world.
And go with us forevermore.
Amen
Sovereign Lord, as You have promised,
Dismiss us now in peace.
Amen.

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- “Be Thou my vision”
- “Hail to the Lord’s anointed
- “Open the eyes of my heart, Lord

Closing Song: “Shine Jesus shine”

Word and Life for the Feast of the Presentation – 2 February 2026

David Howard

Texts

Malachi 3:1–4
Psalm 84
Hebrew 2:14–18
Luke 2:22–40

Introduction

As mentioned on the Liturgy page, The Feast of the Presentation celebrates the events recorded in Luke 2:22–40 when Joseph and Mary faithfully observed the purification rites and presented the Lord Jesus in the Temple.

The Scriptures set for this Feast Day should ignite in us a longing for the beauty of the Saviour's Sanctifying Presence. Luke 2:22–40 shows us Simeon and Anna's longing as they watched and prayed for the coming of the Messiah. Psalm 84 invites us into the place of longing for the holy presence of the Life-Giving God ourselves. Malachi 3:1–4 offers the sobering reminder that God brings life through purifying our lives of everything that robs us and others of life – and that can prove profoundly uncomfortable. Likewise, Hebrews 2 reminds us that our Life-Giving Saviour makes atonement for our sins but also empowers us to overcome temptation and to grow increasingly into his holy likeness.

Hearing the Word

Comments on Malachi 3:1–4

About a hundred years after their return from exile, the people of God had fallen into old habits of unfaithfulness and corruption in their worship of God. Into that context, God sent the prophet Malachi, whose name means “my messenger”, to speak God's words of rebuke and correction. Malachi called God's people to repent of their sins and plead with God for grace.

In our passage for today Malachi foretold the coming of two other messengers of whom he was only a foreshadowing. The first such messenger (3:1a) is interpreted by many Christian commentators to be fulfilled in John the Baptist, who prepared the way of the Lord. The second is the Messiah Himself who would come to establish the New Covenant and was the “Desire” of his people (3:1b).

But note the warning that follows. The Messiah's ministry would be anything but comfortable. His mission would be the purification and refinement of God's people. And yet, even in that warning there is a word of hope, for the Messiah will “sit” as this “refiner and purifier”. This ‘sitting’ communicates an element of intense concentration on the careful work of one using fire to bring out the purity and beauty of a precious metal.

Comments on Psalm 84

Psalm 84 expresses absolute delight in the house of worship and in the privilege of dwelling there, surrounded constantly by the worship of God's people. It is the song of someone who loves and marvels at the privilege of worship, and finds rich blessing in God's presence there. It's not at all a stretch of the imagination to suggest that both Simeon and Anna shared the psalmist's passion for the Temple, delighted in the privilege of dwelling in the house of the Lord, and longed to praise Him there.

As one of the Psalms of Ascent, Psalm 84 was sung for generations by groups of pilgrims making their way up to the Temple to attend one of the great Feasts or simply to mark a special occasion, such as the dedication of a firstborn son. One can imagine Joseph and Mary singing Psalm 84 as they approached the City of Jerusalem to dedicate Jesus there.

Comments on Hebrews 2:14–18

Our passage begins after a quote from Isaiah 8:18 in Hebrews 2:13, which pictures the risen and triumphant Jesus standing in the presence of Almighty God surrounded by the flesh and blood “children” whom He has redeemed. It is a great declaration of his return to glory in triumph over sin and death.

But, for Him to triumph in this way, it was necessary for Him first to descend and take on human flesh. This is the focus of v.14–18. Hebrews 2:14–18 describes Jesus as having shared in our humanity (v.14), having been made fully human in every way (v.17), having been tempted just as we are (v.18) and having pioneered our salvation through his self-sacrificial death for us (v.14). Having become fully human, Jesus Christ was perfectly positioned to become our merciful and faithful high priest, and to make atonement for our sins (v.17). And now He is also able to help us to overcome when we are tempted (v.18). In this reading we observe Jesus' ministry of sanctification.

Comments on Luke 2:22–40

Mary and Joseph visited Jerusalem to fulfil the requirements of the Old Covenant. They gave the offering for Mary's ritual purification as provided for in Leviticus 12 and they dedicated their firstborn son, Jesus, in accordance with Exodus 13:13–15. It seems that, due to their poverty, they combined the two offerings for these sacred events. Luke is intent on showing that Jesus was raised under the Law of Moses and the Old Covenant it represented. Jesus was fully human and He was fully Jewish too.

The way Simeon is described (“righteous and devout”) tells us that he was sincerely devoted to God, loved God, stood in awe of God, longed to please God, lived his life in accordance with God's will and waited in holy expectation for the Messiah; i.e. the anointed Saviour King who would come to establish God's Kingdom in Israel. That day in the Temple, the Holy Spirit opened his eyes to see Jesus for who He truly was.

Simeon's prophetic utterance, now used as the "Nunc Dimittis" (v.29–32), shifts the attention from Simeon to Jesus. In Jesus, Simeon sees the one who will bring "salvation" and who will be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" and "the glory of Your people Israel". Simeon himself stands as an example of one whose eyes have been miraculously opened to see the Saviour in the unlikely form of a helpless infant.

The other important character in our passage is *the prophet, Anna*. While it may simply be genealogical, it seems significant that she is described as "the *daughter of Phanuel*", because "Phanuel" means "the face of God" in Hebrew. Anna's dedication to worship, fasting and prayer had made her a daughter of God's face. She sought God's face. She sought the beauty of God's presence and goodness, and this pursuit affected every part of her being. She had dedicated her lengthy widowhood (v.36) to the pursuit of God, spending every waking moment in worship, prayer, and intentional fasting. Her hunger for God was rewarded as she saw the face of God in the infant Jesus.

Like Simeon, Anna saw Jesus for who He was. We are not told exactly what she declared about Jesus, but she gave thanks to God and spoke about Jesus to "all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem". Clearly, she also saw Jesus to be the One whom God would use to bring liberation to his people.

Interpreting and Preaching the Word

Our sermons for today should reflect the fact that this is the Feast of the Presentation. This is a moment to celebrate great hope and light in the midst of darkness. It is a moment to celebrate that people of all nations are invited to participate in the Kingdom of God in Christ Jesus. It is a moment to encourage people to wholeheartedly seek the presence and ministry of the Living Christ in our midst.

Malachi ministered to people who had grown complacent and had lapsed into much compromise. More than a century after returning from exile in Babylon, the priests and people alike had fallen back into the habits of previous generations. They were breaking God's laws, bringing half-hearted, unworthy sacrifices, withholding their offerings, and living out of step with the just and life-giving ways of God. They paid lip service to their God, but their lives did not align with their confession. Malachi's warning was that the Saviour for who's coming they longed would arrive with refining fire to purify his people. As preachers, we would do well to consider how our local congregations need to experience the refining and purification of the Saviour. Thirty years after Apartheid was dismantled, how has my local church fallen back into the disobedience, separation or isolationism of past generations? How are we compromising the will of God? How are we complacent? How are we living out of step with God's just and life-giving ways? Might we be bold enough to allow Jesus to shine his light into our dark corners to bring revelation, so that we may repent, turn to Him and be saved.

It seems to me that the combination of Malachi 3 with Hebrews 2:14–18 in the lectionary, provides an unmistakable focus on the purifying and sanctifying work of Jesus. Every local church, and every Christian, faces the constant temptation to compromise, to take the low road, the easy way out, the way of the world rather than the way of Jesus and his self-sacrificial love. Jesus' ministry aims to liberate us from these lesser ways of living. He became like us in every way so that, through faith in Him, He might transform us to be like Him. Again, as preachers we should highlight the ways our listeners and local congregations are currently experiencing the temptation to adopt lesser ways of living – ways that align with the fallen world more than with Jesus. Might we be tempted (however subtly) to adopt the world's materialism, individualism, racism, escapism, power-hunger? Jesus longs to set us free. There are so many areas of weakness and struggle for contemporary Christians, but which one is most relevant (most tempting?) to your particular listeners? The prosperity gospel? The "me-and-my-Jesus" approach to spirituality? The subtle attitudes of racial or ethnic superiority? The lure of the idol of entertainment, fantasy, pornography, etc.? The disturbing power-struggles that destroy churches and nations?

In conjunction with the other readings, Luke 2:22–40 invites us to proclaim the tremendously joyful Gospel-News that all is never lost for the people of God. After 400 years of longing (between Malachi and Luke 2) and after two lifetimes of longing and praying (for Simeon and Anna) the Saviour appeared. No matter how corrupt our society has become, and no matter how compromised the Christian Church might have become, Jesus Christ is still the Light who brings the revelation of God's glory and goodness. He is still our Saviour and Deliverer. He can still transform his people into his image and into an expression of his glory.

Jesus invites us to pray and fast and seek his face with the dedication and passion of Simeon and Anna – a passion and dedication so beautifully foreshadowed in Psalm 84. And, speaking of Psalm 84, no matter how much our lives, our churches or our society may resemble the "Valley of Weeping" (Ps. 84:6), the Lord can and will transform them into "a place of springs" covered with pools of living water.

Jesus also invites us to be aware of the reality that he still comes to us today clothed in unexpected and unlikely disguises. Only Simeon and Anna noticed the Saviour of the world in the face of a nondescript peasant baby in the Temple that day, for only their spiritual eyes and ears were open. Perhaps this Feast of the Presentation is also a moment to call God's people to open our eyes to the face of God in the stranger, the least, the last and the outcast.

Living the Word

Having heard the Word proclaimed today, what could our individual listeners or congregations resolve to do about it?

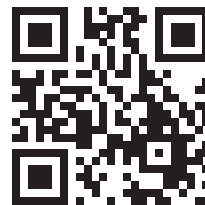
Certainly both Malachi and Hebrews would invite us to engage in serious introspection, seeking the light of Christ to shine into the dark corners of our individual or corporate lives, to reveal sinful attitudes, habits and practices to which we may have become blind. They invite us to repentance from these things and to seeking God's grace in Christ for our transformation.

Both Psalm 84 and the examples of Simeon and Anna could inspire us to embark on an intentional season of prayer for the renewal of our passion for the presence of God, and of our communal lives of prayer and worship.

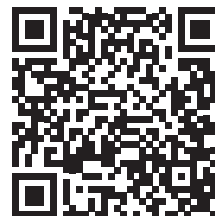
Simeon and Anna could challenge us to embark on a personal or corporate mission to observe the presence of Christ in unexpected people and places. We might invite our congregations to walk the streets around our church buildings, homes or our places of work (before work, over lunch, or after work) and to engage with a stranger, a person living rough in the area, a lonely person, an elderly person, a waitron, or anyone in whom we might least expect to encounter Jesus. Might we encourage one another not to allow these engagements with strangers to be for the purpose of 'evangelism' but rather simply to build a human connection through which we might see Christ's presence. Might we see these as opportunities to share the light of his presence in *us* with those we meet, through simply expressing the light of his grace, generosity, kindness and compassion.

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Word and Life for the 5th Sunday of Epiphany – 8 February 2026

Craig Morrison

Texts

Isaiah 58:1–9a, (9b–12)
Psalm 112:1–9 (10)
1 Corinthians 2:1–12, (13–16)
Matthew 5:13–20

Introduction

Year A of the Revised Common Lectionary's texts for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany invites preachers to emphasise social justice as an expression of righteousness, celebrate God's light in the world, follow the Spirit's guidance, and recognise Christ as the fulfilment of the Law. It is a call to live out faith through action, reflecting divine justice and embodying the transformative power of God's presence in the world.

Hearing the Word

Isaiah 58: 1–9a (9b–12) The full pericope, viz. Isaiah 58:1–12 calls for genuine righteousness, emphasizing justice, compassion, and faith demonstrated through action rather than mere religious observance. The passage critiques a community that outwardly appears devout but faces divine judgment for neglecting justice. Written in a post-exilic context, it reflects the struggles of returning exiles, facing hardships, famine, and social division, all the while raising the question of how God's presence is revealed amid suffering and injustice.

Isaiah presents God as a champion of justice, attentive to the cries of the oppressed. The whole book interprets the Babylonian exile as part of a divine plan of judgment and restoration. This final section, known as Third Isaiah (Isaiah 56–66), is addressed to those living in Jerusalem during and after Israel's return in 539 BCE, emphasising that God is exalted through justice and calling the community to live accordingly.

Psalm 112:1–9 (10) celebrates those who fear the Lord and live generously, reflecting God's light in the world. As a Wisdom Psalm, it offers guidance on righteous living and faith, similar to other wisdom literature in the Old Testament. Like Psalm 111, it is an acrostic poem, with each of its twenty lines beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. While Psalm 111 focuses on God's mighty deeds, Psalm 112 instructs believers on how to respond to God. One scholar distinguishes the two, describing Psalm 111 as "theology" and Psalm 112 as "anthropology", in other words, God's character versus our human response.

1 Corinthians 2:1–12 (13–16) features Paul proclaiming Christ crucified, relying on the Spirit's wisdom rather than human understanding. In the preceding chapter, Paul addresses divisions among the Corinthian Christians. In chapter 2, he shifts to a deeper theological reflection on the gospel's wisdom, contrasting human intellect with the power and revelation of the Spirit. Maturity in Christ comes not through eloquence or worldly wisdom, but through the Spirit's guidance.

Matthew 5:13–20 presents Jesus' teaching that his followers are the salt of the Earth and light of the world, calling them to live in a way that preserves goodness and illuminates truth. He then emphasizes that he has come not to abolish the Law, but to fulfil it. The gospel of Matthew portrays Jesus as an authoritative teacher, reinforcing his role as the one who both upholds and deepens the meaning of God's commandments.

Interpreting the Word

Isaiah 58:1–9a (9b–12) The people believe they are doing everything right and that God has failed to remain faithful (vv. 2–3). They are confused, thinking that fasting will please God and bring divine favour. Having been taught that fasting is a pious act, they are shocked by the prophet's harsh rebuke. How could their devotion displease God?

The prophet disrupts their claims to righteousness, calling instead for justice: loosening the bonds of oppression, sharing with the poor, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, reconciling with family, and helping the afflicted. These are not isolated good deeds but actions that reshape society, dismantling unjust relationships. God desires not so much ritual piety but a complete transformation of how people relate to one another.

Psalm 112:1–9 (10) Here follows an outline of Psalm 112.

Outline of the Psalm

Verse 1a: A Call to Praise

Verses 1b–3: Praise of Those Who Reverence the Lord

Verse 4: The Fate of the Upright

Verses 5–9: The Deeds of the Righteous

Verse 10: The Fate of the Wicked

The psalm begins with "*Hallelujah*", part of a group of psalms (Psalms 111–118) where this phrase is repeated at the beginning and end. The first verse varies in translation, "Happy are those who fear the Lord" (NRSV) vs. "Blessed is the man ..." (NIV). The Hebrew word '*ashre*' implies more than happiness or blessing; it conveys *contentment*, that is, the peace of following God's path faithfully.

1 Corinthians 2:1–12 (13–16) Paul explores the paradox of the Gospel, describing his message, ministry, and God's wisdom. He surprises the Corinthians by the way these elements interpret one another. Paul challenges human expectations of power and success. He recalls ministering in weakness, fear, and trembling (v. 3), embodying the message of the cross. If the cross is central, then true ministry reflects its humility. The world sees weakness and failure, yet through this, the Spirit's power is revealed, compelling listeners. This paradox, strength through weakness, defines the Gospel, pointing to a God who brings life through a crucified messiah (vv. 4–5).

Matthew 5:13–20 The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus’ defining teaching, setting the tone for Matthew’s gospel. Initially addressed to his disciples (5:1), by the end, the audience expands to the broader crowd (7:28).

A key theme is righteousness (*dikaiosune*), understood here as justice. The sermon begins with the Beatitudes (5:3–11), which emphasise God’s favour toward the marginalized, those who mourn, the meek, and the peacemakers, challenging cultural norms. Under Roman rule, peace-making was not a celebrated virtue.

The sermon on the mount concludes with a call to obedience (7:24–29), likening Jesus’ words to a new Torah. While God grants favour (salvation), following Jesus requires total commitment, full discipleship as a living sacrifice.

Preaching the Word

Isaiah 58:1–12 offers a profound opportunity to explore key prophetic concerns, viz. justice, oppression, and care for the vulnerable. The passage highlights a community earnestly seeking to worship God but failing to integrate their spiritual devotion with ethical conduct. Their fasting, though a significant religious practice, does not translate into actions that reflect genuine righteousness. The prophet condemns this disconnect, insisting that worship divorced from justice is empty and self-serving. True worship must manifest in tangible acts of mercy and justice, not just in ritual observance.

To fully grasp the passage’s theological weight, we must consider its historical context. Isaiah 58 is written during a time of deep uncertainty in Israel’s history. The Babylonian exile had stripped the nation of its political and religious institutions. With the return of some exiles, the question of restoration loomed large. The monarchy was gone, and the temple lay in ruins. How should the people move forward? Should they rebuild the temple, or maybe they should reestablish the Davidic throne? These uncertainties fuelled anxiety about God’s future for Israel.

Isaiah’s response is clear: true restoration is not about rebuilding institutions alone but about aligning communal life with God’s justice. The passage calls for a restructuring of society where the hungry are fed, the homeless are sheltered, and the oppressed are set free. God’s concern is not empty piety but a community actively embodying divine justice.

Psalms 112:1–9 (10) This psalm presents a vision of the righteous person whose life reflects God’s enduring justice. The concept of righteousness here extends beyond moral correctness to embody a life lived in alignment with divine justice and right order. This idea is deeply rooted in Hebrew thought, where righteousness is more about right actions than simply right belief.

The psalm declares that the righteous are “*content*”, suggesting a deep peace found in living according to God’s will. This *contentment* is not passive but results from trust in God’s justice. In verse 4, the promise of “light in the darkness” echoes similar descriptions of God in Psalm 111:4. This suggests that the righteous person’s life mirrors divine attributes of graciousness and mercy. Living righteously, then, is not just about following rules but about embodying God’s character in one’s personal and social actions.

1 Corinthians 2:1–12 (13–16) St. Paul continues his argument about the paradox of the Gospel in 1 Corinthians 2, emphasising divine wisdom over human wisdom. This passage offers four key themes:

Called to Be Saints Together – Paul uses the plural “you”, reminding the Corinthians that their call is communal. He intentionally avoids “lofty words of wisdom”, countering the divisions in Corinth where different factions claim superior spiritual insight.

Together, We Lack No Spiritual Gift – The Spirit of God enables believers to understand and exercise the gifts granted by God, not through human reasoning but through divine revelation.

It’s Not About You – The crucified Christ challenges human notions of success and self-sufficiency. True wisdom and power come from the cross, which turns conventional values upside down. St. Paul insists that the only glory worth seeking is found in God’s grace revealed through the cross.

God Is Faithful – Despite human divisions and misunderstandings, God’s faithfulness remains constant. The Corinthians’ struggles reflect broader tensions in the Christian community, yet God’s grace sustains them even in their failings.

Matthew 5:13–20 Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is foundational to Matthew’s gospel, shaping the identity of his followers. In this passage, Jesus calls his disciples to be salt and light, emphasising their communal role in reflecting God’s kingdom.

A crucial detail in this passage is the use of the plural “you” in verses 13–16. This means that no single individual fully embodies the role of salt or light; rather, the whole community together reflects God’s presence. The metaphors themselves reinforce this communal aspect:

Salt works best in combination with other elements. In cooking, salt enhances flavour, just as God’s people are meant to enrich the world around them (see Job 6:6). In biblical sacrifices, salt was a key component, signifying purification and covenantal faithfulness (Leviticus 2:13; Ezra 6:9; Ezekiel 43:23–24).

Light is only effective when it illuminates something. It serves its purpose by revealing and enhancing what is already present. Jesus’ followers are called to bring light into dark places, allowing others to perceive God’s truth.

Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:13–20 also reinforces his relationship to the Law. He does not abolish the Law but fulfils it, revealing its deeper intent. The righteousness he calls for surpasses legalistic observance; but it is a transformative way of life that aligns with God’s justice and mercy. Discipleship requires active engagement, living as salt and light in a world that desperately needs both.

Living the Word

Isaiah 58:1–9a, (9b–12) emphasises God’s deep concern for justice, freedom, and societal well-being. True fasting, according to God, is not merely abstaining from food but actively working to eliminate oppression and meet the needs of the hungry. The passage assures that when this kind of fasting is practiced, God will respond. The people lament that God does not seem to notice them, and in response, God clearly outlines how they can draw divine attention, by pursuing justice and caring for others.

The prophet does not dismiss religious rituals entirely; rather, the concern is that they can become self-serving if detached from social responsibility. Isaiah 58 calls for a faith that is both spiritually devout and socially engaged. In many ways, this passage parallels Jesus’ teaching about being the salt of the Earth and the light of the world, reminding believers that righteousness must extend beyond private devotion into public action.

Psalms 112:1–9 (10) describes the righteous as those who illuminate the world through generosity and justice, embodying God’s light. Jesus’ call for his followers to be salt and light challenges believers to live visibly as agents of God’s kingdom, making faith tangible in daily life. A thought-provoking question for reflection is: In what ways are we acting as salt and light within our communities?

1 Corinthians 2:1–12, (13–16) addresses the divisions within the Corinthian church over differing interpretations of the gospel. St. Paul reminds his audience that despite human disagreements, God remains faithful. As established in 1:8–9, God’s unwavering faithfulness sustains believers, ensuring they remain blameless. Through the Spirit, God grants diverse gifts to each follower, uniting them in the mind of Christ as a counterbalance to human tendencies toward discord and divisions.

Paul repeatedly references the cross of Christ (1:17), the word of the cross (1:18), and “Christ crucified” (1:23) as shorthand for God’s intervention in the world. This intervention is an act of self-emptying, kenotic love, through which Christ gave his life to inaugurate a new age. The wisdom of the world is overturned by the wisdom of the cross, where God’s power is revealed in apparent human weakness.

Matthew 5:13–20 presents Jesus’ well-known teaching on salt and light. Notably, Jesus speaks in the present tense, his followers are already salt and light, not merely destined to become so in the future. This teaching defines not only the nature of God’s kingdom but also the identity of its people. Followers of Jesus do not passively receive abundant life; rather, they actively engage in shaping a world characterised by justice, compassion, and kindness. The call is not simply to enjoy personal blessings but to embody a faith that transforms the lives of others, making the presence of God visible through righteous action.

Word and Life for the 6th Sunday of Epiphany, Transfiguration Sunday – 15 February 2026

David Sylvester

Texts

Exodus 24:12–18
Psalm 2 or Psalm 99
2 Peter 1:16–21
Matthew 17:1–9

Introduction

The Transfiguration depicts Jesus being transformed on a mountain, his face shining like the sun and his clothes becoming dazzling white. It is an important event in the earthly life of Jesus Christ in which his inward hidden glory became visible to his inner circle of disciples – Peter, James, and John. Jesus took the three disciples to a mountain top and there suddenly, the inward, hidden glory of Jesus shone through his body, and he was seen conversing with Moses (representing the law) and Elijah (representing the prophets). During the encounter God announced that Jesus is God's beloved Son. The episode is recorded in Matthew 16:28–17:8; Mark 9:1–8; Luke 9:27–36; and alluded to in 2 Peter 1:16–21.

Hearing the Word

Exodus 24:12–18

Exodus 24:12–18, depicting Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai, serves as a powerful prefiguration of the Transfiguration, highlighting God's glory, the importance of divine revelation, and the role of a mediator in connecting humanity with the divine. Moses spend forty days and nights on the mountain which is significant inasmuch as the Scriptures associate the number forty with significant transitions in the salvation history: the flood of Noah and the Arc lasted 40 days; the Israelites spies spent 40 days in Canaan; Elijah's journey to Horeb took 40 days; Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness at his temptation; and 40 days passed between the death and ascension of Jesus.

This reading has shaped the traditions of transfiguration that we find in the Synoptic Gospels. Placed on Transfiguration Sunday, this passage, which describes Moses' encounter with Jesus on Mount Sinai, brings the season of Epiphany to conclusion. Thus, in this season of reflection upon God's manifestation and incarnation, today's lesson brings us to the place of revelation—God's holy mountain—where heaven meets earth and humans encounter the divine.

There are three prominent themes in this passage: 1) Moses the mediator; 2) the manifestation of the Lord's glory; and 3) the significance of the revelation. Moses' special status among the people and among the leadership of Israel is accentuated in this passage. The entire event is a holy occurrence, a specially marked encounter between God and human upon the mountain, from which divine instruction emerges. The event points simultaneously to the Lord's presence among the people and the uniqueness of Moses who alone enters the cloud. The sanctity of this

encounter emphasizes the importance of the directions for the Tabernacle that follow.

Psalm 2

Psalm 2 is a royal psalm, likely composed for the coronation of a king, which speaks of God's chosen king and the nations' rebellion which finds a powerful echo in the Transfiguration, where Jesus, the Messiah, is revealed in glory as God's Son, fulfilling the psalm's promise.

The Psalm speaks of God's chosen one who will rule over the nations. It describes the nations plotting against God and God's anointed one, and seeking to break free from God's rule. In response God, however, laughs at their futile attempts and declares that he has set God's king on Zion, God's holy mountain. The psalm proclaims that God has said to God's king, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you" (Psalm 2:7). The Transfiguration, where Jesus is transformed before his disciples; it is a powerful manifestation of this promise and voice from heaven declares, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 17:5), echoing the language of Psalm 2:7; it reveals Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, and the one whom God has anointed to rule over the nations; it is the fulfilment of Psalm 2, demonstrating that God's promise to establish God's king is real and that Jesus is the one who fulfils that promise. One can say that the Transfiguration serves as a reminder that rebellion against God and God's anointed one is futile, and that submission to Jesus is the path to true life and joy. The Transfiguration is a glimpse of the future kingdom, where Jesus will reign in glory and justice, as foretold in Psalm 2

Psalm 99

Psalm 99, with its emphasis on God's majesty, holiness, and reign, resonates deeply with the Transfiguration, mirroring the psalm's depiction of God's divine power and the awe-inspiring response it demands. The psalm emphasizes God's position as the ultimate authority, a king who is "great in Zion" and "high above all peoples" and calls for a response of awe and reverence in the face of God's majesty. God's holiness and love of justice is highlighted, and the Psalm concludes with an exhortation to worship God and obey God's statutes and decrees.

2 Peter 1:16–21

Drawing on his eyewitness account of Jesus' transfiguration, Peter asserts the authenticity of his message and the scriptures, emphasizing that it's not based on "cleverly devised myths" but on divine revelation and the prophetic word. Peter, together with James and John, were present at the transfiguration, a pivotal event where Jesus' glory was revealed, and God's voice confirmed Jesus as God's beloved Son. This firsthand experience serves as the foundation for Peter's authority and the truth of his message,

contrasting it with the “cleverly devised myths” of false teachers.

The writer of this letter, along with his sisters and brothers in Christ, is clearly facing opposition to the message that he has sought to faithfully proclaim. It is difficult to be entirely certain about the precise content of the objections faced by the preachers and teachers, but within the whole context of 2 Peter we note that there seems to be a relationship between the *parousia* (Grk the time when Jesus Christ will return) of Jesus rooted in the prophetic words we read in the Old Testament (2 Peter 1:19; 3:2) and an emphasis upon living lives of good character (2 Peter 1:5–7; 3:11). What makes most sense here is that the writer is contrasting the gospel message with the myths perpetrated by the “false prophets” (2 Peter 2:1).

It is important to note that the writer, having already emphasized the authenticity of his evidence as eyewitness to the event of the transfiguration, now makes clear that his witness statement about the content and character of the King and his Kingdom is fully in line with all that the prophets had spoken about. This double witness is commended to the readers to encourage them and create a light of hope within them even as they live in an era where the culture and society promotes and rewards injustice, disregard of God, and dismissal of loving kindness.

Matthew 17:1–9

Jesus takes his inner circle of Peter, James, and John up a high mountain alone where he is transfigured before them with his face shining like the sun and his clothes becoming white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. On the mountain top God revealed a glimpse of the true nature of Jesus – the Divine Son of God, the Divine Word Incarnate in the flesh, God Himself, taking up our human nature and existence, coming down into our midst and walking among us, so that through his coming, he may reach out to us and embrace us as His own. He came to us as God who truly loves each one of us, gathering us from among the nations, and calling on us all to follow him, turning away from our sins.

The Transfiguration of Jesus and appearance with Moses and Elijah, highlights again everything that God has done for our sake. Moses represented the Law of God, the Law and the Ten Commandments, and everything that God has provided to God’s people Israel, during the time of their Exodus from Egypt and journey to the promised land. Elijah represented the Prophets of God, the many prophets through whom God sent God’s reminders and assurances to God’s people, reminding them of God’s love and faithfulness, of the coming of God’s salvation, and the revelation of God’s love and truth. The appearance of Moses and Elijah together with the Transfigured Christ affirms us all that the Lord has truly been faithful to the Covenant established with us, and God wants us all to put our complete trust and faith in him and follow him.

But Jesus was not ready for the news of his transfiguration to be spread and: “As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” The three disciples obeyed the Lord.

We read today of the obedience of many to God. We see as we read the Gospel, we realise the cost of obedience to God. Jesus shows utter obedience again as he comes down from the mountain ready to go to his Passion, his suffering and death in Jerusalem, to be betrayed by one of his own disciples, to be rejected by his own people and the chief priests, condemned to death. He showed us perfect and selfless love. Jesus showed us in person why we can trust God and put our faith in God.

Interpreting the Word

What does the transfiguration mean to us today? Placed in the context of the life and mission of Jesus, the transfiguration is an integral part of the promise to those who believe in and follow Jesus. As Jesus is transfigured into glory by following God’s will, so too will each Christian disciple be transfigured. It is a promise to you and me.

There are several truths that we can take from the transfiguration narrative. The first is that **as we follow Jesus, He will prepare us to face the next situation in our lives because Jesus is for us and will always be with us.** In the same way that he was preparing the disciples for what was going to happen in their lives, even though they were not able to fully grasp it, Jesus is constantly preparing us for what is in the days before us. He will give us “something to hold onto” as well.

The second is that **as we follow Jesus into our unknown future, it would benefit us to also “listen to him.” His words are for us.** The disciples had preconceived notions of how their future, and that of Jesus, was to unfold, but they needed to place their hopes and expectations in Jesus. We must also put aside our preconceived notions and put our hope in Jesus. We need to listen to him. Today we listen to him by in prayer and our quiet times and reading our Bibles and resting in the truth of his word.

The third truth is that **life is bigger than what our eyes can see.** The disciples needed to be reminded that God was at work in the world accomplishing God’s purposes. We, like the disciples, need to abandon our life agendas and turn our attention toward the greater work that God is doing.

The fourth truth is that **this glimpse of Jesus in the transfiguration reminds us that this world is not our final home.** In the same way that eternal God’s glory breaks into the kingdom of this world and Jesus is transfigured for just a moment, one day the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord. We are to live with this in mind. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Preaching the Word

What is the purpose of following Jesus? The disciples had been following him for three years: watching him pray; listening to him preach; witnessing his healing; learning from his teaching and absorbing the love and compassion that he showed everybody that he encountered. They knew something about the power and the reality of who Jesus was.

The transfiguration of Jesus Christ was a powerful demonstration of His divine nature and manifestation of his glory, which Jesus possessed prior to coming to earth in

the human body. The voice of God that came from heaven at the baptism of Jesus that said: “You are my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased” which resonates at the transfiguration with the voice of God from the cloud that says: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” The transfigured Jesus showed the disciples the promise that discipleship can bring to both this life and the life to come.

It is impossible to appreciate what’s going on with the Transfiguration unless you consciously factor in the reality that this remarkable scene takes place just a few days after Jesus had, for the very first time, told his disciples that He was going to die. When Jesus began to talk about dying it was staggering to the disciples, and they began to wonder if He was really the Messiah. Their faith wavered as this is not what they were expecting.

Jesus takes Peter, James, and John into the mountains and prays. He asked the disciples to pray, but, not for the first or last time, they fall asleep. They awake and see Jesus standing before them illuminated in light and glory which will be his when he reigns as King of King and Lord of all. The caterpillar became a butterfly. Jesus, who had so carefully veiled his physical glory, revealed it for a moment to reinforce the faith of the apostles.

The point of the Transfiguration was to reinforce the sometimes-hesitant faith of the apostles. As Jesus, Peter, James, and John return from the mountain, they find the other apostles trying to drive a demon out of a man and unable to do so (verses 14–16). When they ask why the exorcism won’t work, Jesus says it is because of their hesitant faith.

In the context, what is it that has triggered their hesitant faith? It was Jesus’ message that he is going to die and that is exactly what the Transfiguration is all about. In such an interesting and compelling way, the Transfiguration illustrates what a careful, sensitive, creative and resourceful teacher Jesus was.

Living the Word

In Scripture, God reveals Godself on mountaintops. In the Old Testament, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, and in the New Testament, Jesus gives us the Beatitudes after “going up a hill” (Matt. 5:1). Jesus died on the hill of Calvary, where the fullest revelation of his saving love took place. With the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, we have the revelation of Jesus’ divinity that shone through him as a blinding light for Peter, James, and John to behold (Matt. 17:1–9; Mark 9:2–10; Luke 9:28–36).

When we encounter God in prayer and participate in the liturgy, we are absorbed into God’s light and become luminous with it. Like Moses, this illumination happens whether we are aware of it or not. St. John Chrysostom was convinced that “it is easier for the sun not to give heat and not to shine than for the Christian not to send forth light”. Holiness is to take on the nature of Christ and to become luminous with his grace. That is why many representations of the saints in sacred art display them with a halo around their heads and bodies. At the Transfiguration, Jesus’ radiance with the light of heaven entices us and excites us with the prospect of our own transfiguration in him.

The experience of the disciples was that of light, but lurking around the edges of the story is darkness and suffering. There is a parallel between the luminous glory of Tabor and the terrible darkness of Calvary that was to follow. Yet for the Synoptic Gospels, God’s glory shone out from this terrible darkness with the greatest love that the world has ever known. Being enlightened by Christ does not mean that we are spared from times of darkness and suffering. Like walking in the thick cloud near the summit of the mountain, there are times when all we can do is put one foot in front of another, keep trusting, and keep walking.

Furthermore, participating in Christ’s light is not about a constant search for consoling luminous experiences. There are moments of darkness that we all need to contend with. Experiencing God is not about leaving darkness behind to obtain light; it’s about allowing God’s presence in the dark to purify our egos and free us from possessive desire. In this way, we seek not the consolations of God but a personal encounter with God. Encountering God’s light leads to a necessary grappling with our own darkness and imperfections. Divine light is disconcerting, but it humbles our pride and frees us from possessive desire in a way that changes us to become more radiant images of Christ himself.

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Introduction to the Redemption Cycle

Introduction

The Redemption Cycle includes the Season of Lent, Holy Week and the Triduum, as well as the Easter Season which ends with the Feasts of the Ascension and Pentecost. The specific character of each of these periods is dealt with individually, but always in their relation to one another through the fourteen weeks of the cycle.

The End of the Season of Epiphany

The Epiphany Season ends with Transfiguration Sunday. A voice affirms Jesus where he is with the three disciples on the mountain. In earlier days this was celebrated on the second Sunday in Lent, but nowadays it is deemed to be more appropriate as the closing scene in the Incarnation Cycle.

Lent

Ash Wednesday is the start of the Redemption Cycle, which includes Lent, Holy Week, the Triduum, the Sundays of Easter and the Feast Days of Ascension and Pentecost.

Calculating Easter (if you don't have Google!): Easter is celebrated on the Sunday after the first full moon on or after 21 March. Thus the earliest possible date for Easter is 22 March. The earliest possible date for Ash Wednesday would then be 4 February. The beginning of Lent on 14 February in 2024 means that there is one Sunday between the Feast of the Presentation and Transfiguration Sunday.

It should be noted that the five Sundays in Lent are described as Sundays *in* Lent, not Sundays *of* Lent. In this season, too, every Sunday is a celebration of the Resurrection, while the weekdays of Lent give time for reflection, prayer, almsgiving and penitence. The difficulty that arises for the Church in planning the Sunday services in Lent is how to appropriately engage worshippers appropriately in the Lenten disciplines while at the same time maintaining the celebration of Christ's Resurrection. The Basic Liturgy for Lent sets out some possibilities for acts of penitence in the season's Sunday services in ways that do not overwhelm the celebratory character of the services.

Holy Week

Palm Sunday at the start of Holy Week introduces a change of liturgical colour, red for Sunday, with the option of red or purple for the three following days. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday in Holy Week follow the same lessons for the Eucharist in all three of the years of RCL. However, there is also an option to read the Passion narratives in the place of the gospel passages.

The Triduum

In the Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Moravian and Methodist traditions, the Paschal Triduum straddles the two liturgical seasons of Lent and Easter. Easter Saturday is the

last day of Lent and the Vigil that ushers in Easter Sunday is the beginning of Eastertide.

The Triduum is a single service in three distinct parts and takes place over the course of three days. It begins with a greeting at the start of the Maundy Thursday service, which then ends without a dismissal. The Good Friday service should begin without a greeting but continue in the mood of the ending of the Maundy Thursday service, and then also in turn end without dismissal. The Easter Vigil of Holy Saturday starts with the Service of Light, which has no greeting before the lighting of the fire, but ends with the glorious dismissal:

Go in peace to serve the Lord! Alleluia! Alleluia!

In the Name of Christ! Amen! Alleluia! Alleluia!

This makes it imperative that the single service is carefully planned to convey a sense of a seamless whole, even as it expresses three different moods and uses very different elements to convey the full celebration.

Easter

Easter is not a single day, but a Season of fifty days – seven times seven days plus one. The services after the Easter Vigil on the First Sunday of Easter are of the First Sunday **of** Easter, with different options for the readings. However, it is possible to include some reminders of the elements of the Vigil in processing with the Paschal Candle rather than a cross and including the renewal of Baptismal Promises.

The season starts with retracing some of the encounters between Jesus and his followers. The Sundays that follow focus on the continuing ministry of Jesus, the risen and victorious Lord.

The Feast of the Ascension, forty days after the Resurrection, is an important part of the Easter Season. It marks the departure of Jesus in his post-Resurrection form after instructing the disciples to wait for the promised Holy Spirit.

The ten-day period between the Feast of the Ascension and Pentecost is observed as the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity throughout the world. With Ascension Day no longer observed as a public holiday in South Africa, the Feast of the Ascension is often shifted to the Sunday following. This detracts from that Sunday's own significant emphasis. In RCL a section of John 17 is read on this Sunday in each of the three years of the cycle, in this way emphasising the prayer of Jesus for the disciples and those who would come to believe through their witness: '*... that they all may be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*' (John 17:21 *NRSV*)

The Redemption Cycle ends fifty days after Easter Sunday with the celebration of Pentecost.

Introduction to the Season of Lent – 2026

Introduction

The reader will have noted that the season of Lent is located within the greater Redemption Cycle that also includes Holy Week and the Triduum. In this way, Lent is more than an end in itself but is rather part of a longer season of preparation for the celebration of Easter.

The English word Lent means *spring* and is related to the word ‘long’, the connection perhaps being the sense of the lengthening of the days in the (northern) spring. However, this does not express the full significance of this six-week period of spiritual discipline before Easter as conveyed by the 40 days of the Greek *tessaracoste* or the Latin *quadragesima*.

The observance of a Lenten period of 40 days is first mentioned in the Canons of Nicaea (AD 325). The custom may have had its origin in a prescribed fast for candidates for baptism. The number 40 is evidently suggested by the 40-day fasts of Moses, Elijah and especially Jesus. Lent is generally observed by Christians as a time of penance in abstaining from festivities, particular foodstuffs or drink, by practising alms-giving, and by devoting more time than usual to religious exercises. The characteristic liturgical colour for the season is purple.

The character of Lent

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the 40-day period of Lent that leads to the celebration of Easter. This is a period of prayer and fasting.

Our prayers should not be restricted to matters of individual piety alone but should also embrace the needs of the community and the world in which we live.

Fasting should not be about trying to shed superfluous weight or bringing our bodies into shape. Fasting requires that we do without something, which can act as a spiritual alarm clock to remind us to pray. This denial should cost us something, thus heightening the reminder to pray instead (so doing without broccoli might not be real fasting!) Fasting also challenges us to identify with those who do not have enough food, and to put aside material resources for the benefit of others rather than ourselves.

An important distinction should be recognised between the weekdays of Lent and the Sundays in Lent. The weekdays are time for self-examination and are usually accompanied by study, fasting, soul-searching, acts of penitence and sustained spiritual discipline. They are intended as time for reflection on the life and example of Jesus, his journey to the Cross, his suffering and his perfect sacrifice, his death and resurrection.

The Sundays in Lent continue to be celebrations of the Resurrection as is true of every Sunday in the year. It is for this reason that they are not included in the days *of* Lent.

The pastoral impact of the season

For many Christians Lent is an important time in the Church Year, calling for deep personal reflection and self-examination. It is also an opportunity for telling witness to be given within the wider community. Our self-examination and other disciplines must not degenerate into a self-absorption that leads to withdrawal from those among whom we are called to live our faith. The Ash Wednesday gospel teaches that alms-giving is a vital part of our Lenten discipline but also warns against doing it ‘to be seen by others’.

Basic Liturgy for the Season of Lent

See the earlier *Introduction to the Season of Lent* for the season's texts

Introduction to the Liturgical Season

Keeping in mind the clear distinction between the Sundays *in* Lent and the weekdays *of* Lent, as is set out in the Introduction to the Redemption Cycle, the most important aspect of the liturgy for the Sundays in Lent is the way in which the service relates to the penitential emphasis of the weekdays. In particular it will be important to locate the Act of Penitence within the Sunday worship and design it in such a way that it does not dominate the every-Sunday celebration of the Resurrection.

The Act of Penitence in Lent

The Act of Penitence can be introduced into the service in various places, and each will have a particular significance.

- 1) When used in the Gathering Rite, it is regarded as giving space for the congregation, individually and as a corporate body, to recognise that we all fall short of God's intention for our lives. Here opportunity is given to acknowledge sins, to seek God's forgiveness and to be assured that repentance opens the way to a righteous relationship with God in Christ.
- 2) When the proclamation in the service leads people to recognise shortcomings and ends with a call to respond to God's grace, then it would be appropriate for the Act of Penitence to follow the sermon, leading to an Assurance of Forgiveness and then into the prayers as a response to the proclamation and the assurance.⁽³⁾ A third option is the moment when the congregation shares the Peace during the service. Here one follows the text of Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount. 'When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.' (Matthew 5:23–24, *NRSV*)

The danger in each of these approaches is that the Act of Penitence could dominate the service, particularly if it should include the recitation of, and reflection on, the full ten commandments as is the practice in some traditions.

- 4) One further possibility is to locate the Act of Penitence at the very start of the worship time, and use the commandments as a structure in which the congregation can be given time to reflect on each commandment and the way in which they have drifted from its thrust. This is then followed by a general confession and an Assurance of Forgiveness. The Sunday service then starts with the Greeting and Call to Worship. This option provides a clear link between the weekday work of Lent and the Sunday celebration of the Resurrection while still giving both their proper emphasis.

Liturgical Features for the Season

The Liturgical colour for Lent is purple.

The Feast and Special Days during the Season

The Annunciation to Mary the mother of Jesus is celebrated in some traditions on 25 March. If this is observed on that date, the liturgical colour would be white.

This publication links Palm Sunday with Holy Week which will be discussed in that section of the Church Year.

Decorations

During Lent, decorations in the church are traditionally kept to a minimum. In most churches floral arrangements are not provided at all. A variation of this is to provide a dried arrangement to emphasise the starkness of the season.

In some traditions ornate crosses are veiled during Lent, but it might be more effective to replace them with simple wooden crosses without any decorations. This could be extended to removing gold and silver candlesticks as well, replacing them with plain wooden ones.

If these steps are taken, the reappearance of the best silver and candlesticks and decorated crosses at Easter will capture the essence of the new season opening.

Symbols of the Season

The cross and crown of thorns are symbols which could be shown on the frontals throughout Lent.

It might be helpful to erect a rough wooden cross within the church or church grounds where people could pray throughout the day. It might help to provide a table on which people could place tea-light candles if there is not a stand already available.

A Basic Liturgy for the Season

Gathering

While Lent is a penitential season in character, the Sundays in Lent should nevertheless also clearly be celebrations of the Resurrection of our Lord. Liturgy for these Sundays should therefore hold these two emphases in creative tension.

Call to Worship & Approach

Give thanks to the Lord, all God's people:

**We are the people of God;
made by God, loved by God,
and continually being formed by God
to reflect the glory of God.**

Let us draw near to worship and adore the One
who offers us abundant life.

**With all our hearts, souls, minds and strength we
worship you,
O God of goodness and grace.
We offer our lives in gratitude, love and devotion.**

The Penitential Rite could follow here

Dear people of God, Lent is a season of self-examination and repentance, of prayer, fasting, self-denial, alms-giving, and of reading and reflecting on God's Word. As we gather for worship today we present ourselves before God to acknowledge our transgressions in penitence and faith.

The weekdays of Lent provide us with an opportunity for self-examination and repentance, for prayer, fasting, self-denial, alms-giving and reading and reflecting on God's holy word.

*If we say that we have no sin,
we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.
If we confess our sins,
God who is faithful and just
will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
(1 John 9:8-9)*

Let us confess our sins to almighty God.

Hear the first commandment of God:

'I am the Lord your God:

you shall have no other gods but me.'

We recognise our failure to love you with our whole heart,
and mind and strength,
our indifference to your call on our lives,
our unwillingness to forgive others as we have been
forgiven.

A pause for silent reflection

We confess to you, O Lord,
we humbly seek your forgiveness.

Hear the second commandment of God:
You shall make an idol of anything and worship it.
We have put our trust in ourselves and our possessions,
we have neglected prayer and worship,
we have not shared the faith you have given us,
We confess to you, O Lord.

A pause for silent reflection

The same pattern of Commandment – Confession – Silent Reflection, and versicle and response is then followed for the subsequent commandments.

The full set of commandments could also be heard in this way during the Ash Wednesday service.

While all the commandments could be so heard and responded to on each of the five Sundays in Lent, another approach could be to limit the focus to two commandments on each of the five Sundays, so allowing more time for silent reflection on the individual commandments.

Assurance of Forgiveness

Jesus said:

'Come to me, all you that are weary
and are carrying heavy burdens,
and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me;
for I am gentle and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls.
For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'
(Matthew 11:28-30)

Receive the good news of the gospel:
In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

Amen

Greeting

The Lord be with you

And also with you.

Let us worship God in Spirit and in truth

Praise God! We are reconciled, redeemed, renewed.

A hymn or song of praise can be sung here. It is traditional in Lent to omit the Gloria in Excelsis which will burst into use again at the Easter Vigil.

Gathering Prayers can follow, including the Collect for Purity which is prayed together:

**Almighty God
to whom all hearts are open
all desires known
and from whom no secrets are hid:
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit
that we may perfectly love you
and worthily magnify your holy Name;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen**

The Collect for the Day, which takes its theme from the texts for the day and the Season, is prayed to conclude the Gathering Rite.

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer for Illumination

The disciples said, 'Lord, to whom shall we go?
You have the words of eternal life.'
Open our minds this day
that we may hear your words to us.
Give us the courage to live that word
in obedience to your will;
for we pray in your name.
Amen

The readings for the day

The Sermon

Responding to the Proclaimed Word

An Affirmation of Faith

The strong link between Easter and baptism, and the development of Lent as a period of preparation for baptism, would seem to indicate that the use of the Baptismal Creed is appropriate for the Sundays in Lent.

**I believe and trust in God the Father
who made the world.
I believe and trust in his Son Jesus Christ
who redeemed humankind.
I believe and trust in his Holy Spirit
who gives life to the people of God.
I believe and trust in one God
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen**

Celebrating at the Table

Sharing the Peace

Being justified by faith,
we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.
The peace of the Lord be with you always.
Peace be with you.

When Communion is celebrated during Lent, it should be a reflective and simple part of the service.

For the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving use the form that is familiar in your tradition.

After Communion this prayer may be said by all:

**Gracious God,
we thank you that you have nourished us
with the bread of life
and with the cup of salvation.
May we who have received this sacrament
be strengthened in your service;
we who have sung your praises
live to your glory;
and we who have known
the greatness of your love
see you face to face in your kingdom;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen**

Sending out the People of God

A key sentence from the text used for the sermon should be used here, to be left in the minds of the congregation as they leave.

Thanksgiving for worship

God of all times and places,
in Jesus Christ, lifted up in glory on the cross,
you opened for us the path to eternal life.
Keep us focused on our Lenten disciplines
that we might safely come to Easter
assured of your love for us
and equipped for service
as we follow your road to Calvary and beyond.
Amen

Blessing and Dismissal

To God's gracious mercy and protection we commit you.
The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you.
The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace, both now and for evermore.

Go in peace,
to serve the Lord who walked the way of the cross.
**And rose again to reveal new life for all.
Amen**

Suggested Songs/Hymns

The music for the services during Lent should reflect a balance between the nature of the weekday journey as well as the joyful celebration of the resurrection that is rooted in the Sunday service.

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Information and Suggested Preparation for Ash Wednesday – 18 February 2026

Jenny Sprong

Background

Ash Wednesday has religious significance because it marks the beginning of Lent. In many cultural traditions the day before Ash Wednesday has been celebrated with Mardi Gras, Fat Tuesday or Shrove Tuesday – signifying the end of frivolity and the beginning of solemnity. Ash Wednesday originated from a period of public penance in the early Christian Church. It is marked by the imposition of ashes on foreheads and initiates a season of fasting and prayer. Lent was originally 42 days long, but was moved back four days in the seventh century to begin on a Wednesday. This gave the devout 40 days of fasting.

Significance of Ash Wednesday and the Liturgical Cycles of the Church Year:

In several traditions – Celtic, Catholic and Protestant – the ashes that are placed in the form of a cross on the foreheads of the worshippers on Ash Wednesday, are prepared from the palm crosses (made from palm branches) distributed during the previous year's Palm Sunday Service.

Worship leaders may plan the Palm Sunday Service in such a way to include an opportunity for worshippers to be invited to receive a palm cross (worship or liturgy groups plan a work party on the day before Palm Sunday to fold these little palm crosses*) and they are provided with various options on how to use the little symbol for meditation and reflection – often used as a bookmark in a Bible or placed somewhere visible as a reminder throughout the year. When starting the cycle in your community of faith, use a palm branch and offer a prayer of dedication as you burn** it to prepare the first ashes for your Ash Wednesday Service. Mix the fine ashes with a little olive oil.

Two Sundays before Ash Wednesday and/or in your church newsletter, worshippers are reminded to bring their palm crosses back to their place of worship on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. These are collected in a basket and dedicated in the sanctuary to become the community of faith's shared joys and sorrows in the form of the ashes to be imposed on Ash Wednesday.

* Help is available online with instructions on how to fold palm crosses. If palm trees are not readily available in your area, florists are usually in a position to order a bunch for you.

** Burn dry palm crosses by cutting them into small pieces, placing them in a tin can and setting it over an open fire (or gas burner) **outdoors!** There is a lot of smoke so do take care and use tongs!

Significance of the Imposition of Ashes on the Forehead:

The practice of placing ashes on the foreheads of the congregation began in the tenth century to symbolise the start of Lent. Ashes symbolise dust, from which God has made us and the ashes also symbolise grief – the grief of having sinned and caused division from God and others.

Lenten Preparation

Programmes to help people develop their acts of kindness can be embarked upon. Giving an item a day during Lent for a *Homeless Shelter* or stocking up a *Samaritan Pantry* for the less fortunate.

Liturgy for Ash Wednesday – 18 February 2026

Jenny Sprong

Introduction and Preparation

Ash Wednesday signifies the commencement of Lent. This is the season of penitence, reflection, prayer, fasting and acts of kindness. Communities of faith are reminded of their Baptism and during this season the faithful once again walk with Jesus, sharing in the messages, experiences and ministries of the Gospel stories. Worship leaders and preachers are called to consider the full implications of this service as it is an appropriate opportunity for calling people to a deepening of their faith and commitment to Christ.

This liturgy focuses specifically on the inward spiritual journey – reflecting on personal faith and commitment. The worshipper is also challenged to be more diligent in daily meditation and prayer. The liturgy can also be used as a springboard for acts of kindness during the season of Lent and beyond. The traditional ‘fast’ in the form of ‘giving up something for Lent’ can be explained, encouraged and broadened. *(The Baptismal Font is open with a little water in it – for quenching of the Ashes – and a small bowl of soapy water and a white towel stand ready for use after the imposition of the ashes!)*

For some denominations, the Season of Lent is a time when the sanctuary appears more sombre. Appropriate worship banners and floral arrangements can also be useful in creating a more penitent atmosphere during Lent. Although praise is an ongoing part of every worship service throughout the year, during Lent hymns and prayers that include “Hallelujah” might be reserved for Easter Sunday.

Introit by a Choir

“Sunday’s Palms are Wednesday’s Ashes”

Processional Hymn:

“Spirit, Open My Heart”

We welcome the Word (an open Bible) and the Light of Christ (a lit candle) into our midst.

Gathering in God’s Name

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Call to Worship

Leader: We gather in the presence of the Light of Christ and are reminded, by the Baptismal Font, of our own Waters of Baptism.

People: We have nothing to fear from the truth, which sets us free.

Leader: Let us turn with confidence to the God of Grace.

Opening Hymn: *“O God, Be Merciful to Me”*

Act of Penitence

O God, you have made us for yourself, and against your longing there is no defence.

Mark us with your love, and release in us a passion for your justice in our disfigured world; that we may turn from our guilt and face you, our heart’s desire. **Amen** (by Janet Morley)

Prayer of Confession

Leader: From lack of reverence for truth and beauty, from a calculating or sentimental mind, from going along with mean and ugly things;

People: Holy One, deliver us.

Leader: From cowardice that dares not face truth, laziness content with half-truth or arrogance that purports to know it all;

People: Holy One, deliver us.

Leader: From artificial life and worship, from all that is hollow or insincere, from trite ideals and cheap pleasures, from mistaking vulgarity for humour;

People: Holy One, deliver us.

Leader: From being pompous or rude, from cynicism about others, from intolerance or cruel indifference;

People: Holy One, deliver us.

Leader: From being satisfied with things as they are, in the Church or in the World, from failing to share your outrage about injustice;

People: Holy One, deliver us.

Leader: From selfishness, self-indulgence or self-pity;

People: Holy One, deliver us.

Leader: From token concern for poor, lonely or loveless people, from confusing faith with good feeling or love with wanting to be loved;

People: Holy One, deliver us.

Leader: For everything in us that may hide your Light;

People: Holy One, Light of Life, forgive us, we pray.
Amen (Gathering Resources)

Silent Reflection ...

Absolution or Assurance of Forgiveness

Leader: Come, learn of God.

People: We come, experiencing God’s love and mercy.

Leader: Come, seek God’s grace.

People: We come, accepting forgiveness and worshipping God!

Symbolic Quenching of the Ashes with Baptismal Water:
(only lightly sprinkle a few drops on the ashes)

Clergy: These ashes remind us of our frailty and our mortality. This water proclaims the grace of God. The mark we bear calls us to walk the way of the Cross.

All: God, our Creator, you formed us out of the dust of the earth. May these ashes be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence, so that we may remember that only by your gracious gift are we given everlasting life; through Jesus, the Christ, our Saviour. Amen

We begin Lent by remembering the need for repentance. So let us ask our merciful God to bless these ashes to our use. They have been made from the palm crosses with which we greeted Christ, our Sovereign, with joy last Palm Sunday. They represent this community's joys and sorrows as the little palm crosses have been in our homes throughout this past year. These ashes are a sign that we mean to prepare ourselves with penitence for Easter. (Silence ... congregation invited to come forward)

Imposition of Ashes

Clergy: Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.

Response: Amen

Special Music by a Choir
"Forty Days and Forty Nights"

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer for Illumination

O God, Source of all light by your Word, you give light to the soul. Pour out on us the spirit of wisdom and understanding, that our hearts and minds may be opened to know your truth and your way. Amen

Texts

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17 or Isaiah 58:1–12 and Psalm 51:1–17
2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10 and Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

The Sermon

Responding to the Word of God

Offering Invitation

God calls us to be generous – let us offer what we have brought today – food for the hungry, contributions towards various projects and money for our Church.

Offertory Hymn

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise God all creatures high and low.
Give thanks to God in love made known;
Creator, Word and Spirit One. (*United Church of Canada*
Doxology)

Prayer of Thanksgiving

We dedicate these gifts to you, O God, asking for your blessing on them, as well as on our lives, as we seek to serve you in our community. Amen

Communion Hymn: "Ye Servants of God"

Celebrating at the Communion Table (a shortened liturgy)

Prayers of the People

Help us, Gracious God, to love as Christ loved. Knowing our own weakness, may we stand with all who stumble. Sharing in Christ's suffering, may we remember all who suffer – the sick, the lonely, the elderly and the vulnerable. Held in Christ's love, may we embrace all whom the world denies. Rejoicing in Christ's forgiveness, may we forgive all who sin against us. Amen

Sharing of the Peace

Leader: May the peace of the Human One be with you.

People: And also with you. (*We share the peace with one another.*)

Invitation to Communion

All who know and love God are welcome at this Table, where Christ is the Host.

Leader: We thank you, O God, for setting our world on its course and giving us the freedom to walk in peace and justice. We join with those who have travelled this road before us as we say together:

All: Holy, holy, holy – God of power and might.
Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest!

Leader: When we were lost, you came in Jesus, our companion and guide, who shows us your way and invites us to follow. Before the last journey, to the Cross, and finally, death, Jesus gathered with close friends for supper.

People: There Jesus shared food with the disciples.

Leader: Jesus took a loaf of bread and after giving thanks to God, broke it saying: "Take, eat. Do this in remembrance of me."

Then Jesus took the cup and after giving thanks, passed it among them, saying: "Drink this, all of you. This cup is the new Covenant, in my blood, which is poured out for you."

People: Through this loaf and cup, Jesus lives within us. In word and deed, Jesus lives among us in community.

The Elements are distributed ...

We keep a moment's silence ...

Post Communion Prayer

We thank you, O God, for nurturing our spirits in this Sacrament and for uniting us with Christ. Thank you for giving us a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, prepared for all people. Amen

Sending

Now rejoice in the Sovereign, your God, who has clothed you in garments of salvation
and covered you with a robe of righteousness! As the earth brings forth its shoots,
so God will cause justice and praise to spring up before all nations!

Sentence of Scripture

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Closing Hymn: “O Jesus I have Promised”

Benediction

May grace, mercy and peace from God – Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer – bless us, and those whom we love, and remain with us throughout this Lenten Season. Amen

Recessional Hymn: “God, Dismiss Us with Your Blessing”

Suggested Songs/Hymns

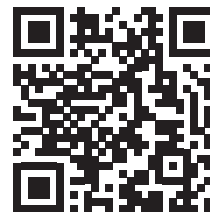
- “Come, Fill our Hearts”
- “Dust and Ashes”
- “O God, Be Merciful to Me”

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O’Day, G.R. & Peterson, D. (eds.) 1999. *The Access Bible – New Revised Standard Version with the Apocryphal / Deuterocanonical Books*. Oxford University Press, New York.

The Methodist Church. 1963. *The Methodist Hymn-Book*. Methodist Conference Office, London.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/>
(Various versions of the Bible for comparisons.)



<https://gatheringworship.ca/> (Worship resources – adapted for a South African context)



<https://www.workingpreacher.org/>
(Worship resources – adapted for a South African context)



Word and Life for Ash Wednesday – 18 February 2026

Jenny Sprong

Texts

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17 or Isaiah 58:1–12

Psalms 51:1–17

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Introduction

Ash Wednesday signifies, for the follower of Christ, the beginning of the Lenten period of introspection, repentance and reflection. Brueggemann remarks that *“In ancient Israel the symbolism of ashes was understood to be a forceful reminder of the pervasiveness of human sin and of the inevitability of human death”* (Texts for Preaching). The *Ashes*, used to mark worshippers with a cross on their foreheads, signify that which once was but is no more. The texts for this day are selected to promote thoughtful self-examination. They do, however, also encourage the faithful to move forward and to recognise the power of God’s redeeming grace, in Christ.

Hearing the Word

Exegetical Comments on Joel 2:1–2; 12–17

Not knowing much about Joel’s era, the poetry of this text leaves the reader in a bit of a quandary. The call is urgent, public and immediate and signifies a crisis (see v.15). A sentry is urged to sound a general alarm in Jerusalem. Joel seems to depict the *“Day of Yahweh”* as an awesome, dreadful, irresistible threat. Joel also warns that God is about to attack God’s own city and God’s own people. The poem seems to describe a military invasion but what is important for the reader is that the enmity of God and the certainty of human peril are spoken of in the same breath! The prophet gives the people a wake-up call and expects an imperative reply. The community is called to its senses and Joel insists it cannot be ‘business as usual’ anymore! When God is forgotten, the society becomes distorted. Ash Wednesday is for acknowledging our situation – in the world and before God.

Exegetical Comments on Isaiah 58:1–12 (an alternative passage)

Ash Wednesday brings about an annual tension between hollow, exterior and sincere, fundamental acts of devotion. The reader is reminded of Jesus, saying: *“Beware of practicing your piety before others ...”* We find this tension to be a key theme of Isaiah 58. This call is similar to a ‘call to preach’ – the Word of God reminds the hearer to be faithful. Fasting with ulterior motives is rejected and justice and mercy are given as imperatives. God’s will seems to be at loggerheads with the will of the ‘religious people’. The poetry from verse 6 onwards, which emphasises God’s requirements of justice and mercy, responds to the lament of the people who complain that when they fast, God does not notice! This passage is a reminder that believers are called to love as God loves.

Exegetical Comments on Psalm 51:1–17

Although this confession, lament and plea for forgiveness, is ascribed to King David, the poetry and language signify that the author might have been a priest. The text, nevertheless, is a pivotal one for this day. It has become fundamental in both the Jewish and Christian traditions and Brueggemann believes that including this Psalm for Ash Wednesday is *‘almost mandatory’*. It is the very universality of the psalm’s language about sin that has allowed it to speak to the widest possible variety of human experiences. The transformation of the worshipper is what matters most. On Ash Wednesday, particularly, what this Psalm addresses are qualities most closely associated with God’s salvation: a “clean and contrite heart” and a “right spirit”. It is not until people acknowledge their own finitude and corruption before God that they receive empowerment from the One who forgives and redeems. What happens to the individual person is extremely important to God.

Exegetical Comments on 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

Quite contrary to the general belief that the Early Church was perfect, Paul’s letters describe early communities of faith that experienced conflicts, struggles and misunderstandings. In this letter, Paul implores the baptised believers to become reconciled to one another and to Christ. The constant need for reconciliation is inherent in the Christian faith. Dissension is not necessarily a sign that a modern day congregation is completely lost. It is interesting to note that unlike in Psalm 51, where a human voice cries out to God for reconciliation, in this text it is God who seeks reconciliation. Paul reiterates the importance of his earlier message: that in the sending of Jesus Christ, God acts to reconcile the world unto God. Paul also reminds the Corinthians that it is God who takes the initiative to correct the situation; human beings have only to receive God’s appeal.

Exegetical Comments on Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

This Gospel text for Ash Wednesday provides a daunting background for the self-reflection and devotion, which is called for during the Lenten season. The text provides a guideline on how Christians should behave and conduct themselves when practicing their piety: acts of kindness, prayer, fasting and giving. This Gospel writer advises against a controlling religiousness that seeks to impress others. *“No person sets out to be a hypocrite”*, writes Brueggemann – often people are merely influenced by their traditions or cultures. Acts of devotion should be intended for God alone. The need for human approval can become an idol, which is then worshipped. The Gospel writer stresses that devotion should be focused on God alone. Brueggemann suggests that the *‘literary structure’* of this text and *‘its hyperbolic language’* seem to stress the extremes and most worshippers would classify their own practices somewhere in the middle. The reader is not told what the ‘divine reward’ might be for those who act according to the guidelines of this text. *“No concrete answers are offered. The text seems more*

interested in where the heart is: Is it bound up with a search for security vulnerable to various forms of decay, or is it engaged in a pursuit of God's will?" (Texts for Preaching).

Interpreting the Word

The overarching theme, throughout the passages selected for Ash Wednesday, is penitence. Each of the texts speak of the need for the believer to reflect, repent and be reconciled to both God and neighbour. In the passages from the Hebrew Scriptures, the alarm bells ring out to signify the ways in which the people (or person) have strayed from God's ways and each of the texts present a call to repentance and renewal. Each of the texts also reminds the hearer of God's interest in human well-being. God hears the cries of the people and God responds to those who truly humble themselves and pray.

The texts from the Christian Scriptures focus on the importance of genuine penitence and devotion. These are focused on the believers' relationship with God and not merely to show off or gloat about their piety before others. Ash Wednesday provides the preacher with an opportunity to highlight the importance of practicing regular and sincere devotions.

Paul's reminder to the Corinthians to not accept God's grace in vain is a remarkable theme, which can help the preacher in designing an appropriate message. Paul reminds his hearers about the difficulties they have faced and each preacher also has this annual opportunity to recall the difficulties the congregation has faced. The preacher might not have solutions or any answers to the problems they face but has an opportunity to prepare well and to invite the congregation to explore possible solutions together – participating fully in the call that Lent demands of all believers.

The Gospel passage ends with a most appropriate remark: *"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"* (v.21). Matthew's reminder gives the preacher an opportunity to focus on what a modern day congregation might view as possible 'treasurers'. The preacher can remind the congregation that Ash Wednesday and Lent are designed in such a way in order to encourage people to re-evaluate what they consider as being a 'treasure'.

Preaching the Word

Ash Wednesday is the springboard into Lent, which signifies the season for reflective occasions. Worshippers are encouraged to use this period of penitence in order that fresh discernments of reality may come. In the same way that Joel's prophecy was an 'alarm bell' ringing in the Holy City, so too, there are 'alarm bells' ringing in the South African context. Corruption and mismanagement of taxpayers' contributions are the order of the day! People of faith, in the midst of these trials, are being challenged to act justly, to show mercy and to be kind to others, whilst learning to walk humbly with their God.

Isaiah reminds the people that when they cry to God, their cry will be heard. God promises that if they feed the hungry their light would rise in the darkness and that their gloom would be like the noonday (see v.10). People today need to be reminded that God is still the same God who hears and responds. The preacher has the responsibility to remind the congregation that their cries are heard and that God knows of their plight.

Psalms 51 may be used, during a period of reflection, to challenge worshippers to interact with and respond to God at a deeply personal level. A call may be extended to believers to turn to God in penitence and contrition – asking God to create in them a clean heart. Although 'confession to a priest' is not something Protestants practise, this Psalm deals with various aspects of confession and repentance. Brueggemann suggests that the desired end-result is God's intervention, bringing about *"a changed and redirected life"*.

In the second letter to the Corinthians, we recognise Paul's growing concern regarding the dark powers of sin and mortality. There is also a sense of urgency in Paul's writings – reminding his readers that 'today' is the day of God's salvation. Daily devotions may be encouraged in this service and, if devotional material is prepared beforehand, these Lenten devotional guides could be distributed at the end of the Ash Wednesday service – to those who wish to participate.

Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount includes warnings against false and manipulative acts of devotion. The sense that God responds mercifully to those who genuinely seek to do God's will, is strong. The reward to the faithful, which is promised, is not explained but there is an unexpressed expectation that this is bound up with the upholding of God's will. The preacher is encouraged to focus on the traditional 'pillars of Lent' – repenting, giving, fasting and prayerful reflecting. The Ash Wednesday Service can also be used as a launching pad for a series of Lenten Bible Studies or a Quiet Day. Standards of Church Membership might be revisited and various programmes and campaigns in the congregation could be highlighted. Leaders in the congregation might be invited to participate and share in some parts of the act of worship.

Living the Word

The preacher is encouraged to relate the situation of the local context to the act of penitence and repentance for the congregation. Often these tie in with the opportunities (or challenges) to do acts of kindness in the community. Community Projects for Lent are often launched on Ash Wednesday. This is something the preacher might wish to examine, do some research on and weave into the message for Ash Wednesday. Adopting a crèche or a home for the aged is an option. Members could be encouraged to pray specifically for someone and to donate an item every week during the six weeks of Lent. A special choir could be called together during Lent to prepare for the Celebrations on Easter Sunday.

Liturgical Suggestions

QUENCHING OF THE ASHES WITH BAPTISMAL WATER IN THE FONT:

(Merely a drop or two of water are symbolically sprinkled on the ashes.)

Leader: These ashes remind us of our frailty and our mortality.

This water proclaims the grace of God and symbolises our own Baptism.

The mark we bear calls us to walk the way of the Cross.

All: God, our Creator, you formed us out of the dust of the earth.

May these ashes be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence, so that we may remember that only by your gracious gift are we given everlasting life; through Jesus, Christ our Saviour. Amen

We begin Lent by remembering the need for repentance. So let us ask our merciful God to bless these ashes to our use. They have been made from the palms with which we greeted Christ our Sovereign with joy last Palm Sunday. They are a sign that we mean to prepare ourselves with penitence for Easter.

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing”
- “Spirit, Open My Heart”
- “Sunday’s Palms are Wednesday’s Ashes”
- “Dust and Ashes”
- “Change our Hearts”

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O’Day, G.R. & Peterson, D. (eds.) 1999. *The Access Bible – New Revised Standard Version with the Apocryphal / Deuterocanonical Books*. Oxford University Press, New York.

Brueggemann, W., Cousar, C.B., Gaventa, B.R., McCann, J.C. & Newsome, J.D. Jr. 2007. *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Years A, B, and C. CD-ROM Edition*. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY.

The Working Preacher – online:

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ash-wednesday/commentary-on-isaiah-581-12-2>



Word and Life for the 1st Sunday in Lent – 22 February 2026

Jenny Sprong

Texts

Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12–19

Matthew 4:1–11

Introduction

For those who do not observe Ash Wednesday, this Sunday also provides an opportunity to introduce Lent to the congregation. The preacher is encouraged to assure the congregation that Lent is not the “bad news” that precedes the “good news” of Easter. Quite the contrary, Lent is the time of grace through which followers of Jesus are reminded of their mortality. It is the amazing creative and re-creative power of God – especially made known to us in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ – which affirms our life as precious. The significance of juxtaposing the story in the Garden of Eden with Jesus’ experience in the Wilderness reminds believers that although the first ‘Adam’ failed, the new ‘Adam’ triumphed over evil. Grace wins! Although there is still a gap, the Psalm and the passage from Romans remind the congregation that the gap is not too big to be bridged by hope and trust.

Hearing the Word

Exegetical Comments on Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7

Human beings have a context and this story motivates the preacher to dig deep and to move beyond preconceived theological classifications in order to hear the narrative afresh. God placed the human being (the earthling) in an intentional relationship with nature. The ‘garden’ had ‘someone’ to take care of it and the ‘garden’ in turn sustained the ‘earthling’. On the first Sunday in Lent this beautiful (intended) relationship is revisited.

The ‘garden’ needs a keeper and the ‘earthling’ needs the garden. God places the human being(s) in the garden and they are to eat freely of every tree in the garden – except *the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil*. If they ate of that tree, they would surely perish. Brueggemann suggests that “the foundational relation of creature and creator is skewed if the “wise fruit” of the tree is pursued”. It is crucial to note that the text is filled with strong verbs about God: this is the Creator who formed, breathed, planted and commanded. The serpent, in robust contrast, can only ‘talk’ with cunning and with manipulation. Firstly, the serpent questions what God had said, and secondly it contradicts what God had said, creating options for the human beings outside of what God had already granted them.

Once the human beings eat of the fruit from the “wise tree” the problem is not that they are naked but that their innocence is shattered. Fear now enters the garden and affects the relationship between the human beings and the Creator. The text invites reflection on the ‘gift of innocence’

and the ‘power of fear’. The preacher is urged to note how this text focuses on the contradictions that resist God’s good intention and distorts human innocence.

Lent gives the preacher an opportunity to distinguish between *the voice of life* and the *counter voices of death*. The ‘serpent’ offers no real gift to the ‘earthlings’. In fact the ‘serpent’ is merely a way in which ‘the gift of life’ is forfeited through a fabricated understanding of truth. Both the woman and the man (earthlings) misperceive their relation to God, and therefore, they misinterpret their place in the ‘garden’. This text not only uncovers evil intentions but it invites believers back to the single voice that speaks the truth. It is crucial to be aware that ‘the serpent’ then disappears from Israel’s narrative life – because its terrible work is done.

Exegetical Comments on Psalm 32

This psalm is one of a group of seven penitential psalms (see Psalms 6, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143). They were possibly grouped together during Augustine’s time. The psalmist’s repentant attitude, expressed throughout the psalm, is suitable for the observance of the Season of Lent. It is, however, important to also note the joyful celebration of forgiveness, which certainly anticipates Easter. This psalm is, therefore, appropriate for all seasons. Psalm 32 is eventually a declaration, proclaiming the Gospel! Quite appropriately, therefore, the apostle Paul quotes Psalm 32:1–2 in his description of “Justification by Faith” through grace alone (Rom. 4:6–8).

This psalm begins with two ‘beatitudes’ that issue a warning against misunderstanding Psalm 1. To be righteous is not merely a matter of being without sin but rather a matter of being forgiven, and of being open to God’s instruction (Ps. 1:2). It is about trusting God rather than trusting self. Psalm 32 proposes that sin and its effects are key themes in the life of the virtuous. Words for sin in vs. 1–2 and 5 frame the psalmist’s self-description of “transgression” and “sin”. The effects of sin are real, even physical – something, which modern-day followers of Christ identify with.

Verse 5c marks the turning point – the forgiveness of God is complete! None of the words for ‘sin’ recurs after this verse. Things are different for those who acknowledge their sin in reliance on the grace of God. The focus, thereafter, is personal. The reality of forgiveness guides the psalmist outward. Attention now is focused on others, who are also invited to share the psalmist’s experience. The attention is now directed to God, who is addressed in gratitude with a profession of faith. The emphatic “you” which opens v.7 recalls the “you” of v.5c and God’s character and activity are emphasised. This teaching ministry is not disrespectful. The psalmist’s witness is to God’s grace. Thus, “the way you should go” points to the psalmist’s illustration of confession of sin (v. 5) and profession of faith in God’s willingness to forgive and restore.

Exegetical Comments on Romans 5:12–19

Paul addresses the Community of Faith in Rome and highlights the truth, which runs throughout this Epistle. All have sinned and all have been justified by faith in Christ through grace. Paul applies the analogy of ‘the first Adam’ (who fails) and ‘the Second Adam’ (who saves). While Paul recognised that sin is universal, this is not to be confused with what Augustine later declared to be ‘original sin’. Paul deeply understood what Jesus introduced in his teachings about the Law. The Law merely increased the power of sin. What is also crucial is that sin existed long before ‘the Law’ but without the Law, there would be no reckoning of sin. Paul also understood that the Law, with all its rules, in fact increases sin.

In this text Paul connected the two ‘Adams’ and described how each of them sets the course for all of humankind. In the same way as one human’s ‘sin’ led to all being condemned, so too the Human One’s ‘act of righteousness’ led to the justification and life for all. All of humankind is under the dominion of sin because of the first ‘Adam’ and the whole of humankind also finds itself under the dominion of **grace** because of the second ‘Adam’, Jesus Christ. Augustine did, however, understand Paul correctly, when he insisted on the absolute universality of sin. Paul believed that sin and grace are alike in that each is a power and each is ushered in by a single event (the lives of Adam and Christ respectively). It is important to note that these two powers are **not** equals, for the power of grace is immeasurably greater and more extensive than the power of sin. Brueggemann writes: “Paul’s acknowledgment of the universality of sin *and* of what might be called the “superuniversality” of grace comes into such a context as a genuine word of good news.”

Exegetical Comments on Matthew 4:1–11

This is a most exciting text – giving the preacher at least three options to pursue:

- 1) What kind of person is Jesus? (*The voice from the cloud declaring that this is God’s Son.*)

What is Jesus’ sense of calling and what does his vocation entail?

- 2) Jesus is someone who can be trusted – Matthew’s hearers would already have heard about the events surrounding Jesus’ birth, so they were expecting someone unusual. Matthew related the story of how Jesus was being tested by the devil and how he withstood the temptations to succumb to the worldview and the order of the day. Jesus emerges fully trustworthy!
- 3) This person, Jesus, provides an example of how his followers can find clues on how to live their own lives. Looking at how Jesus deals with temptation is also an example for his followers to find meaning in their own lives and to be motivated to be faithful.

At the end of the story it is not the devil that has any power over Jesus, but Jesus who issues commands that the devil adheres to. It is clear that Satan leaves Jesus – for a time – but will return again later. However, Jesus demonstrates – for all time – how the evil one’s temptations can be withstood. For

Jesus it was in being faithful to his vocation to be God’s child. He clung resolutely to his divine calling, something that is also clear throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry.

This text shows clearly how Jesus refuses to abuse his power and perform miracles (or signs and wonders) on demand. Matthew, whom we believe wrote for a mainly Jewish audience, also reminds the preacher how truths from the Hebrew Scriptures dovetail with what Jesus experiences and says.

Interpreting the Word

At face value, the temptation story of Jesus, which is the key passage for this Sunday, is similar to stories of some of the prophets of old, who also faced difficulties early in their ministries and then, with God’s help, overcame their trials. At Jesus’ Baptism by John the Baptist, God affirmed Jesus as the One who would introduce the coming of God’s Realm. Jesus’ experience in the wilderness – directly after his Baptism – confirms that he is trustworthy and filled with the Spirit of God.

This era – the early twenty-first century – seems to be an age of untrustworthy leaders. The preacher is encouraged to suggest what qualities are needed in modern day leaders – in both South Africa and in the world. Matthew proposes some principles and attributes of trustworthy leaders and the Psalmist for this Sunday points to the importance of acknowledging wrongdoing and becoming repentant. Paul reminds the Romans that both sin and grace are at work in the world and worthy leaders would acknowledge both.

Matthew 4:1–11 might also point to a time of suffering in the Church. Jesus and the devil come face-to-face in this passage and the Church must choose: the way of the Realm of God or the way of the devil. The Church should take its model from Jesus and, in the power of the Spirit, live faithfully. Matthew uses the three temptations as models of points at which the Church is tempted to turn away from the movement towards the Realm of God and to continue to live in the selfish, violent, self-destructive ways of the old age (*Working Preacher*).

Although there are several options open for people to find meaning, in this story Jesus proves himself to be trustworthy! Matthew describes this story in such a way that the reader cannot fail to acknowledge that Jesus was at a low point in the desert. It is the Jesus who denies himself the temptation to turn stone into bread, even though he is famished after his fast, who wins the contest. Jesus is the one who rebukes the devil and acknowledges that God’s will is supreme and not to be manipulated.

Amid the numerous options open to people, to which they can orient their lives and from which they can find meaning, Jesus alone has proven worthy of trust. Matthew’s narrative offers him as one who has been assaulted at his most critical point and yet has overcome. It is this dependable, reliable Jesus, worthy of confidence and commitment, who is today present to the Church and alive in the world.

Preaching the Word

The remarkable way in which Jesus begins the ministry, which changed so much in the known Western world, deserves careful reflection, planning and attention to God's Spirit. Preachers are advised to spend time with these texts, listen deeply and discern what the current challenges, facing their congregation, are.

Droughts, wars, corruption, abuse of the vulnerable, overfishing, exploitation and many more evil practices are causing hunger, poverty and displacement of peoples. Unscrupulous world leaders are making money out of exploiting vulnerable peoples with little accountability for their actions. This reality paints a rather gloomy picture. Yet, the preacher is reminded that both sin and grace are the realities of life. Christ ushered in a new order and through faith in Christ, the Realm of God continues to be established in every age.

Sermon themes for Lent are numerous: Penitence, Salvation, Creation, Grace, Forgiveness, are some examples. Preachers also have the privilege of working with the mission and service committees in their congregations to focus on the areas adopted for special ministry during Lent. If a crèche is adopted, then the needs of this facility might spark off a specific theme or two for the Lenten period. Special services – with drama, music or dance – are possibilities, which often get through to people in a way that a 'sermon' seldom does.

Living the Word

Various Lenten programmes, studies, observances and devotional guides may be launched, publicised and/or distributed during this first Sunday in Lent. Preparation for this particular Sunday is, therefore, crucial – meetings to plan and share responsibilities for the liturgy, etc. are essential. Interviews with any project leaders might be helpful to gather information which in turn might inspire the congregation. Many communities in South Africa suffer because of lack or breakdown in infrastructure. Needs, such as access to water and power supply, are important and it is almost futile to try to preach the Gospel to people who don't have their basic needs met. Many people face their own 'Wilderness' daily and so the preacher is challenged to understand the context of the people who will be worshipping. Are they being tempted beyond their endurance? How do Jesus' responses to the devil's temptations affect and influence the local congregation?

Liturgical suggestions

Offering Invitation:

During Lent we are invited to bring our gifts in a spirit of reconciliation.

Offertory Hymn:

"Doxology" (United Church of Canada)
Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise God, all creatures, high and low
Give thanks to God in love made known
Creator, Word and Spirit one.

Prayer of Thanksgiving:

Holy God, bless and transform all that we offer:
Our faltering steps, our brokenness, our hope, our
risking,
Our hearts, that your Covenant may be written on our
Hearts and we may be a blessed and a transformed
Covenant people in Christ's name. **Amen**

Blessing:

God of the wilderness, be with us as we wander
through the desert of our lives. Keep us from running
back to the safety of old assumptions. Walk with us as
we learn to live the life abundant. **Amen**

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- Brueggemann, W., Cousar, C.B., Gaventa, B.R., McCann, J.C. & Newsome, J.D. Jr. 2007. *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Years A, B, and C. CD-ROM Edition*. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY.
- O'Day, G.R. & Peterson, D. (eds.) 1999. *The Access Bible – New Revised Standard Version with the Apocryphal / Deuterocanonical Books*. Oxford University Press, New York.

The Working Preacher – online:

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/890-first-sunday-in-lent-year-a-february-26-2023>



Word and Life for the 2nd Sunday in Lent – 1 March 2026

Jenny Sprong

Texts

Genesis 12:1–4a

Psalm 121

Romans 4:1–5, 13–17

John 3:1–17 or Matthew 17:1–9

Introduction

‘Faith in God’ and ‘Deliverance by God’ are the dominating themes for this second Sunday in Lent. Sarah and Abraham’s initial migration symbolises the movement of any person from despair to hope, from the old into the new and from death to life. Paul also confirms this evolving of faith in the text to the Romans. Nicodemus’ initial reaction to Jesus, however, epitomises the literal understanding, which, unfortunately, permeates all of the Abrahamic faith traditions. Being ‘born again’ is still misunderstood even after two millennia of Christian ministry and witness. Jesus invited Nicodemus to be open to the movement of God’s Spirit in order that his whole being could be renewed. This same invitation is presented to all people in every age and it is exactly this phenomenal transformation that the psalm for this day greets with elation.

Hearing the Word

Exegetical comments on Genesis 12:1–4a

Although very little is known about Abram and family, this text is a crucial one in the story of Israel. This call from God came and they responded – they left Haran and journeyed to the new and unknown land. God presented them with a promise and offered them a purpose – their lives would never be the same again! In this speech, the whole biblical journey to a new Land of Promise is commenced and, it is important to note, this call of God continues to make people of faith restless. Missionaries dare to go to the unknown, trusting the One who continues to call, even today. Faith gives pilgrims the ability to risk what is known and to go onto what is unknown. People of faith trust in the One who speaks. In this divine ‘speech’ there are promises of gifts – requiring faith. God’s Word is yet to be enacted upon but that gift, promise and word cannot be resisted by human despair or prevented by human inventiveness. God’s promise is kept only in God’s power. The community of Abraham is the recipient of God’s Word but never its administrator.

Exegetical comments on Psalm 121

This much-loved psalm is one of the ‘*Songs of Ascents*’. It is widely accepted that pilgrims would chant these Psalms when making their way to Jerusalem for the significant Jewish Festivals, such as Passover, Weeks or Tabernacles. A common view of ‘God’ as being elevated and ‘the forces of evil’ being depressed into the earth is maintained and this psalmist affirms that the God of Zion – Israel’s God – is the One who comes to their aid. This psalm gives voice to the basic needs of every human being and, at the same time, acknowledges the Creator of heaven and earth. It seems that

ancient Israel was confident that their Creator God was the same Compassionate God who had saved them from danger in the past. This psalmist refers to the One True God of Israel as the One who does not sleep – unlike Baal who slumbers – see 1 Kings 18:2, where the prophet Elijah mocks Baal. The theme of ‘God as Keeper’ emerges towards the end of the psalm, signifying a commitment to “keep” the ways of Yahweh (see Deuteronomy 6:2). These words remind the people that Yahweh will “keep” the people, both as a nation and individually, so that pilgrims who come with uplifted eyes are reassured that a compassionate Yahweh would preserve their going and coming.

Exegetical comments on Romans 4:1–5, 13–17

The gospel of Jesus Christ discloses God’s initiative for the salvation of all people, even in the face of their sinfulness against God. Even Abraham, who responded to God’s call, is not an exception to this claim. It is because of Sarah and Abraham’s *faith* that they became the spiritual ancestors of all believers – both Jew and Gentile. Paul relates two features of Abraham’s experience as: (a) *how* Abraham is declared to be righteous, and (b) *when* Abraham is declared to be righteous. To illustrate how Abraham was declared righteous, Paul refers to Genesis 15:6: “*Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.*” Faith plays a key role in this letter to the Romans and Paul uses the illustration of Abraham’s faith to show that circumcision wasn’t a prerequisite for righteousness but merely a “seal” thereof. This also supports the claim that God gives gifts to God’s people – freely and undeserved – such as the gift of a child to Sarah and Abraham in their old age.

Exegetical comments on John 3:1–17

This pivotal text does not stand alone. The narrative began at chapter 2:23, with the declaration that a faith based solely on Jesus’ signs and wonders was not enough. Nicodemus was impressed and viewed these deeds as proof of God’s presence with Jesus. Faith, he thought, came from weighing up the evidence and drawing logical, sane conclusions. Jesus’ response was completely unpredictable: “*No one can see the reign of God without being born from above*” (v.3). It required something else – an act of God – to change Nicodemus’ perspective.

The clue to the character of God’s new world was the action of the Human One. Jesus referred to Moses’ lifting up of a bronze serpent on a pole, which brought healing to a stricken Israel (Numbers 21:9). Jesus would in turn be lifted up (on a Cross) in order to bring healing to the whole world. The passage ends with another reference to faith (3:15–16) but it is not about mere amazement at miracles. This faith calls for a commitment to the One whose death would reveal the things of heaven. It calls for an openness to God’s Spirit, who makes all things new.

Exegetical comments on Matthew 17:1–9 (alternative text)

The disciples seemed confused – they had nothing with which to compare this experience. Jesus comforts them, though, and gives them a strange instruction, which they will only understand after the Resurrection. It is almost as though God gives them a little glimpse into God's Realm. For the preacher, making the connection between the *Transfiguration* and the *Resurrection* of Christ is significant. There is no way of 'making any sense' of this divine occasion. It cannot be translated in human terms. Although all this is not easy to translate, the story needs to be told. Reminders of the shining faces, the dazzling white clothing and the appearance and disappearance of Moses and Elijah are essential. People need to hear that God is a God of awe and wonder – even when it is difficult to understand.

The symbolic appearance of both Moses and Elijah is important. They stay only a short time, seem to talk with Jesus but do not **do** anything. Their names connect Jesus with the ancient history of God's deliverance of Israel. The *Transfiguration* is both a promise of Resurrection as well as a symbol of the *Fulfillment of Jesus' Heritage*. The *Voice from Heaven* evokes memories of Moses (Deut. 18:15) and calls disciples – both ancient and modern – to follow Jesus! Jesus' instructions **and** his suffering shape the identity and life of his followers.

Interpreting the Word

If the story of Nicodemus' visit with Jesus is challenging for preachers, the *Transfiguration* narrative is even more so. No human experience comes even close to describing what happened on that mountain. The 'voice', declaring Jesus to be God's 'Son', echoes the story of Jesus' Baptism by John the Baptist (see Matthew 3:17) and the splendour and glorious light depict God's divine presence. Preachers, focusing on Matthew's Gospel, do have the challenge to tell the story of the *Transfiguration*. It seems clear to Matthew that Peter's offer to 'build three tents' is a trivial, ridiculous outburst. Peter is interrupted, mid-sentence, by the 'overshadowing cloud' and the 'voice from heaven' that said what was essential! The disciples were not reprimanded – quite on the contrary – Jesus comforted them! This is a beautiful passage, showing how Scripture offers incredible grace to disoriented, fumbling followers!

Although Abraham isn't actually mentioned in John 3, Nicodemus models an Abram who has yet to leave Ur of the Chaldees. Nicodemus's understanding of God seems shallow – mirroring the typical literalists who still inhabit all of the world's great religions, including Christianity! His questions in John 3:4 betray an ironclad mind, which not even a well-honed figure of speech is able to penetrate. How ironic it is that Jesus' metaphor about being "born again" continues to be misread two millennia after Nicodemus's tragic display of dullness.

Preaching the Word

The Gospel text is usually the key text during Lent and on this day the preacher has a choice.

- a) Preachers, focusing on John's Gospel, are sorely challenged when faced with familiar stories, which are often steeped in poor theology. Finding something fresh and exciting to say about being 'born again' isn't easy and preaching about Nicodemus' visit with Jesus, without sounding like last year's news, will require some meditation. With reference to the TV series, *The Chosen*, an opportunity is created to merely tell the story again. What if this significant meeting created a major shift for Nicodemus in his theological understanding of the Messiah? John does not tell us much but we do briefly meet Nicodemus again in chapter 19 (see verses 38–42) – at Jesus burial! Preachers have the privilege to interpolate! A carefully selected testimony might be included in a worship service of someone, like Nicodemus, who came to deeply understand what Jesus meant by being "born again".
- b) If the 'Transfiguration' was not chosen for the theme on the last day of Epiphany, an opportunity is created to deal with this challenging theme this week. The preacher, using the *Transfiguration* theme, is encouraged to facilitate reflection on this incredible narrative and work hard at avoiding attempts to explain what happened. Do, however, treat this text with utmost seriousness and recognise that literal interpretations are not helpful. This theme lends itself to drama, role plays and special music. A Power Point Presentation with significant images could be used to highlight this narrative and bring home to the congregation that something quite out of the ordinary happened on that mountain.

Relating the various texts, set for this Sunday, to the chosen key text is always helpful. How does Moses (or Elijah) fit into the picture and does the psalmist add anything of significance to the message for the people?

Living the Word

It is crucial to relate the Christian message in as contextual a setting as possible. Lent, in South Africa, takes place at the end of summer. The congregation is not looking forward to spring (as in the Northern Hemisphere) so the illustrations for the coming Easter time must be different. Many local people are dealing with unemployment, poverty and lack of or poorly maintained infrastructure. All these concerns affect a congregation's ability to really hear the preacher. Are basic needs of people being addressed and met? It is almost impossible to preach conversion (or being born again) when people are suffering in their present life conditions.

Liturgical Suggestions

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- "We Are Pilgrims on a Journey";
- "Love, Divine, All Loves Excelling";
- "Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies";
- "Holy, Holy, Holy, Great God Almighty".

Prayer of Confession

As you gathered your followers for healing, Jesus, so your Spirit gathers us as a Church, called to be a community of restoration. Yet, we refuse to answer! We stand apart, too proud to acknowledge our need or too cynical to believe it can be met. This is our sin, O Christ.

We pour out our repentance at your feet.

As you gathered your followers for learning, so too, your Spirit seeks to enlighten us that we might speak truth in a world of lies. Yet, we hang back, sceptical that there are any answers. This is our sin, O Christ.

We pour out our repentance at your feet.

As you gathered your followers for mission, so your Spirit also seeks to send us forth – that God's reign may be advanced but we are inert, complacent in our comforts, having forgotten the passion of your Good News. This is our sin, O Christ.

We pour out our repentance at your feet.

(Silent confession ...) Amen

Assurance of Pardon

Leader: On this, our Lenten journey, we receive your compassion!

People: Thank you for the courage to examine our lives.

Leader: In your strength, Living God, our journey will be remembered.

People: Thanks be to you, O God.

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Word and Life for the 3rd Sunday in Lent – 8 March 2026

Brian Burger

Texts

Exodus 17:1–7
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1–11
John 4:5–42

Introduction

Today's texts capture the human problem of a limited worldview and stubborn sin and show a God who intervenes. Our journey in life includes snags and hurts along the way. Fortunately God never leaves us and is always able to provide what we truly need at the right time. This may be God's confrontation of our hardened hearts, teaching us a lesson in faith, or healing our brokenness and misconceptions. This enables renewed conviction to journey to a place of rest, of peace and of salvation.

Hearing the Word

Exodus 17:1–7

Although the Wilderness of Sin is a geographic name, not a moral one, it is the place where the Hebrews “sinned” through complaining about food and blaming Moses – and God! After travelling from place to place, they arrive at Rephidim, which as the name suggests, is meant to be a “place of rest.” Unfortunately, there is no water. Forgetting how God provided manna and quail in the past (Exodus 16), they “quarrel” with Moses. In his reply, Moses says that they are “tempting” or “testing” God. As the crowd's tension escalates, Moses turns to the Lord, who gives him instructions to take his staff and some community leaders with him to Horeb (another name for Mount Sinai) to witness God's miraculous act. God says, “I will stand there...” meaning “I will remain there” or “I will present Myself to you there.” After striking the rock, water flows displaying God's providence. Moses gives two names to that same place, namely *Massah* (meaning “testing”) and *Meribah* (meaning “quarreling”), due to the questions of turmoil that the people had.

Psalm 95

This Psalm evokes awe-filled worship and thanksgiving. God is the Almighty One who has made everything and is in control of all the elements. This God is greater than all the gods of other nations. When things seem to go awry, we can still worship the “Rock of our salvation.” It's a phrase reminding us of stability and dependability on the one hand. But, from our reading in Exodus, we can link it to lessons learnt regarding the “salvation” or relief from their thirst or need. The last section of the psalm refers specifically to what took place in the Exodus reading for today. The phrase “will not enter My rest” may seem at odds with the salvation God provided in the earlier portion of the psalm. But it's a phrase referring to the stubborn Israelites who were not open to what God had been doing and hardened their hearts towards God. This was certainly not the only time they complained

in the desert. They would be doomed to wander in the desert and never enter the Promised Land, the place of “rest.”

Romans 5:1–11

The word Paul used for “access” is *prosaḡōgē*, which can either mean Christ “ushers” us into the presence of God, or the actual “haven / harbour” of God's presence. This belief in justification is rooted in what Christ has accomplished for us, something the law could never achieve. As stated in the last sentences of the text, this was done while we were wayward in disobedience from God. Christ displayed God's faithful love as He died for us. Through that death, our status with God changed into a right relationship with God.

Paul also knew his readers would hit trials and tribulations, using the word *thlipsis*, encompassing things like needs, sorrows, persecution, etc. The word translated as “perseverance” or “fortitude” is *hupomonē*, a word that is more than endurance. It refers to a spirit that overcomes all tribulations, such as Beethoven overcoming his deafness as he continued to compose music. The word translated as “character” is *dokimē*, which is like metal that has been purged of impurities through fire, making it stronger and of greater value. And the “hope,” *elpis*, Paul wrote about is that which sees opportunity in the midst of crises. That kind of hope knows that we are backed by the power of God which will not disappoint us.

John 4:5–42

In verse 4, Jesus felt compelled to go through Samaria to encounter a Samaritan woman. The Greek word is *edei* meaning “it was necessary.” *Dei* is the same word Jesus used when he, as a child, said to his parents in the Temple, “Didn't you know I *had to be* in My Father's house?” (Luke 2:49). It was of spiritual, not geographical, necessity that Jesus went through Samaria. A God-ordained encounter then takes place.

The story is of a Samaritan woman who comes to Jacob's well or spring (Greek: *pēgē*) of free-flowing water in the midday sun. This encounter confronts Jesus with several problems. Firstly, her timing reveals that she is ostracized from the other women who would usually gather water and socialize in the early morning or at dusk to escape the heat. This was probably due to her string of broken relationships with men. Secondly, she is Samaritan. Samaritans had intermarried with Assyrians during the 722 B.C. exile period and were seen as impure Jews and living reminders of the Jewish oppressors in exile. Samaritans established an alternative “denomination” to Jews as they worshipped on Mount Gerizim.

Another factor is that, according to the *Mishna* (2nd Century oral law), men should never be alone with or talk too much to a woman. Rabbis did not even speak to their wives or daughters in public. Jesus overturns the religious and cultural barriers between men and women, Jews and Samaritans, and acceptable people and outcasts by respectfully addressing her. It takes her, and later the disciples, by surprise.

Interpreting the Word

Exodus 17:1–7

The people's complaint is understandable given that they have travelled from "place to place" with no refreshment at their eventual destination or resting place. Their journey takes its toll on them, seeming endless, aimless and futile. They focus their resentment on Moses. In contrast, Moses turns to the Lord for help and direction about what he can do. This would remind future generations to Whom they should turn when they feel stressed, abandoned or in need.

In spite of their behaviour - "Is the Lord among us or not?" - the Lord provides water from the rock. In future, when we think of the rock, we can connect it to the Lord who reveals God as the dependable, reliable Rock of our salvation found in many other texts of the Bible. Looking back on this story, Paul equates Jesus as being this Rock in 1 Corinthians 10:4.

The leaders were to witness first-hand the miracle God would perform, just as the Apostles in the New Testament were to do regarding Jesus (see Acts 1:21-22). They would then convey the message out of their personal experience (as the Samaritan woman did in our reading from John) so that others would also believe.

Psalms 95

This psalm is directed at the people, calling them to worship the Lord as they acknowledge and remember who God is and what God has done. The God who brought forth water to quench the thirst of people is now celebrated as the Rock of our salvation. The Almighty God is our Maker, but this does not mean that God has left creation to its own devices. Instead, the Lord is amongst us as the people or flock under His care. Think about the Middle Eastern relationship of care a shepherd had for his sheep. Forgetting this is evident in phrases like "harden your hearts;" "hearts go astray" and "have not known My ways." In other words, forgetting or stubbornly not paying attention to God's voice speaking to us and the work of salvation (as those at *Meribah* and *Massah* did) would inevitably lead to disobedience. This, in turn, would result in not experiencing an entrance into the Promised Land of "rest." There is also reference to this in Hebrews 4. This is not only a warning to worshippers in the future, but also a gracious invitation to remember what God has and is doing, with care, in our midst. When we remember and worship as the psalmist invites the people to do, we enter a security and "rest" in spite of our difficult circumstances.

Romans 5:1–11

In contrast to the Israelites' unbelief in the desert resulting in not entering "rest," we are put in a right relationship with God (justified) through faith (belief) and find "peace" with God. We rejoice (not complain as the Israelites did) in sufferings because we know God wants to teach us something worthwhile or mould us into someone better.

Christ died for us, even though we didn't deserve it. This is just like God who provided manna and water to a complaining and ungrateful nation and how Jesus addressed the woman at the well.

John 4:5–42

The woman Jesus meets at the well is in a place of vulnerability and humiliation. Life has not turned out the way she expected and there is no realistic possibility of it improving. Jesus is not blind to her emotionally broken and sinful life-story. But He treats her with dignity as a person. Before "fixing" her life, Jesus asks her for water. It reminds us that God can use us even before we feel worthwhile, before we have our lives "in order." As we face our incapacity to fulfil what the Lord requires, God offers the Spirit (living water) to help us. The water and access to God is available to everyone: man, female, Jews and despised Samaritans and sinners. That water is the grace that brings healing and the close presence of Christ within us. Like this Samaritan woman, our storyline can take a new trajectory when we have an encounter with the God who knows our secrets and loves us even when we feel unloved or unlovable.

Preaching the Word

Here are two approaches the preacher can choose when dealing with these texts:

- 1) One option is looking at common elements found in the passages. For example:
 - Focusing upon the present-day needs of people in the congregation or community.

Acknowledge the needs or complaints of the congregation – such as tight budgets, food shortage, inflation and rising electricity costs. Others might be those who are rejected in some way by society, such as prisoners or the mentally ill and disabled or those who hold a different worldview to the dominant one. While it may be difficult to identify God's presence among us as the Israelites realized, or as the Samaritan woman wrestling about a worshipping location, God is amongst us.

- The nature of God.

The Lord is capable of shaping a new reality and a different, preferable outcome. God does not react with vengeance, but responds to the complaint Moses brings with patient kindness. Jesus displays similar patience and kindness towards the woman at the well. Jesus gives the woman he encounters inspiration and instructions without ever condemning her as others had done. Salvation and new life are made possible while we were still stubborn, hard-hearted sinners.

- The Lord becomes the Rock of our salvation.

Water, forgiveness, a new start, etc. is offered even while we were complaining sinners. We come before the Lord in complete trust and total dependency when we have nowhere else to turn and find that Living Water flows from the place where God stands or reveals Himself. Whether it is on "this mountain" or "that mountain;" this rock or that well, we will discover the true worship of God in spirit and truth. God will not disappoint us.

- The instructions God gives lead to others receiving salvation too.

The Israelite nation have their thirst quenched. The woman at the well spreads the word in town and many Samaritans come to salvation. When we obey God's instruction, miracles occur and that leads to others receiving life-giving salvation.

- 2) Another option the preacher might choose is to unpack the symbolism of the images presented in the texts.

One is visiting our "Massah" and "Meribah" or "well." It is the place of our fear, pain and wrestling. But it's also a place that we hope will bring us rest (Rephidim) and water in our arid desert or midday sun. The Rock and the Well can be the place the Lord reveals Godself, ultimately in Jesus Christ. The preacher can also explore them as symbols of stability or place of gathering together to find our source of water. The water is life-restoring, salvation, healing etc. Just like water, the Lord becomes our sustenance for life. We are as completely dependent upon water and upon the Lord for our very existence.

Living the Word

How open are we to the work of God in our midst? Or do we trust in our own righteousness and strategies ending up frustrated when our resources run out and we have to keep coming back to the well? Or is our heart hardened through complaint or from being on the receiving end of "a bad deal"? Put our pride and egos aside and identify what we need the most. Spend time contemplating the astonishing range of God's creation. Give thanks for God's vast greatness and power which becomes accessible to us because the Lord cares for us.

Asking the Lord, in spite of our waywardness, to reveal God's merciful nature to us and to give generously what we need the most. Maybe this trip to the well will be a turning point for us.

Trust the Lord that He will lead us into the future. The Lord will not leave us as we move from place to place in life. Enter the "rest" or salvation God has in store for us.

Liturgical suggestions

Prayer of Invocation:

God of the wilderness and water, who shaped a people for Yourself;
Guide us through this season so that we may not avoid struggle
but take up Your invitation to repentance and prayer.
May we open ourselves to the guidance of Your Spirit
and be cleansed and revived through Your living water;
through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- "Come, now is the time to worship"
- "Fill my cup Lord, I lift it up Lord"
- "I need Thee every hour, most gracious Lord"
- "Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's wild restless sea"
- "Let Your living water flow over my soul"
- "Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us o'er the world's tempestuous sea"
- "O come let us sing unto the Lord, to the Rock of our salvation"

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Word and Life for the 4th Sunday in Lent – 15 March 2026

Brian Burger

Texts

1 Samuel 16:1–13
Psalm 23
Ephesians 5:8–14
John 9:1–41

Introduction

The themes of light and dark, seeing and not seeing are repeated in today's passages. This is particularly aimed at identifying the will of God in various circumstances. This is not always easy to do due to our own bias. We need the help of God to discern what truly pleases God.

Hearing the Word

1 Samuel 16:1–13

Following a confrontation with King Saul, Samuel was instructed to find Jesse of Bethlehem and anoint one of Jesse's sons as the next king. Jesse was the grandson of Ruth and Boaz from Bethlehem. Going to Bethlehem required passing through King Saul's territory, a danger zone for Samuel, given the incident between them in chapter 15. The Lord instructed him to take a heifer as a "distracting" story of offering a sacrifice.

As Samuel inspects the sons of Jesse, the Lord provides the necessary guidance not to rely upon outward appearances as a criterion, as had been the case with Saul (1 Kings 9:2), who was head-and-shoulders taller than others. Although David was described as handsome and "ruddy" (verse 12), physical appearance is not what God looks at, but rather at the person's heart.

Note that while the appointment of King Saul had been given as a concession to the people's demand (1 Kings 8:7 & 22 and 12:13), this passage emphasizes that David was "chosen" by God. The Hebrew text in verse 1 should be translated as "I have provided (Hebrew: *rā-ʾî-tî*) Myself (Hebrew: *lî*) a king (Hebrew: *me-lek*) ..."

Psalm 23

This psalm is known even by those who have a rudimentary knowledge of the Bible. It was written by King David, who was himself a shepherd as we saw in our reading from 1 Samuel. He used that experience of caring for sheep to describe the kind of treatment he (and we) received from the Lord as the supreme Shepherd. King David's speak to the personal backing of the Lord's protection, forgiveness and guidance.

Ephesians 5:8–14

The good fruit produced by Christians (people who lived as light) included benevolence (Greek: *agathōsunē*) which is a generous spirit; righteousness (Greek: *dikaïosunē*) meaning "giving to people and God that which is their due"; and truth (Greek: *alētheia*) which has to do with moral truth being done, not simply an intellectual concept. Paul called upon

his readers to "find out" (Greek: *dokimazō*) what pleases the Lord. In other words, it is about examining or discerning it. The Christian ethic is largely an ethic of meticulous discernment.

The quotation in verse 14 ("Wake up, O sleeper ...") may have been a fragment of an early church hymn based on Isaiah 60:1–3. It could have been a baptismal hymn sung as symbolic of emerging out of the water from darkened paganism to the light of Christianity. Other scholars suggest it refers to the final awakening when we emerge from death to eternal life.

John 9:1–41

This chapter is about a blind man (living in darkness) who was healed (into light). This is contrasted by the Pharisees who had physical sight yet were spiritually blind in their hearts and minds to who Jesus was, thus lived in darkness.

Blindness was common in the time of Jesus. One of the prevailing opinions was that suffering was due to an individual's sin or to generational sin, hence the disciples' question about the source of this man's blindness. It could not be his own wrongdoing, since he was blind from birth. A theology of prenatal sin was based upon Genesis 4:7 "sin is crouching at your door" where the vagina was seen as the door; as well as Exodus 20:5 and Numbers 14:18 which speaks of punishment to the third and fourth generation. Jesus offered an alternative view by saying that, through this man, God's work would be displayed.

Interpreting the Word

1 Samuel 16:1–13

Initially, Samuel assumed the one to be anointed was Jesse's oldest son. When this was not so he moved to the next oldest, and so down the row of sons to the last one in his presence, but each was not to be. David, the youngest and seemingly the least likely, was the chosen one. It reminds us that we sometimes make premature assumptions about the will of God. People tend to look solely at outward factors, but God looks at the heart, the motivations and underlying values of people. Fortunately, Samuel was the kind of prophet who had a keenly discerning spirit as he patiently listened for the Lord's affirmation. Similarly, we need to "see" things the way God sees them.

Psalm 23

The analogy of the relationship between the shepherd and his sheep, captured in this popular psalm, has found its way into bringing comfort to those walking in darkness. Phillip Keller's interpretation of David's psalm (*A Shepherd looks at Psalm 23*) is that God, the Shepherd, addresses many of the apparent threats we face in life. We can see these "threats" as an opportunity to experience God's grace in a new way. Here are a few examples. Verse 1 addresses our anxiety, whether it's about our children, jobs, health, finances, etc. When we acknowledge our dependence

upon the Lord as our Shepherd, we can know that He will ensure our well-being by providing for our needs. Verse 2 addresses our fretful busyness which often results in burn-out, as the Shepherd lead us into serenity to re-charge and refocus our lives. More than that, the Shepherd gets us back on our feet when we are downcast (a downcast sheep on its back was in imminent danger of death because they became bloated and could not get back up on their feet again, thus also susceptible to predators). God guides us into paths that are right when we face indecision. The Lord comforts us when we walk through the overwhelming experiences of death and grief. And God provides for us even while we are surrounded by those who undermine us, our enemies (or the Pharisees in the Gospel lesson for today). The Lord affirms us by anointing our heads with oil (as the king was). Oil also protected sheep from parasites. Dwelling in the house of the Lord was a “place” that begins now and continues beyond death into eternity. Thus, we need not fear any evil and anything that seeks to undo the gift of life.

Ephesians 5:8–14

Christians were those living in the light and *are* light as they identify with the Lord. This reminds us of Jesus’ words in John 8:12 about being the light of the world and His followers walking in it. The dark consisted of barren, shameful works and light produced good fruit which pleased the Lord.

Just as lighting a small candle can reveal a lot in a dark room, our light or testimony exposes that which is false, wasteful, useless and sinful activity. The light helps us distinguish or discern what pleases God and what does not. Shining in the darkness is not *only* to expose the sin done in secrecy, but *also* to invite the darkness to become light, ie. for people to come to an experience of God’s grace and live accordingly.

John 9:1–41

All of us see and interpret events through our own bias, but it does not always represent the truth. Apart from Jesus, there are four main characters interpreting the events here.

Firstly, the disciples. They interpreted the man’s condition as being the result of sin. They wanted to debate where the blame was to be laid, instead of offering some constructive alleviation to his pain.

Secondly, the Pharisees who could not see that a miracle had taken place, checking whether this was indeed a blind man to begin with. Then their sight was blinkered by their legalism over healing on the Sabbath. And finally they displayed their complete blindness by turning to abuse when the blind man refused to “toe the party-line.” They excommunicated him.

Thirdly, the parents who were not in any position of power, turned a blind eye and left their son to defend himself. Before we judge them, they were naturally fearful of being excommunicated and ostracized themselves.

And fourthly, the blind man had his own version that grew in stature. From having only a story of logistics about a “man they call Jesus” who gave him some instructions, he went on to call Jesus a prophet (verse 17), to someone who “must be of God” (verse 23), to complete worship (verse 35–38). Through being healed, he did display the work of God in his life.

This initiative of Jesus to seek the outcast is repeated when the now-healed man has been removed from the religious establishment. Jesus goes looking for him until He finds him. Jesus always does that with us, never leaving or forsaking us. This would encourage the early persecuted church who sometimes wondered why they were on the receiving end of the world’s dark forces when they were trying to obey Christ who had sent them into the world with good news of salvation.

Preaching the Word

One of the analogies used to discerning the will of God is that of light versus darkness and seeing versus blind.. Jesus is our Good Shepherd or “light” who opens our eyes and anoints us in the power of the Holy Spirit. Living in the light will *always* be healing and life-affirming.

Examples of structuring the sermon could be:

- Through using the three fruits mentioned in Ephesians: Benevolence, goodness or having a generous spirit. Look for examples of this in the other texts, such as caring as the shepherd does. The Good Shepherd protects and provides for the sheep, even to the extent of laying down his own life for them. Or Samuel mourning the failure of King Saul (he didn’t gloat at his failure), and which paves the way to anointing David, a young person overlooked by others. Or Jesus reaching out to the blind man, first to heal him and then to seek and support him when he was excommunicated.

Righteousness which involves both righteousness with God and with people. Firstly, when it comes to God, Jesus becomes both the anointed Messiah-king and the perfect sacrifice for our sins, so that we can be reconciled to God. And secondly, there is righteousness with people, dealing with them in fairness, compassion and giving them their due.

Acting in ways that are morally true. Admittedly, it is not always easy to “see” our sinfulness. All of us have blind-spots. The Pharisees thought they were correct in confronting and excommunicating the once-blind man. Additionally, the truth can sometimes cost us something, like the blind man’s parents experienced. So fear prevents us owning up to it.

- Another example is to list some stages of having our eyes opened. Using the ever-increasing insight gained by the blind man, we can connect to the other passages as they begin to see their world in a new way. The initially blind man moves from total ignorance about Jesus to worshipping Him. Worshipping the Lord (as David wants to do forever) is included in our learning experience. Likewise, we grow in our capacity to discern the lifestyle the Lord invites us into. Psalm 23 invites us into the kind of sensitivity we should have to those in need and treat them as the Shepherd (the Lord) has treated us. In Ephesians, we can be convicted of changing bad or unproductive habits (even if it’s one at a time) into valuable ones which glorify God and leave a worthwhile legacy.

Living the Word

Pride, power and pleasure have twisted our priorities and blinded us to the way we were meant to live. Like Samuel, we need to have patient discernment regarding God's will in the midst of a complex world. It is not always as simple as it seems as in the following examples.

In a greedy world, generosity is often scoffed at. While we *do* need to take care of ourselves, it should not be at the *exclusion* of those in genuine need. There are those of us who speak against greed but whose own lives are shaped around impressing people with our possessions and titles. We often give and expect something in return, when sometimes we should simply give when our eyes have been opened to the need. While background checks are important (scammers are a reality too), we must also beware of our benevolence being short-circuited by our protocol and red-tape as the Pharisees were regarding the previously blind man.

Righteousness has to do with "doing right," such as fair dealings with people instead of cheating and bribery; proper access to quality education for every child; and a thorough justice system. Of course, righteousness is also about doing right with God through tithes, regular worship and seeking the will of God with all our heart, and expressing that through mission.

Truth coming out through whistleblowers is costly for them. Witness protection has become a necessity. Some people who are easily "offended" don't like facing the truth. Living morally includes the things we do during the week. Think of the coarse joking that occurs, hints of impurity or flirting that can lead to sexual infidelity, incest and rape.

We live in a world where it is not easy to boldly proclaim the will of God. We live in a dark world and many cannot "see" the light. Yet it is the scrutinizing discernment and brave conviction of the prophet who can stand firm in the face of opposition, knowing that the Lord will protect them and provide the necessary guidance.

Liturgical suggestions

Prayer of Invocation

Merciful God, who in Christ was tempted as we are and who discerns our hearts,
Look beneath our outward appearance and lead us from sin to the new life of grace.
Banish in us the blindness that prevents us from recognizing truth
so that we may see the world through Your eyes
and with the compassion of Jesus Christ who redeems us.
Amen.

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- "Amazing Grace how sweet the sound"
- "Come sinners to the gospel feast"
- "Just as I am without one plea"
- "Let me be a shining light to the nations"
- "Light of the world, You shine down into darkness"
- "Lord I was blind, I could not see in Thy marred visage any grace"
- "The King of Love my Shepherd is"
- "The Lord's my Shepherd"
- "Open the eyes of my heart, Lord"

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Word and Life for the 5th Sunday in Lent – 22 March 2026

Jenny Sprong

Texts

Ezekiel 37:1–14
Psalm 130
Romans 8:6–11
John 11:1–45

Introduction

Although Lent is **not** supposed to be the ‘sad’ period of preparation for the ‘joy’ that comes at Easter, this season is indeed a trying time for many people of faith. During Lent, people are again encouraged to walk with Jesus and face the reality of human shortcomings. This Sunday in Lent’s focus is on the inability of people to save themselves from this condition. The list of social ills in our world seems endless and so we ask again: “*What shall we do?*” The texts for this day ask this question over and over again, eventually making it personal. Ezekiel examines the valley of dry bones – symbolic of an unremorseful Israel – and pleads with God to put flesh on the bones. Paul writes about ‘life in the flesh’ and ‘life in the spirit’ and challenges his hearers to move from the realm of the flesh to that of the spirit. Both the Psalm and the Gospel story of Lazarus prompt the same question because people, faced with death, ask what they can do. However, this crucial question is not answered in the way people expect. The texts emphasise that only God holds the power over life and death.

Hearing the Word

Exegetical comments on Ezekiel 37:1–14

Ezekiel has two amazing experiences in this story – firstly, he is given a vision of the dry bones (sadly, reminiscent of Israel’s waywardness and ‘death’ during exile) and secondly, the prophet is given an insight into the power God has over death (even dry bones). The question Ezekiel asks is one, which has been asked, in many forms, throughout the ages – *can these bones live?* (or *can the lame walk?* or *can the blind see?* or *can the poor be glad?*). Translated for a modern world, one may even ask whether there is a future for those living under the power of ‘death’? As Ezekiel recognised, the power of life lies only with God and therefore, the future of those in the grip of death, belongs only to God. So, Ezekiel prayed and responded when asked by God to prophecy over the bones. This is an affirmation that God calls human beings – in every age – to be partners in God’s mission for salvation and restoration.

God made a three-fold response to Ezekiel: 1) God promised to restore ‘the dry bones’ to life; 2) God kept the promise and in verses 7–8 by God directing Ezekiel how to prophecy, the bones came together with sinews and flesh; and 3) finally, the prophet was invited, by God, to summon the ‘wind’ and God breathed life into the bones. Although a common belief at that time was that the exile came upon Israel because they had sinned, the prophet was used by God to speak new life and healing, after exile, into both Judah and Israel’s story.

Exegetical comments on Psalm 130

Although this well-loved psalm indeed embraces “the human condition” of sin, the intention of the psalm is not so much to focus on human woe but rather to speak about and to facilitate the transformation that frees those in the depths of despair and liberates them. Almost every human being has known ‘depths of despair’ at some point in their lives and God sees and knows what people go through. This psalmist is an example of an Israelite in despair but yet, an Israelite who continues to speak to God. There is an assumption that in merely speaking to God, brings hope to an individual (and salvation to Israel – in this context).

This psalmist anticipates, with enthusiastic yearning and hope, what God will do – confident that God’s promises are reliable and that their newness will create great good and well-being. This is not a song of pleading guilt but rather of liberated expectation. Israel is redeemed from bondage, yet many need to be liberated from loneliness, sickness, oppression and sin. This psalm – long before its time – tells the Gospel story. Acts of God (such as the redemption of Israel) are possible because of God’s steadfast loyalty to humanity! God comes through for people, even when they find themselves in the most despondent of circumstances.

Exegetical comments on Romans 8:6–11

This epistle is one of Paul’s most significant letters. This chapter begins by bridging the discussion about human sin and the Law of God – particularly in chapters 6 and 7 – and then culminates with Paul assuring his hearers that nothing can separate them from the love of God, in Christ Jesus. What Paul raises here is not a list of wicked deeds but rather what could be termed a mind-set. This mind-set, which completely takes over in the world, does not recognise its Creator. Paul separates this way of being from living in the Spirit and his remarks about this way of life are brief. Paul definitely does not wish to usher in a list of rules so he simply suggests that living according to the Spirit is to have one’s mind set on the Spirit, which results in life and peace.

The Spirit of God safeguards the assurance that life in the Spirit was not only meant for the people of Rome at that time but that God, by raising Jesus from death, would grant that same new life to all people. Paul reiterated that the power of death could not conquer God’s Spirit.

Exegetical comments on John 11:1–45

During this Lenten Season, the powerful dramatic narratives of John dominates the Gospel texts. Jesus’ meetings with Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the man born blind and this week, with Lazarus and his family, are all important stories. The preacher might feel that the raising of Lazarus is more connected with the Resurrection of Jesus and that it would make more sense to rather include it **after** Easter. Therefore, to consider preaching from this narrative **before** Easter – so close to Holy Week – requires reading it with new glasses.

In this text there are five distinct stories. It is important to recognise that John dealt with this narrative in his typical way of using banter and satire. No matter what or who interrupted, Jesus was determined to bring life to the dead. The disciples, however, were confused and didn't understand what was happening. They definitely pressed Jesus not to go back to Judea because of his recent experience there (v.8). They also didn't understand what Jesus meant when he said that Lazarus was 'asleep' so they assumed that Lazarus would recover. More confusion when they heard the news that Lazarus had in fact died. When arriving at Bethany, Martha was unable to grasp what Jesus was saying or what he was about to do. Her religious comment showed how bewildered she was. The friends, who had come to mourn with the sisters, were equally puzzled and they were peeved that Jesus did not prevent Lazarus from dying. At the tomb, Martha was anxious about the odour of the body that had been dead for four days. Nobody understood! It was not normal to expect that life could come out of death. The people in the story could not know that Jesus was the life-giving power of God in their midst but Jesus did what was necessary to bring glory to God.

The larger story confirms that life will not be overcome by death. What remains beyond the raising of Lazarus is not only Jesus' death, but his Resurrection and his persistent giving of life. Although the text for this Sunday ends here, the plotting to kill Jesus intensified.

Interpreting the Word

The role of God's Spirit stands out most strikingly in the story of the dry bones. The Hebrew word *ruah*, means "breath" or "wind" as well as "spirit" and, interestingly, is repeated ten times in the Ezekiel passage – four times in verse 9 alone. The emphasis, however, lies in the very question of death and life. Beside this story the psalmist cries: "*Out of the depths I cry to you ...*" Ezekiel speaks from Babylon, to a people exiled from a country that has 'died', its temple and capital city destroyed. Like earlier prophets, Ezekiel also viewed this calamity not simply as the ill-fated result of Babylon's empire-building. To the prophet, nothing could happen unless God allowed it! He believed that Judah's people and especially their leaders, brought this destruction upon themselves because of their disobedience to God.

The context of the whole Book of Ezekiel supports that the prophet had reason to be pessimistic about the people of Judah's 'goodness'. He maintained that the people were at liberty to make ethical choices and that they were responsible for the consequences of their choices. In chapter 18, for instance, the people were given opportunities to decide for an either life-giving or death-dealing future! However, Ezekiel saw little evidence that the people of Judah would choose more wisely in the future than they had chosen in the past.

Having been reminded of the contrast between living in the flesh and living in the Spirit, people of faith would be tempted to compare themselves with their neighbours and ask: *Who stands where?* Who, though, can accurately measure where people are? Another reaction might be to want to **do** something – in response to Paul urging the people

of Rome to choose a direction. Brueggemann suggests that rereading these passages, with greater attention, might reveal the shortsightedness of all these reactions. Paul warned his hearers against drawing premature conclusions about 'life in the Spirit' and he offered encouragement regarding the Holy Spirit's work.

The Holy Spirit does not belong to any human being as the Spirit is always *God's* Spirit. God *gives* the Spirit and it is important to remember that even Jesus was raised by the Spirit of God. No human being can earn the Spirit, Who will always and forever be a gift of the One Sovereign and Holy God. Paul strongly warns against people asserting their own authority. The gift of the Spirit is a gift of enablement and Paul definitely views this gift from God as sacred and not to be flaunted in public.

John tells the story of what happened just after Jesus' final public sign: the raising of Lazarus! This incredible event was followed by innumerable responses and reactions (vs. 45–53). There is certainly more here than a bare account of the raising of Lazarus. People definitely wonder why anyone would wish to kill Jesus after he had raised Lazarus from death. This event puzzled and worried the Sadducees very much. They did not believe in life after death so "*where had Lazarus been for four days?*" was one question uppermost in their minds. It seemed as though very few people were happy for Lazarus and his sisters but many were ready to trap Jesus.

Preaching the Word

The preacher is presented with a number of themes on this fifth Sunday in Lent. '*Death and Resurrection*' seems to be more appropriate for an Easter theme and yet these texts challenge the preacher to find the relevance for Lenten preparation and reflection. Exploring the themes running through all the set texts, presented in the Lectionary, is this week's major task. The Book of Ezekiel is a challenge all on its own as the prophet's visions are wide open to interpretation. The passage from Ezekiel also lends itself to exploring why bad things happen to good people because not ALL of Judah would have been wicked and deserving of exile!

Sitting with the Psalm this week might be most beneficial. Examining how '*Transformation from Human Woe to Spiritual Joy*' takes place, could be a most appropriate theme to present to a congregation in the local context. Another most challenging theme would be to tackle what Paul meant when he stressed that this movement from 'death' into 'life in the Spirit' is not about a new set of rules and/or regulations. Paul's direction to the Church in Rome might be supported with the story of Lazarus being raised back to earthly life from physical death. None of these themes are easy but all of them are infinitely worthwhile exploring.

Living the Word

When, like in South Africa, a large portion of the population had been oppressed because of racial prejudice, their eventual 'homecoming' was a celebration! When people are restored to their own proper place, there is new life, joy and even merriment! This is God's intention for all God's

people: remembering that God is Sovereign over all. Ezekiel affirmed God's sovereignty, the psalmist celebrated the movement from despair to hope and gave God the glory! Paul reiterated that God is the One whose Spirit lives in the believer! The Gospel story celebrates human life in a very tangible way, but Martha also acknowledged that Lazarus would enjoy the spiritual resurrection at the end of the age. How do some of these questions and comments speak into a local South African context? Has the dream of "*A Rainbow Nation*" died? Does the spirit of *Ubuntu* still hold out hope in this land? What would be utter life-giving? How would modern day South African believers in Christ celebrate their 'life in the Spirit'?

Liturgical Suggestions

Call to Worship

Leader: God calls us to worship.

People: We are here – ready to give and to receive.

Leader: God calls us to move from death to life in the Spirit.

People: We long to honour you, O God.

Help us make it so.

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- "Weeping One of Bethany"
- "We Shall Rise Again"

Prayers for the People

An alternative to the Prayer Jesus taught the Disciples ...

O Breathing Life, your Name shines everywhere!

Release a space to plant your Presence here.

Imagine your possibilities now.

Embody your desire in every light and form.

Grow through us this moment's bread and wisdom.

Untie the knots of failure binding us, as we release the strands we hold of others' faults.

Help us not forget our Source, yet free us from not being in the Present.

From you arises every Vision, Power and Song – from gathering to gathering.

Amen – May our future actions grow from here!

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Introduction to Holy Week – 29 March – 5 April 2026

Introduction to the Season

In South Africa, Holy Week, the Triduum, and Easter Sunday is a particularly special time for black African Christians. Many people will travel across country to worship in their family church, or to gather at places of religious significance such as Mount Moriah. There are people who look forward to Easter music like choral cantatas or the Messiah. And then there are those who see this as a long weekend to take a break from the pressures of life – but putting pressure on the traffic-clogged roads of our country.

Different traditions have developed a wide range of ways in which this focal point of the Church Year is celebrated. In all traditions it is always a busy time for clergy, preachers and others responsible for ordering services of worship. The danger is that one can settle for a familiar and predictable pattern simply because this is the way it has always been done.

When planning for Holy Week some questions need to be asked:

- what do these familiar texts say to this congregation, situated in this place, in this very special week?
- how best can the voice of God be heard within our particular context this year?

Such an approach could help enliven the week in reaffirming the faith of worshippers and encouraging their active and helpful discipleship in the communities where they are called to serve.

Locating the Season

Holy Week marks the brief period between the Sundays in Lent and the Triduum. It kicks off with Palm Sunday, which can be observed in some form of procession with palms into the church as well as the reading of a substantial portion of the Passion narrative according to Matthew (21:1–11). Better still, this could include a procession – ecumenical if possible – in the surrounding streets or an observance confined to the church grounds and building.

Palm Sunday is then followed by the weekday services of Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week. In some traditions there is an option to use the passion readings from Matthew, Mark and Luke instead of the passages from John.

The particular character of Holy Week

From Palm Sunday through to Easter Day there are thus several services at which sermons could be offered. Care should be taken to ensure that the services on the three weekdays before Maundy Thursday allow ample opportunity for thoughtful reflection and meditation for those who gather.

An Example: Three readings from John's Gospel Chapters 12 & 13 can be used: Mary at Bethany anointed the feet of Jesus (Monday), some Greeks who had come to worship at the Feast asked to see Jesus (Tuesday), and Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and speaks of impending betrayal (Wednesday).

Liturgy for Palm Sunday, Feast of the Palms – 29 March 2026

James Massey

Introduction

For this Sunday the Revised Common Lectionary offers the choice between the ‘Liturgy of the Palms’ and the ‘Liturgy of the Passion’. There are historical and traditional reasons for this, and the choice you make may depend on your own Church’s tradition or expectations.

Simply put, there are at least four options:

In the first option, the focus is put on the entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and all that went with it. This is set out in what follows in the Liturgy below and the Word and Life notes that follow.

In options 2, 3 and 4 the focus is on the Passion, i.e. the whole sequence of Jesus’ suffering and death. The explanation and resources for all these options are given in ‘Liturgy of the Passion’ and the Word and Life notes for the Feast of the Passion that follow.

Texts for the Feast of the Palms

Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29

Matthew 21:1–11

Gathering in God’s Name

On the day before Palm Sunday the Church Sanctuary should be decorated with Palm branches. If desired, musicians should prepare and distribute suitable songs (e.g. ‘Hosanna’, ‘Majesty’, ‘Bayete’, ‘We have a King who rides a donkey’, ‘We are marching in the light of God’).

The congregation assembles in a suitable place away from the church building and processes to the church building. Where this is not possible, all is done inside the church building. If possible some or the entire congregation should take part in the procession. Members who are not able to walk the distance to the church should wait at the main entrance of the church until the procession arrives.

The people bring palm or other branches, or palm crosses, or are given them as they arrive.

The Procession enters the Church, still singing.

Call to worship

Lord Jesus

We want to journey with you ...

As you enter our cities, rescuing us from pollution and vandalism and gangsterism.

As you cleanse our temples from self-concern and sentimentality and obsession with money.

As you wash our feet, freeing us to wash the feet of those we live with.

As you eat and drink with us, making every meal different, holy, special.

As you sweat lonely blood in a garden, showing us how to grieve and mourn our losses so we might be healed more fully.

As you suffer injury and humiliation and even death, helping us to face our inevitable death and the death of those whom we love.

As you rise in victory, filling us with joy and hope that will never leave us.

Lord Jesus

You journey with us

And we are grateful.

Hosanna to the Son of David!

Hosanna in the highest!

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest!

The Minister or Leader says

Sisters and brothers in Christ, during Lent we have been preparing for the celebration of our Lord’s death and resurrection. Today we begin this solemn celebration in union with Christians throughout the world. Our Lord Jesus Christ entered Jerusalem in triumph to complete his work as our Saviour; to be rejected, to suffer and die, and to be raised from the dead.

Let us go with him in faith and love, so that, united with him in his sufferings, we may share his risen life.

This prayer may be said over the palms:

God our Saviour,

whose Son entered Jerusalem as Messiah to suffer and die:

may these palms be for us a sign of his victory;

may we who carry them ever hail him as king

and follow him in the way that leads to eternal life. With all the faithful,

may we enter the new Jerusalem in triumph; through Jesus

Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

A hymn is sung (e.g. ‘All glory, laud and honour’)

Psalm 118 and Matthew 21:1–11 are read, followed by the sermon.

This or some other prayer follows

Eternal God,

in your tender love towards the human race you sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ

to take our flesh and to suffer death upon a cross.

Grant that we may follow the example of his great humility, and share in the glory of his resurrection;

through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The Service of Holy Communion may follow, using the following or another Order

This or another Order may be used:

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving

May the God of hosannas be with you.

May the God of this holy week be with you.

Lift your broken hearts to our God,

who will fill them with hope in these days.

Remember to sing laments during this holy time,

we do so, that we may know the reason for glad songs of joy.

Morning by morning,

creation's voices join in praising you,

God of every goodness.

The forests form a festal procession,

the heavens reflect your glory's light.

Though we were formed by you,

we looked around at everything

sin and death had to offer,

and followed them through the world,

thinking they could protect us.

You gave prophets

the tongues of teachers,

to comfort our weariness

and teach us the way back to you,

but we turned our back on them.

When judgment did not

lead to redemption,

you sent Jesus to reach out in love,

to bring us home to you.

So with those who spread cloaks before you,

and those who are sustained by your love,

we join our voices, singing,

Holy, holy, holy, God of enduring love.

From every part of creation come glad songs.

Hosanna in the highest!

Blessed is the One who comes in humility and hope.

Hosanna in the highest!

Holy are you, Sustainer of the weary,

and blessed is Jesus Christ, your Love become human.

He emptied himself of glory,

to be filled with our broken hopes and hearts.

He chose the path of suffering love,

so that we could run through

the streets of the kingdom

waving branches of joy.

He walked the sin-cold stones

into the tomb which could not hold him,

so we could join our voices together,

'Hosanna! Hosanna! He is risen!'

As we journey through Jerusalem and beyond,
as we struggle with death, loss, and grief
we would ponder that mystery we call faith:

In trust, Christ died.

In joy, Christ was raised to new life.

in hope, Christ will come again.

Here at the Table graced

with creation's gifts,

we discover the world you intend.

Here where you love enlivens

the bread and the cup

we are given more than enough

of everything we need.

Sharing deeply in the Spirit,

we can give hope its wings,

as it carries us to serve

the broken all around us.

Strengthened by the grace

with which you feed us,

we can join together

to sustain the weary of the world.

And when the gates of joy

have been opened to us,

we will spend moment by moment,

every knee in creation bending,

singing our praises to you,

God in Community, Holy in One. **Amen.**

The Communion elements are shared.

Sending

Go out into the world in as God's people.

We will journey with praise on our lips.

Go out into the world as followers of Jesus.

We will join the parade of the broken, the lost, the hopeless,
for that is where Jesus may be found.

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- "All glory, laud and honour"
- "All hail, Lord Jesus"
- "Make way, Make way"
- "O Sacred Head, sore wounded"
- "Who will save our land and people?"

Word and Life for Palm Sunday, Feast of the Palms – 29 March 2026

James Massey

Texts

Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29
Matthew 21:1–11

Introduction

As a delegate to the 1998 Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Church, Professor Denise Ackermann watched the magnificent procession of bishops in all their finery until the great doors of Canterbury Cathedral swung closed. She records that she found herself straining forward, because she knew that something was missing. She was surprised at the image that popped up in her mind. The missing piece was ‘the man on the borrowed donkey’. There, for her, was the ‘Jesus whom I had come to know and love, and who had changed my life’.

Palm Sunday has always been for Christians everywhere a moment of climax where we are challenged by the profundity of God’s self-revelation. And, of course, it is our opportunity to be renewed and ready to celebrate the Resurrection – the greatest of all divine self-revelations, described by C.S. Lewis as the moment when ‘a totally new mode of being ... appeared in the the Universe: as new as the first coming of organic life.’

Hearing the Word

As a preface, in what follows, amid all the many starting-points for exegesis and interpretation, I will be trying my best to come from the perspective of a ‘hermeneutic of compassion’, so ably exemplified by Karen Armstrong as a counter-narrative to the violence in which our world is awash. There are only two lectionary passages for this Sunday, so the exegesis is somewhat fuller than usual

Psalm 118

This is a processional hymn for the feast of Shelters (Tabernacles), sung antiphonally. The ceremony took place before the gates of the Temple as well as inside the Temple (vv 19–20) and seems to have reached its climax in a cultic dance round the altar (v 27). Throughout, this psalm gives testimony to the strength of faith that flows from experiencing the help of God in overcoming human afflictions and fears. So *yada* (vv 1,29) is usually translated as “Give thanks”, but it can as easily be expressed as “Testify”. At the start (vv 1–4), the different groups of people taking part in the ceremony are invited to testify: Israel, the priesthood, the “god-fearers” (proselytes of non-Israelite origin), followed by the king himself (v 5–21), who testifies or narrates all that God has done, even when he looked death in the face (v18). Then the congregation all give testimony (vv 19–25), speaking of the *ashlar*, the cornerstone which has to carry all the weight of the building. This becomes a clear reference to the Messiah, the Son of David the king, who would be the One to “save us now” (*hosia-na*) (v 25). Then there is a blessing by the priests (vv 27–27) and the final

thanksgiving by the king (and perhaps the choir) (vv 28–29). Matthew records the crowds shouting out this psalm as an acclamation of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, who was expected to set Israel free. The Church has always used it in Palm Sunday processions. It also ends the Hallel psalms (113 – 118) which were recited at great feasts, including the Passover supper (see Lev 23:40 and Matt 26:30).

Matthew 21:1–11

Matthew follows Mark 11:1–11, showing Jesus’ careful preparation for the entrance and the adulation of the disciples and the crowds. He inserts the quotations from Isaiah and Zechariah, and the “turmoil” in the city, with the questioning (and answering) as to who Jesus is. Where Mark separates the entry and the cleansing of the Temple (“next day”), Matthew directly links them, doubtless to show what it means that “Jesus is the prophet”.

As he begins his passion narrative, we see Matthew’s characteristic perspectives on Jesus’ passion: Jesus is in control of everything that takes place, and everything happens according to the scriptures. So, although he suffers and dies, throughout Jesus is still Messiah, Lord and Son of David.

Verse 1: “Jerusalem” is of course the centre of all the gospel narratives. It would be in the Holy City, where so many of the Old Testament narratives are located – which is to say where the scriptures writers centrally saw God acting in history. It is here that the culmination and fulfilment of God’s saving works would be revealed. The use of “Bethphage (*house of figs*) on the Mount of Olives” is also significant: Zechariah 14:4 describes it as the site where a great eschatological battle would take place.

Verse 2: Matthew has “donkey and colt”, where Mark has “colt”. This may well be due to Matthew’s need to show the fulfilment of the Zechariah prophecy by reading it literally: *riding on a donkey* (Heb. *chamor*, Gk. *onos*) *even on a colt* (Heb. *ayir*, Gk. *polos*), *the foal of a donkey* (Zech 9:9). Matthew holds to this throughout. The reference to “them” in 21:7 may mean the garments or the animals – or both.

Verse 3: “Master” *kyrios*: Matthew uses this ambiguously. It means “master”, but to the early Church it clearly meant “Lord”. So then, the pre-planning can take on either a natural meaning (he knew the owner beforehand) or a supernatural foreknowledge. Matthew holds before us the mystery of who Jesus is throughout the passion narrative.

Verse 4: “fulfilled”: Here is a central theme and claim by all the gospel writers: Jesus completes all the Old Testament prophecies. It is a composite quotation (Is 62:11 and Zech 9:9) although Matthew simply says, “the prophet”.

Verse 5: Matthew omits Zechariah’s “righteous and victorious”. Here is a key to Matthew’s presentation of Jesus, who is both Messiah-King, but a very different kind of king with a very different kind of kingdom. Jesus is “humble

(Heb. *'aniy*, Gk *praos*) sitting on a donkey”, and not like other kings who sit on big horses.

Verse 8: “palm branches”: these were used from ancient times in ceremonial feasts such as at the Feast of Tabernacles and Hanukkah (Lev 23:39–43, 1 Macc 13:51, 2 Macc 10:7). Clearly their use here shows how the crowds recognised the importance of what Jesus was doing.

Verse 9: *Hosanna* is a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew *hosia-na* which means “save, please”. Here it functions as a shout of acclamation. Matthew’s modification of the greeting in Mark 11:9–10 serves to emphasise that Jesus is “the son of David”.

Verse 10: “turmoil”: the Greek *eseisthe* describes the effects of an earthquake. That is what Matthew wants us to see as the effect of Jesus’ action in the Temple – and indeed with the whole passion event (as in Mt 27:51).

Verse 11: “prophet”: Right from the start of his gospel, Matthew portrays Jesus as repeating, and fulfilling, all that God had done with Moses (e.g. being saved from the Bethlehem massacre 2:13f, cf. Exodus 1:22f). And of course, the whole of Matthew can be read as a completion of the Torah. Jesus fulfilled the ancient promise that God would raise up a prophet like Moses (Deut 18: 5,18).

Interpreting the Word

As always, the historical context is a good bridge between what the author intended and what the passage might mean in today’s context.

Israel was under the authority of the mighty Roman Empire. Most of the people of the land had a fierce hatred for these foreign oppressors and many were actively looking for a way to get rid of them. The Romans had allowed the Jews to have a fake government, whose members naturally looked to their own interests before those of the people.

Now the Passover festival had come! Every able-bodied Jew was expected to be in Jerusalem for the celebrations. What better time to strike for liberation? The people were expecting a powerful kingly messiah who would liberate them from Rome and indeed from a deadening religious system. For many, then, the opportunity was at hand.

Jesus was without doubt deeply aware of these expectations and opportunities. He knew intimately the traditions that sustained the hopes of those who desired change. He knew how just a few decades before (141 BCE) Simon Maccabaeus had expelled the occupying foreigners from Jerusalem and cleansed the city of its defilements. When that was done, we are told, “The Jews made their entry into the city with acclamations and carrying palms, chanting hymns and songs, since a great enemy had been crushed and thrown out of Israel.” And this then became an annual procession and festival in Israel (see 1 and 2 Maccabees, especially 1 Macc 13.49–51).

Jesus knew without doubt that he was the true Messiah sent by God to bring true and lasting freedom. So Jesus deliberately set up a public demonstration to show that he really was the Messiah, and that he intended to make a real difference in that context and for every following context. Jesus took and

acted out the prophecy of Zechariah, made 350 years before (almost certainly because of the conquests of Alexander the Great) which speak of the coming King, the real King, the one sent by God to bring true liberation. And that king would ride, not on a horse like Alexander and all the usual vain and time-limited rulers of this world. This King chose to ride on a donkey. How strange! How comical! What sort of a king is this? It is a man on a borrowed donkey! In the preaching of Zechariah, and in the mind of all who trusted this scripture, this is indeed a king, and he will win the struggle, for the text says, “His cause is won, his victory is secure.” (Zech 9.9). This king on a borrowed donkey does indeed win the victory, but in a very strange way, for he banishes chariots from Israel and horses from Jerusalem by doing away with the weapons of war. How is this possible? Here comes some wandering preacher and says that the way to make peace is to get rid of our weapons. Don’t buy those warships! Convert those tanks into tractors! This king proclaims Peace to all the nations. How can this be possible?

By his deliberate prophetic action on that day, Jesus was proclaiming by word and deed that he is the Messiah of God. He is the one expected by all the prophets. He will fulfil all the deep desires for freedom. And the people instantly recognised what he is doing. They responded as they did every year to the festival of Simon Maccabaeus’ victory. They waved branches, and chanted hymns and songs (such as Psalm 118 – see above). They recognised this claim to be Messiah. They fervently hoped that another great enemy was going to be crushed and thrown out of Israel.

And then, to confirm and complete his declaration, Jesus went into the Temple and cleansed it! Without hurting anybody, of course. Neither Matthew nor Mark nor Luke speak of any violence. John (in chapter 2) mentions a whip and that is an improvised one which appears to be used only on the animals.

Palm Sunday is a unique opportunity to testify to the victory Jesus achieved: the Victory of the Cross. It is a chance to raise our people’s awareness of the contexts in which they live and what God is doing within those contexts.

The lectionary readings focus this for us: Here is Jesus our Master confronting injustice and ancient prejudice and wilful ignorance. Here is Jesus our Lord readying himself to pay the price for making that confrontation so public. And here is Jesus our Saviour calling us to do the same things in the same “non-violent” way that he chose to follow.

Preaching the Word

Some of the themes that might be addressed through the sermon are quite clear. We are called to see Jesus in his triumphal entry and to make decisions about how we will follow him in confronting sin and injustice and prejudice in our present contexts, and within our own lives.

We might call people to decide whether they also want to identify and confront such sin (“What will you do with Jesus today?”), or challenge people to make decisions about what methods they will use to make those confrontations (“Horse or Donkey?”). We might simply declare the central Easter message: if we want to live, all we must do is to ‘die to sin and die to self’ (“The Victory of the Cross”).

Palm Sunday is this shocking revelation of who God is in Jesus. He is not our lackey to do our will, but one who remorselessly confronts every sin and every injustice. The truth is that we're very comfortable with the Jesus who heals – Jesus in the hospital, even Jesus in the home. But we're uncomfortable with the Jesus who confronts – Jesus in the City Hall, Jesus in parliament, Jesus in the street demonstration. We are comfortable with Jesus who builds our 'feel good' moments. But we are uncomfortable with Jesus who directly challenges the way we vote and the way we spend our money.

So here is this today/everyday Palm Sunday. Here is this uncomfortable Jesus who comes in the name of God. Here is this stubborn, humble Jesus who confronts and deals with every injustice. Here is this moment of decision – what will you do with this Jesus? Judas decided: it's time to do it 'My Way'. The religious Pharisees decided: it's time to do it another way – 'a-way' with Jesus (so Matt 11:18, and Lk 19:47) and to do the same with his follower Lazarus (so John 12:10 and 12:20). And then the question of our decision? We really have only three choices today: we too can seek to kill him and his followers, or we can try to ignore him, or we can believe him, trust him, follow him in his powerfully gentle way. Now, on Palm Sunday and during Holy Week especially, that means learning how to kill within ourselves every desire to kill, every attitude and value that is for death.

Living the Word

Engagement with the community in which the congregation lives could naturally arise from the direction chosen for the sermon.

Perhaps as a part of the sermon, or as a follow-up workshop, there could be an invitation to join a "Justice Commission" where volunteers learn to identify local issues of injustice or prejudice (or sexism, racism, abuse) and take specific action. There could be letters to (and sometimes longer engagement with) prominent people, asking for explanations and action. And there could be public statements of commendation for people who had taken courageous actions. There might develop from this group a programme to assist people to get identity documents, or qualifications from SETAs, for example as security guards.

Palm Sunday is also an opportunity to encourage those who feel called to do so to join in public marches asking for action where there is, for example, lack of proper service delivery. Christians might help such marches to be without violence or looting.

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Liturgy for Palm Sunday, Feast of the Passion – 29 March 2026

James Massey

Introduction

For this Sunday the Revised Common Lectionary offers the choice between the ‘Liturgy of the Palms’ and the ‘Liturgy of the Passion’. There are historical and traditional reasons for this, and the choice you make may depend on your own Church’s tradition or expectations.

Simply put, there are at least four options:

1. The focus is put on the entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and all that went with it. This was set out in the Liturgy of the Palms and the Word and Life notes for Palm Sunday.
2. A focus on the Passion, with a reading of the full Passion according to Matthew and including a sermon. This is probably the longest of the four options.
3. A hybrid service that starts outside the church with appropriate reading of the triumphal entry, followed by a procession into the church where the service will include a reading of the shortened version of the Passion and a sermon.
4. A hybrid service as set out in the third option, but with dramatised reading of the full Passion interspersed with appropriate hymns and no sermon.

The explanation and resources for options 2, 4 and 4 are given here in the ‘Liturgy of the Passion’ and the Word and Life notes that follow.

Texts for the Feast of the Passion

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Psalm 31:9–16

Philippians 2:5–11

Matthew 26:1–14 – 27:66 or Matthew 27:11–54

Option 2: focus on the Passion, without procession

Call to Worship

We come to prepare for the holiest of weeks.

We will journey through praise, with joy on our lips;
we will travel through betrayal and death,
cradling hope deep in our hearts.

Jesus leads us through this week, and we will follow,
for he is the life we long for,
he is the Word who sustains us.

We wave palm branches in anticipation,
we lay our love before him, to cushion his walk.

Setting aside all power, glory, and might, he comes:
modelling humility and obedience for all of us.

Hosanna! Hosanna!

**Blessed is the One who brings us
the kingdom of God.**

Call to Reconciliation

When the parade is over, do we pick up our lives, brush them off, and live in the old way? Do we toss our palm branches aside, so we can grasp the seductions of the world? As we begin the journey through the holiest of weeks, let us speak the truth, as we confess to our God, praying together,

Unison Prayer for Forgiveness

Ever constant God, mixing love and hope together, you pave the way to the kingdom, but we prefer to stub our toes on the potholed roads of temptation. You will touch the cup of grace to our parched lips, but we seem to hunger for the ashy taste of bitterness. You beg us to learn the songs of salvation, but we hum along with the chorus death plays in the background of our lives.

Have mercy upon us, God of Holiness. As you come to us, you bring healing for our brokenness, peace for our troubled lives, hope for our doubting minds. May we empty ourselves of everything which keeps us from following you, so we may receive these gifts, and more, from Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

Silent prayers may be offered.

Assurance of Pardon

Laying aside judgment, God offers us redemption; setting aside anger, God embraces us with love; letting go of grief, God pours living water upon us. This is the good news, my friends: God’s steadfast love endures forever.

Hosanna! Hosanna!

**Blessed is the One who brings us
the kingdom of God! Amen.**

Offertory Prayer

As we offer these tangible gifts, Holy One, remind us of those who could use the clothes hanging in our closets unworn, those who could be fed by the food stored in our pantries, those who could be healed by the grace and hope we keep locked away in our hearts. May we be as generous with others as you are with us, we pray. **Amen.**

Proclaiming the Word

The set lessons, Isaiah 50:4–9, Psalm 31:9–16 and Philippians 2:5–11, are read, followed by a sermon while should probably be briefer than usual.

The Passion

The four parts should be read by different Readers (who have been well-prepared). There could also be elements of dramatisation and participation. Each section should be followed by a hymn or song and a time of silence.

Matthew 26:31 – 26:56

Matthew 26:57 – 26:75

Matthew 27:1 – 27:23

Matthew 27:34 – 27:66

The Communion

A shortened liturgy could be used, since a great deal of the usual Communion Order will have been read during the Passion recital. Elements of the Communion liturgy for the Feast of the Palms might be used, for example:

Sending

Go out into the world in as God's people.
We will journey with praise on our lips.
Go out into the world as followers of Jesus.
We will join the parade of the broken, the lost, the hopeless,
for that is where Jesus may be found.

Option 3: A focus on the Passion, with a Procession

The congregation gathers some distance outside the church. Palm crosses and branches are distributed. If possible, the procession is led by musicians. Perhaps for this option the Procession should be informal, to give the feeling of the crowd rushing to see what was happening and of children rushing to be included.

A minister may bless the palms and palm crosses with these or other words.

Eternal God

Bless these palms to our use:

Grant that we who have received them

May ever hail as King and love as Saviour

Your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Matthew 21:1–11 could be read

When the Procession has entered the church and taken their seats, the above Call to Worship, Call to Reconciliation, Assurance of Pardon and Offertory Prayer should be used.

Proclaiming the Word

The set lessons, Isaiah 50:4–9, Psalm 31:9–16 and Philippians 2:5–11, are read, followed by a shortened version of the Passion, e.g. Matthew 27:1–54. A Sermon is preached.

The Communion

The Order of Service for Holy Communion offered in the Liturgy for the Feast of the Palms might be used, or another appropriate Easter liturgy.

Option 4: A focus on the Passion, with a Procession, the full reading of the Passion and no sermon

This option would first follow Option 3 up to 'Proclaiming the Word', which would read as:

Proclaiming the Word

All or some of the set lessons, Isaiah 50:4–9, Psalm 31:9–16 and Philippians 2:5–11, are read. There is no sermon.

*This would be followed by the final two parts of Option 2, viz. **the Passion** and **the Communion**.*

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- “All glory, laud and honour”
- “All hail, Lord Jesus”
- “Make way, Make way”
- “O Sacred Head, sore wounded”
- “Who will save our land and people?”

Word and Life for Palm Sunday, Feast of the Passion – 29 March 2026

James Massey

Texts

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Psalm 31:9–16

Philippians 2:5 – 11

Matthew 27:1–54

Matthew 26:14 – 27:46, the alternate reading.

Introduction

Today is Passion Sunday, and we hear the story of the passion of Jesus. It's one of those words which we use routinely but which has a very different meaning for most of our people, who tend to understand it as 'emotion'. The Latin words '*passio*' and '*passum*' mean to suffer, to endure suffering and pain. The word 'Passion' unlocks the meaning and uniqueness of the Christian faith. Ours is the only religion in the world whose God gets hurt, who gets stabbed, who gets whipped, who writhes in pain on the cross and who shouts his pain in the midst of his suffering on the cross. We are the only ones who believe in a God who steps down and steps forward and dies on behalf of his friends, so that they wouldn't have to.

That 'Passion' is exactly what each of the lectionary readings speak about.

Isaiah 50:4–9a

This is the third "Song of the Servant". These songs depict a perfect servant of the Lord, who would declare the true faith, expiate people's sins by his own death and so bring people back to God. Jesus explicitly applied these passages to himself and his mission, as did the early Church (e.g. Mark 10:45, Luke 22:19–20, 37, Matt 12:17–21, John 1:29).

In this third Song, the servant himself speaks, declaring his call to teach God's people (4–5) but also all those "in darkness" (10). This call enables him to endure persecution (5–6) and emerge in triumph (7–9).

Psalm 31

This is a prayer in times of ordeal. There are many links to the Confessions of Jeremiah (e.g. vv 11, 13). Throughout one can hear Jesus using this Psalm during the Passion (e.g. v.5, cf. Luke 23:46).

Philippians 2:5–11

Why is it that Jesus is exalted above all others? At the mention of his name, says the passage, every knee on earth and in heaven shall bow. Is that because of his miracles? The text is clear: it is because he humbled himself and walked a life of obedience. In other words, it was because of his Passion, his suffering for our benefit.

In context we read: 'Do nothing from selfishness or conceit. But in humility, count others better than yourselves. Look not to your own interests but look to the interest of others. Have this attitude among yourselves that we find in Christ

Jesus. ... For Christ did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but Christ walked the path of humility and obedience therefore God has highly exalted him.'

Our Passion Sunday celebrations should make it clear that God wants us to have that same quality as well, to have this same inner attitude that he does. It is not only Jesus, but we ourselves are invited to possess this same self-giving humility.

Matthew 27:1–54

Vv 1–2: *they handed him over to Pilate*: Jesus' prediction in Matt. 20:18–19 was fulfilled: 'The son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles... '.

Vv 3–10: This episode – the death of Judas – has no parallel in any other of the gospels. It differs significantly from the account in Acts 1:18–19. It's possible that Matthew includes the story for three reasons: to confirm Jesus' warning in Matt. 26:42: "Woe to the one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed", and secondly to give a contrast to Peter in Matt. 26:69–75. Where Peter repented and was restored to a right relationship with God, Judas merely "changed his mind". Matthew avoids using *metanoia*. Thirdly, Matthew wants to emphasise the shameful actions of the chief priests. Throughout, Matthew typically wants to show that everything happened to fulfil the scriptures, as the concluding scripture quotation (based on Zechariah 11:13 rather than Jeremiah) shows.

Vv 11–14: In the end, Jesus is executed because of this charge of aspiring to be a political "king" of the Jews (Matt. 27:29, 37). Here Jesus affirms Pilate's question, but with irony, because he knows very well that both Pilate and the Jewish officials understand the title very differently to him. In v 12 he "answers nothing" to any of the charges, fulfilling Isaiah 42:2 and 53:7. In v14, Pilate is "amazed", reminding the readers of Isaiah 52:15, "so shall he (the Servant) startle many nations ... and kings".

Vv 15–26: Now the narrative moves very swiftly. In Matthew's account there are now five players: Pilate, Barabbas (son of Abba), Pilate's wife, the crowd, and the elders. They all move across the stage: Barabbas as a contrast to Jesus the Son of God, Pilate's wife as a Jewish plea for justice, and the crowds as all those everywhere who are reckless about their future, saying *his blood be upon us and our children*. Matthew deliberately moves from *ochloi* / crowd, to *pas ho laos* / all the people or Israel as a whole. The elders act as cynical manipulators of people's ignorance and prejudice. Pilate himself equivocates, knowing very well that the charges are trumped-up and so offering to the elders the obviously more culpable Barabbas, on to taunting the chief priests and elders with their word Messiah. But he betrays the noble Roman tradition of justice by washing his hands – a Jewish rather than Roman custom (see Deut. 21.7 – "Our hands did not shed this blood ..."). Then he has Jesus scourged and he hands him over to be crucified.

Vv 27–44: Here Matthew gives an account of the crucifixion in three scenes: the mockery (vv 27–32), the crucifixion (vv 33–37) and the derision (vv 38–44). Matthew follows Mark 15:16–32 closely here. The mocking takes place in the *praetorium*, which was Pilate's official residence, under a group (*speira* a “whole company”) of Pilate's soldiers. The mocking centres on the charge of “kingship” (v 29) which of course is for Christian readers ironic. The soldiers don't know that they are in fact dealing with a real and ultimate king. The crown of thorns and reed are part of this parody. Matthew builds up Mark's picture (*they struck him on the head with a reed* – Mk 15:19). For the crucifixion (vv 33–37), Simon of Cyrene is made to carry the cross (if he's a pilgrim, this would make him unclean and bar him from participating in any Passover ceremonies). They take Jesus to *Golgotha* meaning “Skull” (which in Latin is “calvaria”, hence our word “Calvary”). Matthew has them offer “gall”, probably from Psalm 69:21 *they gave me poison ... vinegar*, perhaps to give a scriptural explanation for why Jesus refused to drink it. And then as tersely noted in Matthew, *they crucified him*. They divided his clothes (some late manuscripts include Psalm 22:18 here), and Matthew has *they kept watch over him* (possibly to refute later allegations that his disciples stole his body). The placard over his head gives the reason why he was condemned. The third scene is the derision (vv 38–44), where the passers-by echo the temptation of Matt. 4:3 and 6 – *if you are the Son of God*. To the mocking by the chief priests and elders described by Mark (15:31–32: *this Christ, this Son of God*), Matthew adds 27:43 – *he has trusted in God ...*” alluding to Psalm 22:8 – *let the Lord deliver him*. The insults by the two thieves echo Psalm 69:9 *the insults of those who insult them have fallen on me*.

Vv 45–54: The death of Jesus. Step by step, Matthew declares how all this happens in fulfilment of the scriptures. *Darkness* (v 45) echoes Amos 8:9 *on that day, says the Lord, I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth*. *Eli, Eli* (v 46) is the opening verse of Psalm 22, the lament of the righteous sufferer. *Elijah* (vv 47–48) seems to result from the watchers' mishearing the *Eli* cry – but it nevertheless links to Elijah's ascent to heaven in 2 Kings 2. The sponge and wine (*oxos*, v 48) is a reminder of Matt. 27:34 and the link we saw there to Psalm 69:21. Jesus ‘*again cried out*’ in v 50 recalls Psalm 22, where the sufferer repeatedly calls to God (vv 2, 5 and 24), rather than the single *loud cry* of Mark 15:37. The tearing of the curtain of the Temple in v 51 had clear links to Exodus 26:31–35 and 40:21. Bear in mind that from Matthew's perspective, the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 was a consequence of the rejection of Jesus, as in Matt. 21:41–43. The biblical portents surrounding Jesus' death in vv 51a–53 – the earth shaken, saints being raised – clearly link to Ezekiel 37:1–14, the vision of the dry bones returning to life. And Matthew inserts into Ezekiel's sequence *after Jesus' resurrection*. Already the resurrection of Jesus is being anticipated in this intricate, but enthralling narrative. Finally, the centurion's confession links to Psalm 22:27–28 *all the families of the nations*.

Matthew 26:14 – 27:46

It's not possible in the space we have to give an exegesis of the whole of Matthew's Passion narrative. I suggest that you use a modern commentary if you want to preach on this passage.

Interpreting the Word

Perhaps a case study might illustrate what we should focus on with our Passion Sunday preaching.

Janani Luwum was born in 1922 at Acholi in Uganda. He became a teacher, was converted to Christianity and ordained in 1956, becoming Bishop of Northern Uganda in 1969 and Archbishop of Uganda in 1974. Idi Amin came to power in Uganda in 1971 as the result of a military coup. He tyrannically began to arrest anyone he suspected of not supporting him. Hundreds of soldiers from the Lango and Acholi tribes were shot down in their barracks. Amin ordered the expulsion of the Asian population of Uganda, about 55,000 persons. Over the next few years, many Christians were killed on various pretexts. A preacher who read over the radio a Psalm which mentioned Israel was shot for this in 1972.

Archbishop Luwum called on President Amin to deliver a note of protest at the arbitrary killings and the many unexplained disappearances. Amin accused the Archbishop of treason, and had the Archbishop and two Cabinet members, both committed Christians, arrested and held for military trial. They were stated as having been found dead following a car accident, but it emerged that they were brutally shot on the implicit instructions of President Amin.

Janani's enthusiasm for the good news of Jesus, combined with his willingness to sacrifice even his own life for the freedom of others led to his martyrdom on 16 February 1977.

We are grateful and awed by the way he humbled himself and gave his whole life so that others might live fully and freely. It was immensely costly. But he was a man of faith. He believed that voluntary suffering for others can lead to fullness of life. That is to say that he believed in the Passion of Jesus.

Today is Passion Sunday, suffering Sunday. The Feast of the Passion gives us the opportunity to lead our people into depths of devoted self-giving through Holy Week and beyond. Matthew 27 takes us through the crucial events of Holy Week – hence the unusually extended commentary given above.

Passion is the gospel. Passion Sunday is that Sunday in which we tell the world that there was man named Jesus of Nazareth, who stepped forward from the line, and took the assassin's bullet so his friends would not have to die. He taught us these famous words that described his life: ‘No greater love has a person than this, that he is willing to lay down his life for his friends.’ That's what Passion is all about

And so it is with God. When you and I are injured or cut, when we are hurting or bleeding, God is with us. That is the very nature of our God. Passionate. God is filled with passion and compassion. Our God is a God who suffers and cries and dies. Our God, this true God experiences fully our pain and sorrow and tears and death.

Our God is passionate. Jesus is passionate, and Jesus has the same nature as the Father. Both are passionate, and passionate means suffering. Passion Week means suffering week. Passion story means the story of Jesus' suffering. 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me and let me suffer like that?' What other religion is there where a cross becomes a throne?

Preaching the Word

From the hermeneutical notes, several themes for preaching emerge.

We might address the issues around humility. Humility doesn't have many buyers today. We live in a culture that says, 'We're number one. I'm number one.' It is not only culture that puts pressure on us to be number one. It is also part of our human nature. We constantly struggle to elevate ourselves above the next person. We take the gifts that God has given to us and often use these gifts to be better than other people around us.

We might lead people to see Jesus in the whole of his Passion, and to make decisions about how we will follow him in following God's will for our personal and corporate lives. This will inevitably involve confronting sin and injustice and prejudice in our present contexts and of course within our own lives. We might call people to decide whether they also want to identify and confront such sin, or challenge people to make decisions about what methods they will use to make those confrontations.

We might simply declare the central Easter message: if we want to live, all we have to do is to 'die to sin and die to self'

Living the Word

Engagement with the community in which the congregation lives could naturally arise from the direction chosen for the sermon. Perhaps call together a "Reconcilers' Group" who would learn to discern and act in places where there is division in the congregation's context. Perhaps a "Foot-washers' Group" could find ways of ministering to people who feel excluded. I worship with a congregation who recently prepared compact gift boxes with Easter treats and useful gifts and took them to specific people's homes, sometimes with follow-up visits and ministries (e.g. simply cleaning up where it was needed and asked for). In one home a man who had been surly and angry for ages broke into tears when he found that someone cared for him in a sacrificial way.

Congregations can set an example of sacrificial living for others through activities such as neighbourhood clean-ups. They can bring youth groups and bible study groups to help senior citizens and other residents with activities such as raking leaves. The intent wouldn't be to raise funds or evangelise, but to create a habit of serving others.

Word and Life for Monday in Holy Week – 30 March 2026

Patty Edwards

Texts

Isaiah 42:1–9
Psalm 36:5–11
Hebrews 9:11–15
John 12:1–11

Introduction

This passage in Isaiah belongs to one of the Servant Songs or poems and is a very positive portrayal of the servant of the Lord. It is beautifully descriptive and is a prophetic voice for the future of all nations. *As the Lord indicated in Isaiah 41:8–9 that Israel is God’s servant, this passage serves as a direct discourse with Israel.*

God will anoint God’s servant for divine ministry. As Israel will be anointed as the nation to bring justice and unity so Jesus will be anointed with spikenard by Mary as he was the chosen one to bring peace and light to a dark world.

We realise a communal but also an individual association in Isaiah. As we read the servant song, we become cognizant of possibly of either one person or the community of Israel, being addressed. What is described in this passage could be deserving of Israel in an ideal situation as the perfect nation of God fulfilling all God’s wishes.

Hearing the Word

Comments on Isaiah 42:1–9

The people of Judah were chosen by God to receive God’s blessings and to be God’s servant. Their mission was to direct others towards God, but they were unsuccessful. When the nation is forced into exile in Babylonia, they are homeless, without a leader or temple and began to turn away from God towards false gods. It became evident that the nation needed new hope, new inspiration and new dreams.

This first suffering servant song shows that the Lord will anoint God’s chosen servant with the Spirit. The servant will receive authority from God to bring justice to the nations in a quiet and compassionate way even amidst suffering. Through the suffering servant God will bring an end to the suffering of the nation and realise new dreams and hopes for them. Consequently, the nation will recognise that God is and will always be their creator and provider. The God who remains ever faithful and true.

Comments on Psalm 36:5–11

Verse 1–4

Here we see how evil and wicked human beings can be. They will plot and scheme and even plan evil things when they are in bed. Those transgressing are self-centred and egotistic and plan wicked and evil deeds. They have no idea of a God who holds all things in God’s powerful embrace.

Verse 5–11

These verses bring the hope needed in the world where evil and deceit triumph. Juxtaposed to human evil is God’s endearing goodness and faithfulness. God’s faithfulness is not limited even to the highest mountains or the depths of the sea. No person or any place on earth is excluded from God’s love. The Lord as creator is also the wellspring of all life because all life is dependent on God. God’s love for all living creatures has no limitations. For this reason, the Psalmist prayer is for God’s continued protection and care against all evildoers.

Comments on Hebrews 9:11–15

Jesus should be our central point of adoration as we live in a world of many contrasts. By Jesus’ blood we can be cleansed and then devote ourselves to active service. The eternal Spirit of God worked through Jesus to manifest the integration of God with the world and the foundation of the New Covenant. Since Jesus is eternal and the cross is eternal, we should engage with Jesus on a profoundly spiritual level as we yearn for the eternal life with him.

Comments on John 12:1–11

In an extravagant act of worship Mary anoints the feet of Jesus with a costly and fragrant perfume called spikenard. Mary’s admiration for Jesus is recognized by her anointing of Jesus before his burial. This is Mary’s way of showing her willingness to serve Jesus in a humble way. Servants usually attended to the feet of guests after a journey. In a remarkable and almost holy act Mary dried Jesus’ feet with her hair as an expression of deep love and devotion. Mary’s devotion brought evil ideas from Judas as he felt the money could have been used for the poor. Judas by his actions also showed his disrespect of Jesus. He regularly took money from the money bag which he carried. Thus, his motivation for the use of the perfume was not actually for the poor but for himself.

Interpreting the Word

The emphasis in the texts of the day is on servanthood. In the servant song in Isaiah the suffering servant points to Israel but also the one who is in mission to Israel under God’s authority. God speaks directly to the servant emphasising their intimate connection “my servant” “My chosen”. Irrespective of being chosen by God, the servant is not obligated to partake in this mission. God knows the servant and the abilities needed and is available to encourage and provide. It is a huge but tremendous responsibility to act under God’s protection.

The servant’s role is to “open the eyes that are blind”. Nevertheless, the servant also suffers and recognises the suffering of others resulting in a renewed focus on enabling others for God’s world. The servant is motivated and prepared by God who values the mission of the servant to all nations. This indicates a special relationship with God and

all people. God is creator of the world, imparting breath and spirit to every living creature. Now God puts God's Spirit on the servant as he sends him to all nations as their light.

The servant role is continued through Jesus who comes as High priest, introducing the new covenant ministry and entering the most holy place of God as he offers himself sacrificially and voluntarily. We are welcomed to this most holy place through Jesus to be cleansed from all sin, then to offer ourselves in active service to a living God. Assessing the two means of sacrifice we realise Jesus' sacrifice is of superior worth and incomparable to the sacrifice of animals. "Without blemish" describes the purity of Christ.

Jesus spends time with his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus and this points us to the fact that death can never have the final say. Jesus indicating to Judas that Mary has kept the perfume for his burial announces his pending death and burial. Subsequently Mary's act becomes more meaningful than she might have envisioned. Her drying of Jesus' feet with her hair is an intensely intimate and loving act and points us to when Jesus washes the feet of his disciples in an act of servanthood. Yet, Judas is not happy with Mary's act towards Jesus because he allowed greed and egocentricity to take over his life. Mary's extravagant act guides us to humble and loving service towards Jesus and the poor.

Preaching the Word

There are many themes that can arise from the chosen texts. Therefore a preacher could go in different directions on Holy Monday.

We can connect the presentation of the servant chosen by God in Isaiah with Jesus, as servant, chosen to sacrifice himself for the sins of the world. Through the suffering servant and Jesus, we envisage again the Covenant of God with God's people.

Paul indicates that Christ came with grace from God the Father and showed God's deep love for humankind through his ministry. Our ministry should reflect our deep love for God as we trust and have faith in him.

Reading the gospel invites different thoughts, ideas and thinking in us. Jesus has a certain smell for us and so we have in the world. Our smell should be identical to the smell of Jesus.

Mary and Judas are opposing characters of true and false discipleship, as well as true and false love. When believers choose to serve God are they true and loyal to God or are they serving to be seen and with their own agendas in mind? Giving of ourselves whole heartedly means surrendering our wills and serving as Jesus did.

Living the Word

The readings of the day motivate us to consider our way of worship of Jesus Christ. It enables us to think deeply about our own critical ways when others worship. Judas was critical of Mary's way of worship and devotion of Jesus. Worshipping Christ, we can learn and grow especially if we live in gratitude, with compassion and generosity.

Worshipping God requires a joyful spirit and a happy demeanour and allows us to bring honour to his name. That is the smell of Christ we will give to those we encounter on our earth journey.

Being true to our servant roles we will want to wash the feet of others and walk the extra mile for those in need. This means losing yourself and putting God centre stage in your life. It will be costly but humbling because it is always about others never about yourself. During this Holy Week we should be intensely conscious of Jesus' way to the cross and how we devote ourselves to him.

Christ portrays sacrificial love and compassion which the religious leaders of Jesus' day lacked as they were primarily focussed on their traditions and rules to safeguard their positions in society. They experienced Jesus as a threat and schemed to have him killed. Likewise, the believers experience will be that of hatred and opposition for the sake of the gospel and their faith. This calls for a deep connection to Christ to endure any threats.

At the start of this Holy Week, it is essential to know that the work of the servant of God must continue through us. Considering ourselves disciples of Christ the realisation should be that we are part of Jesus' way to the cross and in our mission, suffering will be real. The mission also includes joyous moments when disciples bring others to God to share in God's blessings and protection.

Liturgical Suggestions (unless a separate fuller liturgy is required for the occasion)

An order of service

Opening chorus / hymn and welcome:

Loving God,
We came to worship you today.
We came to sing, pray and listen.
You always hear us.
Help us to hear you. **Amen.**

Gathering in God's name

Our help is in the name of the Lord,
Who made heaven and earth."

What did God do to help us?

God chose the people of Israel to make a new beginning.
They received God's covenant and prepared the way for Jesus to come as Saviour

Light a Candle to invite Christ in

The word of God:

- First lesson/ reading
- Psalm
- Hymn/ chorus
- Second lesson/ reading
- Reflection/ guided meditation
- Time of prayer: corporate / guided
- Offertory hymn/ chorus

Conclusion

- There could be an act all persons will partake in. Be creative.
- End with blessing/ grace
- Extinguish candle and invite parishioners to carry Christ within them into the world.

Closing chorus/hymn

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Word and Life for Tuesday in Holy Week – 31 March 2026

Patty Edwards

Texts

Isaiah 49:1–7
Psalm 71:1–14
1 Corinthians 1:18–31
John 12:20–36

Introduction

After the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, we face the days before Jesus' crucifixion and the need to balance all our emotions leading up to the dramatic events on Good Friday.

Hearing the Word

Comments on Isaiah 49:1–7

Isaiah is called upon to bring hope to the nation as they struggle in exile under the Babylonian rule. The hope they needed was that justice will prevail, and that God will accompany them as he loves and cares for them.

This periscope is the second of the Servant Songs where the servant of God addresses all the people in all the distant places of the earth. The servant's mission was to declare war against the chaos in the world. In Verse 3–4 the servant is identified as the Israelite nation. However, verse 5–7 indicates the Messiah as servant of God, who will come to bring light to many. The challenges the nation faced while in exile caused a considerable amount of frustration which subsequently led to their acknowledgment of God as their God and salvation. The servant will not only be responsible to restore the dignity of the nation but also lead them to salvation. God promised Abraham that he will bless his descendants and raise up the nation. Although the servant is rejected by some people, kings will pay homage to the servant because he is in mission to God.

Comments on Psalm 71:1–14

The psalmist seems to be an older person who cries out to God for help in the first four verses "deliver me...rescue me...save me...". The Psalmist needs God's saving grace as he experiences challenges. God is pictured as his "hope", his "confidence" and "my God". The Psalmist admits that God is important to him since his youth and now he can look back at his relationship with God as he calls on God to rescue him. The Lord helped him through many tough situations before, and he trust in God to do it again. As people age they still experience conflicts and even anxiety as many relationships do not work as planned. The time of old age might even bring anxiety about one's relationship with God.

Comments on 1 Corinthians 1:18–31

The letter of Paul is addressed to the Corinthian people because he heard how they were acting and wanted to direct them towards God and the way God expects them to act. Some people believed that the message of the cross was inspiring, wise and a source of strength, but others thought

the cross was foolishness. Paul is implying that human wisdom is not God's wisdom. Isaiah 55:8–9 tells us "For my thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways, says the Lord."

Comments on John 12:20–36

In John's gospel Jesus invites believers to follow him, to serve him and to die for him. John indicates that Jesus will be glorified in his sacrificial death. After Jesus addressed the Father, a voice spoke from heaven to confirm Jesus' statement. "*I have both glorified it and will glorify it again.*" This is the third time a heavenly voice declared that God's name will be glorified. The other two occasions were at Jesus' baptism and his transfiguration.

He indicates his pending death by saying; 'And I if I am lifted up from the earth will draw all peoples to myself.' The metaphor of the seed he uses is to illustrate that it is only through death that a life can be fruitful. We need to die to ourselves and follow Christ. As we give ourselves over to God, we allow him to plant us where we are needed.

Interpreting the Word

The selected passages are very appropriate for Holy Week as we continue to walk the way to the cross with Jesus. Christian interpreters suggest that Jesus is referred to as the suffering servant of Isaiah because he was sent to the world by God to be the light for all of God's people and bring new hope in them. Jewish interpreters believe that Israel is the suffering servant showing all nations that God should be revered and worshipped. This is the calling of the nation to be the servants of God.

Paul speaks into the divisions in the Church in Corinth and reminds believers of the true message of the cross of Jesus. The message of the cross shows that God works in powerful ways completely opposite to humankind's ways. The cross should bring unity and fellowship to all believers and as we journey to the cross with willing hearts we can receive hearts of true wisdom. Instead of a self-sufficiency that the world advocates all believers are dependent on God's wisdom and grace. All believers need constant renewal, and God is willing to renew by the power of the Spirit and redeem the penitent from all sin. Paul refers the Corinthians to the Isaiah passage where God used those rejected, weak and marginalised instead of the rich and famous to serve his purpose. The Corinthians will have to change their mindset and surrender completely to Christ to be saved by the power and grace of God.

Jesus is glorified through his suffering on the cross which becomes the mission and message of the church. When Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man some of the people did not grasp the full meaning of this message. The Greeks came to see Jesus and believers came to worship at the feast.

Preaching the Word

God sent Isaiah to warn the Judean people but also to assure them that God will save them. Should the people continue to trust in false gods it could lead to God's judgement of the nation. Isaiah is the book that is extensively quoted in the New Testament and is written in prose and poetry.

Isaiah was preaching to the nation who was totally defeated, felt lost and abandoned. The nation lived under severe circumstances and could not comprehend why their situation was so bad. They strayed from God and started worshipping strange gods which did not benefit them. As they were disobedient to God they had to repent and return to God who waited for their return. Our lives are so complex at times that we sometimes stray from God and make the wrong choices, not anticipating that God is patiently waiting on us to return to him. So many people need restoration and renewal but stubbornly continue with the things of the world. Through the death of Christ restoration is possible.

The theme of servanthood stands out in the different readings. The followers of Christ should reflect servanthood as Christ did. Both the suffering servant and Christ come to bring hope and restoration. Today we see the need to embrace all people as we are part of the same family of God. Jesus always included those who others designated "outsiders" as all people are vulnerable and should have the same access to the kingdom of God.

The theme of light is portrayed through the Isaiah reading where Israel was called to be a light to all people. Nothing should be in darkness. As Christ's light is within each person that is what the world should see. Believers are to carry the light of Christ into the world and bring light to the lives of so many who are in darkness because of their circumstances. Our lives should be Christ centred, and light filled. The world needs more Christian light bearers.

The imagery of the seed that must die and that produce many more seeds is linked to the death of Christ. Christ was willing to be sacrificed for the sins of the world in order that the world could be saved.

Living the Word

As much as Lent is a time of reflection and self-examination, it could also be a time of guilt feelings. Thinking about the crowd that shouted "crucify him" we could ask whether we also are guilty of abandoning Jesus? Like Isaiah, believers are called to bring hope to those who feel their situations are hopeless. This is a time to deeply reflect on Isaiah's words as it also speaks to us today and how we should avoid darkness and walk in the light of God.

We listen to so many voices on our earthly journey and at times it is difficult to concentrate on God's voice. God's voice should be our number one priority. As we listen to God's voice, we leave all hindrances behind in order to positively influence the lives of others. Self-love is so very important as it allows us to love others. Where we stand in relation to God will direct our lives, and it will show in our attitudes and actions towards self and others.

Liturgical Suggestions

An order of service

Opening chorus / hymn and welcome:

Lord, our God, we trust your promise
to be among us as we gather.

We come in the name of Christ.,

drawn by your Spirit,

eager to hear your word

Fill our hearts with your Spirit

And prepare us for faithful service.

Amen.

Gathering in God's name

Come let us sing for joy to the Lord;

Let us shout aloud to the rock of our salvation

Let us come before him with thanksgiving

And extol him music and song.

Psalms 95:1–2

Light a Candle to invite Christ in

The word of God

- First lesson/reading
- Psalm
- Hymn/chorus
- Second lesson/ reading
- Reflection/ guided meditation
- Time of prayer: corporate/guided
- Offertory hymn/chorus

Conclusion

- There could be an act all persons will partake in. Be creative.
- End with blessing/grace
- Extinguish candle and invite parishioners to carry Christ within them into the world.

Closing chorus/hymn

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Word and Life for Wednesday in Holy Week – 1 April 2026

Ian Booth

Texts

Isaiah 50:4–9a
Psalm 70
Hebrews 12:1–3
John 13:21–32

Introduction

The Wednesday of Holy Week each year focuses on the character of Judas Iscariot, and his departure from the Upper Room to meet with the religious leaders to betray Jesus. Over the centuries there has been much speculation about Judas' motivation for doing this. Some suggest his disappointment that Jesus' understanding of his role as Messiah or Christ differed so widely from his own preconceived definition. There is also a thought that perhaps Judas had no choice, and was set up for this betrayal. Was it disappointment, was it greed, was it not his fault at all? Whatever it might be, Jesus included Judas at the table despite knowing what Judas was planning to do.

Hearing the Word

Isaiah 50:4–9a: These verses are of particular interest to Christian readers, as they contain a description of suffering very much like that endured by Jesus. Perhaps Jesus meditated on these verses as he prepared to go up to Jerusalem. New Testament writers were attracted to these words because through them they were able to understand the suffering of Jesus – not because of his sinfulness, but because of his obedience to God.

Psalm 70: In this Psalm we find an individual lament from the Psalmist seeking urgent intervention from God at a time when his reputation is at risk. Given the tone of this Psalm, it is not hard to understand why it is included in the Lectionary for this date.

Hebrews 12:1–3: Chapter 11 of the Letter to the Hebrews contains a litany of the great figures of the Old Testament and others who persevered in their faithfulness despite not seeing the fulfilment of God's ultimate plan. These are the "great cloud of witnesses" referred to in these opening verses of Chapter 12, in which Jesus is described as the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith" because of the cross. Each time I read this passage I am reminded of the experience, during the Comrades Marathon, of running along Harrison Flats near Cato Ridge, where the pupils of a school for the deaf line the road as a host of silent witnesses.

John 13:21–32: Jesus knows that there is betrayal in the air, and that the betrayer is in the room with them. He then identifies the betrayer by handing him a piece of bread, and Judas is "outed". Judas is then sent on his mission after being told to do it quickly.

Interpreting the Word

Isaiah 50:4–9: The poem of Isaiah 50:1–11 is about the cost of being a disciple, and is addressed to the Judean exiles in Babylon at a time of suffering. It was not only the Judean exiles who were suffering, but all Babylonians were suffering during the last days of the empire, where food and water were scarce and social services had broken down, resulting in fear and confusion. There was division among the exiles, and accusations made against Isaiah regarding things he has said about the exiles. Isaiah preached that God had chosen a foreign king to serve as God's anointed prince and that the people of the whole earth can be children of God, and not just those who regarded themselves as the chosen. Verses 4–9 speaks to the training and inner strength required of a disciple. This required a tongue trained to encourage weary and discouraged people and an ear sensitised to hear what God was saying and to act in obedience. The sensitised ear was also attuned to the cries of people for healing, forgiveness, and liberation. The training also required a willing back to endure the suffering of lashes; and a disciplined face which would endure slapping, spitting, and hair pulled out from the beard and the head. This was intended to humiliate a person and break them down. The disciplined face would accept the pain and humiliation without showing that the pain had broken a person down. The prophet used these techniques to withstand the false accusations of the exiles, and furthermore to invite them to join the community of disciples.

Psalm 70: This Psalm is almost a verbatim repeat of Psalm 40:13–17. It refers to the attack of enemies. The plea is that these foes should be stripped of their honours and struck with terror because of their idolatry. The Psalmist prays that joy may reside where it properly belongs, in the community of faithful worshippers of the Lord.

Hebrews 12:1–3: The Letter to the Hebrews, by an unnamed author, appears to have been written during the early Christian movement to Jewish converts to Christianity to encourage them to remain steadfast in their new faith, despite doubts and even taunting from their fellow Jews. Chapter 12 follows the litany of the faithful of Chapter 11, all of whom were Old Testament characters (suggesting an early authorship of this letter). The encouragement to the audience is that, while these heroes of the past had not obtained the promises even though they had run their race, the post Easter community had that opportunity. The sense one gets is of a rather large and extended relay race, where each generation hands on the baton to the next, all cheered on by this great cloud of witnesses. These witnesses are not just spectators, but have all completed their leg of the race, and are now cheering on the current generation. The imagery of a race is extended to the removal of garments (an allegorical reference to the removal of the encumbrance) and to "run with endurance the race that is set before them." In the race their eyes are to be fixed on Jesus, the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

John 13:21–32: The Gospel according to John differs from the other three Gospels in several ways, which raise questions regarding the timing of the composition of this Gospel and the purpose of the author in writing it. As the passage we are looking at is the beginning of the process toward Golgotha and the events that follow, it is necessary to point out that this Gospel account has the greatest number of chapters and verses dedicated to this crucial 18 hour period in the life of Jesus, and has the greatest degree of detail – almost as if written by an eye witness of the events. This begs the question of whether it is the last of the Gospels written (as has been the common wisdom) or whether it was the first written while these events were still fresh in the mind of the writer. The intention of the writer is that people may recognise their relation to God in Jesus. The events that transpired in the Upper Room and around the table are described in close detail, including where some of the disciples were located in relation to Jesus. The passage reveals that Jesus knew that Judas was about to betray him, and that this would set in motion the dramatic, painful events that were to follow – events which were integral to the mission of Jesus. Here is the hard truth – that sometimes the enemy is within. In response to a question regarding the identity of the betrayer, Jesus gives a signal “It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.” Then he gives it to Judas Iscariot. Jesus tells Judas to act with speed as he embarks on his task, of which most of the disciples are ignorant. Jesus exonerates them from complicity in Judas’ act of betrayal. Judas leaves “And it was night.” This does not only portray the time of day, but the sense that darkness was gathering around them. And, again, let’s not overlook the fact that Jesus included Judas in the meal, despite knowing what he was about to do.

Preaching the Word

This is Wednesday of Holy Week, during which we travel the road from the glorious events of Palm Sunday to the betrayal, the unjust trial, the pain and suffering, the cross – and ultimately the source of our hope as followers in the way of Jesus. On Wednesday we join the gathering at the table in the Upper Room for the first time in the week, where the focus is not so much on the meal, nor the significance of the transformation of the meal from Passover to Last Supper, but on the betrayer and his planned deeds. The passage from Isaiah, the Psalm, and the Gospel passage all speak to betrayal, to opposition, to suffering for doing the work of God. The passage from Hebrews points to those whose race is run and who were then cheering on those who had chosen to follow the way of Jesus and are now cheering us on. The focal point of the sermon is going to be on Judas and the role assigned to Judas in the drama of Holy Week. Did Judas choose the role, or was it chosen for him? We don’t know, and that will depend on where we stand on the question of predestination. I believe we each have a choice, that God gives each of us a choice, and sometimes events carry us along and we engage in them without giving too much

thought to where they will take us. That Judas and perhaps the others had a different understanding of the role of the “Christ” or “Messiah” is clear from the Gospels. There is much to make us understand that the expectation of the Jews was very different to that of the way Jesus understood the role and the mission. The sermon will explore different possibilities and reasons, but always with the same outcome in mind. The ultimate decision will be whether Judas is the villain of the piece, or a bit player in the drama of Holy Week because he was a weak point which was exploited by the Chief Priests and the teachers of the Law. He does serve as a point of reference to the fact that the enemy is not always “out there” but sometimes, perhaps more often than we think, is within. The sermon will be shorter than usual, because that is the nature of Holy Week sermons, but there is much to be explored and “mined” from the texts.

Living the Word

There are various ways in which we could “live into the Word” on this occasion. There could be reflection on the ways in which people have felt challenged and threatened by people they thought would be there to support them – as it was for Isaiah and for Jesus. There could be reflection on the threat of “the enemy within”, which could link to the risk of speaking out about certain injustices because we are not sure who we can trust. At the time of writing there is a lot of thought given to the striking similarities between the second coming of Donald Trump and the 1933 election of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of Germany, and the rise of Nazi repression and the demand for absolute loyalty to Hitler – and now Trump. These are realities in the world we inhabit now.

The fun element of this is relating the story of running races: I spoke of the Comrades experience; Gqeberha has historically had a relay race that covered a distance of about 100km pitting a team of human runners against a train. These can be fun recollections or stories to tell – and there may be others in your community.

The important element of “living into the Word” is considering how individuals have or will respond to a Judas in their midst, or the Judas element in them when they have betrayed another. Is Judas still at the table, or not? What did Jesus do?

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Introduction to the Triduum

Introduction

The Triduum is a single service that begins with the greeting on Maundy Thursday and ends with the dismissal at the end of the Easter Vigil. This basic unity needs to be maintained even if the three elements of the service are planned individually. The word comes from the Latin *Triduum Sacrum*, ('the sacred three days'), and refers to the three concluding days of Holy Week that commemorate the Last Supper, Passion, and Death of Christ, and lead to the celebration of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday.

This single service encapsulates the heart of the Christian faith: that the incarnate Christ entered fully into our human condition, gave himself even to death for the sin of the world.

Over the course of time the celebration of the Triduum (Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil) developed and grew. Many observances and traditions, both general and local, accumulated to each of the services. In the Reformation the Protestant churches removed a number of these observances but over the past fifty years many have been adapted and included in the service once again. This can result in the celebration of Holy Week and the Triduum taking on the nature of a marathon demanding a degree of stamina to complete fully.

Planning the Triduum

Those who have the responsibility for planning the Triduum must decide how each part will fit into the celebration this time, rather than simply taking the order they have always used and inserting other hymns.

Questions to be considered when planning Holy Week should include:

- What services are planned for the period Palm Sunday to Easter?
- How will the Triduum fit into this pattern of public worship?
- What resources are available for the three elements of the Triduum?
- What do we hope to offer the regular members of the congregation?
- How will the Triduum allow the congregation to reach out to the wider community?
- Which elements should we include in the service this year and which might we leave out?

Different elements may be included in other years. There is no need to include all every year. At times it may be more important to create space for individual reflection within the liturgies than to complete every possible variation of them.

It could prove counter-productive to focus on getting all the different elements in place as if we were trying to present a pageant made up of the events from Palm Sunday to Easter morning. More important is that the liturgy should provide a number of spaces where worshippers can reflect on the

impact of these episodes on their own lives in their own generation. Space should be allowed for the texts set for the service to address the current situation of the community and the wider world.

Preaching in the Triduum

Four vital issues need to be clear in the minds of those who plan the preaching for Holy Week and the Triduum:

1. It should have its place in an overall plan for the proclamation during Lent, Holy Week and Easter.

The practice of inviting visiting preachers to participate in the services of Lent, Holy Week and the Triduum is often seen as a way of injecting variety into the proclamation over the season. But it is also possible that this could produce a series of disconnected sermons leading to a very disjointed experience for the congregation. Where visiting preachers are included, they should be made aware of the flow of the season and how the occasion where they are to participate fits in the sequence.
2. Care should be taken to ensure that all the preachers involved are made aware of the central themes of the sermons that will precede and follow their own contributions.
3. While each sermon should be complete in itself, it should also provide some indication of how its theme relates to what has gone before and what is to follow.
4. The reading of the texts throughout the service is as important as the proclamation. Care should be taken to ensure that the readings are presented clearly. A number of the lessons could be considered for dramatization and the use of different voices.

Hickman *et al* suggest that in the Triduum we 'approach the yearly renewal of our incorporation into the central mystery of Christian life and faith'. It is a time to walk together as a believing and worshipping community, treading gently in our care and respect for those who walk with us.

The Elements of the Triduum Service

Maundy Thursday

This evening service has its focus on the Institution of the Eucharist, on the occasion of the Last Supper that Jesus had with his disciples. On that occasion:

- they gathered with great joy to celebrate the Passover;
- Jesus washed the feet of the disciples before the meal;
- he dramatically identified himself with the broken bread and the poured wine;
- they left to go out into the darkness of Gethsemane.

This service could also include an observance of Tenebrae, the service of the shadows or gathering darkness. With the lighting turned off in the church, a sequence of readings is accompanied by the gradual extinguishing of a number of candles, until darkness prevails and the congregation leaves quietly without any benediction being said.

Good Friday

The Good Friday devotions can take on different forms. Some churches have a simple morning service which embraces silence and prayerful reflection. Other Church traditions offer a three-hour service, (often called “The Three Hours’ Service” or “The Three Hours’ Agony,”) which is a liturgical service commemorating the three hours Jesus spent on the cross. It is typically held from noon to 3 p.m., and includes prayers, hymns, and homilies on the seven last words of Christ.

The Easter Vigil

Also known as the Paschal Vigil or the Great Vigil of Easter, this is a liturgy followed in some traditional Churches as the first official celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus. Historically, it was during this liturgy that people were baptised and adult catechumens received into full communion with the Church. This act of worship is held in the hours of darkness between sunset on Holy Saturday and sunrise on Easter Day – most commonly in the evening of Holy Saturday or at midnight. In some traditions worshippers remain in the church all night. With days being traditionally considered to begin at sunset this service is then the first celebration of Easter. The Vigil is then an early morning event that reminds worshippers of the darkness that engulfed the followers of Jesus at the end of Maundy Thursday and their ensuing sorrow and confusion over the following two days. Features of the Easter Vigil are the lighting of the new fire and blessing of the paschal candle, together with the singing of the Easter song of praise, the *Exultet*, and the celebration of the Easter Eucharist.

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Liturgy for Maundy Thursday – 2 April 2026

Rachell Hoogbaard

Introduction

Maundy Thursday sees a change in liturgical colours from Purple for Lent and the Passion to White to celebrate the Eucharist. The use of white on Maundy Thursday, which marks the beginning of the Easter Triduum, emphasizes the celebration of the Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharist.

Texts

Exodus 12:1–4, (15–10) 11–14

Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

John 13:1–17, 31b–35

Gathering in God's name

Call to worship

Come and take your seat

For the Lord, our Teacher is here.

Come, be washed and fed

For the Servant of Servants is here

Come with an offer of thanks and praise

Be filled by the cup of salvation, the glorified Son of Man

Act of Penitence

For the times when we forgot that the blood of Jesus protect us from the plagues of this world,

Lord have mercy

For the times that we forgot to celebrate your festivals and partake in the Eucharist with reverence and thanksgiving,

Christ have mercy

For the times that we distrusted the Lord's cleansing and allowed his cup of acceptance to pass us by,

Lord have mercy

Absolution or Assurance of Forgiveness

The Lord of mercy and grace heard your cries and saw your contrite heart. May the Lord forgive you and wash you clean.

May the Lord's cup of salvation and love, fill your life and grant you eternal life. Amen.

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer for Illumination

Compassionate God, our light and our salvation.

Grant that that our hearts are receptive as we break bread in the light of your glory.

Grant us discernment and understanding of your Word.

In Jesus name.

Amen

Responding to the Word of God

Confession of faith

We believe in the God of Moses and Abraham

The one God who saved God's people from the plagues of Egypt.

The God our protector, who continue to save us from the plagues of this world.

We believe in Jesus Christ

Who washed the feet of his disciples.

The Suffering Servant who command us to wash the feet of our brothers and sisters.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,

The Spirit who guides us as we participate in the Lord's sacraments,

And grant us grace to celebrate this Maundy Thursday with thanks and praise.

We believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Litany- Prayers for the people

Let us pray,

(Pause)

Compassionate God

We give you the highest praise.

We praise you for directing our steps as we journey through the forty days in the wilderness.

Loving God, your ways are higher than our ways

Your thought are higher than our thoughts

Help us to accept your cleansing through the washing of our feet.

May we too wash the feet of our neighbours with water of forgiveness, service and love.

Merciful God, your body and blood renew our spirit.

We thank you for you cup of the new covenant.

May we become what we eat and follow your example of humility and love.

Compassionate God

Grant hope to the hopeless

Healing to the sick

Comfort to the needy and those who mourn

Justice to the oppressed and destitute.

May the light of Jesus Christ light lighten the path of all who is in darkness.

Merciful God, grant these prayers

For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord

Amen.

Celebrating at the table

Sharing of the Peace

May the peace of our Lord Jesus, who washed the feet of his friends, overtake you today and always – in your schools, homes, places of work and institutions of learning.

May the peace of the Lord be with you always.

Peace be with you.

Invitation to Communion

Our Lord Jesus Christ washed the feet of his friend so that they could be part of him. Therefore, on this Maundy Thursday Jesus invites us to become part of him through the body and blood.

Come friends, come and share in the feast of our Lord with praise and thanksgiving.

Sending

Post communion Prayer

Holy and Gracious God, we thank you for feeding us with the body and blood. Thank you for loving, accepting, and cleansing us. Help us to thrive as we celebrate you through your Holy Sacrament of love. May we be strengthen in faith and fellowship as we journey through the Triduum.

Amen

Sentence of Scripture

I have set you an example that you should do as I have done to you. John 13:15.

Benediction

Go forth,
Secure in the love of God the Almighty
Strengthen and renewed by the body and blood of Jesus Christ
Cleanse and comforted by the Holy Spirit.

And the blessing of God the Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, remains with you always.

Amen

Sending out

You were cleanse by the washing of your feet
And fed by the body and the blood
And Equipped by the Holy Spirit
Therefore, go out into the world spreading the good news of salvation and eternal life.

In the Name of Christ. Amen.

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- “Brother let me be your servant”
- “We break this bread to share in the body of Christ”
- “Here, o Lord, your servants gather”

Word and Life for Maundy Thursday – 2 April 2026

Rachell Hoogbaard

Texts

Exodus 12:1–4, (15–10) 11–14
Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19
1 Corinthians 11:23–26
John 13:1–17, 31b–35

Introduction

For Christians around the world, it is the beginning of the Triduum – the Latin word for three days. The Three Great Days start with Maundy Thursday, followed by Good Friday, Holy Saturday and ending with the Easter Vigil or Easter Day services.

The service starts with the celebration of the Pascal Mystery and continues with the passion-death-resurrection event. There is a greeting on Maundy Thursday but no dismissal until Easter, with a rejoicing sound of “Alleluia! Alleluia”.

Maundy Thursday is significant to Anglican Priests who renew their priestly vows on this day. This is cause for great joy when priests get together to renew vows, celebrate the Eucharist, and receive the new Oils- for the sick, confirmation, and baptism for the year. It is therefore a time of rejoicing for the Ordained who recommit to God’s mission.

Hearing the Word

Exodus 12:1–4, (15–10) 11–14

The lesson includes liturgies associated with the Exodus of God’s people. YHWH is central to the story of the Passover and the death of the firstborn of people and animals. YHWH was judge and protector of God’s people. The blood protected and rescued the firstborn sons of the Hebrew people. The ritual of the Passover became central as the theme of the Second Temple. Ezra 6 later recalls that this act of worship by returning exiles was a way to strengthen their self-identity as the people of God. The Passover sacrifice of the lamb was a sign of liberation for generations to come.

Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19

This Psalm is a hymn of thanksgiving. Psalms 113–118 form part of the Egyptian Hallel Psalms. The focus is on praise (*hallel*) to the Lord. These Psalms were used as pilgrimage songs or used in the annual festivals. These and other prayers were prominent after the destruction of the temple. It also formed part of the Passover liturgy.

The Psalmist declares a great love for God because God became visible in human circumstances. The Psalmist praises God, for God was attentive to human cries in times of death and great sorrow. The Psalmist claims that humans are liars, but we can trust God. The Psalmist sang praises to God, whose goodness cannot be repaid.

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

The meal reference in the text was a potluck dinner or ‘*agape*’ (common) feast. Rich and poor brought and shared food. While the poor contributed less, the rich ate so much more that the poor went home hungry. Behaviour at the table was not something that brought glory to God, and for this reason, Paul addressed the behaviour of participants of this feast. He passed on what he received from Jesus regarding the Lord’s Supper. The Supper connects to the Passover and continues in the light of Jewish meal practices: unleavened bread, giving thanks, breaking bread, and sharing. The reference to the cup symbolises the covenant of the blood through Jesus Christ. St Paul’s remark or teaching of the Lord’s Supper brings to the fore the new covenant and fulfilment of God’s promises. He urged partakers to continue to commemorate the Lord’s Supper in a worthy manner that brings glory and honour to God.

John 13:1–17, 31b–35

John begins his account of the Passion. The first Passover relates to the beginning of God’s chosen race. The Lord’s Supper allows believers to enter a new era of grace through the Cross of Jesus Christ. John makes connections to Jesus’ unlimited love and protection. The Synoptic gospels imply that Jesus ate the meal on Thursday night before the hearing before Pilate and the Crucifixion. John emphasised that Jesus was fully aware of his destiny, which was the Cross.

John reveals the divine truth when he speaks of the glory that is his through the Cross and his reference to the “Son of Man”. He confirms his supernatural origin, the purpose of his death, and his authority. Jesus declares his relationship with his disciples, which he based on his love for them. He commands them to follow his example and to love their neighbours in the same way that he loves them (13:31b–35).

The common thread in the text is the Passover reference to the Lord’s Supper and the communal feast. The Psalm is a familiar Psalm read by Jews at festivals. All these texts serve as a reminder of Jesus’ command for commemoration of what he instituted, and his willing sacrifice for believers.

Interpreting the Word

God addresses Moses and Aaron, who in turn need to address the community of Israelites. The backdrop to this event is the hardship of the Israelites under the reign of Pharaoh. Pharaoh resisted numerous requests (and nine plagues) pleading for the release of the Israelites. Pharaoh’s resistance moved God to strike the first-born sons of the Egyptians.

The Psalm is an individual declaration of thanksgiving and love for the Lord. The Psalmist expresses trust in a God who delivers in time of need. There is a commitment to the Lord who hears the cries and prayers of those in distress.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, which comprised both Jews and Gentiles. The reports from believers were alarming, therefore he wanted to provide some advice on practical and

pastoral matters to clarify misunderstandings and provide guidance to restore unity. The attitude of some members during the agape meal was unbecoming of Christians. The rich behaved like gluttons while the poor stayed hungry. This inconsiderate behaviour compounded the division within the church. Paul calls for reverence, humility, and fellowship that honour God.

John sketches the scene of the Last Supper. Jesus washes the feet of the disciples with Peter objecting profusely because he lacks understanding. Jesus' action is a reflection of what it means to serve. The washing of the feet also points to a spiritual cleansing or the power and authority that Jesus has to cleanse the world from sin. Jesus not only reveals that their "Lord" and "Teacher" can be a servant, but he also urges the disciple to do likewise by following his example. Jesus went further by commanding the disciples to love one another. He knows that they will face many trials and tribulations when he is gone and that would cause them to scatter in fear.

The Exodus texts speak to us today in difficult circumstances of violence and turmoil. It assures us that God is to be found with those who find themselves in impossible circumstances, when the enemy seems immovable and powerful. God works in ways and wonders that are beyond our human understanding.

The works and wonders of God, which we see in small or big ways of our lives, continue to move the believer to Psalms or songs of praise and thanksgiving. God shows up every day to defend and deliver God's people from the evil of this world. For that, the believer expresses love and gratitude in various ways, especially through acts of love and goodwill for friends, family, and neighbours. Believers express their love to God in whom they put their trust and dependence.

This love fosters unity and walking in humility, which is vital for the extension of God's Kingdom. Jesus set the example of humility and servanthood through the washing of the feet. He explains to the disciples who lack understanding of his ministry that he uses the outward (water) to cleanse the inward (soul and spirit).

Many churches continue the practice of washing of feet during the service. This is a way of following the command of the Lord. Washing of feet not only humbles the one that performs the act (Priest or Minister) but also the parishioner. The Spirit and the Word work in ways that cut through flesh and bone so that the heart responds with humility, love, and compassion. The washing of the feet is symbolic of masters brought to their knees to the level of a servant. To serve is the true nature and purpose of Jesus' ministry.

Preaching the Word

The institution of the Lord's Supper takes centre stage on Maundy Thursday. Major themes will include the washing of the feet and the Lord's Supper. The washing of the feet serves as a reminder of the humility and servanthood of Christ. The Congregation has an opportunity to contemplate the words, example, and command of the Lord. The sermon leads believers to reflect on the need to wash the feet of their brothers and sisters, especially those who harmed or disappointed them. For some, the spiritual act of worship may be the first step in terms of their own healing.

To be cleansed, forgive, and to ask for forgiveness are central to the washing of feet. A question that comes to mind relates to the restoration of the marginalised. These may include the youth, the elderly, the undesirable, or outcasts. People drawn from such groups may be considered to be invited as participants in the liturgy.

We draw attention to the Lord's Supper as a sacrament instituted by Christ. This act of worship highlights reverence, humility, and the commandment of love. Inclusivity and diversity in the Body of Christ are essential principles for this sacrament. Parishioners and visitors are invited and assured of being welcomed at the Lord's table.

Themes related to the Lord's Supper include:

- The meaning and importance of the sacrament of the Eucharist
- Behaviour that brings glory to God
- Christ-like behaviour (Become what you eat)

The Old Testament reading reveals God as the protector of God's chosen race. God shows up through wonders and miracles. The all-powerful Pharaoh is powerless against the living God. God comes through as a judge against the enemies of Israel.

On the brink of the Passion of Christ, we may use the opportunity to give thanks to God for strengthening believers during the Lenten journey.

The themes related to the conclusion of Lent may entail the following:

- Expressing our deep love for God (Psalm 116)
- Thanksgiving for liberation and protection (Exodus 12)
- Marvelling in the wonders and miracles of God (Exodus)

Living the Word

South Africa has a history of exclusion and lack of forgiveness. Maundy Thursday creates an opportunity for cleansing and forgiveness of the wrongs of the past. Offering prayers for individual and corporate sins can foster reconciliation. The service creates a space for unity and deep reflection. This deep reflection during the sacrament of the Eucharist renews the intentions of the believer for Holy living. It reconnects and reconciles the faith community with Christ. The Eucharist allows for recommitment to God's mission in a broken and chaotic world as the faith community rededicate themselves, "To Go and serve the Lord, in the Name of Christ".

Liturgical Suggestions

See specific liturgy for Maundy Thursday.

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- "O God, our help in ages past"
- "Now thank we all our God"
- "All my hope in God is founded"
- "Broken for me, broken for you"
- "Lord Jesus Christ, you have come to us"
- "Be still in the presence of the Lord"

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Liturgy for the Good Friday (Three-Hour Service) – 3 April 2026

James Harris

This year the Three-Hour Good Friday liturgy is divided into nine (9) sections of twenty (20) minutes each. Each section includes a hymn, a reading and a short homily, a prayer in response to the Word, then a brief period of silence for reflection, and finally a choral item or an instrumental piece. Then the cycle begins again with a hymn, etc. Any three-hour period will do, but the traditional pattern begins at 12 noon until 3pm. Speakers should offer focused and meaningful prayers after each homily. Closing prayers should be appropriate to the day, the needs of the congregation, the concerns of the world, and the mission of the church.

Liturgists need to choose their own hymns for each subsection or theme, appropriate to their ecclesial tradition, as well as appropriate anthems or instrumental music to fit the theme. I have made suggestions for the introductory hymns and the anthems, but these can be changed to suit the context of worship and people. These hymns and anthems have the metre and name of tunes from the sources I took them from; they can be changed to music known by the user. I have left the instrumental pieces for individual choice, which can be solo, duet, trio, choir, or organ, or band pieces.

There is no greeting nor any formal introduction. Notices or instructions should be written up clearly on the bulletin or liturgy sheet and distributed to all in attendance.

Here are my suggestions:

1. 12h00 to 12h20

Hymn: “Go to dark Gethsemane” (77.77.77/Cassel)

Reading: John 18:1–14

Homily: Arrest

Prayerful response

Quiet Reflection

Anthem: “There is a name I love to hear” (CM/Dalehurst)

2. 12h20 to 12h40

Hymn: “O sacred head once wounded” (76.76.76.76/Passion Chorale)

Reading: John 18:15–18, 25–27

Homily: Questions to and denial by Peter

Prayerful response

Quiet Reflection

Instrumental

3. 12h40 to 13h00

Hymn: “I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene” (87.87.87.87.irregular/My Saviour’s love)

Reading: John 18:19–24

Homily: Questions to Jesus by the high priest

Prayerful response

Quiet reflection

Anthem: “God forgave my sin in Jesus’ name” (Songs of Fellowship #129)

4. 13h00 to 13h20

Hymn: “Man of sorrows, what a name” (77.78/ What a Saviour)

Reading: John 18:28–40

Homily: Summoned by Pilate

Prayerful response

Quiet reflection

Instrumental

5. 13h20 to 13h40

Hymn: “How willing was Jesus to die” (8888/David or Trewen)

Reading: John 19:1–13

Homily: Sentenced by Pilate

Prayerful response

Quiet Reflection

Anthem: “Give me a sight, O Saviour” (PM/Make me understand)

6. 13h40 to 14h00

Hymn: “Here is love, vast as the ocean” (Songs of Fellowship #168)

Reading: John 19:14–16

Homily: Sacrificed by Pilate

Prayerful response

Quiet Reflection

Instrumental

7. 14h00 to 14h20

Hymn: “Glory be to Jesus” (6 5.6 5/Caswall)

Reading: John 19:17–27

Homily: Crucified

Prayerful response

Quiet Reflection

Anthem: “Beneath the cross of Jesus” (76 86 86 86/St Christopher)

8. 14h20 to 14h40

Hymn: “When I survey the wondrous cross” (LM/Rockingham)

Reading: John 19:28–37

Homily: Death

Prayerful response

Quiet reflection

Instrumental

9. 14h40 to 15h00

Hymn: “I heard the voice of Jesus say” (CMD/Vox Dilecti or Kingsfold)

Reading: John 19:38–42

Homily: Buried

Prayerful response

Quiet reflection

Closing prayers

Anthem: “Search me O God, and know my heart today” (10.10.10.10/Ellers)

Closing hymn: “King of my life, I crown thee now” (CM with refrain/ Duncannon)

NB: There is no formal dismissal. Worshippers leave at will. There are no greetings as people leave, as they will be entering a period of quiet reflection through the rest of Friday, into Saturday, until Easter morning.

Word and Life for Good Friday – 3 April 2026

James Harris

Texts

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12

Psalm 22

Hebrews 10:4–25

John 18:1 – 19:42

Introduction

The structure for this Three-Hour Devotion is based on a nine-fold division of John 18:1 – 19:42, corresponding to the Liturgy for the day. Comment is also offered on the three other texts so to enable readers to have some diversity, if required. Clearly the theme is the arrest, crucifixion, and burial of our Lord Jesus Christ. This Devotion is designed to allow the time between death and resurrection to ‘hang’ as it were, through Holy Saturday, with the obvious tension of anticipation, until Easter Sunday when we declare that Christ was raised! Whilst we are able to look back knowing what will happen, the objective of Good Friday’s reflection is to help believers enter into the seeming horror of an unfulfilled ending at the burial of Jesus. Encourage worshippers to use Saturday as a quiet, reflective time, thinking of the events leading up to the death of Jesus, and anticipating the hope of the resurrection.

Hearing and Interpreting the Word

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12

This is the fourth ‘Servant Song’ (the others are from Isa 42:1–4; 49:1–6; and 50:4–9). Many interpreters regarded these passages as relating to Israel as a nation which brought light to others. However, this particular text is so individual and personal that it raises the question of who exactly it could be? Christian interpreters have always seen this passage as referring to Jesus. Yet the RSV text suggests considerable contradictions! ‘... my servant shall prosper ... be exalted ... his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance ...’, whereas the GNB is less so: ‘... my servant will succeed in his task ... (and) ... will be highly honoured ... he was so disfigured that he hardly looked human ...’ The RSV more than the GNB suggests gross irony: lifted high yet marred: the cross in its ironic horror. The GNB enables us to see the purpose of the servant’s suffering, with its end result. (Here is a good example of using more than one translation to get to the core of the meaning of a text.)

This narrative raises a real concern: that of justifying God’s use of violence to attain God’s purpose. If anything is true, it is that the servant suffers on behalf of others. The RSV’s translation is accurate and helpful when it says ‘... we esteemed him stricken by God ...’, in other words, this is our human perception of the divine/human encounter. In the midst of human aggression and inhuman violence, God works the miracle of reconciliation.

Psalm 22

This Psalm is well known in its relation to the Passion of Jesus. But what of its original intent? A psalm of David, certainly, but at what point in his life, and in what circumstance did he write it? There is little within the psalm that tells us the context, but probably it was during one of the many struggle episodes in David’s life, more particularly when he was being chased and hunted by King Saul!

The psalm has been dominated by Christological interpretation, yet it is important always to contextualise a text into its original setting – as far as possible. The fact that Jesus quotes the first verse, and that other NT references are made to this psalm, does not detract from the psalm’s historical reality.

Hebrews 10:4–25

To begin at verse 6 makes no real sense of the passage in relation to the Good Friday narrative. We need to go back to at least verse 4 which introduces the idea of ‘sacrifice’ and thus its association with Jesus and the purpose of the cross. The writer to the Hebrews is clear that as much as the sacrificial system of the OT had value, it now was replaced by the sacrifice of Jesus. His sacrifice was supreme, given that it was once and for all, thus becoming effective in every way for those who trust in Jesus (not merely the act of sacrifice).

John 18:1 – 19:42

For the purpose of the devotion, this long reading is broken into nine (9) segments (see the liturgical suggestion), enabling us to reflect meaningfully on the whole story from the arrest of Jesus through to his death and burial. The whole objective in presenting the Good Friday readings, especially the Gospel, in this way is to help worshippers to fathom something of the drama of the event. These ‘bite-size’ devotions or homilies give the hearers an opportunity to spend the whole three hours together without thinking it is far too long! The nine segments help listeners to connect the ‘dots’ of the story.

18:1–14: The arrest

This is, understandably, an important feature in the story. Judas Iscariot (distinguished from another disciple of the same name – see John 14:22) arranges for a ‘cohort’ – usually about 600 soldiers in rough estimate (but often in practice a smaller body of men) – to go and arrest Jesus. Six hundred men (or even less if this term is merely a broad expression of speech) is excessive to arrest one person! But this is exactly the point the authorities want to make: bludgeon those to be arrested with a force which intimidates overwhelmingly. Against such a force, no-one will attempt to engage in a fight! Except Peter does exactly this when he attacks a servant. Yet it is Jesus who quells the aggression not the soldiers. Violence is never the answer.

The authorities knew where Jesus would be, for Judas Iscariot was aware of Jesus's schedule. But why was our Lord betrayed? Perhaps for money - but more importantly, because Jesus was considered treasonous and blasphemous by Roman and Jewish authorities. Here, therefore, was someone who could, and possibly would if left unstopped, create rebellion, disturbing civic peace, which in turn could bring speedy and vicious Roman military power into action; and no-one wanted that.

18:15–18, 25–27: Questions to Peter and his denial

While the travesty of a trial took place, Peter was seeking to keep 'tabs' on what was happening. He was noticed and upbraided as a disciple of Jesus, which he denied. What did it mean to Peter when he realised what had happened? The cock crowed, and Peter heard the words of Jesus again (see Mark 14:27–31, Matthew 26:75, Luke 22:60–62). He wept bitterly – raising a contemporary question: “is this what we do if or when we realize we deny our Lord?”

18:19–24: Questions to Jesus by the High Priest

The striking thing here is Jesus's protestation of honesty and truthfulness. Jesus asked his detractors why they beat him when he had spoken no wrong. Here is one of life's great challenges: to be a truth-teller and conversely being able to show proof that one is not a liar. Two sides of the same coin!

18:28–40: Summoned by Pilate

I have taken a homiletical liberty here by suggesting that Jesus was 'summoned'; actually, Jesus was taken to Pilate by the high priest. Note the hypocrisy of the religious leaders who, though wanting to get rid of the Saviour, would not enter a Gentile house for fear of becoming ritually unclean! That's a tragic irony, if ever there was! Then the interrogation.

Note the prevarication of the Jewish religious leaders when asked by Pilate the reason and crime of Jesus. They don't answer clearly but merely state that the fact they have brought Jesus before him – he is an 'evildoer' after all – is proof enough of his guilt.

Then consider the response to Pilate's demand that they deal with Jesus themselves: 'we are not permitted to put anyone to death', indicates that, as far as they were concerned, Jesus was guilty of a capital crime notwithstanding the lack of an honest trial.

Pilate's interview with Jesus contains some amazing dialogue. Pilate is flummoxed by Jesus and his answers to the questions posed. Look at the interplay: '*You are the king of the Jews?*' '*Is this your own view, or is it that of others?*' '*What have you done?*' '*My kingdom is not of this world!*' '*You are a king?*' '*You say I am a king.*' Jesus is enigmatic to say the least. Here's the 'kicker': '*whoever belongs to the truth listens to me.*' '*What is truth?*'

What is fascinating is the way the word 'truth' is used: Jesus seems to make it a personal concept; Pilate a philosophic construct; but this part of the interrogation goes no further. Pilate moves back out to the religious leaders to tell them that he finds 'no reason to condemn' Jesus. The upshot of this piece of the travesty is that the mob demands Barabbas. Ah, the clamour of the masses, the mob, the crowd, the

loudest voices! Beware of loud people, shouted arguments, veiled or obvious threats that are endemic to such patterns of intimidation. This surely is a message for our own day.

19:1–13: Sentenced by Pilate

Note the important observation in verse 12 that mitigates considerably Pilate's total capitulation to mob rule: '*Pilate ... tried to find a way to set Jesus free ...*' Of course Pilate paid the consequences for his prevarication and fear, his self-interest and self-preservation. One wonders if his wife, who encouraged him not to follow through with this travesty (see Matthew 27:19), later upbraided him with a wifely 'I told you so!'

Yet the pressure was huge, especially when the threat of being identified with another king other than Caesar was thrown at Pilate. Pilate well knew the power of Caesar easily stretched from Rome to Palestine like an unmerciful throttling hand.

19:14–16: Sacrificed by Pilate

Note John's reference to both 'people' and the 'chief priests'. The writer wants the reader to know that both groups were guilty of this travesty. Both parties clamoured for Caesar to be king, not Jesus. This, outside of Jesus's role, shows how far away everyone was from their Jewish history and prophetic tradition. Their antagonism towards Jesus was of such a depth that nothing else mattered except to get rid of this pretender to faith's throne.

19:17–27: Crucified

John's record of the crucifixion is a masterful objective description. It is almost clinical. There are emotive characteristics, clearly: Pilate's obdurate mandate that the inscription, 'King of the Jews', remained, over against the objection by the chief priests; the gambling over the clothes; the reference to the people below the cross includes three Marys, Jesus's aunt, and John himself, the beloved disciple; and Jesus's final words to his disciple whereby he entrusts his mother to his friend. That Jesus found the strength and compassion to make this request in midst of his agony is amazing.

19:28–37: Death

Jesus dies and then his side is pierced, although his legs were not broken. Breaking legs was a brutal act typical in these circumstances to ensure a speedier death to those lingering. John refers to Scripture being fulfilled by the bones not broken but the piercing by a spear. The texts alluded to are possibly verses from Psalms 69, 22, and 34, as well as from parts of Exodus 12 and Numbers 9.

It is recorded that Jesus knew that 'everything had been completed'. How John knew this we are not told, and just what 'everything' meant, is equally unknown, at least at this point in the story. Theologians have interpreted this as the fulfilment of the purposes of God. My own take on this is that Jesus's teachings, the development of the disciples, and the recording of the life of Jesus were set in process. The wickedness of humans planned to destroy the presence of God as seen in Jesus. God, however, included such evil in God's purposes, and overwhelmed it to bring meaningful

redemption and a renewal of humanity through the cross, making it a symbol of reconciliation, forgiveness, and hope.

19:38–42: Buried

And so, the end occurs. Our Lord is taken from the cross by Joseph of Arimathea, and together with Nicodemus (see John 3), they embalm Jesus with 30kgs of aloe, myrrh, and other spices (an interesting detail). He is then entombed. The Synoptics refer to women who prepared the spices for the burial, but it seems this act came after the entombment, seemingly to re-embalm the body.

John makes it clear that it was the eve of the Sabbath. No work would have been done. Mourning would have taken place within the bounds of Sabbath rules. Burial sounds so final. And it was and is for so many. Hope is deferred until sight and faith and experience prove otherwise.

Preaching the Word

The structure I am using enables the preacher to help listeners grasp the story in piece-meal fashion: nine brief insights to put the event together. Encourage people to stay for the complete time, to benefit from the whole process.

Preachers can seek to find one meaningful focus in each segment, highlight it, and apply it in the context of their people's lives and situation. So, for instance, an application from the 'Arrest' segment could be on whether aggression, intimidation, or violence to attain an objective has validity? There are many illustrations of this from local history as well as from world history. Another facet could be how Jesus dealt with his arrest, especially considering other experiences of antagonism towards himself? Yet another challenge is in asking if listeners have been, or are, complicit with unjust laws or actions? Yet still other questions of application are found in Peter's denial of the Saviour: how would that be in our context?

Taking themes from the interaction with Governor Pilate will be profitable. Even powerful governments are under the will and purpose of God.

Perhaps the deepest focus could come from investigating theological ideas from the sections on the death of Jesus.

Living the Word

For some people three hours in church or at worship is a burden far beyond their perceived ability! Yet if they have never done this before, encourage them to try it. Prepare the congregation well beforehand. Remind them that the Three-hour service is not simply or solely a long time in church, or even at worship; it is worship, but it is also a deeply devotional and reflective time considering the most sacred event of the year. These nine segments in the service, each with hymns and the brief talks, are well within most people's ability to follow. Encourage listeners to make notes so as to have material to read and think about after Easter, and to help them living out the Easter message.

This is what we are encouraging and preparing listeners to do: think and live. We want our hearers to enter into an imaginative experience of being at the scene of the crucifixion, to sense something of the horror of the travesty of justice, and to engage in the emotional identification of the family and friends of Jesus. We are wanting people to learn to anticipate, to be patient, and to hold tensions in balance. We should be hoping for people to discipline themselves to keep the scenes they have heard about during the service before their eyes and in their minds. Therefore, we should be giving people suggestions as to what they could do, and what they could expect emerging out of the experience of waiting.

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Liturgy of the Easter Vigil – 4/5 April 2026

Rowan Rogers

The Easter Vigil, also known as the Paschal Vigil, the Great Vigil of Easter, or the Holy Night of Easter, is a liturgy held in traditional Christian churches as the first official celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus. This Easter Vigil begins in the evening of Holy Saturday and continues into Easter Sunday morning, marking the transition from darkness to light, symbolizing Christ's victory over death.

Key Elements

- **Service of Light:** The vigil begins with a service of light, where a new fire is kindled, and the Paschal candle (representing Christ) is lit.
- **Liturgy of the Word:** A series of readings from the Old and New Testaments are read, recounting God's plan of salvation.
- **Liturgy of Baptism:** New converts are baptized, and the baptismal vows of the faithful are renewed.
- **Liturgy of the Eucharist:** The service concludes with the celebration of the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper.

Preparation for this service: a paschal candle, a baptismal font, and Holy Communion prepared

- **Light:** The lighting of the Paschal candle symbolizes the light of Christ overcoming darkness, representing hope and new life.
- **Water:** The blessing of baptismal water, or at least the sprinkling of water, commemorates baptism, a symbol of cleansing and spiritual rebirth.
- **Eucharist:** The elements remind us of Christ's death and resurrection.

Greeting and Introduction

Grace and peace to you from Jesus Christ our Lord

My brothers and sisters in Christ:
On this most holy night (*morning*)
In which Jesus Christ passed over from death to life,
We gather as the Church to watch and pray.
This is the Passover of Christ,
In which we share in Christ's victory over death.

Opening Prayer

God of life,
Through Jesus Christ
You have bestowed upon the world the light of life.
Sanctify this new fire,
and grant that our hearts and minds may also be kindled
with holy desire to shine forth with the brightness of Christ's
rising,
that we may attain to the feast of everlasting light;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lighting of the Paschal Candle

The Liturgy of the Word

Introduction

Let us hear the record of God's saving deeds in history,
And pray that each of us may receive the fullness of this grace.

The Creation

With a word God creates order out of the primeval, watery chaos.

God's good creation reaches its pinnacle in humankind,
the bearer of God's image

Genesis 1:1–2:4a

Prayer: Almighty God, you wonderfully created, yet more wonderfully restored,
The dignity of human nature.
Grant that we may share the divine life
of the One who shared our humanity,
Jesus Christ our Savior. **Amen.**

The Covenant between God and the Earth:

God causes the earth, overcome by sin, to be drowned in a watery deluge.
Yet in Noah and his family, God saves a remnant
And binds all together in a covenant with the sign of a rainbow.

Genesis 7:1–5, 11–18; 8:6–18; 9:8–13

Prayer: Almighty God of heaven and earth, you set in the clouds a rainbow
To be a sign of your covenant with every living creature.
Grant that we may be faithful stewards
Of the dominion you have entrusted to us on earth,
According to your grace given to us through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Abraham's Trust in God:

Abraham is tested when God commands him to sacrifice his own son,
the embodiment of God's promise to him.
Through God's own provision on the mountain, the promise holds.

Genesis 22:1–18

Prayer: Gracious God of all believers, through Abraham's trust in your promise
You made known your faithful love to countless numbers.
By the grace of Christ's sacrifice
Fulfil in your Church and in all creation
the joy of your promise and new covenant. **Amen.**

Israel's Deliverance At The Red Sea:

The ruler who kept God's people in slavery
Pursues them to the Red Sea as they try to escape.
Despite a hopeless situation, God rescues God's people,
Leading them in dry land through the parted sea
And closing the waters on their former masters.
Miriam then sings a song about God's marvellous
deliverance.

Exodus 14:10–31

Prayer: God our Savior, as once you delivered by the power
of your mighty arm
your chosen Israel through the waters of the sea,
so now deliver your Church and all the peoples of the earth
from bondage and oppression, to rejoice and serve you in
freedom,
through Jesus Christ our Deliverer. **Amen.**

Salvation Offered Freely To All:

The prophet Isaiah issues an invitation of abundant life to
the hungry and thirsty.

Isaiah 55:1–11 (or 1–5 if canticle follows)

Prayer: Creator of all things,
You freely offer water to the thirsty and food to the hungry.
Refresh us by the water of baptism
and feed us with the bread and wine of your table,
that your Word may bear fruit in our lives,
and bring us all to your heavenly banquet;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

A New Heart and A New Spirit:

The prophet promises that God will renew God's people.
God will replace their heart of stone with a new heart.

Ezekiel 36:24–28

Prayer: God of holiness and light, in the mystery of dying
and rising with Christ you have established a new covenant
of reconciliation.
Cleanse our hearts and give a new spirit to all your people,
that your saving grace may be made known to the whole
world;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

New Life For God's People:

The prophet Ezekiel sees a vision:
God will take the dry bones of God's people,
Reconnect them, breathe into them, and restore them to life.

Ezekiel 37:1–14

Prayer: Eternal God, you raised from the dead our Lord
Jesus
and by your Holy Spirit brought to life your Church.
Breathe upon us again with your spirit and give new life to
your people,
Through the same Jesus Christ our Redeemer. **Amen.**

The Liturgy of Baptism:

The Easter Vigil is rooted in the early church's practice of
celebrating Easter as the primary baptismal occasion. For
many, this is still an opportunity to baptise new believers, or
to reaffirm one's baptism. This is a night for rich celebration
and full immersion in the mystery of salvation opened to all
in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul reminds us that in Christ we have already
died,
drowned in baptism.
Yet we who have died are raised to newness of life.

Romans 6:3–11

This is the appropriate moment to offer baptism. Here the
appropriate baptism rituals and liturgy of the denomination
may be used. Use water and anointing oil generously. Allow
plenty of water for all who participate – be sure, too, to have
plenty of towels in place, ready for all who will need them to
use. Nothing minimalist here!

The Peace

O Lord, God of life, as you care for all creation, give us your
peace. May our security come not from weapons, but from
respect. May our strength come not from violence, but from
love. May our own wealth come not from money, but from
sharing. **Amen.**

The Peace of the Lord be with you all

And also with you

The Liturgy of the Eucharist

*Here the appropriate Eucharist rituals and liturgy of the
denomination may be used.*

*The service concludes with a hymn of Praise. Sing a rousing
Easter hymn! For example United Methodist Hymnal 78,
162, 186, 486 may be used.*

Blessing

The joy of this service continues with the sending into the
world as the Risen Lord's disciples, reborn or renewed.

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Word and Life for Easter Vigil – 4/5 April 2026

Rowan Rogers

Texts

Matthew 28:1–10

Romans 6:3–11

Introduction

The Easter Vigil begins in the evening of Holy Saturday and continues into Easter Sunday morning, marking the transition from darkness to light, symbolizing Christ's victory over death. This is a time to reflect on the Paschal Mystery, the interconnectedness of Christ's death and resurrection, and its implications for humanity. The readings for the Easter Vigil include Old Testament prophecies and passages from the Gospels that speak to the resurrection. This year it's Matthew's turn to tell the story. A sermon on such an occasion should preferably be a shorter holily, so as to pull together the narration of Scripture already present in the liturgy. A short, powerful word is better than a long, detailed exposition of Scripture.

Hearing the Word

Matthew 28:1-10

Although some scholars place Matthew early, most locate his Gospel as having been written after the destruction of the Temple. This places the both the Jewish community and the fledgling Christian community in a world of uncertainty. Matthew, scholarly in his knowledge of Jewish faith and practice, emphasises that through the resurrection of Jesus, a new dispensation has begun.

In his resurrection narrative, Matthew is clear that what once was, is no longer. As in the other Gospels, the women will be the first witnesses of this new epoch. Instantly, the accepted norms are inverted. The earth literally quakes, as the renewing of the whole creation begins. This dramatic change is not by human endeavour – this is no mere political or social upheaval - it is the work of God. The angel, commonly present in Jewish tradition to indicate God's presence and intervention, is here.

The resurrection of Jesus is not merely a single event in history. It stands as the vindication of 'the human one' after His suffering, and God's initiation of a new age; an age which will culminate in a new heaven and a new earth. '*Come, see the place where he lay*' (Matthew 28:6), the reminder of his suffering. '*He has been raised from the dead*', his vindication.

The passage is frequently interjected with the language of fear. There is the bewilderment of an unexplained and unexpected event. And there is the disruption to the way life has always been. But this disruption is good news – it is not a warning, but a promise of a new order.

Romans 6:3–11

Paul writes pastorally. He is seeking to settle the fears of the Christian community in Rome.

Romans was likely written while Paul was staying in Corinth and is dated AD late 55 to early 57. Jews were expelled from Rome because of disturbances around AD 49 by the Emperor Claudius. Claudius died around the year AD 54, and his successor, Emperor Nero, allowed the Jews back into Rome. Paul writes to this community – some of whom had been expelled as "Jews" and others who had stayed in Rome because they were Gentiles. He wants to settle the potential for division and so emphasises that all are saved by faith into a new Christian community. In chapters five through eight, Paul argues that believers are freed from the bondage of sin, and the division caused by sin. All can be assured of their hope of salvation.

God's redeeming work exceeds human history, and yet entirely embraces the intimacy of every human life. *So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.* (Romans 6:11)

Paul is answering the rhetorical question: should we sin, that grace may abound? Does this newly discovered grace give us licence to behave as we like? Does the death and resurrection of Jesus so free us from the law of sin and death, that how we behave is no longer of any real consequence?

Paul appeals to the community of faith to live out their baptism. The death and resurrection of Jesus has broken the power of sin. The Good news is that we have been baptised into Christ's death, so that through His resurrection, we may walk in newness of life.

Interpreting the Word

Matthew's Christ-following community, which remained deeply embedded in the Jewish community, was in conflict with those had not yet recognised or accepted Jesus. It is in Matthew's Gospel that we find Jesus' harshest criticism of the religious leaders of the day. In our deeply divided world, we are familiar with the antagonisms of conflicting communities.

Matthew seeks no compromise. His Gospel comes to announce the diminishing of empire, as the reign of God, through the people of God, emerges from a darkened tomb, into creation. Although we rightly must be cautious about the temptations of dualism, and especially of always seeing ourselves in a favourable light, Matthew is emphatic. The resurrection of Jesus is a definitive repudiation of the ways of the world. As the famous hymn says: "there comes to every person and nation, a moment to decide". (James Russell Lowell).

Paul's warning in Romans is equally sobering. *For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.* (Romans 6:5)

We are entirely disqualified from using the ways of the world, even if we deem the ends to be meritorious. This is no simple task for the Christian person, or community. We are so deeply trained in the habits of empire; so deeply caught in our own sinful impulses, that our only hope of behaving differently, of engaging our world differently, is to be baptised into the death of Jesus. Nothing less than death will be enough.

The challenge for the community of faith (or individual), 'alive to God in Christ Jesus' will need to decide each day whether they embrace God's new world initiated in Jesus, or to abandon their baptism!

Preaching the Word

Both the angel, and Jesus, tell the women not to be afraid. The guards, although also fearful, are interestingly not given a word of comfort!

Although not the primary theme of the passage, the regular presence of fear, and the imperative command to not be afraid, may offer the preacher an opportunity to explore the disruptive nature of change – even when change brings hope and promise.

The passage also offers us some helpful 'antidotes' to fear. We are invited to see the place of the resurrection. In both instances, there is the promise of seeing Jesus. Again, in both instances, the women are sent to share the news of the resurrection of Jesus.

We also cannot avoid that Matthew is writing to a community caught up in religious, theological and political conflict. In such a context, the injunction to not be afraid, takes on a very particular tone.

The Church has a long history of extraordinarily courageous people, and at the same time, a terrible history of cowardice, complicity and shame.

Reading Matthew 28 carefully can feel like a liturgy. You might hear a confession: I am afraid. The response is: do not be afraid.

In South Africa's history, many in the church sought to walk a middle ground; to keep a certain kind of peace. Matthew knows no such compromise, and might say to us in the 21st Century "In the midst of injustice – do not be afraid; In the midst of racism – do not be afraid; In the midst of homophobia – do not be afraid;"

Living the Word

One of the hardest things, especially for anyone struggling with an addiction, is to admit that our lives are unmanageable; that we're in trouble. Paul's invitation to be baptised into the death of Jesus, is the solemn acknowledgment that our lives are in a mess, and that without the help of God, our higher power, vigorous life is impossible.

It is also an invitation to frame our lives as being lived exclusively within the life of God.

A life lived in God trusts and finds contentment. A life lived in God, is a called life. A life lived in God, is shaped by the values of God.

Liturgical Suggestions (unless a separate fuller liturgy is required for the occasion)

Use Psalm 114 as a basis for a concluding prayer.
There is a liturgy for this service.

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Introduction to the Season of Easter

Introduction to the Season

Easter is not just a single day and the climax to the observance of Lent and Holy Week. It is a separate Season of fifty days in its own right. During Eastertide the Christian Church explores the glorious truth of the Resurrection and its meaning for faith and life today.

The Season includes the seven Sundays of Easter, as well as the Feasts of the Ascension and Pentecost. Between Ascension and Pentecost the Church in Southern Africa observes the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, where the gospel text on the seventh Sunday is always part of John 17 where the Lord prays that his followers 'may be one'.

Planning for this season must not be left until Holy Week is over, else it could be an anti-climax following the hard work of Lent and Holy Week. Careful planning needs to be undertaken well in advance of Lent and Holy Week, so that congregations may be led seamlessly from Lent into the Easter Season and so on to Pentecost.

The Characteristics of the Season

The aim is not so much to relive the Easter story as it was experienced by the disciples and the women at the cross and at the empty tomb. Rather it is to understand how the resurrection life of the Lord impacts on our lives where we are in the twenty-first century. It calls for more than a simple walk through the familiar readings that recount the resurrection appearances of Jesus to the first disciples. For Christians in every age the question is this: what does the resurrection of Jesus imply for his followers today in the contexts where we find ourselves? The question calls for answers from us as individuals, and from the Church as a body called to manifest resurrection life in this day and place.

The first three Sundays of the Season deal with the resurrection appearances of Jesus to the disciples, in which we see them gradually becoming aware of their Lord's surprisingly close presence. The next three Sundays prepare the disciples for the departure of Jesus at the Ascension.

The final Sunday before Pentecost focuses on the prayer of Jesus that the disciples would be united as they moved out to bear witness to him in 'Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8).

This new life experienced in the risen Christ is what needs to be proclaimed to the faithful and revealed to the world in which we live our faith.

The Pastoral impact of the Season

It is important to keep viewing the Sundays of Easter as a connected season, with each day's emphasis contributing something towards the truth of a resurrected Jesus. These are not simply separate and disjointed stories of Jesus and the disciples. This requires careful planning, aided by the choice of appropriate hymnody and song.

The celebration of the Ascension and Pentecost provides a great opportunity for churches within a community to worship together in their shared prayer for unity and the call to witness together within the wider community. A well-planned combined service in the early evening of Ascension Day could serve as the launch of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Basic Liturgy for the Season of Easter

Introduction

Worship through the weeks of the Season of Easter should continue the joyful celebration of Resurrection of Easter morning. This should be reflected in the music selected, in the proclamation of our new life in Christ, and in the decorations used in the church.

The songs, both traditional and contemporary, that are selected for the services should carry the joyful message that is for all people everywhere:

**‘Christ has died,
Christ is risen
Christ will come again.’**

And not only the hymns, but also the flow of the proclamation week by week, should explore the great themes found in the Sunday readings of the Easter season. Then, in the final weeks of the Season, there come the great Feasts of Ascension and Pentecost. These round off the Redemption Cycle and complete the first half of the Christian year.

Liturgical Features for the Season

The **liturgical colour** for Easter is white or gold. This continues until Pentecost, when the colour is red. The liturgical colour for the period after Pentecost will be green.

These **Feasts and Special Days** occur during the Season of Easter:

Easter Day, 5 April 2026, being the first Sunday after the first full moon after the Autumn Equinox.

Feast of the Ascension, 14 May 2026 forty days after Easter.

Feast of Pentecost, 24 May 2026, fifty days after Easter .

Decorations

The style of decorations used on Easter Sunday should continue throughout the Season.

Symbols of the Season

The Paschal Candle is the principal symbol of the Resurrection. It should remain in a prominent place in the church throughout the Season and be lit at all public services during this period. An earlier tradition saw this candle being extinguished after the reading of the gospel at the Ascension Day service, but in more recent times this is done after the last service on the Feast of Pentecost.

Liturgy

Gathering the people of God

Greeting

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia

Call to Worship

Break forth into joy, sing together:

for the Lord has comforted his people,

and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our
God.

An Act of Penitence

Loving God,

If we have fallen into despair,

Lord, forgive us.

If we have failed to hope in you,

Lord, forgive us.

If we have been fearful of death,

Lord, forgive us.

(Silence)

May the living God

raise *you/us* from despair,

give *you/us* victory over sin

and set *you/us* free in Christ.

Amen.

Assurance of Forgiveness (from Ephesians 2:4–7)

God, who is rich in mercy,

out of the great love with which he loved us

even when we were dead through our trespasses,

made us alive together with Christ.

By grace you have been saved,

and raised up with him, and seated with him

in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,

so that in the ages to come he might show

the immeasurable riches of his grace

in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.

Amen

A Song of Resurrection

Christ our passover has been sacrificed for us:
so let us celebrate the feast,
**not with the old leaven of corruption and wickedness:
but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.**

Christ once raised from the dead dies no more:
death has no more dominion over him.

**In dying he died to sin once for all:
In living he lives to God.**

See yourselves therefore as dead to sin:
and alive to God in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Christ has been raised from the dead:
the firstfruits of those who sleep.

For as by man came death:
by man has come also the resurrection of the dead;

for as in Adam all die:
even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

Glory to the Father and to the Son:
and to the Holy Spirit;
**as it was in the beginning, is now:
and shall be for ever.**
Amen.

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer for Illumination

God of life,
your Spirit raised Jesus from the dead.
Your Spirit inspired the prophets
and the writers of Scripture.
Your Spirit draws us to Christ,
and helps us to acknowledge him as Lord.
We ask for your Spirit's gifts of
insight, encouragement, faith, and hope,
through the proclamation of the Easter gospel.
Amen

(from The Worship Sourcebook 2nd Edition)

Responding to the Proclaimed Word

The Prayers of the People should focus on the ways in which
resurrection life might become the norm in everyday life:

God of the Resurrection life:
we thank you for the possibility of new beginnings
and opportunities to implement that life in this world.

We pray for new beginnings and new life
in creation ...
in our nations and region ...
in education ...
in the ministry of your Church ...

(Additional areas of interest and concern may be added to
this list.)

Guide us that we might hear your clear call

to go from here to our community,
that the world may know that you are Lord of all;
for we pray in the name of the risen Lord.

Amen

Celebrating at Table

Sharing the Peace (from John 20:19–20)

The Risen Christ came and stood among the disciples
and said, 'Peace be with you'.

Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

The Peace of the Risen Lord be with you always!
Peace be with you.

*The great **Prayer of Thanksgiving** at the heart of the
Eucharist/Communion Service is a joyful rehearsal of the
heart of the Gospel. Use should be made of the form that is
familiar in your tradition.*

Sending out the People of God

Thanksgiving for Worship

Lord Jesus Christ, risen to new life,
you revealed yourself in the breaking of the bread.
Open our eyes that we may recognise your work in the world,
follow your example by serving others,
building up your Church,
and serving you in your world.
We ask this in your Name.

Amen

Benediction/Blessing (based on Hebrews 13:20–21)

May the God of peace,
who raised to life the great shepherd of the sheep,
make us ready to do his will in every good thing,
through Jesus Christ,
to whom be glory forever and ever.

Alleluia! Amen

Dismissal

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

Alleluia, Alleluia

In the name of Christ,

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Amen

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Liturgy for Easter Morning – 5 April 2026

Joey Naiker

Introduction

Easter Sunday is a worldwide Christian commemoration that gives pre-eminence to the Resurrection of our Lord that marks his victory over the sinful authorities of his time. While the first Easter Celebration focused on Christ's victory over the existing religious and political order, the Resurrection of Christ also serves as a forerunner for the ultimate victory when all other temporal authorities will be vanquished and the one and only and eternal Kingdom will prevail when God the Almighty will reign as the King of kings and Jesus serves as the Lord of lords. The customary greeting at the Easter Morn is, "The Lord has risen! The Congregation will respond, **"He has risen indeed."**

Texts

Acts 10:34–43 or Jeremiah 31:1–6
Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24
Colossians 3:1–4 or Acts 10:34–43
John 20:1–18 or Matthew 28:1–10

Gathering in God's name

Call to Worship

Alleluia. Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

Our Lord is God, Christ the Lord is good to his people.

The Lord is good indeed; He died on a cursed cross because of my sin.

The Lord has forgiven my sins.

The Lord has pardoned my sins; Christ thinks of my sins no more.

He has broken down the temple.

In three days, he has rebuilt the broken temple after he had broken down the wall of hostility and united all people into one.

Glory to the King of kings

Glory to the Lord of lords; He reigns forever!

Act of Penitence

Leader: Brothers and sisters in Christ, on this glorious morning of Resurrection, we rejoice in the victory of our Lord over sin and death. Yet, we acknowledge that we have not always lived as people of the resurrection. Let us now turn to God with contrite hearts, seeking his mercy and renewal.

Moment of Silence for Personal Reflection

Leader: Lord Jesus, You rose from the grave to bring us new life, yet we often remain in the tombs of our sins and doubts. Lord, have mercy.

All: Lord, have mercy.

Leader: Christ Jesus, You call us to walk in the light of Your resurrection, yet we sometimes choose the darkness of selfishness and despair. Christ, have mercy.

All: Christ, have mercy.

Leader: Lord Jesus, You have conquered death so that we may live in the freedom of Your grace, yet—we hold so passionately onto fear, strife, tears resentment, and unbelief. Lord, have mercy.

All: Lord, have mercy.

Absolution or Assurance of Forgiveness

Leader: May Almighty God, who through the resurrection of his Son has opened the gates of eternal life, forgive us our sins and lead us into the fullness of his joy.

Amen.

Proclaiming the Word of God:

Leader: Blessed Lord, by Your inspiration, all Holy Scriptures have been written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them and lay them to heart, that, strengthened by Your Holy Word, we may ever hold fast the assurances of eternal life which You have given us through our Saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ, **Amen**

Prayer for Illumination

Leader: Lord, May the Words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to You O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer **Amen**

Responding to the Word of God

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;

He descended to the dead

On the third day he rose again from the dead.

He ascended into heaven

and is seated at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the one holy, universal and
apostolic Church,

the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Amen.

Celebrating at the Table

Sharing of the Peace

Leader: After his resurrection, Jesus appeared unto his disciples and blessed them with the greeting which assured them that He has forgiven them their desertion of Him. To them he exclaimed: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. Therefore, the peace of the Risen Lord be with you always.

People: May the peace of the Risen Lord also be with you.

Invitation to Communion:

Leader: The Risen Lord invites us all indiscriminately to share in his triumphant victory over death and conquering the world. Without prejudice he offers us bread and wine, so that we may reflect and remember how his body was slain and his blood was shed, the symbols through which we were assured that none of us will be lost, but that we will share in the gift of Eternal Life. In the Name of the Risen Christ, who is the Head of the Church, I invite you all to take your rightful place at his Holy Table to receive his gifts of grace.

People: Thanks be to God our Father

Sending:

Leader: Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to Him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. **Amen.**"

People: Father Almighty, we offer ourselves anew unto You as a living sacrifice in Jesus Christ our Lord. Send us out into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit, to live and work to your praise and glory. **Amen**

Post communion Prayer

Leader: Lord God, we are grateful to you for the food we have received. you have sent your Holy Spirit among us to make our eating and drinking here a memorial of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. May your Spirit help us day by day, that in our living and working, our loving and doing and thinking, the Resurrected Christ may be seen in us, so that in the end, with the great company of the redeemed, we may eat and drink and rejoice with him in the glory of his Eternal Kingdom; through the same victorious Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

People: Thanks be to God, Father of our Resurrected Lord, Hallelujah!
(The Threefold Amen is sung)

Sentence of Scripture

"I pray that out of his glorious riches, he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses all knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Based on Ephesians 3:16–21)

Benediction

Now unto him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, throughout all generations, for ever and ever! **Amen.**"

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- "The Old Rugged Cross"* (George Bennard, 1912)
- "Amazing Grace" (John Newton)
- "Christ The Lord Is Risen Today"
- "Because He Lives" (Bill and Gloria Gaither)
- "Crown Him With Many Crowns"
- "He Lives" (Alfred H. Ackley)
- "In Christ Alone"
- "All Hail King Jesus"
- "Thine Is The Glory" (Edmund L. Budry, Handel's melody)
- "Christ The Lord Is Risen Today; Alleluia!"

Word and Life for Easter Morning – 5 April 2026

Joey Naiker

Introduction

Our Easter Morning provides us with the Gospel Reading that deals with the interaction Jesus had with Mary Magdalene. This Reading is closely connected with Psalm 118 which deals with the themes of *JOY* and *TRIUMPH*. These are the same themes that are embedded in the narrative about the Resurrection of our Lord. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles embraces the Resurrection of Christ as an unceasing central theme in its proclamation. Paul's letter to the Church in Colossae is an urgent pastoral appeal to the Colossian Christians. They are entreated to base their lives and lifestyle on the life, work, teaching and preaching of Jesus Christ who has been raised from the dead. The Resurrection of Christ has set the trajectorial pattern that our lives will be afforded, accompanying Christ in Glory.

Texts

Acts 10:34–43 or Jeremiah 31:1–6
Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24
Colossians 3:1–4 or Acts 10:34–43
John 20:1–18 or Matthew 28:1–10

Hearing the Word

Comments on Psalm 118:1–2; 12–14

The Psalms form part of the Biblical poetic literature. The Psalms were intentionally written as songs and Psalm 118 forms an intrinsic part of the greater “Egyptian Hallel”. The opening verses are invitational with the purpose of thanksgiving for the goodness and unceasing steadfastness of God. Verse 14 is a war cry derived from the Red Sea conquest. Verses 15 and 16 persistently holds onto the theme of victory, in which full recognition is afforded to God for God's strength, might and supremacy are recognized. The Exodus serves as a defining model for God's redemptive acts across history.

Comments on Acts 10:34–43

The Reading from Acts 10:34–43 locates Peter's sermon in the residence of Cornelius when he was addressing the Gentiles (non-jews). In his introduction Peter makes a twofold assertion:—(1) The disposition of impartiality of God and (2) The criteria for God's cosmic inclusivity, namely faith and fear in Him.

The author of Acts 10 is Luke, who presents us with a summarized version of the sermon of Peter with specific reference to the work, life and teachings of Jesus and continues his homily citing Jesus' undeserved and brutal massacre on a cursed cross.—He subsequently continues the narrative to include God's intervention on behalf of God's Son by raising the latter on the third day. Luke makes special mention of all those who were divinely set apart to corroborate the truth about Jesus' resurrection. Very assertively he declares that Jesus entrusted him and the other apostles with the responsibility to drive home the

irrefutable fact that Jesus was divinely consecrated and set apart (נפרדים – nefredim – Hebrew / ἐξορίσται – exchoriste – Greek) to be the judge of both the living and the dead. In his Name all those who believe in Him, qualifies to be pardoned of their iniquities

Comments on Colossians 3:1–4

Read this prescribed chapter parallel with Colossians 2:20. For Paul the significance of the death of Christ lies in its transformative power to eradicate the Christian's worldly inclination and align him/her with the will, life and lifestyle of Christ. That is why Paul questions the lifestyle of the Colossian Christians, for it does not seem to be aligned with the life of Christ, but rather exhibits worldly tendencies.

Comments on John 20:1–18

This pericope accentuates both the literal reality and theological eminence of the resurrection, exhibiting captivating substantiation through the epiphany of the empty tomb and the early post-resurrection encounter between Christ and Mary Magdalene. N.T. Wright attests “The resurrection was not just a doctrine; it was the central event that shaped the early Christian movement” (*Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 2003*). This is thus an affirmation that the resurrection is not merely as a spiritual allegory but as a factual and metamorphic reality.

In Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics, he asseverates that the resurrection is “the turning point of history” and the foundation of Christian faith, marking God's triumph over sin and death (CD IV/1). He opted to highlight that the empty tomb and Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene are both factual records and personal celestial revelations, that unveils God's categorical ascendancy and compassion.

Interpreting the Word

John 20:1–10

1. John specifies the time of the event as taking place on “the first day of the week”. Considering that the crucifixion took place on the day prior to the sabbath implies that it must have happened on the Friday which a lunar calendar would designate the sixth day. The day thereafter would therefore be the seventh (7th) day, the Sabbath. If, therefore, Mary went to the tomb on “the first day of the week” It means thus that the resurrection took place on the Sunday, the day on which we celebrate Resurrection Sunday. colloquially known as Easter Sunday.
2. John identifies Mary as the only woman at the grave where the discovery of the open grave and an apparent misplaced Jesus is made. However, as Mary reports to Peter about her encounter at the grave of Jesus, her usage of “we...” bears evidence that Mary was accompanied by other women. The evidence of a grave in such disarray left her in a frantic state of mind. She

- was convinced that someone had removed the Body of Jesus and feared they could impose even worst physical harm than what He already had to endure. This caused her to hastily run to Peter to share the distressful news with him and subsequently to John whom the text describes as “the other disciple whom Jesus loved very much”
5. Their immediate reaction was to run to the tomb to verify Mary’s story. John outran Peter but did not enter the tomb.
 - 6–7 However, the always-injudicious Peter had no inhibitions to enter the tomb and he observed the graveclothes neatly left in the grave. He, nevertheless, was unable to fathom what all this meant. The parallel Lucan Text describes Peter as “... amazed at what had happened.” (Luke 24:12)
 8. In John we observe a different disposition. He entered the tomb afterwards. He saw the neatly arranged grave clothes lying in an inexplicably empty tomb and then recalling the words of Jesus, left him with a firm belief that Christ has Risen.
 10. Despite this theatrical unfolding of events, the disciples receded to their own homes. One theory is they might have been apprehensive about meeting Jesus and uneasy about how he will look at them or say to them. Another theory is that they might have feared that the brutality towards Jesus has not yet ended and the disappearance of his body may be intentional to denote that the authorities are yet to come for the disciples. The latter theory corroborates John 20:19 that explains the fear of the disciples even after news were spread about the Resurrection. The receding disciples virtually abandoned Mary to be the sole news bearer of the empty tomb and the possible removal of the body of Jesus from the tomb and this left her with unstoppable emotions.
 - 11.– Mary stood there alone outside the tomb ceaselessly bewailing the apparent disappearance of the body of Jesus. When being addressed by divine messengers she persisted in bemoaning the mysterious disappearance of her master’s body because where they have taken his remains, was disturbingly unknown to her and the cause of her anguish. The emotionally overtaken woman expresses her love, affection and loyalty to Jesus.
 12. Both Luke (24:4) and John make mention of the two angels who were conversing with Mary. Angels are generally associated with God for they are the ones whom God sends to carry God’s messages to the designated people. These two were assigned by God to transmit the message to Mary that the prophecy of Jesus was made manifest. John positions the angels precisely at head and feet at the place where Joseph from Arimathea had laid Jesus to rest.
 13. It is her grief and her bereavement that renders her crushed, defeated and unable to celebrate the victory that is right in her face.
 14. She obviously had her back turned toward the other person whom she now becomes aware of. Her emotional state affected her eyesight, because looking through her teary eyes everything becomes blurry and vague, but she walked up to the unknown person and starts to address him too.
 15. This time it is Jesus Himself who now addresses this emotionally overburdened women, confronting her with the same question as the angels. “Woman why are you weeping? Additionally, he asks, “for whom are you looking? She, however, confuses this unknown blurry figure with the graveyard’s caretaker. John makes special mention of the fact that she then turned around and spoke to the “gardener” pleading with him, through her tears, to reveal unto her if he had removed the body of her Lord and where he had transferred it to, because she could find a permanent resting place for Him.
 16. Then in his normal tone of voice and maybe in that special way that he used to address Mary, (she would probably immediately dry the tears from her eyes) and with her eyes free from blurring, she exclaimed “Teacher!” She recognised him by his voice and when her eyes are free from tears the recognition became even more profound and this is manifested by her joyful and reverberating exclamation, calling him by his title *RABBI!* / *TEACHER!*. This reminds us of Jesus’ teaching about his true identity, “I am the Good Shepherd. My sheep know My voice and follow Me.”
 17. Her embrace of Jesus is virtually impromptu and born out of excitement. However, Jesus cautions her to leave the first embrace of him as a special reserve to his Father exclusively, to whom he is about to return and who awaits his imminent arrival. However, Jesus commanded her to go and inform his disciples that his Resurrection is no longer a mystery or speculation but real and historical. She is to inform them that his return to his Father is imminent, but that he is also their Father and their God.
 18. Mary was set apart to become the very first witness to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Her election bears testimony to the Words of Jesus, “I am going to do a new thing.” It is the New Covenant, inaugurated by Jesus, that restored the identity and social standing of women to its actual glory. In him there shall be no distinction between Jew or Gentile, slave or free man, man or woman, but all will be equal in the sight of God. Through Mary’s testimony the whole world will believe in the Risen Christ.

Preaching the Word

The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is a fundamental component of the Christian faith, and it requires an in-depth understanding, reflection, meditation and study before any Christian can make the unequivocal proclamation as a witness to the risen Christ. John 20:1–10 provides us with some rudimentary axioms to substantiate the proclamation of the Christian witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The following core elements are helpful for it provides

expedient explications on the theological significance of the Resurrection:

1. The Significance of the Resurrection on the First Day of the Week.

The explicit assertion of John 20:1 that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb “early on the first day of the week.” affirms that this timing reflects the inauguration of new creation, as the resurrection echoes God’s first act of creation (N.T. Wright (2003).

2.– The First Sign of the Resurrection – The Empty Tomb

A key sign that an exceptional event has taken place is the revelation that the stone had been moved away as depicted in John 20:1. Craig Keener (2012) points out that the empty tomb in itself is not proof but it solicits the fundamental religious imperatives such as faith and deeper inquiry, as portrayed by Peter and John’s reaction to Mary’s emotional utterance as presented in John 20:6–8.

3. Human Confusion in Mary Magdalene’s Immediate Responses

Despite the forewarning of Jesus, the resurrection was not something that the disciples of Jesus expected. D.A. Carson (1991) sees that their incomprehension corroborates the precision of the historical details of the account, because why would any person falsify a resurrection narrative where the initial witness does not fully understand its significance?

4. The Testimony of Eyewitnesses is Central to the Gospel

John, the beloved disciple, and Peter were factual witnesses to the emptiness of the tomb (John 20:3–6). The rigor and credibility of the empty tomb is fortified by the certitude provided by multiple witnesses. Richard Bauckham (2006) contends that the belief of the Early Church hinged on the empirical attestation by those who actually were at the empty tomb at the time and who physically encountered the risen Christ.

5. The Burial Clothes Authenticate the Truth About the Resurrection

Verses 6–7 narrates how the grave clothes were left neatly folded, not destroyed nor poached. This suggests no foul play, but rather that someone handled it orderly, sensitively and with great care and maybe to ensure that it could serve as authentic evidence to eradicate any doubt or confusion. Gary Habermas (2004) contends that neither the authorities nor Tomb raiders would have abandoned the burial garments, and this truth is reinforcing the miraculous nature of this extraordinary event.

6. The “Beloved Disciple” Believed Before Seeing Jesus

According to John 20:8 the disciple whom Jesus loved saw the empty tomb and the neatly folded grave clothes and this prompted his virtually instinctive belief, even before he had a face-to-face encounter with the risen Christ. Rudolf Schnackenburg (1982) highlights that this moment reflects the blessedness of faith referring to the fact that John believed but his belief was based on the evidence he had right in front of him and not on having a direct sight of the Risen Jesus as in the case of the unbelieving Thomas. (John 20:29).

7. The Disciples Did Not Yet Understand the Scriptures

Theirs was an evolving faith. Leon Morris (1995) affirms that the verse proves that a Christian’s faith grows over time, often starting off confused, but later developing into a poignant insight.

Living the Word

It is no coincidence that John 20:1–18 is the leading text for this Easter Celebration. The text confronts us with noteworthy women, the likes of Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James at the burial site of Jesus. They found the tomb is empty and the only remains are the neatly stacked grave clothes. Moreover, they encountered two messengers from God who cautioned them not to search for the living among the dead. Then John’s Gospel makes special mention of the privileged face-to-face encounter that Mary had with her risen Lord and, in fact, became the first to see and have physical contact with her Lord. We are thus hereby reminded about the indispensable function of women in the ministry of Jesus

We live in a society permeated with patriarchy and the Church is no exception and therefore not a “light to the world.” The leadership capacity and work ethic of women in both Church and society should never be distilled, minimized or downplayed. On the contrary, it should be celebrated and respected, while the abuse of women should be rejected as a vile social violation and a religious abomination and monstrosity. If Mary was ordained to be the first witness to the victorious Resurrection of Christ, women in our churches should equally and without prejudice be assigned prominent responsibilities and for the Church. Easter is significantly a relevant starting point. The presence of women must be equated with that of men, therefore their participation in the church should be greatly valued, respected and utilized.

Just as the empty tomb and grave clothes served as conclusive evidence of the Resurrection of Christ, in the same way living the resurrected life will have a lasting effect and influence on the lives of those on the other side of Resurrection

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Word and Life for the 2nd Sunday of Easter – 12 April 2026

Khawuluzile Makubalo

Texts

Acts 2:14a, 22–32

Psalm 16

1 Peter 1:3–9

John 20:19–31

Introduction

The Second Sunday of Easter readings have a flow that validates the resurrection and its implications. The readings move the reader from the reality of resurrection as the fulfilment of God's salvation plan (Acts 2:25–28 and Psalm 16:8–11), to the response of faith by those who encounter the risen Lord (John 20:28–29 and 1 Peter 1:7–8), and finally to the call to mission enabled by the Holy Spirit (John 20:21–22 & Acts 2). This theological flow establishes the resurrection as both a historical reality and a transformative call—inviting the Church to trust, witness, and live in the power of the risen Christ.

Hearing the Word

Acts 2:14a, 22–32

Acts 1:3 already validates the resurrection of the Lord as this account should be read together with the Gospel of Luke. Further, in Acts 1:8 we hear of the promise of the Holy Spirit which will empower and enable the disciples to become witnesses. Acts is a carefully and critically arranged history of the activities and impact of the risen Lord and the Holy Spirit.

In the prescribed text we encounter this activity and impact enabling Peter to courageously step out and offer a speech/sermon. Speeches are a prevalent feature in the book of Acts. Willimon observes a pattern in the 28 speeches found in Acts that begins with a confrontation by a crowd followed by a speech from an Apostle who interprets the Gospel. In this pericope it is an accusation from the crowd that leads to Peter's speech.

Pertinent to this season of Easter is the validity of the resurrection (Acts 2:24). Observe how this validation follows a strong accusation to the Israelites (2:22). First Peter points that the resurrection of the Lord is an act of God (2:24). Then he shows how this act was foreseen and is therefore a fulfilment of a promise by quoting a Psalm of David.

Observe also the change of tone between 2:22 and 2:29. Now Peter, a Jew/Israelite, persuades fellow Jews/Israelites. It is strategically important that David is quoted in this courageous persuasion.

The speech concludes with the emphasis that God raised up the Jesus that they crucified (2:32, 2:23). This emphasis is in line with what Jesus declared in Luke 9:22. The speech also concludes with the fact that Peter and the disciples are witnesses of this great act of God.

Psalm 16

The psalmist expresses a choice of relating to God. The Psalmist chooses to trust and be joyfully dependent on God. This choice of relating leads to an unwavering confidence in God's guidance, provision, and ultimate deliverance.

The psalmist's relationship with God is marked by exclusive trust (v 1–2, 5–6), devotion (v 4), and joyful confidence in divine protection and eternal security (v 9–11). The Psalm echoes resurrection hope (v 10). Psalm 16 ultimately portrays a faith that is deeply personal, secure, and hopeful, anticipating God's ultimate deliverance and presence.

Peter 1:3–9

There is a clear discernible relationship between the persons featured in this reading. The relationship is between God / Father and Jesus Christ and the recipients (You) as well as between Jesus and the recipients.

1:3–5 the focus is on God who gives new birth into a living hope. The author includes himself as the receiver of this gift by the use of the pronoun *us*. While at the end of verse 4 through to verse 9 the pronoun changes to *you*.

1:5–7 the focus is *you*, the recipients. The *you* are protected by the power of God, they rejoice in suffering. Faith is an important trait that connects them to God and to what they receive from God.

1:8 speaks about Jesus Christ (Him). The recipients love Jesus, believe in him, and rejoice in him even though they have not seen him.

1:9 speaks about salvation as a result of the faith of the recipients.

John 20:19–31

John 20 records the discovery of the empty tomb and the three resurrection appearances. The first appearance is to Mary Magdalene (20:11–18), the second appearance is to the disciples without Thomas (20:19–23) and the third appearance is to the disciples with Thomas and Thomas being the focal point (20:24–29). The chapter concludes with the author's note declaring the purpose for the Gospel.

Both the discovery of the empty tombs and the appearances occur on the first day of the week, in today's terms on a Sunday. This day would have been a working day. It seems then it was customary for the early Christians to gather in the morning or evening of this day (Culpepper – see also Acts 20:7).

The first two appearances end with telling others, "I / we have seen the Lord!" Mary Magdalene told the disciples (20:18) one may assume that they were complete with Thomas present. On the second appearance, where Thomas was clearly absent, the disciples tell Thomas (20:25). This could be connected to the apostolic mission "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (20:21). The appearance is

not only to validate the resurrection but also to commission, send out as Jesus was sent by the Father.

After the disciples have been commissioned, Jesus breathes on them to receive the Holy Spirit. This echoes the creation narrative in Genesis 2:7 and the life giving breath to the dry bones in Ezekiel 3:9. This can be seen as the fulfilment of the promise to send the Spirit to the disciples (John 14:16–17).

At the appearance to the disciples Jesus twice says to them ‘Peace be with you’, a common Jewish greeting. This greeting becomes special on this occasion as it can be seen as the fulfilment of a promise (John 14:27–28). It would be the kind of peace that turns their grief to joy that no one can take away (John 16:20–24).

Culpepper makes an interesting observation concerning touching the risen Jesus (‘hold’ John 20:17 and ‘put’ 20:27) and says Jesus “invited Thomas to do exactly what he had said he would need to do in order to believe. There is no inconsistency between Jesus’ admonition to Mary, “Do not hold on to me” (20:17) and his invitation for Thomas to touch him. In both cases he was inviting each one to do what he or she needed to do to take the next step in faith and understanding. Mary needed to recognize that Jesus was going to the Father; Thomas needed to believe that the one who had died was alive again.”

In the series of resurrection appearances in John 20, Thomas’s confession in John 20:28 represents a climactic moment, if not a conclusion of the Gospel’s unfolding revelation of Jesus’s identity (Culpepper). Thomas’s confession aligns directly with the purpose of the Gospel (John 20:31). By using both titles, ‘my Lord and my God’, Thomas explicitly acknowledges Jesus’s divine and sovereign identity validating the declaration that the Word was God (John 1:1).

Interpreting the Word

The Gospel of John was written for a specific community of believers who faced historical challenges such as persecution, exclusion from the synagogue, and internal divisions over the identity of Christ and the validity of Jesus as the Messiah. In addressing these struggles eyewitness testimony was crucial resulting to the prevalence of seeing and believing in the Gospel. But the important messages in the gospel is the beatitude in 20:29 ‘Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed’. This community is often referred to as the Johannine Community.

John’s gospel is described as the Book of Signs. Unlike the Synoptic gospels, John’s gospel records fewer miracles that are called signs. The signs emphasise that Jesus’s works are not just displays of power but revelations of his divine identity as the Messiah. The signs are meant to lead the community and the reader to faith, not just believing the sign itself but believing that Jesus is the Messiah (John 20:30–31).

This Gospel portrays Jesus as the source of eternal life. This is seen at the beginning of the gospel where Jesus is identified as the Logos and that ‘in him was life, and the life was the light of all people’ (1:4). This is also evidenced in some of the sayings of Jesus that he gives water which becomes a spring of water gushing up to eternal life (4:14),

he is the Bread of life (6:35) and that he is the resurrection and the life (11:25). The gospel insists that life is not just about existence but about knowing Jesus intimately (John 17:3). In the gospel, as found in Culpepper, ‘the Father is the *sender*, who sends Jesus (the subject) to complete the work of bringing eternal life to the children of God (the object).’ Eternal life begins not after death but in the present.

A major theme in the Gospel is the necessity of belief as a primary response to Jesus and the witness given through what is recorded in the gospel. To believe appears 85 times in the gospel of John more than any other New Testament writing. Belief, as argued and presented in this gospel, is not just rational – it is about trusting and it leads to eternal life (John 3:16). ‘Believing requires seeking the glory of God, but belief is blocked when we seek glory from one another (5:44). This condition is illustrated by the leaders who believed but would not confess Jesus for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue’ (Culpepper). It was important to encourage the community not to believe secretly (like Joseph of Arimathea, John 19:38) but to be courageous and bold in confessing their faith and in the apostolic mission (John 20:21).

In John’s gospel Jesus’s suffering and glory are inseparable. The risen Jesus appears with the marks of the passion, the marks of the cross. These are not a sign of defeat rather a sign of victory. When Jesus invites Thomas to see and touch his wounds, it was not a mere invitation to prove the resurrection but was the evidence that the one who was crucified is the one who is risen. In believing we must embrace the crucified and the risen Christ together. This was crucial for the Johannine community which was suffering social rejection, exclusion and opposition. The risen Christ with wounds reassured them that their suffering does not mean they are abandoned. In the words of Culpepper ‘faith does not erase suffering but sees it in the light of the resurrection.’ The wounds of Christ are a sign of both suffering and triumph and an assurance of the new birth into a living hope.

Preaching the Word

There are several themes a preacher can focus on interpreting them with the resurrection in mind.

The assurance of the resurrection: The readings emphasise the certainty and power of Jesus’s resurrection.

Faith beyond sight: Both John’s gospel 1 Peter speak about trust in Christ even without seeing him physically.

Resurrection hope is for the struggling and suffering: Both 1 Peter and John write to strengthen a struggling and suffering communities.

The gift of peace (shalom): Note how peace is offered again before the commission (John 20:21), Jesus’s peace is not peace of silence but the peace of truth, justice, healing, restoration.

Witness and Mission: The disciples move from fear to bold witnesses showing the transformation brought by resurrection faith.

Living the Word

Resurrection is not just about Jesus rising from the dead; it is about God's power to bring life where there is death, hope where there is despair and justice where there is unfairness and oppression. Resurrection is also a commission to step out courageously to a hostile world proclaiming life and peace.

In South Africa where there are still wounds and struggles of the divisive past, there is corruption, the gap of the rich and poor widens, where violent crime prevails, all these countering the message of Easter which is life, shalom, and a living hope. The Church should not just stand in awe of the resurrection but the church should be challenged by the message of the resurrection becoming bold in witnessing to it through proclamation and just living.

Liturgical Suggestions

Call to Worship

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By God's great mercy, we have been given a new birth into a living hope – through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead!

Risen Jesus; 'My Lord and my God!'

The earth rejoices, the heavens proclaim, for Christ is risen! Death is defeated, life is made new, and all creation sing with joy!

Risen Jesus; 'My Lord and My God!'

Therefore, our hearts are glad, our souls rejoice, and our bodies rest secure. The Lord has shown us the path of life and filled us with the presence of the Lord.

Risen Jesus; 'My Lord and my God!'

Christ comes to us, not in power and might, but in tenderness and mercy. Christ meets us in our doubt, our wounds, our longing and speaks peace to us.

Risen Jesus, 'My Lord and my God!'

Christ is Risen! The tomb is empty! The life of God is at work within us! Let us rejoice and give thanks!

'My Lord and my God!' Alleluia!

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Word and Life for the 3rd Sunday of Easter – 19 April 2026

Ian Booth

Texts

Acts 2:14a;36–41
Psalm 116:1–4;12–19
1 Peter 1:17–23
Luke 24:13–35

Introduction

The focus of this Sunday is on the encounter between Jesus and two followers, one of whom, Cleopas, is named, but the other not. This encounter takes the form of an extended Bible Study in which Jesus educates the two regarding what the Scriptures have said about him. The focus is on understanding the prophecies about the Christ and realising that the events of Good Friday are part of God's plan, not a disastrous failure.

Hearing the Word

Acts 2:14a;36–41: Peter stands and addresses the crowd gathered in Jerusalem for the ancient Jewish festival of Pentecost, which is forever transformed for Christian readers into a festival of the birth of the Church. After the opening words, the first half of verse 14, the lectionary skips to the crunch part of the sermon: “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” This early Christian sermon has an amazing effect as about 3,000 people are baptised and become members of the fledgling Church. Clearly, not every person in Jerusalem could be held personally responsible for the death of Jesus: responsibility lay with the Chief Priests and the Roman Governor. But the crowds had bayed for the blood of Jesus because they felt betrayed by his interpretation of the “Messiah” or “Christ” (the Anointed One). There is collective guilt among his audience, which is felt particularly acutely when Peter says that God has made this Jesus to be the Christ. When Peter speaks of the need for repentance, it is not meant in the sense of remorse, but the primary meaning of the word *metanoia* is a shift in mindset, or a new understanding. “Change your minds about Jesus” is what Peter is, in essence, saying to them, “Then be baptised into the fellowship of believers in Jesus as Lord and Christ.” This is the first good news contained in this sermon, offering the people a way out of their collective guilt. The crowd is brought to a new understanding of themselves and of God, and this opens the way for new possibilities. The resurrection is not the end of the story, but this is only the beginning of a whole new chapter.

Psalm 116:1–4;12–19: Psalm 116 begins with a personal testimony regarding God's answer to prayer at a time of distress, which has encouraged the person to pray continually to this God who answers prayer. The last section fulfils the promise to pray and honour the vows made and then ends with a promise to be a servant in the house of God.

1 Peter 1:17–23: In this passage, Peter is preparing his audience for a journey from one way of life to another. He uses the imagery of being aliens in the world, strangers

in the place they have always called home. The journey is from one way of living to another, as they are called to turn from their former ways of living and to embrace the way of Christ. This is a difficult journey because it challenges people to turn their backs on what have been their customs, their culture, their identity, for their whole lives. Now they are asked to trade this for a new movement centred around a saviour who was executed at the hands of the authorities, which would have been ridiculed by the elders in their home communities. They now find themselves “outside the house” of their ancestors, and the temptation to return to their past lives must have been great. This is why Peter emphasises that the Christ was “chosen before the creation of the world” i.e. it predates any of the traditions they held so dear. In the context of the exodus, the unblemished lamb was not a sacrifice of atonement but a divine invitation to a meal. The blood was a sign of divine favour, as the angel of death passed over the houses on whose doors the blood of the lamb was painted. Jesus is then portrayed not as a substitute for us in the crucifixion, but as an invitation to journey through the blood to the new Promised Land, of which the readers are citizens.

Luke 24:13–35: This passage also focuses on a journey, or journeys. The first is the long, sad, walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus for Cleopas and his unnamed companion, who happen to share a home together (we discover during this account). They are joined by one they do not recognise, who asks why they are so sad, and they cannot believe that anyone in Jerusalem can possibly ask that question. It seems that they had waited as late as they could in Jerusalem to see if Jesus would reappear in terms of his own words, but then leave disappointed. Jesus carefully explains to them what all the Scriptures say about him. As with Peter's response to the Jews in Jerusalem, these two companions are encouraged to change their mindset about who Jesus is, and about the meaning of the cross. This is a journey in understanding that they are encouraged to undertake. When they reach their destination Jesus acts as if he is continuing his journey, but they invite him to join them for the night. It is when they sit down at the table and Jesus breaks the bread after giving thanks that “their eyes were opened and they recognised him, and he disappeared from their sight.” They hurry back to Jerusalem with the news of their experience and find the remaining Eleven disciples and others affirming the resurrection. This is not the end, but the beginning.

Interpreting the Word

Acts 2:14a;36–41: Peter's sermon in Acts 2 follows on the dramatic outpouring of the Holy Spirit, an act which transforms the disciples into bold witnesses of the work that God has begun in Jesus. It is a sermon which challenges and accuses the Jews of the crucifixion of Jesus, or, more accurately, of rejecting Jesus as the Messiah or Christ. This is the crux of the matter. The crucifixion, the death and resurrection of Jesus, were part of the plan. The biggest issue was that the Jews did not recognise, in Jesus, the Messiah

whom God had appointed. “Let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” (Christ and Messiah are the same word, one in Greek and one in Hebrew, which mean the Anointed One). When the people who heard the sermon realise the impact of what has been done, they ask what they can do to change things. Peter says: “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” The word for “repent” is *metanoia*, which is literally a 180-degree turn. Change the way you look at things, is what Peter is telling them. Instead of collective guilt for what was inevitable, change the way you understand the role of the Christ and recognise that Jesus is God’s choice for the role – then come and join the journey. This is just the beginning.

Psalm 116:1–4;12–19: Psalm 116 is part of a collection of Psalms running from Psalm 113 – Psalm 118 which centre on the deliverance from Egypt. Psalm 116 affirms God’s faithfulness in responding to the plight of an individual, and the commitment of that individual to serve in the temple.

1 Peter 1:17–23: Just as Psalm 116 is part of a collection of Psalms which centre on the deliverance from Egypt, or the Exodus, so Peter uses the imagery of the Exodus to impress on the readers their journey to a new life which is bestowed on them by their baptism. Peter’s audience consists of converts to Christianity in the province of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). The primary issue Peter deals with is that their conversion and subsequent baptism requires them to leave their former way of living, with its customs and traditions, and embrace a new way of living and being in Christ. This requires great discipline on their part because they are still living in the same communities but need to be different in their lifestyles from those of their neighbours. This has the effect of making them strangers, or aliens, in their own land. As with the Jews in Jerusalem, so these people needed to make a change in their outlook, in their understanding of who Jesus is and the role Jesus played. Peter emphasises that God had set the plan in place for Jesus to be the new liberator, the initiator of the new Passover, before the creation of the world in order to make it easier for them to leave behind their ancient customs. They were leaving them for something older, which made this conversion more palatable for them.

Luke 24:13–35: The main point of the story of the encounter between Cleopas and an unnamed companion and an unrecognised stranger (who turns out to be Jesus) is that these two need to change their outlook on who Jesus is and the role Jesus played. They are heavy-hearted because of the death of Jesus on the Friday, and they think all their hopes in the Messiah were dashed. Jesus takes them through an extended Bible Study and explains that all that had happened was set out in the Scriptures. When their eyes are opened at the breaking of the bread, Jesus disappears because they have seen the truth and have a new understanding.

Preaching the Word

The thread through all the passages of Scripture is the common theme is about being open to transforming our minds, about thinking differently about the death and resurrection of Jesus, about culpability on the part of the Jews, about how we understand the significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Jews who were in Jerusalem for their commemoration of the ancient Pentecost festival, and who became the audience for Peter’s first sermon, are challenged for their failure to recognise Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, the one made “Christ and Lord” by God – not for the “murder” of Jesus. That is the critical element of Peter’s sermon, which has traditionally been interpreted as accusatory of the Jews for killing Jesus because this fact is mentioned several times. But it was not all the Jews who were culpable of this, and certainly the visiting Jews from around the empire who had gathered in Jerusalem could not be implicated in these accusations as they were not even there at the time. Their sin, their guilt, is because they could not accept Jesus as the Christ, despite the fact that it was God who designated Jesus as such. This requires a transforming mind-shift on their part – the “repentance” or *metanoia* that Peter encourages. Think differently about your relationship with God and how you view Jesus, and then be baptised into a new community.

The converts in Asia Minor are encouraged to be steadfast in their faith in the face of opposition from their former friends and even family members who cannot understand why they would turn their backs on the culture and traditions in which they were raised, which dated back to antiquity. Peter uses the exodus motif as an illustration of a journey from one way of living to another, a journey in which the Hebrews went from being foreign slaves in Egypt to being landless people in the wilderness to being aliens in the land of promise, until they made it their own. The exodus motif is also referenced in the blood of the lamb, which was not a substitute for their sinfulness but an invitation to become part of the journey. The blood was their ticket to the journey, for the angel of death passed over the houses on which the blood was marked on the doors. He also emphasises that God had set this in motion before the creation of the world because this predates any of the ancient traditions they had left behind. For these converts, a transformational mind-shift was required to follow Jesus and not their traditional cultures.

Cleopas and his unnamed companion needed a transformational mind-shift to understand that God had not abandoned them but was in all the events that had transpired. When their eyes are opened as Jesus breaks the bread, Jesus disappears. They no longer need the physical evidence, because they have been transformed by the renewing of their minds.

Living the Word

The challenge to all in these texts is to change our thinking, to give up some deeply held beliefs, to give up a way of living, and even to feel like strangers in a place we once called home. There is the mind-shift in the realisation that the “sin” of the Jews was that they did not recognise in him the Messiah, or Christ. Imagine how this mind-shift could have changed the historical experience of Jews throughout Europe and prevented anti-Jewish sentiment that ultimately led to the Holocaust. This could have negated the need for them to move to Palestine and once again displace the occupants of that land.

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Word and Life for the 4th Sunday of Easter – 26 April 2026

Khawuluzile Makubalo

Texts

Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10

Introduction

The image of the Shepherd is a rich recurring theme in the Old Testament, symbolising God's care, guidance and protection. The Old Testament also features liberating heroes, like Moses and David, who received their calling while they were shepherds. Israel's kings were expected to shepherd God's people, but many failed resulting in God's intervention.

The Old Testament shepherd image is fully realised in Jesus who embodies God's personal, sacrificial and redemptive care. While human shepherds failed, Jesus perfectly seeks, leads, protects and saves the flock. The fourth Sunday of Easter, known as the Good Shepherd Sunday, highlights this image of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Hearing the Word

Acts 2:42-47

The book of Acts is the living story of the resurrection of Christ unfolding in human history, propelled by the dynamic movement of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, the Holy Spirit is the chief actor in Acts. Acts shows that resurrection and the Holy Spirit are inseparable. Where the Holy Spirit moves, resurrection life appears. It is for this reason Acts highlights the community of believers (in Acts 2:42-47) as a community of the resurrection in keeping with the Eastertide.

The Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, together form a two-part narrative showing how the revelation of Christ moves individuals from confusion to clarity, from fear to mission, from self-centeredness to generosity and care. Reading both narratives we see that meeting Christ transforms the way people see God, themselves and the world. Encounter with Christ is not merely emotional or private, encounter with Christ radically reorients life (for example Zacchaeus 19:8; The Disciples on the road to Emmaus 24:13-35 and now the community of believers Acts 2:42-47).

The early Christian community described in this pericope represents more than a model of charity or social generosity. It is a manifestation of the resurrection life breaking into the world. This brief but vivid portrait captures the deep theological and spiritual truth that the resurrection of Jesus reorders human relationships, economics and society itself.

In the resurrection of Jesus, the old order of death, scarcity and division is abolished. This passage displays a new order shaped by abundance and not fear, by sharing and not hoarding, by unity and not classification and segregation.

This passage reveals that the early Christians were not simply religious enthusiasts or moral reformers. They were a resurrection community: a people whose life together announced that death has been defeated and a new creation has begun. Their common life was a tangible sign of obedience to Jesus's commands of love and service, was a tangible sign of living under the legacy of peace and a sign that Jesus is alive offering abundant life for all.

This community life resonates with the African understanding of Ubuntu, a view that sees individual identity inextricably linked to community. Verse 44 describes the community as being together having things in common and verse 47 describes them as having the goodwill of all people; these are the true marks of Ubuntu where an individual recognises that 'I am because we are.'

The act of selling possessions and distributing the proceeds to those in need (2:45) reveals that scarcity thinking has been overcome by abundance thinking, another key feature of many African communal systems, customs and practices. African understanding of Ubuntu recognises that survival depends on solidarity and sharing and not on private accumulation. "No person can come into existence, live, work, suffer, or rejoice alone and in isolation" (Mbiti).

This early Christian community embodies a faith where being, belonging and blessing are inseparable. In a fragmented and individualistic world, Acts invites the church to strive to live a life of the resurrection that says I am because we are and we are because Christ is risen!

Psalm 23

Psalm 23 obtains rich imagery. The psalmist immediately identifies the LORD (YHWH) as the Shepherd. This is a powerful metaphor for divine care. The Psalmist is not merely describing what YHWH does but more who YHWH is; what YHWH does stems from who YHWH is. What YHWH does, specially leading and guiding as in verses 2-3, YHWH does it for the sake of YHWH's name.

The focus changes on the fourth verse to the Psalmist. The presence of YHWH brings comfort and security to the Psalmist. The Psalmist is not spared from crises and trouble but can face crises and trouble with courage due to the comforting securing presence of the Shepherd YHWH. The shift from the third person to second person ('He leads me' to 'You are with me') is a poetic turning point that depicts this comforting securing presence.

YHWH does more than just guiding and providing a secured comforting presence; YHWH prepares a table in the presence of enemies; a hospitality that defeats hostility. He anoints with oil honour, joy and healing.

These images of Shepherding may be unfamiliar to modern readers, especially those far removed from farming and rural life. One may look to use images that will bridge this ancient pastoral beauty to a contemporary life experience.

1 Peter 2:19-25

The letter of 1 Peter is addressed to Christians scattered across Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). They are described as exiles of the dispersion (1 Peter 1:1). These Christians were not political exiles but social and religious outsiders because of their faith in Jesus. They faced mockery, slander, exclusion and suffering. It is for this reason that suffering is a major theme of the epistle encouraging the recipients to endure hardship and to have hope. Encouraging them not to see suffering as abandonment but as sharing in the passion of Christ.

In 1 Peter 2:21 we see clearly that discipleship inevitably involves suffering. The cost of discipleship is not accidental; it is a calling (you were called / *klethete*) to willingly walk the same path as the risen Christ (1 Peter 2:9). Peter frames the suffering of Christ not simply as substitutionary but as an example to be imitated. This is no jump to the victory of Easter but a walk to Easter through the suffering of the crucifixion. The crucifixion reveals that God stands with the victims of history while the resurrection promises not just personal salvation but the transformation of unjust structures that bring about suffering. The suffering of disciples is not resignation but resistance, a life witnessing to a God who will overturn the powers that bring about suffering (1 Peter 2:20).

The reference to the 'shepherd' and 'guardian' of souls is both pastoral and hopeful. The image of 'going astray like sheep' evokes the biblical tradition of a people lost, vulnerable, and exploited as in Ezekiel 34. The movement of the straying sheep back to the shepherd and guardian is a movement initiated by God in Christ, a movement towards healing (verse 24), it is a movement of liberation, it is returning to life, to dignity and to true community. Then the Shepherd and Guardian tends the suffering (Ezekiel 34:12-16, Psalm 23:4). The Shepherd and Guardian is the risen one who triumphed over evil, violence, abandonment and rejection (1 Peter 2:7). The resurrection hope in 1 Peter 2:25 is both pastoral (you are not alone) and revolutionary (your future will not be defined by suffering but by liberation under the guidance and care of the Shepherd). This is the Shepherd Guardian who restores and gives life.

John 10:1-10

There is no clear break between chapter 9 and 10 of John's gospel. The closing of chapter 9 depicts Jesus responding to the Pharisees and the dialogue is about seeing and blindness. In chapter 10 Jesus continues to speak. In this chapter we notice a change. A new metaphor of Shepherd and sheep is introduced with loaded images that point to Jesus himself.

The Shepherd metaphor and its loaded images has similarities with Ezekiel 34 where God rebukes the "shepherds" for feeding themselves instead of the sheep, for oppressing the weak and allowing the flock to be scattered. Ezekiel 34 concludes with God's promise to raise up a new Shepherd and to gather the scattered sheep.

The image of sheep features in the parables recorded in the Synoptic Gospels. Though each may have a different emphasis there are similarities, such as the vulnerability of sheep, and a sense of community seen in God's active

concern for the sheep and the gathering of the sheep. Jesus makes a bold claim in John 10 as he refers to himself as the Shepherd of the sheep who has come to offer abundant life.

There is a clear distinction between the one who is the Shepherd and the thieves. The thieves enter the sheepfold illegitimately, they have no relationship with the sheep, their motive are to steal, kill and destroy. While the Shepherd enters legitimately by the gate, knows the sheep intimately and has a motive to offer abundant life.

The Shepherd calls the sheep by name (10:3). Being called by name is a consistent occurrence of deep significance in John's gospel. It expresses intimate knowledge, personal relationship, and the foundation of true belonging. In John 11:43 Jesus summons Lazarus from death to life by calling out his name. In John 20:16 Jesus calls Mary Magdalene by name and it is this personal address that opened her eyes transitioning her from fear and confusion to comfort and announcer of the Good News.

Another occurrence of deep significance in John's gospel is knowing and recognition. Knowing in the gospel is not just cognitive awareness but deep, intimate relational recognition. The sheep (10:4-5) know the Shepherd's voice; they do not just hear it, they recognize and respond to it out of relationship and trust. There is a reflection of mutual knowledge that could have been attained through experience and intimacy. The sheep follow because they learned to discern the character and truth behind the voice. The sheep's refusal to follow strangers is rooted not in fear but in relational loyalty and trust to the one they know.

Culpepper in his commentary on the Gospel of John emphasises that life is a central theological theme throughout the Gospel. From the Prologue (first chapter) to the final resurrection scenes, John presents Jesus as the one who brings life. John 10:10 is a climatic statement of this mission. Jesus comes not only to preserve or protect life but to offer it abundantly. This life is not merely physical existence or duration but a deep, spiritual and relational reality. It is life in communion with God, made possible through Jesus Christ. Culpepper underscores that eternal life in John is not only a future promise but a present experience accessible now through faith in Jesus Christ.

Interpreting the Word

Jesus's promise in John 10:10 is not simply a statement about prosperity or physical longevity. It is a profound theological claim about the kind of life God desires for humanity. The abundance refers to a fullness of being characterised by peace, freedom, love and purpose. This promise echoes the closing line of Psalm 23:6b "and I shall live in the house of the Lord my whole life long." Here the Psalmist expresses confidence in ongoing communion with God, which is the very essence of abundant life. To dwell in God's presence is to live securely under divine care, receiving restorative love, healing, and nourishment.

The early Church in Acts 2 provides a practical outworking of abundant life. Their common life was marked by generosity, unity, and spiritual vitality. Likewise, 1 Peter 2:24 particularly the line "so that we might live for righteousness," reminds us that Christ's self-giving is

not only for our healing but also for transformation. The transformed life lived for righteousness is characterised by justice, compassion, and holiness. Abundant life then is not self-centred but a communal, righteous way of life rooted in Christ self-giving love, where Christians are healed and empowered to live for others and for God.

Righteousness in the context of 1 Peter 2:24 refers to a restored way of life that reflects the character of God made possible through Christ's suffering. It is a life marked by obedience to God, ethical conduct, and love for others even in the face of suffering with Christ as an example. This righteousness involves both personal holiness and communal integrity. In essence, righteousness is the way we live abundant life in the presence and care of the Shepherd.

Preaching The Word

Shepherd Sunday offers a variety of themes that bears resonance with the struggles of life experienced in a South African context and globally. Here are a few themes:

True leadership and destructive false leadership: Different from the thieves who come to steal, kill and destroy with selfish intent, Jesus leads the flock from a place of intimate relationship, care and concern offering life.

A community of mutual care: In acts 2 we see resurrection life made visible. The early church embodied the resurrected Christ by sharing, worshiping, and caring for one another. This can be linked to Ubuntu and the interpretation of abundant life for all. This early church example displays a radical alternative to economy.

Identity and belonging: 1 Peter 2:25 speaks of a return to the Shepherd of your souls which can be viewed as reclaiming true identity and communal belonging. This is echoed in the reading from the book of Acts and the idea of belonging to a sheepfold in John 10:1

The Lord as Shepherd: The Lord as Shepherd brings dignity, nourishment, protection, healing and life. This theme connects all the prescribed texts for the fourth Sunday. The Lord is Shepherd in a personal level of relating. This can relate to the intimate knowledge in John. The Lord is a Shepherd in a communal level of relating this can be drawn especially from 1 Peter 2 and John's Gospel.

Living the Word

In a world of suffering where inequality prevails, exclusions, violence, gender-based violence, poverty, despair, self-centred leaderships that betray followers these texts open the eyes of believers to a renewed hope found in the caring Shepherd. These texts speak prophetically to economic justice as they make a call to shared life over privatised accumulation. The texts offer encouragement to mutual care and community belonging as an alternative, an expression of those who identify with the resurrection. This idea of community belonging and mutual care could offer a healing balm to those who suffer intergenerational trauma, dislocation, loss of cultural and spiritual belonging. The Shepherd theme becomes pastoral and liberating calling people back to God's restorative care.

Liturgical Suggestions

(unless a separate fuller liturgy is required for the occasion)

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- “The Kingdom of God is Justice and Joy”
- I know that my Redeemer Lives”
- The God of Love my Shepherd is”

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Word and Life for the 5th Sunday of Easter – 3 May 2026

James Massey

Texts

Acts 7:55–60

Psalm 31:1–5, 15–16

1 Peter 2:2–10

John 14:1–14

Introduction

In these post-Easter, pre-Pentecost weeks we are challenged to understand and live out the essential purpose of the Church, which is to give testimony to what God has done in Jesus. That is reflected in the lectionary readings in these weeks: the first readings are always from the book of the Acts of the Apostles. The Epistle readings are all from the 1st Letter of Peter, written to sustain the Church as it bore witness in a time of persecution and suffering. The Gospel readings, with the exception of one or two from Matthew, are all from John's Gospel.

Hearing the Word

As a brief preface, so that you might best benefit from all that follows, let me share how I approach writing for Word and Worship. I'm very conscious that I can readily write simply from my own perspective: that of an eighty-year old, middle-class, white man. To balance and correct that, I re-read the complex history of how the Bible has been interpreted, from Jewish *halakah* and *haggadah*, to Jesus and Paul, to Origen's allegorising, to Augustine and Aquinas' preference (often insistence) on the literal meaning, to the Reformers and to the modern analytical methods of interpretation. As a further balance to my subjectivism, I try to stay aware that we live in times of unprecedented violence, and that much of the biblical commentary that people see (especially on the web) seems to carry reflections that violence. So I do my best to express a 'hermeneutic of compassion' as a counter-narrative to all that.

Acts 7:55–60

Our lectionary passage marks a great turning point in the life of the Church. Chapters 6 and 7 show how Stephen had been chosen as one of the "deacons" who would care for the Hellenist (Greek-speaking) converts. His work was so successful that he was arrested and interrogated by the religious authorities. His defence was to show precisely how Jesus fulfilled all the Jewish scriptures, even to the murder of the Messiah, the "Righteous One" (*dikaïos*, 7.52), who is even now "standing at God's right hand ... heaven is thrown open!" (7:55–56). This the Sanhedrin members could perceive only as blasphemy and sacrilege – a denigration of God – the punishment for which was stoning (Lev. 24.10ff).

The way Stephen faces death and regards his killers is described as imaging the way that Jesus did that. He prays for their forgiveness and asks God to receive his spirit (vv 59–60). And then this killing is the start of "a bitter persecution" for the whole Church and a scattering of the

disciples (8.1). And yet, this is the start of a great "growth spurt" for the Church. And so began a pattern as Tertullian said (ca.197 CE), "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church" – the suffering of all martyrs would plant seeds which would grow faith – and the martyrs themselves would grow more powerful and influential after their death. The way our people have faced trials and death changed the very persecutors. Paul was the first one to be so changed, and eventually the whole mighty Roman Empire was changed. Today there are more than 2.6 billion Christians in the world, which is nearly one third of humanity.

Psalm 31

This is a prayer in times of ordeal. There are many links to the Confessions of Jeremiah (e.g. vv 11, 13). Throughout one can hear the Church using this Psalm during times of persecution (e.g. v 4 cf. 1 Peter 4:12).

1 Peter 2:2–10

Centrally, this letter speaks to Christians who are suffering for their faith, for their love of Jesus. It's worth reading through this whole letter, brief as it is, to see that it is speaking from a situation of great trial for the Church. It is addressed to, and speaks about, the whole Church – all the "you's" in English are plural, not singular (ref "*julle*" in Afrikaans, or "*ni-*" in isiXhosa or isiZulu). We are indeed 'The Fellowship of the Holy Spirit' and we find our true life and purpose as we witness to that and by the price we pay for our witnessing.

The commentaries on 1 Peter virtually unanimously ascribe this letter to the apostle Peter (or at least major portions of it), and so it is seen as having been written around 65 AD (CE), the time of the terrible persecution of the Church by the mad emperor Nero. What is said in 1 Peter became even more relevant as persecutions became fiercer and more widespread, e.g. under Domitian (90), Decius (250) and Diocletian (300).

Here is the general structure of today's involved passage. Verses 2–3 gather up and complete the exhortation of chapter 1 ("*a living hope, so be holy*"). Verses 4, 5 and 9 give the essence of the whole passage, which (1) makes it clear that to come to Christ means that we become part of a community, (2) describe the nature of the Church and (3) show what happens when we openly make witness about our faith. Verses 6–8 are a parenthesis which illustrate the meaning of the 'stone' in v 4. Verse 10 further explains v9.

John 14:1–14

Again, it's crucial to an understanding of this passage that we read all the "you's" as plural ("*julle*", "*yenu*"). So the passage is meant for the whole Church and shouldn't be limited to 'personal comfort'. That's why we so often read it at funerals, for the whole congregation.

The context into which the passage speaks is enough to make the bravest person fear. The disciples have heard that Jesus is about to be killed (13:31–33), that he will be betrayed by one of the Twelve (13:21) and that even Peter would deny him (13:38). Now Jesus wants to strengthen their faith. So straightaway in vv 1 he says “*trust in God, trust in me*”. And so it is that Jesus always seeks to strengthen the faith of the Church! In vv 2–6 he speaks of himself as the Way. He is about to walk the very way that will reveal God’s victory over sin and death forever. And he makes clear what the final destiny of his disciples is: to be forever with the Father in him. And he promises that he will not only show us the way to reach that goal, but he will walk with us as we make the journey.

In vv 7–11, Jesus makes the most outrageous claim. He says that to see him is to see God. We are asked to see God as suffering and dying. Philip for one was clearly baffled by this. Paul, too, struggled with it. At first he persecuted people (the Church) who were happily proclaiming this and living it out. He later became deeply aware that the good news came across as “blasphemy” to religious people and “complete nonsense” to philosophers (1 Cor 1:23). But it is this very claim – that we worship a dying and rising God – that has sustained and preserved the Church for 20 centuries.

Interpreting the Word

A case study might be the best way to contextualise all this exegesis. Let me remind you of the martyrdom of Maqumusela Khanyile in 1877. In response to the activity of Christian missionaries and their converts around what is now Eshowe in KwaZulu Natal, King Cetewayo had declared that, while women and children might accept it, no warrior could do that, on pain of death. But Maqumusela Khanyile, to put it at its simplest, fell in love with Jesus and the way of love that he offered. Brought before the king, he refused to deny his faith, and he was led out to death. To this day there stands on the outskirts of Eshowe, a ten-foot high “Martyr’s Cross”, which boldly commemorates Maqumusela’s life and death and everlasting life. Nearby are the thriving Maqumusela Lutheran Bible School and KwaMondi Lutheran Church. Here is a classic historical example of the ongoing clash between people of faith and political figures who present themselves as ultimate, even god-like authorities.

This time between Easter and Pentecost give us a unique opportunity to invite, call, challenge and help our people to “be the Church”. We can raise awareness of how great a heritage we have been given, how powerful are the resources we possess now, even in times of brokenness and poverty, and how glorious is the future we are promised.

The lectionary readings for this Sunday give us enough and more material to use this opportunity to the full. Behind the text of 1 Peter, for example, lie the graphic memories of how terrible were the persecutions under Nero – there is enough here to help present-day Christians cope with the horror stories we still hear of our people being lined up on a beach and beheaded.

Perhaps if Peter were writing in our day, he would also use the image of a family, where everyone relies on everybody else and where we all eat or we all go hungry. Indeed,

today’s reading from Peter assures us that we are *living stones* (2:5), which means that we are all growing together as a community: growing in faith, growing in understanding, and without doubt growing in numbers.

Again, in John 14, we are offered Jesus’ promise that we truly are his Body. So we the Church are one with him in suffering and in victory. And so we are one with God! We truly are the Fellowship of God the Holy Spirit. Those are the resources we are given to walk the Way.

Preaching the Word

Here are some of the themes that might be addressed through the sermon. We are called to know who we are as the Church, and we are invited to see and trust the glorious resources we are given as Church, and we are challenged to make decisions (individually and together) about how we might become more fully “the Church”.

Another theme might be to help people identify what kind of persecution they will face. Many will say how fortunate we are in South/Southern Africa that we are not persecuted and can worship freely. But there is always for every Christian the pressure of jealousy: people who knew us before we became Christians often put great pressure on us to revert to their old way of life. John cautioned us: *they don’t know us because they don’t know Jesus* (1 John 3:1).

Another theme that might be addressed is that of the Unity of the Church. Surely, to become the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit, to resist persecution and witness to the world, we should be in solidarity. In eleven days we will be at Ascension Day – and then into the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. If we help our congregations celebrate that, then there might be a great Pentecost for us!

The Church also has a prophetic, evangelistic function: together and individually we declare the “mighty works of God who called us out of darkness into light”. John 14 speaks of the pastoral function of the Church: by our faithful deeds and prayers we can show the glory and power of the risen Christ (vv 12, 14).

And another theme might be the urgency of our message, and the consequences of ignoring what is offered in the Word. What does it mean that people who do not believe “stumble” over the Stone?

Living the Word

Engagement with the community could arise as individuals who catch this vision strengthen their commitment to help organisations in the community. The preaching might include a challenge to such members who are already involved in NGO work to invite others to join them in that work.

This could extend to members’ work-lives. There is great strength in specifically commissioning and blessing people to “serve God at work”, as nurses or teachers or social workers – but also as engineers or plumbers or gardeners. Many retired people are longing to be shown or given opportunities to be useful for God in these ways. That is surely what Pentecost implies.

Liturgical suggestions

Have a look at John van de Laar's *Sacredise* website, where there are multiple contemporary resources; e.g.

In the face of it all –
the beast of destruction that threatens to undo
all that makes me feel safe,
the piercing wounds that burn my soul
until pleasure feels like a distant, delusional dream,
the unrelenting whys
that leave my mind drunken and hollow with their echoes...

In the face of it all I am drawn to despair
certain that God cannot be
or if God is, then evil;
But, something, somewhere will not allow me that resolution
In some forgotten cavern of myself is an angel
that insists on wrestling my dark certainties to the ground

God, seemingly so distant, forgive me
that I too often choose simple unbelief
over the struggle of faith
And keep disturbing my heart
so that the demons of fear and faithlessness are always
shaken loose.

<https://sacredise.com/easter-5a/in-the-face-of-it-all>



Suggested Songs/Hymns

- “O Love that will not let me go” (Hymns & Psalms 685)
- “Spirit of love, you move within creation” (Church Hymnary 618)
- “There’s a spirit in the air” (Common Praise 198, H&P 326)
- “Let every Christian pray ... Come, Holy Spirit, come” (H&P 305)
- “Jesus, united by thy grace” (H&P 773)
- “Christ from whom all blessings flow” (H&P 764)
- “In Christ there is no east or west” (Church Hymnary 624)
- “Go forth and tell! O Church of God, awake!” (H&P 770)

Word and Life for the 6th Sunday of Easter – 10 May 2026

Peter Langerman

Texts

Acts 17:22-31
Psalm 66:8-20
1 Peter 3:13-22
John 14:15-21

Introduction

Coming, as this Sunday does, just before the feast of the Ascension, means that we must both anticipate that great event, but not run ahead of it. It would do well to consider the disciples, who have been reunited with Jesus after his resurrection, and are now having to come to terms with the reality that he is going to leave them again. A point of contact might be to ask people to think about a time when family from far away, living in another province or country perhaps, came for a visit and the feelings that begin to well up as the time for departure comes near.

Hearing the Word

Psalm 66:8-20

Although the whole Psalm is not part of this Sunday's lectionary readings, it is important to deal with its structure as a whole in order to understand how this portion links to the rest of the Psalm. The Psalm divides into 2 parts, vv 1-12 are communal and focus on God's saving acts towards the people, specifically how God at the Red Sea (v 6) saved the people of Israel. In vv 13-20, the individual thanks God for assistance in a time of great trouble. The two distinct parts have led some to speculate the Psalm was once two separate passages that were spliced together into one.

The two sections are connected by the invitation to "come and see" or "hear" in vv 5 and 16.

The particular section of the Psalm that comprises the lectionary reading connected God's actions on behalf of the community and the individual with the word "bless / praise" in v 8 and v 20. The worship setting of the verse may have been the presentation by an individual of a thanksgiving sacrifice in which the individual places God's salvific acts on the individual's behalf in the context of God's actions on Israel's behalf.

The Psalmist invites all people to praise God (v 8). God's action on behalf of Israel is a sign of God's goodness for all. Although God saved Israel (v 9), the Psalmist recalls how God put Israel to the test (vv 10-12) before bringing them to a "place of abundance" (v 12).

This is an amazing picture of the nature of Israel's God who saves the people, but punishes them when they do wrong, and who is genuinely concerned about the well-being of all peoples. Hence, these verses reveal God's true character. The Lord who brought Israel out of Egypt is not just a God who is partial to this people to the detriment of others. Indeed, God shows God's concern about justice and equality

by rescuing Israel from bondage but also by punishing Israel for unfaithfulness.

In v 13, the voice shifts to the individual, and vv 13-15 focus on the individual's promise to bring a sacrifice into the temple, to fulfil the vows that the individual made when in a place of distress. This proves that the vow and pledges made were not empty promises, made to try to manipulate God, but a sign of the faith and trust that the individual placed in God and a tribute to God's faithfulness.

In v 16, the individual who trusted God, who was saved by God, and who is sacrificing thanksgiving offerings to God, calls on "those who fear God" to be aware of what God did for the individual. The psalmist cried out to God, and God answered (v 19).

Those who "fear" are those who stand before God in humility, and who have a clear perspective of who they are and who God is. They are the ones who "cry out to God in praise" and who do not "cherish sin in their heart" (vv 17-18). Those who fear God do not claim moral perfection, but put their faith and trust in God for forgiveness and salvation. They do not claim moral purity either, but because they are in right relationship with God, the relationship characterized by reliance on God for forgiveness and salvation.

Sacrifices here, although not familiar to us, are similar to the liturgies that people go through in worship, no matter what Christians tradition to which people may belong. Liturgies remind us that faith has to be lived out, in public, with others.

Acts 17:22-31

On his second missionary journey, Paul crossed Asia Minor (modern Turkey) and arrived in Athens, a city known for its interest in the divine and its openness to discussion of philosophy and religion. In Athens, Paul argued for Christianity both in the synagogue and in the marketplace.

Epicurean and Stoic philosophers saw him as dabbling in philosophy and proclaiming "foreign divinities" (v 18), when he spoke to them of Jesus and the resurrection, which led them, possibly, to regard Jesus to be some sort of god. They invited Paul to join in philosophical discussions at the "Areopagus" (v 19) a public space dedicated to those wanting to share their ideas with others, situated on edge of the marketplace. In this environment, Paul presented the good news of the gospel to a people of a culture very different from the one in which it was first proclaimed.

He explained the good news in terms that were familiar to his listeners. After praising the Athenians for their piety and their devotion, ("objects of worship", v23), he drew attention to an altar to "'an unknown god'". He told them: "I know that God; he is the who made the world ..." (v 24) and is "Lord" of it. He depends on nothing ("He is not served by human hands as though he needed anything ...", v 25), so he is greater than all Greek gods; he is the source of all ("gives ... life"). Not being confined to specific "shrines", holy places (v 24) and

needing no sacrifices (v 25) this God shows his greatness in that this is the God who created “all nations” (v 26) from the one original human, (“one man”).

From that one human all the nations came forth and God “fixed the boundaries of the peoples”. Peoples had a deep sense that their origin was in this God and, as a result, people searched and groped for God (v 27). But, Paul argued, we go further: we have found, obey and serve this God, something to which their own poets and authors have even attested (v 28).

For “God’s offspring” (v 29) idols are inadequate objects of worship; only the true God, the creator of heaven and earth and of all lower orders of spiritual beings, is worthy of our worship and service. Jesus has brought an era when turning to God is imperative; “ignorance” (v 30) of God’s ways is no longer acceptable – because God will have Jesus (“a man”, v 31) judge people’s worthiness. This we know because he has raised Jesus from the dead. That this Jesus, a human being, was raised to divine status was difficult for Paul’s hearers to accept. Some were open to further discussion but others were not (v 32).

1 Peter 3:13-22

The author addresses the persecution faced by the readers, emphasizing that suffering for doing good places them in a blessed position with God. They are encouraged to fear God above all else and be ready to defend their faith. By living ethical, godly lives and keeping their conscience clear, they can shame their persecutors and potentially stop their harassment. Suffering for doing God’s will is considered morally better than suffering any other reason.

Christ, described as “the righteous,” is presented as the ultimate example of suffering. He died in the flesh but overcame death, and even in death, he preached to the spirits in prison, offering them the chance for redemption. This act is linked to the salvation of Noah’s family through the flood, symbolizing baptism. Baptism is not about physical cleansing but about preparing believers to be found worthy at the Last Day, sharing in Christ’s death and resurrection. Christ now reigns in heaven, with all heavenly powers subject to him.

Interpreting the Word

John emphasizes love right through his Gospel, and he reminds us that Jesus wanted us to follow the command to love. And as William Coffin, Presbyterian pastor and activist reminded us, “If we fail in love, we fail in all things else.”

In John’s Gospel, Jesus commands the disciples to love, and love becomes the determining factor of how the disciples have lived as disciples of Jesus during that day. At the end of the day, as we do an examen, the question that we should ask of ourselves is, “Where, and in what ways, did I love today? And where, and in what ways, did I fail to love today?”

John’s understanding of the person and work of the Holy Spirit is somewhat distinct. Where other Gospel writers (such as Luke) mention the Holy Spirit as active in the lives of the disciples from the beginning, John tells us that the Spirit will come when Jesus goes. The main reason for this

seems to be John’s identification with the Holy Spirit as “another paraclete.” In John’s Gospel, the Spirit comes when Jesus goes. The disciples’ dismay at the “loss” of Jesus is made up by their joy when Jesus returns to them in the Holy Spirit. The disciples are not just apprentices any longer, but fully-fledged followers of Jesus, empowered by the Spirit to do the same works that Jesus did, to the glory of the Father. This becomes the paradigm for all the generations of Christ followers after those very first pioneers. Later generations are not penalised because they never knew Jesus personally, because everything that was available to those first disciples and apostles is available to us.

The word “paraclete” is an interesting and complex word, literally, “one who comes alongside to help” and translated as Comforter, Advocate, Counsellor, and Helper. It appears only five times: four times in John 14-16 and once in 1 John 2:1. The Holy Spirit is specifically said to do the following: teach, remind (14:26), abide (14:16), and testify about Jesus (15:26). Like Jesus, the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth.

Preaching the Word

The speech, made by the apostle Paul to the leading thinkers of his day, in the melting pot that was 1st century Athens, is fairly unique in the context of the NT. Paul seeks to build a bridge linking Athens to Jerusalem. That Paul should preach the gospel among the philosophical elite of his day is, in itself, pretty remarkable, but still more remarkable, is the way in which he did it.

Paul, the one-time Jewish pharisee and hater of Christians, now a leader of the Christian movement himself, comes to Athens to speak of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead. He does what all preachers should do, he works from concepts that are known and accepted, to concepts that are new and somewhat radical. In doing this however, he is not tolerant of their worship of idols.

He remarks on their religious sensibilities, and then focuses upon their idol dedicated to the “Unknown God”. He quotes their own poets and he uses language that is not foreign to them. He translates the good news of the gospel into a cultural paradigm very different to the one from which it originated. However, in doing so, he does not avoid either confronting them for their idolatry, nor does he compromise the truth of his message. He is very clear that God is the Lord of all, that God gave life as a gift to human beings and that this God sent a representative who brought with him forgiveness for all people. As proof of who he was and why he has come, Paul makes his most controversial statement: Jesus was raised from the dead.

Paul’s message is not well received, most give up listening before he is finished. Some do stay and become Christ followers, but it is a very small group. When we are asked by those who either don’t know much about the Christian faith, or who might be hostile to that faith, about our faith, our response tends to be crafted in such a way that it will not cause too much reaction. Paul doesn’t do this at all. While respecting his listeners, he does not “dumb down” his message, but gives them a succinct summary of the gospel message which they are free to accept or reject.

Living the Word

Reflect on the following:

- Can you articulate your faith without embarrassment?
- What do you think are the stumbling blocks that people have today about the issues of faith in Christ?
- How can you challenge people as to their position on the Christian faith without provocation?

Liturgical Suggestions

A responsive reading of Psalm 66

Celebrate your God, you people,

let the songs of praise be heard loud and clear.

For God has given us a great living

and has not permitted our feet to slip.

You God, you have surely tested our faith,

like silver we have been assayed.

You certainly let the pressures fall on us,

and we have been knocked down by the powerful.

You allowed others to trample over us,

we have gone through hell and high water.

Yet now you have led us out of disaster

and given us an open space.

I will bring my offerings to your house,

I will renew my vows to you;

I will fulfil the things my lips uttered,

all that my mouth promised when in trouble.

I will give you the best of my possessions,

like sweet incense my thanks will rise.

I will make an offering of my strengths,

of the choicest that I have and am.

You who are in awe of God, come and listen,

... and I will tell of what has been done for me.

I cried at the top of my voice to my God

and praised with a joyful tongue.

If I had nursed evil in my heart,

God would not have listened.

But the truth is that God has heard

and known my outspoken prayer.

Wonderful are you, loving God,

for you have not been deaf to me,

or for one second removed your love

and faithfulness from me.

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Liturgy for the Feast of the Ascension – 14 May 2026

David Howard

Introduction

The Feast of the Ascension celebrates the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ into heaven in his resurrection body. Upon his Ascension, Christ was seated at the right hand of God, the glorious Father, in the heavenly realms. From here he rules as head over all things for the sake of his Church. The Feast of the Ascension is a reminder to us that Christ represents us, his people, before the throne of God, mediating for us eternally. It reminds us of Jesus' ongoing humanity and that, in Jesus, our humanity is taken into the presence of God.

Texts

Acts 1:1-11
Psalm 47
Ephesians 1:15-23
Luke 24:44-53

Gathering in God's name

Call to worship

Come, people of God
Rise before the King of Heaven and Earth!
The Congregation stands and responds:

Come, people of God
Worship the King of kings!

**Lord Jesus Christ,
High King of heaven and earth,
You reign supreme over all creation.
We stand in awe of You!**

Come, people of God
Worship the King of kings!

**With clapping hands and shouts of joy,
with songs of loudest praise,
with all the people of the earth,
we glorify Your Name!
Amen.**

Act of Penitence

Almighty God,
we worship Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
as King of heaven and earth.
Yet, we humbly confess that all too often:
**We have rebelled against His rule and reign.
We have failed to be faithful.**

**We have let our love for Him grow cold,
and neglected to love our neighbours.
We have treasured the pleasures of this world
and forgotten our glorious inheritance.**

Lord in Your mercy,
hear our confession,
see our repentant hearts,
and forgive us by Your grace.
Through Jesus Christ our Great High Priest, we pray.
Amen.

Absolution or Assurance of Forgiveness

Through the grace of our Great High Priest,
the Lord Jesus Christ,
our sins are forgiven.
Amen. Thanks be to God.

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer for Illumination

Lord Jesus, High King of Heaven and earth:
Everything written about You
in the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms has been fulfilled.
Help us to see You in the words we read.
Help us to encounter You in the temple of our hearts.
Help us to hear You in the Spirit's whispers and the preacher's
words.
Anoint Your Word to speak life to us today.
In holy anticipation, we wait on You.
Amen.

Responding to the Word of God

After the Ministry of the Word we pray:
King Jesus,
You have called us, Your people,
to be Your witnesses to the ends of the earth,
in the power of the Holy Spirit,
so that Your Kingdom may be extended
on earth as it is in heaven.
Send Your Holy Spirit on us now,
that we may be Your faithful witnesses forever.
Amen.

As we seek to be obedient to Your call
to receive the power of Your Spirit,
and to discern Your guidance for our mission,
we wait on You in silence.

*We wait in silence for a full minute,
listening for the gentle whisper of the Spirit
and waiting for His empowering,
whereafter we pray:*

Lord, help us to be continually filled
with Your presence and power
to be constantly open to Your guidance,
and to be courageously obedient at all times.
Amen.

Celebrating at the table

Sharing of the Peace

The peace of the Risen and Ascended Lord be always with
you.
And also with you.

Invitation to Communion

Jesus Christ, our Risen and Ascended King
Invites us all to His table
and to this foretaste of the heavenly banquet.
Come now in faith and receive His Body broken for you,
His Blood poured out for you,
and His Life-Giving power for mission.
Amen.

Sending

Post communion Prayer

We thank You Lord,
for feeding us in this sacred moment,
for nourishing us with Your Life,
healing us by Your Love
and empowering us by Your Spirit.
Amen

Sentence of Scripture (Luke 24:50b-52)

“Jesus lifted up His hands and blessed them.
While He was blessing them, He left them and was taken up
into heaven.
Then they worshipped Him and returned to Jerusalem with
great joy.”

Benediction

High King of heaven and earth, We stand in awe of You!
As we go from this place of worship to fulfil Your mission
in the world:
May Your Royal Power direct our paths,
Your Royal Love be our sure foundation.
May all the peoples of the earth, come bow before Your
Name!
And every voice from every tribe join us in our praise:
**“O High King of heaven and earth, we stand in awe of
You!”**
Amen

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- “God is working His purposes out”
- “Go forth and tell”
- “Waiting here for You”

Word and Life for the Feast of the Ascension – 14 May 2026

David Howard

Texts

Acts 1:1-11
Psalm 47
Ephesians 1:15-23
Luke 24:44-53

Introduction

The Feast of the Ascension celebrates the Ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven in his resurrection body. Upon his Ascension, Christ was seated at the right hand of God, the glorious Father, in the heavenly realms. From here he rules as head over all things for the sake of his Church. The Feast of the Ascension is a reminder to us that Christ represents us, his people, before the throne of God, mediating for us eternally. It reminds us of Jesus' ongoing humanity and that, in Jesus, our humanity is taken into the presence of God.

Hearing the Word

Comments on Acts 1:1-11

Written as a second volume to the Gospel of Luke, and also dedicated to the benefactor Theophilus, Acts records the history of the earliest followers of Jesus and how they courageously spread the Good News of Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. Our passage for today highlights *why* they set out to do so.

Firstly, through his appearances to them over a period of forty days, they had come to be utterly convinced of the truth that the Lord Jesus had risen from the dead. They believed this truth to the point that they would lay down their lives for it (v.3). *Secondly*, they spread the Gospel because they were being empowered to do so by the risen Jesus, who had promised them what he had later poured out on them; viz., the person and power of the Holy Spirit (v.4-5). *Thirdly*, Jesus had given them the Great Commission, and, despite their continued confusion about the nature and timing of the Kingdom's coming, Jesus had given them the very clear instruction that their part in its coming was to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. *Fourthly*, they were given a very dramatic confirmation of the reality and urgency of their task by the two angelic messengers who promised them that Jesus would return from glory just as He had ascended into glory.

Two key themes to notice are (a) the invitation to wait for the power of the Holy Spirit, which is an important focus of the next ten days on the Church calendar, and (b) the missional call to spread the Good News of Jesus.

Comments on Psalm 47

Psalm 47 celebrates Israel's God and pictures Him ascending to God's throne as King over all the nations of the earth. It is a magnificent Psalm with which to celebrate the ascension of Jesus Christ to God's heavenly throne, having been vindicated by his resurrection and made triumphant over

sin and death. To the prayerful imagination it evokes images of the great heavenly audience of angels and the cloud of witnesses lining Jesus' path to the heavenly throne and cheering his ascension with the sounding of trumpets and shouts of joy and praise.

It also carries forward the missional theme, as it imagines the peoples and kings of every nation on earth being gathered to worship this king, and it reminds us that our motivation for mission is to establish the rule of this heavenly king on earth as it is in heaven.

Comments on Ephesians 1:15-23

Written by the apostle Paul from prison to encourage an embattled and persecuted band of Christ-followers, this passage's connection to the Ascension only becomes clear in verses 19-23 when it celebrates the great power God exerted when He raised Christ from the dead and seated Him at God's right hand in heavenly places. It holds out the revelation that Jesus has been exalted to the place of highest power and authority in the present age and the age to come. From this place of authority, he rules as head over everything for the sake of his earthly body, the Church. The final verse implies that the Church is now the earthly manifestation and representative of the glorious, heavenly Christ. It is in this context that the Church's earthly mission unfolds. We are ever seeking to expand the Body of Christ and Christ's Kingdom rule and reign by our mission and witness.

Like our other readings for today, this passage has a strongly missional and motivational theme. The passage is Paul's account of his prayers for the Ephesian believers, and the heart of his prayer is that the believers would have clear revelation and understanding that, as Christ's holy (set-apart) people, they are his glorious inheritance. He prays that they may live up to this identity and experience the truth that the same power is at work in them as was at work in the resurrection and ascension of Christ. They (and we) need never doubt that we have the power to do what Christ has called us to do.

Comments on Luke 24:44-53

As Jesus prepared his disciples for his final physical departure from them in the Ascension, He ensured that they were given a clear, Scripturally grounded understanding of what He had accomplished by his life, death and resurrection. He did this, in part through instruction (v.44) but also by inspiration (v.45). They needed his mind-opening ministry if they were to receive the truth of his Kingdom fully.

As Paul would later pray for the believers in Ephesians 1, in Luke 24 Jesus helped them to catch a clear vision of the importance, value and significance of their missional task and of the resources He was making available to them. Certainly they (and we) are called and commissioned to take the Good News of the risen and ascended Christ to all the nations and to invite all who will receive this News to respond and be reconciled to Him through repentance

and the forgiveness of sins; but they (and we) will also be supernaturally equipped for that task by the power of the Holy Spirit. Without that power we can do nothing.

In the same way that joyful worship and prayerful expectant waiting was the disciples' response immediately after Jesus' Ascension, so this Feast of the Ascension invites us to worship with great joy and to wait with great anticipation for the Holy Spirit's ongoing empowerment for mission.

Interpreting and Preaching the Word

It seems likely that the Gospel of Luke and The Acts of the Apostles were written at more or less the time Paul was imprisoned in Rome as described in Acts 28. Luke may very well have felt that the first generation of Gospel preaching was swiftly ebbing to a close and that the existing local Churches now needed to be reminded of the heart of the Gospel and be called to continue the work of the Great Commission which Paul had so faithfully carried out to this point.

Luke recognised the power of persecution to silence the Church and so he emphasized the truthfulness and importance of the Gospel message as well as the promised power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit who had empowered Jesus' and Paul's ministries was also promised to every disciple.

The Ascension of Jesus, as depicted historically-theologically in Luke-Acts and theologically in Ephesians 1, would have been a source of incredible *confidence and hope* to the first century disciples of Christ living under the increasingly oppressive persecution of the Roman Empire. The political and military power of Rome was physically overwhelming, and it would have seemed to the average Christ-follower that their mission to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth did not stand a chance if Rome opposed them. However, the Ascension reassured them that Christ had entered his heavenly glory, that he was sovereignly overseeing and directing their mission on earth, and that he had poured out (from heaven) the person and power of the Holy Spirit to be God's Agent, directing and supernaturally empowering their mission on earth. The Roman Emperor may have had all the earthly power, but Christ was (and is) seated on the eternal throne of the universe and from that throne he was (and is) exercising his "incomparably great power (Eph. 1:19) for the sake of his Kingdom and his people. In the words of Psalm 47:8, "God reigns over the nations; God is seated on God's holy throne." The Roman Emperor may have seemed all-powerful, but, in fact, Christ was (and is) seated "at God's right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked" (v.20), and, verse 20 continues, this is true "not only in the present age but also in the one to come."

This reassurance would surely have been ground for tremendous *confidence and hope*. As we preach these passages today, we could invite our listeners to consider the ways in which the powers of this world currently militate against our mission to extend the Kingdom of Christ on earth. Powerful political forces are certainly at work in many nations and in the global community of nations to polarize and separate people rather than bringing us together in harmonious pursuit of a better world. The dark powers of

materialism, greed, oppression, abuse of power, corruption, sexual immorality and abuse, misogyny, manipulation and bullying all operate at an individual, corporate and even international level to spread darkness rather than light, death rather than life. Many of our listeners will be battling against despair and hopelessness, and our preaching of this theme ought to be a word of *hope and confidence* to the demoralization of our age. As dark as this world is, Christ is in fact still on the throne and he is still working his purposes out. Christ still longs to use us to shine light into this world's darkness on his behalf, and to proclaim (in both word and deed) the Good News of his selfless, unfailing, saving love in a world of selfishness, hatred and division.

Another theme which is common to a few of today's readings is the theme of *waiting and longing* for the return of Christ and for his inauguration of God's Kingdom in all its fulness. There is a tension even within the few verses we read from Acts 1. The two men dressed in white promised the disciples, "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11) But Jesus himself had also just responded to their question about the coming of the Kingdom with the gentle rebuke in v.8, "It is not for you to know the times and dates the Father has set by God's own authority."

We know the reality of our own wrestling with the tension of living in the "now and not yet" of the Kingdom that has come near in Christ but has not yet come in all its fulness. We may feel called today to remind our listeners to believe the Gospel message and to remain faithful in proclaiming it, as they (and we) watch and pray for the return of Christ. Jesus redirected his disciples' attention in Acts 1, and he would redirect our attention today, to stop gazing at the skies and wondering when Christ will ever return and to spend our energies instead in getting on with the work of being his witnesses to the ends of the earth. We are now the Body of Christ on earth (Eph. 1:23) and his Kingdom will not come in our world unless it comes through us. So, ours is to be an active waiting and watching while witnessing.

Living the Word

Having heard the Word proclaimed today, what could our individual listeners or congregations resolve to do about it?

Certainly (in addition to the practice of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity) the local church ought to seriously consider a period of intentional prayer for the fresh empowerment of the Holy Spirit for mission as we enter the ten days between Ascension and Pentecost. It is not that we have somehow "lost" the Holy Spirit or that the Spirit has "left" the Church. But a renewed commitment to the Great Commission will need to be fuelled by a renewed openness and surrender to the Holy Spirit who is our source of wisdom and power for mission. Such a period of prayerful watching, listening, waiting and surrendered openness will do every local church a world of good.

Perhaps this is also a season for the individual believer and/or the local church to reassess our faithfulness to the Great Commission. Have we allowed the darkness of this world to overpower our hope and confidence in the Gospel? Have

we gone silent? How could we more effectively live out the love, life and light of Christ in our corner of this dark world? How might we better impact our sphere of influence towards Christ's Kingdom of righteousness, peace and flourishing?

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Word and Life for the 7th Sunday of Easter – 17 May 2026

Peter Langerman

Texts

Acts 1:6-14
Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35
1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11
John 17:1-11

Introduction

This Sunday, post-Ascension, and pre-Pentecost is a little like Holy Saturday in the Easter cycle. Once again the disciples are alone and confused, not really knowing what to do. We can find ourselves in similar places at times on our faith journey, where God seems distant and the future unclear. Sundays like this one help us to pastorally guide people about what to do, and not do, when God seems absent and to encourage them to remain faithful because we never know what lies just around the corner.

Hearing the Word

Acts 1:6-14 New International Version

Acts is addressed to “Theophilus” (v 1, lover of God) as is Luke. The setting for this passage is that Jesus has risen from death; in Luke 24:42-43, he has had breakfast on the beach with his disciples. In Luke 24:44-53, Jesus told them that they have both witnessed and will bear witness to what they had experienced as they are sent by the Father. All this has taken place in Galilee, but Jesus has also clearly stated that the next phase of their journey must take place from Jerusalem. So he goes with them to Bethany where he was taken up into heaven and the disciples continue the short journey to Jerusalem.

In Acts, Luke goes back slightly, (vv 3-5) saying that Jesus “presented himself alive ... during forty days”; “not many days from now” they will receive the Holy Spirit – at Pentecost, the fiftieth day since Easter. As they are together in Jerusalem, in vv 6-8, the disciples ask what is going to happen next, what will happen in this new era, and Jesus answers:

6 Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7 He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”(NIV)

In vv 9-10 we have the account of Jesus’ ascension, a clearly visible event set in a historical context. Note the references to their “seeing”: “before their very eyes”, “sight”, “looking” and “you have seen him” The reference to the cloud, reminds us of Elijah’s ascension and the reality of the presence of God. Two messengers confirm the supernatural nature of this event. The disciples return, presumably to the same place at which they ate the Passover meal with Jesus, together with certain women to pray and to wait.

Psalm 68:1-10,32-35

This Psalm seems to depict a temple liturgy in which the events of Israel’s deliverance from the Red Sea and journey to Jerusalem are dramatically re-enacted. The Psalm consists of couplets commemorating God’s deliverance of the people.

In v 1, the Psalmist repeats Moses’ words whenever the Ark was moved and in v 2, the wicked melt in God’s presence like wax in the fire. Baal, the storm god rides on the clouds, and here God does so as well. God saves the needy and prosecutes the rebellious. God’s actions on behalf of the people are dramatic and accompanied by signs on the earth and in the sky. God’s voice thunders and all people are to offer God their obedience. In the early church, this Psalm was regarded as a prophetic foretelling of the ascension of Christ.

1 Peter 4:12-14;5:6-11

As this letter comes to a close, the writer encourages the church who are suffering persecution, to accept what they are going through as something to be expected, something which is testing their endurance. Those who suffer for Christ are not just following Christ’s example, but they are sharing in the sufferings of Christ. All this is in preparation for when he returns (v 13), and, in the meantime, they are fortunate since they are assured that the Holy Spirit is with them. For a Christian, suffering for doing good is not something of which to be ashamed (v 16), but a foretaste of the judgement that is coming at the end of the age for those who do not obey (v 17) Christ’s message. In this in-between time, they should entrust themselves to God

Finally, the author addresses fellow “elders” (5:1) as one who shares in the certain hope of Christ’s return. Leaders are meant to:

- care for the faithful,
- guide them in matters of faith and life,
- regard them as equals, and
- be examples to them.

All God’s people should humble themselves (v 6) under God’s mighty hand, so that, at the appropriate time they will be raised up in union with him. As they wait for that to happen, believers must trust God (v 7) and remain alert (v 8) for evil is ever present. They will suffer together with others, (v 9), but that suffering will be sort lived and, at the culmination of things, God will give them eternal life and the reward’s that are due to them.

John 17:1-11

Jesus has warned his disciples that they will face persecution in the world, but has assured them that he has overcome the world. Jesus now prays for them, as the time for his departure looms. In v 1, Jesus asks the father to glorify him, the Son, with the same glory that the Son once shared with the Father. The Son participates in, and even adds to, the Father’s

splendour and glory because the Father has endowed the Son with authority (v 2) over human beings. This authority, Jesus points out, is the authority to give eternal life to humans, and eternal life is the invitation to experience relationship with both the father and the Son. In vv 4-5, Jesus says that he adds to the Father's glory by completing the task that the Father sent him to accomplish, and the Father will add to the Son's glory by restoring the Son to his place of honour. Jesus introduces a discussion of the work he has done in v 4, and then expands on it (v 6): Jesus has made the Father's character and identity known to those given to Jesus by the Father. These chosen ones belong to both Father and Son, they have obeyed the Father's word. The disciples have kept the father's word in that they acknowledge that the father is the source of all that Christ has to give; that Jesus came from the Father by being sent into the world; and Jesus, anticipating his departure, petitions the Father to protect the disciples from outside influences (v 11)

Interpreting the Word

Christ's resurrection brings a living hope to believers, even when they are being persecuted. This tracks back to last week's passage about suffering which runs as a theme through this letter.

This Sunday marks the end of the Easter season so it is perhaps an appropriate time to give some thought to the end time return of Christ. The world of the early Christians was not so different to ours, where faithfulness to Christ was, and is, a challenge to the dominant cultural and political systems of the day. Even in the midst of confusion and uncertainty, Christians can be assured that God's promises won't fail. As resurrection people, we are carried by the hope that, no matter what happens in this crazy world, we are connected to Christ's suffering, death and resurrection.

1 Peter 4 begins with a reminder of Christ's suffering, so Christ followers must be ready to face suffering. The word "suffer", or derivatives of it, occurs twelve times in the letter, out of the 42 times it is used in the rest of the New Testament.

Suffering here is not glossed over or downplayed, but addressed and acknowledged as real and distressing. The key is to view suffering through a very particular lens – Christ also suffered. Suffering connects the community to Christ in a very special, unique way.

The writer tells them to “...*not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you (NIV).*” Instead suffering will reveal the root of this community's faith. Will they indulge their sinful natures, or will they use the gifts that have been given to them for the benefit of others?

So the reality of suffering should not give rise to fear or anxiety, but should be cause for rejoicing, because their suffering links them to the suffering of Christ. Suffering is the mark of the Christ followers identity as a member of Christ's community. Bearing the name of Christ, even when it means suffering, is not a cause for shame, but is actually a blessing. Mistreatment by those who hate or persecute the believers given them the assurance that the Holy Spirit is resting upon them.

Only people who are eagerly expecting and anticipating the return of Christ can see things this way. Even for us, two thousand years later, still waiting for that great event to come, the assurance of Christ's coming remains our guiding light in the darkness of a sinful world. Believers are called to live a disciplined and serious life that adheres to the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels. Humility, alertness, being aware that the enemy is prowling about makes the connection with the temptations of Jesus and leads to an invocation to pray for those who are undergoing these trials.

The assurance is that suffering is only temporary and resurrection is forever. This week, as in last week's passage, the readers are reminded that power belongs to God, forever.

The final word of encouragement, indeed, as it were the final words of this epistle are the reminder that the “*God of grace has called you*” (5:10). In the perspective of God's grace, the author encourages, the time of suffering is only for a little while. God's grace and the promise of the resurrection is forever. No matter what happens in this life, God's promise are safe and secure, to raise us up when we are cast low, to pick us up when we fall, and to make us strong when we are weak.

Preaching the Word

It is worth remembering that Jesus didn't pray this prayer recorded in John 17 off by himself somewhere, but with the disciples sitting with him around the table where they have just shared the Passover meal. We could even call this prayer the “Lord's Prayer” and the one Jesus taught to his disciples, “The Disciples' Prayer” because this is the prayer that Jesus prays as the disciples listen.

Jesus gives us a very clear definition of eternal life: “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (v 3). How many times have we made this our description of eternal life? Probably, seldom, if ever. Here is the meaning and consequence of the resurrection of Christ, celebrated in this Easter season.

Eternal life is a living relationship with God the Father, Jesus the Son, in the power of the Spirit. Knowing God, according to John's Gospel, is to be in a relationship with God.

It means being up close and personal when Jesus does incredible things, like turn water into wine or raise Lazarus from the dead; when Jesus makes amazing statements about himself, like he is the way, the truth and the life. It means taking the incarnation seriously, if we truly are to know God.

Jesus is no longer physically with us, but he continues to be with us in the Holy Spirit. We must now live in the world, we are his hands and his feet in the world. The resurrection is not the conclusion of the Jesus story, and our participation in it, but the beginning. The launch of doing what Jesus promised we would be doing in Jn 14:12 – the same, and even greater, works than he himself did.

Living the Word

So, what difference does it make to overhear Jesus praying for you?

- How can you hear Jesus' words in a new way today?
- How might we understand prayer in a new way, hearing how Jesus prays?
- Could it really be that simple that eternal life means being in a relationship with God?
- How does that knowledge change how we live our lives each day?
- How does it change our perspective on our future in God's presence?
- How does it affect the way in which we see God?

Liturgical Suggestions

On this last Sunday before the Season of Pentecost, what might it mean to offer this as a blessing to your congregation:

“And now, although Jesus is no longer physically present with us, Jesus represents us before the Father. We are going into the world in his name.. So, in the name of the Father who made us, Christ who intercedes for us and the Holy Spirit who brings us before God and brings God's presence to us, I pronounce protection over you in the name of the Holy Father, the Holy Son and the Holy Spirit. May the triune God protect you in that holy name that we may be one, as Father, Son and Spirit are one”

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Liturgy for Pentecost Sunday – 24 May 2026

James Gribble

Introduction

This day ranks with Christmas Day and Easter as one of the principal feasts on the Christian calendar. In an earlier day it was commonly referred to as Whitsunday. What happened at Pentecost was central to the birth of the Christian Church and its subsequent growth. In every generation God's continuing gift of his Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, is vital for the life of the Church in its mission and in the daily lives of individual Christians.

Texts

Acts 2:1–21 *or* Numbers 11:24–30
Psalm 104:24–34, 35b
1 Corinthians 12:3b–13 *or* Acts 2:1–21
John 20:19–23 *or* John 7:37–39

Gathering in God's name

Call to worship

God will pour out his Spirit upon all flesh,
And our daughters and sons shall prophesy.
Our old ones shall dream dreams,
And our young ones shall see visions;
And all who call upon the name of the Lord
shall be delivered.
(Based on Joel 2:28–32)

Act of Penitence

Let us confess our sins, our failures and shortcomings:

(Silence)

Gracious and holy God, we confess that we have sinned against you and against our neighbour.

Your Spirit gives light, but we have preferred darkness: your Spirit gives wisdom, but we have been foolish; your Spirit gives power, but we have trusted in our own strength. For the sake of Jesus Christ, your Son, forgive our sins, and enable us by your Spirit to serve you in joyful obedience, to the glory of your name.

Amen.

Absolution or Assurance of Forgiveness

There is now no condemnation
for those who live in union with Christ Jesus;
for the law of the Spirit of life has set us free
from the law of sin and death. **Amen.**

Thanks be to God.

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer for Illumination

God of All Power,
Open our ears, our eyes, and our hearts with a spirit of wisdom and revelation. Help us to hear your voice, to see yours ways, and to receive your truth with joy.
In the name of Jesus,
Amen

Responding to the Word of God

This could be a time of quiet reflection or testimony.

Prayers of intercession could be offered for:

- the renewal of the life and faith of the Church
- the unity and welfare of all people across the nations of the world the sorrowful, the sick, the oppressed known needs in the community and the congregation.

Celebrating at the table

Sharing of the Peace

We are the body of Christ.

In the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body. Let us therefore keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

The peace of the Lord be always with you.

And also with you.

(Source: *Methodist Worship*, MPH, Peterborough, 1999)

Invitation to Communion

Receive this holy sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, and feed on the Lamb of God, with reverence and with faith.
(Use the resources of your faith tradition for the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving and the sharing of the sacrament.)

Sending

Walk out into a God-enchanted world, search for clues to heaven on earth.

Every leaf, every ant, every shiny rock calls out to you, begging to be watched, to be listened to, to be handled and examined. Become a detective of divinity, collect evidence of God's genius, and admire the tracks he has left for you to follow.

(Barbara Brown Taylor)

Post communion Prayer

Let us pray.

God of power, may the boldness of your Spirit transform us, may the gentleness of your Spirit lead us, and may the gifts of your Spirit equip us to serve and worship you now and always.

Amen

Benediction

The Spirit of truth lead *you/us* into all truth, give *you/us* grace to confess that Jesus is Lord, and to proclaim the word and works of God; and the blessing of God, Spirit, Son and Father, remain with *you/us* always. Amen.

We go into the world in the power of the Spirit to fulfil our high calling as servants of Christ.

Thanks be to God.

Amen

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- “Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me” (Daniel Iverson)
- “Sing to him in whom creation” (Michael Hewlett)
- “Holy Spirit, truth divine” (Samuel Longfellow)
- “God’s Spirit is in my heart” (Alan T. Dale)

Word and Life for Pentecost Sunday – 24 May 2026

Ian Booth

Texts

Acts 2:1–21 *or*
Numbers 11:24–30
Psalm 104:24–34;35b
1 Corinthians 12:3b–13 (*or* Acts 2:1–21)
John 20:19–23 *or* John 7:37–39

Introduction

This is Pentecost Sunday, traditionally believed to signify the birthday of the Church. The Feast of Pentecost (50 days) was an ancient Jewish Festival dating back to the early occupation of the Promised Land. In Leviticus 23:15–22 it is referred to as the Feast of Weeks, where they are to count off seven full weeks after the harvest is completed; then count off 50 days up to the day after the seventh Sabbath (Pentecost) and present an offering of new grain to the Lord. Pentecost has become a significant Christian event – even giving the name to some churches as Pentecostal. This festival now focuses entirely on the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples of Jesus and their companions who are gathered in the Upper Room, and their transformation into bold apostles. It is the birth of the church of the priesthood of all believers.

Hearing the Word

Acts 2:1–21: This passage contains a very dramatic experience among the gathered disciples and their companions who are waiting in the Upper Room for the gift that Jesus spoke of at the Ascension scene of Chapter 1, namely the baptism with the Holy Spirit. It is most likely that they had no idea what exactly this meant for them in practical terms. Then, suddenly, “*a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.*” This was dramatic, no doubt unnerving and scary – yet it transformed them and moved them out of the house and onto the streets. The impact of the tongues of fire was that they were able to “*speak in other tongues as the Spirit enable them.*” These “other tongues” were the languages of the array of people from 15 different locations who had travelled to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost in that year. This spiritually inspired simultaneous translation had the effect that everyone heard the word of God at the same time in their own languages. Some scholars equate this to a reversal of the curse of Babel in Genesis 11 where the people all spoke the same language and conspired to erect a tower that reached into heaven, so God confused their language so that they were divided and could not understand each other. The spiritual gift of other tongues at Pentecost unites people as they can all understand what is said at the same time. When the gathered crowd ask what the meaning is of all this, Peter stands up and begins to preach what has become the first Christian sermon. In it he draws on words from the prophet Joel which refer to the

outpouring of the Spirit of God on *all* people. Young and old, women and men, servants and masters, all people are equipped to prophesy.

Numbers 11:24–30: This passage is part of a section in which Moses is feeling burdened with the responsibility of dealing with all the complaints of the pilgrim Hebrews on their journey through the wilderness. God instructs Moses to select 70 elders and bring them to the Tent of Meeting so that the Spirit of God that empowers Moses may be shared among them. On the appointed day, the 70 gather in the Tent of Meeting, but it seems only 68 gathered there. For some reason Eldad and Medad remain in the camp. As the Spirit rested on the elders in the Tent of Meeting they prophesied – and so did Eldad and Medad! This caused commotion in the camp as they had no idea of what was taking place in the Tent, and so this is reported to Moses, who is begged by Joshua to stop them. But Moses, in his reply said: “I wish that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them.”

Psalms 104:24–34; 35b: God is celebrated as the Creator who created in wisdom, and recaps how God went about this task. In the section allotted for this day there is specific mention of the sea, which is regarded as the home of evil (because it is beyond human control), and mention is made of leviathan, the monster of the deep, whom God also created. All are dependent on God, who can take away their breath, and they die, who can give the Spirit of God, and all are re-created. 35a is excluded because it is translated in the NIV and NRSV as “But may sinners vanish from the earth, and the wicked be no more”. However, the Masoretic text, usually used to translate the Old Testament reads “let sins cease”. The translation “sinners” is based on that contained in the Dead Sea Scrolls. A world in which sin ceases is what God desires.

1 Corinthians 12:3b–13: (This passage could be displaced by the use of Acts 2:1–21 here) 1 Corinthians 12 is dedicated to the unpacking of the meaning and purpose of the gift of the Holy Spirit in the Church, with particular emphasis on the unifying effect of the spiritual gifts that are allotted to individuals. The Corinthian church, much like the modern church, had begun categorising spiritual gifts and allocating varying values to each of them, thus perpetuating competition and varying levels of spirituality. Paul therefore finds it necessary to emphasise: “*Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good*” Then he lists the variety of gifts. It is critical to understand that no gift is given to make one person superior to another, but rather that all the gifts together build up the body of Christ. Verses 12 and 13 emphasise this point by drawing a comparison between the physical body and the Body of Christ (the Church). All the various parts of the physical body are necessary to make the body whole and healthy and

all parts need to carry out their allotted function for the body to work optimally – so it is with the Body of Christ, which is given the one Spirit.

John 20:19–23: The Holy Spirit is passed on to the disciples who are then commissioned to be apostles (a disciple is a learner or follower, while an apostle is one who is sent on a mission). The commissioning takes place just before Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into them when he says: “*As the Father sent me, I am sending you.*” Then he breathes on them and says: “*Receive the Holy Spirit.*” This act is reminiscent of the act of creation in the Genesis 2 version of the Creation narrative, where God creates a man out of clay and breathes life into him. This implies a new creation through the Holy Spirit. It also implies that the mission of the followers of Jesus is the same as the mission given to Jesus: to bring God to life in the day-to-day world of human beings by living the word of God. In this account there is no fire or the noise of a multiplicity of tongues (as in Acts Ch 2), but just one voice commissioning and bestowing the indwelling presence of God through the Holy Spirit. Could this be a “Pentecost” experience for the introvert? It certainly provides a more comprehensive understanding of the continuation of the work of Jesus in those who are sent.

John 7:37–39 (an alternative Gospel passage provided for in the lectionary) This describes an event that took place during the Feast of Tabernacles, not the Feast of Pentecost. While seldom mentioned in the Gospels, this was one of the big three festivals of Judaism, along with Passover and Pentecost, for which all Jewish men were expected to travel to Jerusalem. This puts it on a par with the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 in terms of maximising the number of people who would witness the event. This is further emphasised by the fact the Jesus chose the “last and greatest day of the Feast” to make his pronouncement regarding living water, by which he meant the Spirit. It may seem a strange passage for Pentecost, particularly when the emphasis is on “streams of living water flowing from within” a person. But the link between the Spirit and water has already been made in this Gospel in the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in Chapter 3, when Jesus tells Nicodemus that: “*no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit*”. In his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well in Chapter 4, Jesus speaks of living water as the symbol of God in Christ which satisfies all spiritual thirst. So, here he speaks of living water as the Spirit which was to be given to the people.

Interpreting the Word

Acts 2:1–21: The Book of Acts is addressed to “Theophilus” who may be a significant person in Luke’s world, or may be a collective as the name means “Friend of God”. Acts 2 describes the beginning of the church, the birth of the church, if you like, with the description of the dramatic events described in verses 1–21, accompanied by the words of Peter in the first Christian sermon in which he quotes from the prophet Joel regarding the prophecy of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh, young and old, male and female, slave and free, all of whom would prophesy.

Numbers 11:24–30: The lectionary for this day speaks of the portioning out of the Spirit given to Moses among 70 elders, and their subsequent “prophesying”. The crux of the passage, and its importance to Pentecost is that fact that two of the selected 70 were not in the Tent of Meeting but received their portion of the Spirit and prophesied in the camp, causing great commotion – and resulting in Moses expressing the wish that everyone would receive the Spirit of God, which is in line with the prophecy of Joel as quoted by Peter.

1 Corinthians 12:3b–13: Much of what we find in the letters to Corinth consists of Paul addressing what have apparently become concerns of the Corinthian church. Here Paul speaks of the importance of the understanding that the gifts of the Spirit in the church are given for the common good, not to make one or two individuals feel more important than others. Nothing is for the individual, everything is for mutual edification within the body – and everyone receives a portion of the Spirit as Moses wished would happen.

John 20:19–23: This is a quieter version of the transmission of the Holy Spirit than that described by Luke and has Jesus commissioning the disciples to become apostles – those sent out on a mission. The mission is that same as that on which Jesus had embarked, to know God, to obey God, and to make God known by our words and deeds.

John 7:37–39: Here Jesus is at the Feast of Tabernacles, not the Feast of Pentecost, but draws a link between the Spirit and living water. The significance of this, and the connection with the passage from 1 Corinthians 12, is that the Spirit within us must flow out with living water that brings life to the world.

Preaching the Word

Most often the preaching on the Pentecost Sunday will centre around the passage from Acts 2:1–21, as this describes events which took place during the Feast of Pentecost in the city of Jerusalem 50 days after the crucifixion of Jesus. The other two descriptions of the transmission of the Holy Spirit in the lectionary reading for the day transpired over the Feast of Passover (John 20) and the Feast of Tabernacles (John 7). As all three were the most important Festivals in Judaism requiring compulsory presence in Jerusalem, they all have equal importance. But the Acts Pentecost experience is the most exciting in terms of drama and leads into a sermon addressing the Jews gathered in the city on the God given role of Jesus. The three readings most commonly used out of the choices provided by the lectionary would be Numbers 11:24–30; Acts 2:1–21 and John 20:19–23. Possibly a change could be made by using Acts as the first reading (which is common for the lectionary in the post-Easter period), this excluding the passage from Numbers but including the passage from 1 Corinthians 12:3b–13. Clearly the most common link and the focus is on the transmission of the Holy Spirit to the people of God, thus extending the Incarnation from just Jesus being the presence of God in human form to all humanity potentially being the presence of God in human form, which frees the revelation of God in the flesh

from the time and place constraints of one historic person, Jesus, to all people everywhere for all time. Emphasis should be made on the availability of the Holy Spirit to all people, not just to some people. This, of necessity, leads to a consideration of the possibility of the priesthood of all believers, rather than the hierarchical and sacramental separation of clergy and laity that pertains in some church traditions and is aspired to in all church traditions (even, sadly, my own, which is Congregationalism which should be the epitome of the priesthood of all believers). This makes the contribution found in 1 Corinthians 12 an important one, because of its emphasis on the fact that the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the common good. There is no hierarchy of gifts, there is no sense that any one person is more important than any other because of the particular gift they may have received, but all the gifts are to be pooled together in order to have a fully functional whole and healthy body of Christ. This addresses the all-too-common human failing of competitiveness, even for places of favour in the Kingdom of God. The gift of the Spirit results in prophecy, which is the telling of the truth of the presence of God in the world, not fortune telling. This is the beginning of the Church, whether we focus on Acts 2 or John 20, for it is the transmission of the Holy Spirit and the commissioning of the people of God who are transformed into a new humanity with a new identity and a mission which has never really been understood or carried out in full because it is uncomfortable for people to consider self-denial and a cross, all being equal in status, and all being called to be servants.

Living the Word

As we celebrate the birthday of the Church, and as we contemplate the implication of the Holy Spirit being poured out on all people, the challenge to the congregation on a day like this is to consider whether or not this church, their church, is really a manifestation of the presence of God in their world, their community, among their neighbours and friends and relatives. What does it mean to be the People of God, the Body of Christ, each of whom are equipped with their own unique gifts of the manifestation of the Spirit given for the common good? What is missing in the world if some are negligent in their duties, in their giving of their gifting to the world through the Church?

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Introduction to the Season after Pentecost

Introduction to the Season

The Season after Pentecost begins with Pentecost 1 (also known as Trinity Sunday) and ends this year on Pentecost 27, which marks 'Reign of Christ' Sunday (also known as 'Christ the King' Sunday). On Trinity Sunday the gospel reading is from John 3:1-17 and its record of the conversation when Nicodemus visited Jesus under cover of darkness. For the rest of the Season the gospel readings are generally from Mark. The exceptions are the five Sundays between Pentecost 10 and 14, which focus on John chapter 6. Also, on All Saints (1 November) and Reign of Christ Sunday (22 November), the gospel readings are from John.

On Trinity Sunday the Christian community reflects on the fullness of its understanding of God, whom we have encountered as Creator/Father, in Jesus the Son, and also in the Person of the abiding and enabling Spirit. For the rest of the season the Church explores the way in which the salvation that has been established in the life and ministry of Jesus, culminating in his passion, death and resurrection, is to be lived out in our world in the power of the Spirit poured out on all people. This season sees the Church, launched on her world-wide mission at Pentecost, continuing her pilgrimage between the times. God's people move on in hope from the Cross and Resurrection, in the light of the Ascension, and under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

This is a long and varied Season that also offers sequences of readings from books such as 1 & 2 Samuel, Proverbs, Job, 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, James and Hebrews. Besides the ongoing readings from Mark these shorter sequences from other books raise the possibility of short sermon series based on such books during the season. These sequences can be clearly seen in the grid below, where all the readings for the season are set out.

The Semi-continuous and Related tracks – and the choice to be made

The season of Sundays after Pentecost is unique in that RCL provides two sets of First Readings (Old Testament with associated Psalm) for each Sunday of the season. Then the two readings from the New Testament accompany whichever set of Old Testament passages is being followed in the congregation.

The first set of Old Testament passages (First Reading with Psalm), known as the 'semi-continuous' track, offers a number of series of semi-continuous readings from books of the Hebrew Bible. This offers the preacher the opportunity, over a few successive Sundays, to work through passages from the Pentateuch, the historical books, a particular prophet, or one of the wisdom books, etc. In this way a congregation can become familiar with the ways in which God's relationship with the people under the Sinai Covenant was lived out in practice or, in many cases, not lived out as God intended.

In the alternate 'related' track of First Readings with Psalms the First Reading is *thematically* related to the Gospel reading for the day.

It is recommended that ministers serving congregations should, before the season begins, decide (perhaps in consultation with liturgists and other assisting preachers) which track is to be followed for the duration of the season. Mixing the two tracks - jumping from one to the other - is not recommended.

Therefore, in this volume of *Word and Worship* we provide exegetical and hermeneutical comment on ALL SIX the readings listed for the day in RCL.

Special Sundays during the Season

Several special individual Sundays occur during this part of the Church Year (see the list at the end of this Introduction). These can provide an appropriate additional focus for the sermon on such days. The observance of these special emphases can also be effected within the liturgy without necessarily being the focus for the sermon on that day. It is also possible to include other speakers to provide a focus at a suitable moment during the service. A visual display on the day could also effectively draw people's attention to the cause.

The voice of the gospel writer should not be drowned out by the need to address various special observances. At the same time, the texts of RCL will often give the opportunity for such issues to be addressed on other Sundays during the year.

The pastoral impact of the Season

As these texts will be read during the winter and spring in Southern Africa it is important to read them against that background. It will be cold and in some places wet as well. It is a time when many people across the region will be suffering discomfort from the weather and will be dependent on places of safety for accommodation and soup kitchens for food. It will be a time when many children will be going hungry to school.

Some churches observe August as a Month of Compassion. The texts for such Sundays need then also to be read through that lens, with an awareness of the oft-quoted words of Jesus regarding widows and children. It is a time for churches within every community, rural or urban, to work together to provide practical alleviation of the needs of those who live in their midst.

Some special observances to be aware of during the Season

16 June Youth Day

20 June: World Refugee Day

12 July: Sea Sunday

4 October: World Communion Sunday

31 October: Reformation Sunday and Bible Sunday

1 November: All Saints Day

11 November: Remembrance Day

1 December: World AIDS Day

During this Season prayer could be offered, of course, for many other specific needs that the congregation is, or should be, aware of.

Some examples are: students and teachers, the spread of the Gospel, those serving in the different levels of government, world leaders, the fruits of human work, the unemployed, the victims of war, young people, the elderly, prisoners and their families, health care workers, emergency service workers, orphans and children at risk, etc.

Many other concerns will be drawn to our attention by unfolding events and trends, both via the media and through our own perceptive awareness and understanding of what is happening around us in community, country and the wider world. The theologian Karl Barth famously said that preachers should ‘preach with the *Bible in one hand* and the *newspaper in the other*’.

Basic Liturgy for the Season after Pentecost

Introduction to the Season

This is the “Green Growing Season” with each Sunday both a celebration of the Resurrection and marking a moment on the pilgrim journey of God’s people travelling ‘between the times’. While some traditions call this ‘ordinary’ Season, it is the season of learning and growing in faith. We are being taught to live out the Gospel week by week, day by day, one day at a time.

It is important also to be aware that this Season differs from the others in another respect. For each Sunday after Pentecost 2 (Trinity) RCL provides SIX readings for the day. (please note the discussion in the *Introduction to the Season* about the semi-continuous and related tracks, each providing as they do a unique duo of First Reading with associated Psalm.)

The Season after Pentecost in this Christian year extends for twenty-seven Sundays in all. It includes the Feast Day of All Saints on the 1st of November. The range of the RCL texts, the pastoral requirements of local communities, the special commemorations that are important for congregations to mark, all militate against attempting to set a single Basic Liturgy for the entire Season. Note that special Feast-day liturgies are provided for All Saints and for Reign of Christ on Pentecost 27.

However, when planning the worship programme for a congregation, the development of a Basic Liturgy for any particular sermon series would help to provide some definition during the season by ensuring a continuity through the weeks of that series.

The first step in the process is to recognise the importance of a clear overall plan for the Season that can help individual preachers and worship leaders to be aware of how a particular Sunday fits into the pattern that has been set up for the congregation.

Liturgical Features for the Season

The Liturgical colour

The liturgical colour for the season is green, but there are these exceptions:

- The first Sunday after Pentecost is Trinity Sunday, when the colour is traditionally white.
- The final Sunday after Pentecost, which is always the Sunday before Advent Sunday, celebrates the Reign of Christ, when the colour is also white.

The Feast Days during the Season

Different traditions celebrate specific Feast Days and Commemorations of significance. The major festivals, some of which are provided for with specific sets of lessons in RCL, are as follows:

Trinity Sunday	1 st after Pentecost
Corpus Christi	Thursday after Trinity
Reformation Sunday	Last Sunday in October
Bible Sunday	Last Sunday in October

Symbols of the Season

While there are no characteristic symbols for the Season as such, a sermon series or a particular commemoration or observance may suggest an obvious symbol. Examples are:

Sea Sunday	an anchor or nets
World Environment Day	indigenous plants, driftwood or dried flowers
Bible Sunday	Bible display and reading notes
AIDS Candlelight	large candle with a red ribbon

Gathering of the people of God

A single Call to Worship can introduce the whole series and be used on each of the Sundays following, thus providing a recognisable series link.

The Psalm for the day could be located within the gathering rite or at the start of the Proclamation. It would help if the presentation of the psalm is done with the active participation of the congregation, perhaps read responsively.

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer for Illumination

The prayer for illumination is a second opportunity to emphasise the link with the other Sundays in the series.

Presentation of Texts

If this is part of a series of sermons, there could be merit in having a single reader present the Focus Texts throughout the series. The other texts could then be read by others.

Responding to the Word of God

Intercessions

The Prayers of the People are an important response to the proclamation as well as an opportunity to draw the whole congregation into the work of intercession for the world. The prayers can also provide a guide for the congregation’s prayers throughout the following week. This would be helped by a prayer diary being provided in the weekly pew leaflet prepared in many congregations.

Celebrating at the Table

When Communion is not part of the service, it is important that some part of the service, for instance the prayers of intercession, is led from the Table as an affirmation that the congregation is a Eucharistic community.

Sharing the Peace

The sentence introducing the Sharing of the Peace should reflect one of the themes of the season or a verse from one of the texts for the day.

Sending

Sentence of Scripture

A further opportunity to use a verse from the texts for the day.

Benediction

Provides a final opportunity for a common text that can reflect some element characteristic of the whole series of sermons.

Word and Life for the 1st Sunday after Pentecost (Trinity Sunday)

– 31 May 2026

Kevin Sprong

Texts

Genesis 1:1–2:4a
Psalm 8
2 Corinthians 13:11–13
Matthew 28:16–20

Introduction

On Trinity Sunday it is good to avoid two dangers. The first is that we can know nothing about God and the second is that we know all there is to know about God. Both are wrong. Please do not use visual aids that you hope will illustrate the Trinity. They are almost always wrong and mostly unhelpful. There is no room here to describe the various heresies they support but they are frequently heretical. So no three leaf clover, no ice water, steam, no father, son, brother illustrations. They are not helpful. Love comes closest but there is no room to illustrate that here.

Today's Lectionary readings guide us in what we do know about God. In Genesis we find the author showing us how God as Creator reveals the creator's nature. The psalmist lets us in to the knowledge of how best to worship this unique God. The Gospel invites us to know how it is we are to live and behave towards our world and universe in an ethical and justice-soaked way. And the epistle links it all for us.

Hearing the Word

Genesis 1:1–2:4a

There appear to be two possible reasons this passage was chosen for Trinity Sunday. There is the reference in v. 26 where God appears to be in conversation with someone and says 'Let us make humans in our own image' (NRSVUE). The second possible reading is a reference to Jesus as the Word of God so this calls to mind John 1:1 where Jesus appears to be the creative accompanier as the Word of God creating the universe. Having said that, it would be wise to address, somehow, the creationist expectation that we are reading eyewitness reporting of the creation of the universe. If not eyewitness reporting then some kind of divine dictating. The best biblical scholars have done so much to show this is a theological reflection on the creator and the creation. Sometimes that reflection countered current theories of the time 2,500 years ago. But mostly, it rises to new heights to declare in powerful words the nature of the Creator and God's creation.

It would be real loss to reduce this beautiful hymn to prosaic prose when it such lofty poetry.

Psalm 8

This beautiful poem affirms some important things. Firstly, of course, the majesty and glory of God and God's creation. This closely links the Psalm to the Genesis passage. There is the new rider that is hinted at in the Genesis passage and now becomes an expressed thought. Humans are 'crowned with glory and honour...' as well (v.5). Clearly our human honour and glory is a derived honour emanating from our relationship to the honour and glory of God.

All is not rosy in this Psalm as there is a reference to the enemy as well as mention of foes and an avenger. Astonishingly enough God does not direct God's power at those who oppose His power. Instead, a bulwark founded out of the mouths of babes and infants. Rather than power, God turns to apparent weakness in order to show where God's real strength is found.

2 Corinthians 13:11–13

This benediction blessing comes at the end of a letter that addresses the problem for the Corinthian church. The church has questioned Paul's authority, the charge being that he does not do what some 'super apostles do' and appears not to match up to their 'superpowers.'. Throughout the previous chapters and verses of the letter demonstrated Paul's deep belief, and frequent teaching, that it is not about Paul's strength or otherwise. Rather it is about the ways in which Christ has been able to use Paul's weaknesses for the Kingdom. So he closes with a wish that they will listen to his appeal, he hopes they will be restored to one another and that the love and peace of God will rule in their hearts instead of the questioning of authority. The fruits of this will be that a blessing can descend on them.

While the Trinitarian formula is articulated here, there is no theology of the trinity taught or explained. The trinitarian blessing is even voiced in a different form in that it begins with the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ rather than 'the love of God...'. An explicit Trinitarian theology cannot really be found in Paul's writings. On the other hand, there is overwhelming references to the Grace of Jesus Christ, The Love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit. All of which led later church fathers and mothers to outline the theology of the Trinity.

Matthew 28:16–20

We seldom imagine the situation here. The disciples are described as worshipping Jesus but from a space of also doubting him. Despite this doubt, Jesus gives them authority for the mission that they must exercise. The authority of Jesus is not withheld because of the doubt but received in spite of it. More than that, they are commissioned to 1. Make disciples. 2. Go and Baptise. 3. Teach those disciples to obey the teaching of Jesus. This is no small commission

for doubters to undertake. Fortunately, the authority for their mission derives from the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and not their doubts.

In addition, they are no longer restricted to going only to the 'household of God'. Now the commission is broadened to include 'all nations.' From now on the mission will involve them as 'priests' – they must baptise, teach and disciple. Believing must be followed by commitment through baptism, willingness to submit to being disciplined and taught.

The mission of Jesus could hardly be clearer. The authority has been broadened and deepened by recognising that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are backing this authority. It is not just that they are 'allowed' to exercise this mission – they also have the power in the name of the Trinity backing that allowance.

Interpreting the Word

There are so many references to the power of God in these passages. Firstly, in the detailed and majestic words of the creation story. Here God's creative actions are detailed in poetic and powerful phrase after phrase.

The psalm picks up this glorious praise and referencing of the majesty of God but also linking it to the honour and status humans hold in God's estimation. There is no turning away from, or ignoring, or even diminishing God's dissenters in the Psalm and the epistle. In the gospel reading the doubting disciples are not seen to be any less because of their doubts. Rather their doubts are wrapped up in their commissioning for Jesus' mission. They are flawed people – just as we are flawed people. Fortunately, that is not all we are. We are a little lower than the angels in God's estimation. Our commission is great. We will need all the authority of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit to rise above our flawed nature to find a way to include that flawed quality in a relationship to God that our language can hardly express. Yet as we set out, we discover God's authority comes with power as well as the warrants to go out and do this ministry. 'We are not alone. We live in God's world. Thanks be to God' (United Church of Canada New Creed.)

Preaching the Word

Churches have a history of saying our people must not doubt but have faith. Truth be told, we do have questions. We do doubt that God can use someone as flawed as me. Even in the most affirming of families there is often a sense of failure. It does not help to say it is not so. Instead, here the opposite happens. Doubts are owned in the first disciples, the Corinthians have questions about what makes an apostle and who they should follow, there are enemies of God and dissenters. Today's readings invites us over and over again to turn and frequently return to an appreciation for the Glory and Majesty of all who God is. Further it reminds us that the relationship God invites us to is a very special one can help even the most ardent questioner believe there is a future. The fact is that we may not get answers to all our doubts. Taking on the commission to exercise Jesus' call on us may astonish us when we see that God views us a complete package where doubts and dissent are only one aspect of a rich and nuanced and layered human being.

Living the Word

We live in a time when the authority of the Church is waning fast. Not too long ago the Church could call an *Apartheid* government to account for its life damaging policies. Today many believe there are church leaders who share a corruption mentality with the government. Status, and power may have enticed leaders away from their mission to 'make disciples' or to 'teach them to obey all that I (Jesus) have commanded them'. But today's lection directs us to see beyond the enemies and dissenters, to see beyond the questioned authority and look afresh to the Glory, Majesty and Authority of a God who does not turn away from dissenters but builds bulwarks, does no reject doubters but calls them to mission and invites those who question authority to find unity in the same place that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit find unity – the perfect love of the Trinity.

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Biblical quotes are from the *Revised Standard Version (Updated Edition)*.

Word and Life for the 2nd Sunday after Pentecost – 7 June 2026

Kevin Sprong

Texts

Genesis 12:1–9
Hosea 5:15 – 6:6
Psalm 33:1–12
Psalm 50:7–15
Romans 4:13–25
Matthew 9:9–13, 18–26

Introduction

We are invited in these passages to reflect on a God who makes covenant with people, a God who keeps God's promises in those covenants and invites us to respond accordingly. As Abram left his country in the deep belief that God's call on him and the way ahead held promise and hope. Matthew left the Tax table for Jesus' table is the invitation to follow a covenant-making God. The raising of the dead girl maintains the idea that our covenant God is life-giving.

Hearing the Word

Genesis 12:1–9

Genesis 12 marks a dramatic change in the biblical story so far. The first 11 chapters of Genesis record a world that has gone through rough times. Creation has been deeply affected by the fall. Murder of a brother has happened. God is described as destroying all living things in a flood. Languages have been confused at Babel. Abraham is the turning point with the promise that the nations will be blessed in him and Sarah. Out of a faraway land Abram is called by God and he responds immediately. Here the character of God is redefined: from here on forward God will be a calling, commanding God and the proper response is to obey. Abram is the supreme model for that obedient response.

The promise is not without its own problems. The land Abram is sent to is occupied by the Canaanites. However, with the building of the altars at Moreh and Bethel there is a declaration that the real sovereign of these lands is God. Along with the building of the altars, Abram acknowledges, for the first time, that the name of God is Yahweh. This declaration marks a significant shift in Israel's and the world's history

Hosea 5:15 – 6:6

This passage recalls the image of a rejected lover. In 5:15 God declares that God will withdraw from God's people as a jilted lover might do. Earlier chapters in Hosea were even harsher than this withdrawal. The response of the people is to repent and return to God, but God needs more than words. God even needs more than religious rituals. God rejects their sacrifices. It is not the sacrifices that are faulty but the implied lack of sincerity that God perceives. Their declaration to return is like the mist that disappears with the morning sun, or the dew that dries early. With statements, that Micah 6:6–8 would echo, God declares that

steadfast love and knowledge of God are called for here and supersede any sacrifices. Judgement is taken seriously by Hosea. Preachers would need to be a little cautious about the modern, lighter take on judgement since Jesus quoted this very passage to the Pharisees (Matt 9:13; 12:7).

Psalm 33:1–12

This psalm invites the righteous and the upright to praise the Sovereign in great exuberance. The choir and musicians are invited to join in the praise of God – because God is faithful, upright, loves justice and God's steadfast love fills the earth. The righteous and upright are the worthy ones to praise God. The psalm goes further. Based on the glory of creation, now all peoples are invited to acknowledge God. God has created safe places for the pursuit of a faith. The sea with all its dangers is contained, as in a bottle. So, all the people of the earth should be in awe of God.

The world follows the plans kings devise, but kings, warriors, weapons and horses of war will amount to nothing if God is not the One who rescues them. Fortunately, God holds all inhabitants of the earth under God's watchful gaze. Those who choose their own plans over God's plans will lose out on happiness.

Psalm 50:7–15

In Brueggemann's ordering of Psalms this psalm is one of 'Orienting', rather than 'Lamenting' or 'Reorienting'. Earlier in the psalm, God has summoned the people. The purpose is to reiterate that God is a God of covenant, God is righteous but also God is judge. Since God does not need anything like food or even fragrances, the sacrifices are not needed by God. Their purpose is far more to invite God's people to see that their sacrifices are important as a gathering meal for the covenant relationship between God and God's people.

In thanksgiving to God and when offered in the right way, burnt offering sacrifices will honour God. In response the people can expect God to lead them in the right way and reveal God's salvation.

Romans 4:13–25

Paul's reference to Abraham's faith, as it applies to Christian believers, is key to this passage. Abraham was not justified by his deed, but rather by his trust in God. Abraham's actions arose out of and followed this trust. The God who acted in Abraham's life and story and brought 'life' out of almost death is the same God Paul invites the Romans to trust. The faith Abraham has in God is the invitation extended to the Romans to have a similar faith in the Light of God's activity in Jesus Christ.

Paul then addresses the Law in contrast to faith, and suggests it nullifies faith to believe in the law and it brings wrath upon us. However there needs to be a caution here. These comments must not be taken out of context. Paul here is emphasising faith over belief or law. Abraham is the illustration because Abraham and Abraham's faith precede

the law. Later comments in this same letter (Romans 7) will clarify Paul's understanding of the role and importance of the Law.

Matthew 9:9–13, 18–26

The calling of Matthew is a little different to the call of other disciples. Fishing is a noble pursuit. In contrast, 'tax collector' was a phrase routinely used in tandem with 'sinners' (such as 'Tax collectors and sinners' in vs11). Matthew's faith activity has him moving obediently and swiftly to follow Jesus. Matthew has left his tax collecting table to take his place at another symbolic table, the table of Jesus. There, apparently, other 'tax collectors and sinners' were welcomed and did not feel judged.

The Pharisees who believed that not only they, but all Jews, should scrupulously keep the law are horrified. The 'in crowd' tends to be threatened by anyone who includes the 'out' crowd in their social circle because it diminishes their status and confuses the class system. Jesus takes the opportunity to affirm his alternate agenda by declaring that it is the sick who need a doctor and not those who are well.

In the miracle of the healing of the haemorrhaging woman and the raising of Jairus's daughter it is helpful to note that both the woman and the girl are called daughter. The daughter of the leader of the synagogue will become widely known and no doubt create a controversy. Here in Matthew's story the woman with the haemorrhage is almost anonymous. For the readers, and us, her story leaves us feeling that we have witnessed a model of faith and inclusion.

Interpreting the Word

The invitation in all these passages is to reflect on the nature of Faith. Abraham will become a model of a person whose faith is revealed in trusting God in radical obedience. Without knowing what might happen in this distant country, and trusting only in God's call, Abram pulls up stakes and goes. This will always be the model for those who hear and respond to God's call.

The psalms invite us to know that in exuberant praise to God we will find the right attitude to develop and grow faith in God. The Creator of safe places has provided a rich environment for faith to grow. The best laid plans 'of mice and men' need to find their source in God or they are likely to be frustrated. While rituals are helpful, if they are distracting from faith by focussing on the minutia of the sacrifice rather than focussing on the faithfulness of God, then know that God does not need the sacrifices. God appears far more interested and responsive to our faith attitude in these sacrifices. In this Lenten period someone has said that giving up chocolates without accompanying that sacrifice with prayer means it is a 'diet' and not a 'fast'.

The letter to the Corinthians addresses the question of whether faithfulness to the law and the rules is more important than faithfulness to God. Retelling the story of Abraham here clarifies what Paul's position is. There were no other models for Abraham to follow. He was the first to be obedient in this radical way. The Corinthians need to see that a raw faith in God is the invitation here. Paul and the

Romans are treading this new path of faith in Jesus Christ and there are no prior models for this kind of faith either. They are all working it out as they go along.

The beauty of the leader of the synagogue and the woman with the haemorrhage approaching Jesus in faith is poignant and powerful. Both these people had to cross so many barrier lines to approach Jesus in their desperate need. The 'unclean' woman illegally touches a man. The leader of the synagogue goes to the apparent enemy of the temple hierarchy. Jesus' response to their faith is instant and affirming. Of course I will go. Your faith has made you well. Here the ancient stories and well-known psalms find their application in a real-time situation. Reaching out in faith in these situations finds the very outcomes that those who approached Jesus in faith wished for. The Gospel lection draws all the expressions of faith together in a real-life situation people can identify with. These situations also include the act of Matthew leaving a well-established career to follow Jesus when called.

Preaching the Word

Much of what 'motivational speakers' and 'life coaches' teach is that people should have faith in themselves. This emphasis on the individual has limited value and in fact in some case has placed impossible burdens on people with limited skills and resources. Some claim the rise in teen suicides is directly related to the impossible demands that social media places on young people

Our lectionary readings call for a renewal of faith. There are blunt reminders that human plans that exclude God are ultimately doomed. Faith by its very nature requires action and it requires a relationship with God. It also honours the actions of people of faith. Abraham, Matthew, the leader of the synagogue, and the woman with the haemorrhage are displayed as heroes and heroines in the exercise of their actions based on faith. Faith is not 'drinking the Kool-Aid' – a blind following of an oppressive god. Every part of the lection emphasises a relationship God is establishing with God's people. Every part demonstrates God's provision and ongoing care and support from God's side. There is an assurance that God will honour the faith of God's people. Opening ourselves up to that assurance, we hope, will encourage our faith and the faith of our listeners.

Living the Word

In our country as in much of the world, technology divides the old and the young. The church has not shifted as smoothly to the Internet as it shifted to radio and TV when they disrupted church life in the 1940s and 1970's. As a result, we have ageing congregations who often think they are in the digital age because they have data projectors in church.

Somehow, we need to claim the opportunity these lectionary readings give us. Gyms, life coaches, motivational speakers are promoting their wares on the internet. Can we be Abrams and Sarais who leave the well-known paths of local, often suburban or township congregations, to go to a distant land of technology with a fresh message of faith for people finding their personal resources limited? I hope so.

Liturgical Suggestions

Perhaps we could mention a series of apparently ‘motivational quotes’ that appear to spur individuals on to greater things but actually create unhealthy burdens.

For example:

A family member used to have this as a slogan
for her Facebook page:

‘Beware the lollipop of mediocrity,
lick it once and you suck forever’. Suck forever?
Really, for ever?!

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Word and Life for the 3rd Sunday after Pentecost – 14 June 2026

Kevin Sprong

Texts

Genesis 18:1-5 (21:1-7)
Exodus 19:2-8a
Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19
Psalm 100
Romans 5:1-8
Matthew 9:35-10:8 (9-23)

Introduction

The Biblical themes seem so diverse this week. Yet, two themes do emerge in them all. The first being that God is powerful in ways we can hardly comprehend. It begins with bringing a laughable legacy to people like Sarah and Abraham, who are clearly too old to be setting up a family. It follows with the Psalms picking up this power of God in their praise of God. Goes on to the Gospels describing the team that will begin a work of God's transforming mission to our planet in Jesus Christ. And of course, Paul demonstrates God's plan for this mission in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Hearing the Word

Genesis 18:1-5 (21:1-7)

In the generous practice of the desert nomads Abraham extends hospitality to the three strangers that come by. After the meal, the visitors are revealed as angelic beings and even Yahweh moves among them. Then the promise is made that Sarah and Abraham will have a son in fulfilment of the promise in Genesis 12:2. Sarah laughs at this news and thereby places the covenant relationship and promise in peril. However, Yahweh challenges her and assures her of the promise because of God's greatness. Furthermore, the covenant had previously been put in danger when Abraham presented his wife to Pharaoh pretending she was his sister. Still God is shown to be greater than their weak faith and an assurance is given that covenant rests on God's faithfulness and not on Abraham's weak faith moments.

The optional reading of most of chapter 21 celebrates the birth of Isaac – the name meaning laughs (“*yitzhak*” (יצחק) he laughs). Things change with the birth of Isaac so that now the laughter is celebratory as God has come through faithfully in ways no one could have expected.

Exodus 19:2-8a

This passage comes in between the great events in Israel's story. God has rescued the Israelites from Pharaoh but has not yet given the law to Moses. In a way, it is a preparatory time – a little like Lent is.

Naturally, it is important to focus on the provision of God in rescuing the Israelites and leading them and providing for them in the desert. However, it is just as important to note that this is also God drawing God's people close so that God can accompany them on the journey. The ‘end’ of the

Israelite journey is not a geographical place or places. Far more it is God drawing people close to himself. Being close to God is the true culmination of the journey.

God recounts God's saving acts on behalf of the Israelites, but now shifts the emphasis. The Israelites will have a new identity and a new task. They will be the keepers of God's covenant with humankind, as revealed to God's people here. As God's treasured possession they need to be obedient to the covenant demands. This covenant relationship will be visited and revisited by prophets, priests, judges and kings all along the journey of God's people. God will never leave them to simply wander, but will find ways to shepherd them back to a close relationship to God.

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

This psalm is appropriate for Easter because it is an affirmation from the psalmist of being rescued from death. (The ‘saving from death’ is described in the verses between verse 2 and 12.) As a result, the psalmist cannot thank Yahweh enough. In fact, the psalmist frequently repeats the name of Yahweh several times in this psalm. A name with such power that it has rescued him. The psalmist is determined to make a worthy response for God's bountiful actions. These are threefold responses the psalmist will make: *Firstly*, there will be a public lifting of the cup of salvation. *In addition*, there will be a public thank offering where the psalmist can proclaim how God has acted in his or her life. *And also*, there will be a public renewal of vows, as a sign of returning to Yahweh. The psalmist wants to bear public testimony to the power and compassion of God.

Psalm 100

The exuberant praise of this psalm is embodied in several actions. We are invited to ‘make’ a joyful noise, ‘serve’ the Sovereign, ‘come’ into God's presence, ‘know’ the Sovereign and more. In our culture ‘know’ is often thought of as an internal mental activity but in Scripture ‘know’ is far closer to an embodied action. We see this expressed frequently in reference to the very intimate knowing of husband and wife. So, all these verbs draw attention to very embodiment of this group praise of God.

Middle-eastern kings frequently appropriated shepherd metaphors to themselves, and here God is described as a Shepherd and God's people as sheep. What prompts this exuberant praise? God's goodness, God's steadfast love and God's faithfulness. When you know that, then in your very bones there is only one appropriate response – praise.

Romans 5:1-8

Paul now moves from a discussion of Abraham as a model of faith (in the immediately preceding chapters) and begins to outline the work of Christ for us. The key issue is that we now have peace through our Sovereign Jesus Christ. In this we can boast because it is the work of God.

Just as importantly, we boast in 'hope'. 'Hope' here is not a synonym for 'wish' as our modern culture has it when we hope/wish for a good outcome like the weather or our sports team winning a match. 'Hope' here has the quality of a not-yet-realised reality that is certain because it is backed by God. Hope is sharing the Glory of God, the hope that character builds and a hope that does not disappoint.

The other important direction is that this all arises because of the work of God in the death of Jesus Christ. Unworthiness is referred to frequently, and in various ways, as well. The unworthy are we who are weak, those who are sinners, those who were God's enemies. Heroes may give their lives for a worthy or important person. What is different in this account is that, astonishingly, Christ has given his life for those who are not worthy. There can be no clearer demonstration of God's grace.

Matthew 9:35-10:8 (9-23)

Matthew goes to great length and in some detail to speak about the commissioning of the disciples. A key element is that it begins with an outline of Jesus' own ministry and mission of proclaiming the Reign of God and healing. Jesus actions are the model for the disciples' call and being sent.

The shift comes about because Jesus sees the crowds are like sheep without a shepherd. The emphasis on the disciples being instructed to pray for harvesters is a reminder that it is not their mission but God's. The disciple list includes 'tax collectors' – a synonym for sinners, and betrayers. This is not an elite group, but is rather an empowered group. This is also a group who has the authority of Jesus and 'authority' here carries the idea of power and not just the right to do something.

The commissioning carries a warning. They are being sent as sheep among wolves. The disciples need to know that the 'crowds' are not the enemy and all must be on the receiving end of the gospel.

Interpreting the Word

There is a common thread in all the lectionary readings: that is that while humans are weak and mostly unworthy, God remains faithful. Moreover, God does not wait for us to become strong and capable. Instead, God demonstrates a faithfulness that is generous and deeply compassionate and this in spite of what God knows about us.

All the people referenced gain strength and authority from God. Abraham and Sarah begin the dynasty that God promises, a dynasty Abraham and Sarah play a part in but is ultimately dependent on God. The Psalmist has been rescued by the grace of God and overflows with praise and gratitude. The disciples are commissioned even though they include tax collectors and betrayers, and finally Paul emphasises how the unworthy have been included.

In the Gospel passage the commissioning could just as well be an invitation for Matthew's readers to see their own call and commissioning. Whether those are first century readers or twenty first century readers. We too are often unworthy, but fortunately our call, too, rests on God's faithfulness and not our own worthiness.

Preaching the Word

Many people are more aware of their faults than their giftedness. The invitation of today's readings is to follow the model of Abraham, who trust God's faithfulness, to accept that God will rescue us often as the Psalmist says and to believe Paul that God does not exclude us because of our unworthiness and Jesus calls us no matter how unworthy we may think we are.

Our peace does not come through a confidence of our own abilities but through God in Jesus Christ, Paul says. Unquestionably, we play a part in the call and mission of God. This is amply demonstrated in Abraham's faithful actions. The not yet ready disciples will become astonished that Jesus sends them out with authority to continue Jesus' mission.

We may laugh as Sarah did, believing we are too old, or too weak, or not capable enough. However, the promise is if we turn in faith to the ones referred to here, we can regain the Hope that Paul emphasised. This is a hope that is embedded in God. There is a pattern here that must not be missed. From Abraham in ancient times to the disciples in modern times there is a certainty. That certainty is that God rescues God's people. From Pharaoh if needed, from our own lack of belief and always with one purpose: to draw people closer to God and to the Reign of God.

The second part of that pattern is that humans get it wrong. Sarah laughs, Abraham betrays his wife and Pharaoh, and the discouraged Roman Church needs encouragement. Paul emphasises that God knows our unworthiness and Matthew actually lists some of the known sins of the disciples. None of these weaknesses are final. Only God's faithfulness to us stays sure and certain across the ages.

Living the Word

We live in a time when the Church is under attack. Priests, ministers and church leaders have been convicted of heinous crimes against children, women and other people they have abused. Church officials have covered these actions up. Often, we say nothing about them in our pulpits because we are aware that while we may not have perpetrated criminal abuse we are not without fault.

With the post-modern emphasis on nothing being definite and final, we become like the 'crowds' Jesus refers to who do not know where to turn. But we do know. We turn to a God who is still faithful in all this. Truly, it is extremely difficult to see how there can ever be a reconciliation between 'woke' progressive church people and science-denying conservative fundamentalists. So, a divided front is shown to the world. The God of Abraham, the God of Paul and the God of Matthew remains faithful. Somehow, turning to that faithfulness is the task of Sarah, the task of the Romans, the task of the disciples and our task. God is faithful, somehow, in all this. God's faithfulness rises above wokeness and conservative fundamentalism.

Liturgical Suggestions

Here are some suggestions for useful YouTube videos for Psalm 100:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mj9w7IUQ5AU>
Old 100th Psalm tune Coronation



https://youtu.be/H5hoeObqNGc?si=2SD6q81hb7rPlc_b
Linnea Good



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<https://www.workingpreacher.org>



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Word and Life for the 4th Sunday after Pentecost – 21 June 2026

Kevin Sprong

Texts

Genesis 21:8-21
Jeremiah 20:7-13
Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17,
Psalm 69:7-10, (11-15), 16-18
Romans 6:1b-11
Matthew 10:24-39

Introduction

This week's lectionary readings take seriously the contrast between the threats in life and the care of God. Isaac's heritage appears to be threatened by his half-brother Ishmael. Surprisingly, God's provision is to agree with Sarah that he and his mother must leave. The threat to Ishmael and Hagar – that they will die in the desert – is contrasted with finding God's provision and promise out in the wild place. The disciples are warned that speaking Christ's message holds with it the same threat for them that it holds for Christ himself but again God will provide for them. Paul continues that assurance as he outlines the place of dying and living in Christ.

Hearing the Word

Genesis 21:8-21

Modern readers may find the treatment of Hagar as distressing as it did Abraham. The assurance from God that Ishmael will also lead to another great nation creates the possibility for Abraham to act as he did.

Ishmael as the older son poses a threat to Isaac as he may, in time, claim his heritage as Abraham's son. Sarah will have none of that and asks Abraham to send her away. So Abraham provides the minimum that Hagar and her child need and they are cast out into the desert. This provision is soon depleted in the desert. As she waits for herself and her son to die, God intervenes and shows her a well. God also provides a promise that Ishmael will also father a great nation. As Hagar finds a wife for Ishmael in Egypt, the promise is beginning to be fulfilled. So, the promise to Abraham that he will be a father of many nations finds another expression through Ishmael.

Jeremiah 20:7-13

This poem of Jeremiah sounds like a standard psalm of lament. In even stronger terms Jeremiah blames God for betraying him or at least enticing him. Jeremiah complains that his message is not well received and that he has become a laughingstock. His enemies plot against him or are looking for him to stumble. But the passion he has for God, drives him to speak, it is like a burning flame within him.

Despite his enemies' plots, Jeremiah trusts in God to act in his favour as a strong warrior. The lament is legitimate because he is in trouble. However, in the closing verses of this reading he looks to God for vindication and so can close with a song of praise to God who will rescue him.

Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17,

In this psalm we are not told what the Psalmist's troubles are, but they are great. There is a counterpoint between the petitions and the responses beginning 'for'. The psalmist petitions God to incline God's ear, '*answer me*', preserve his life, save his servant, be gracious to him, and gladden his soul. On what basis does the psalmist can make all these requests? Because he knows that God will hear his many motivations. He trusts in God, he cries to God all day, and he lifts up his soul to God.

These petitions and the motivations that follow affirm why God will respond. These are based on the affirmation articulated in verse 5 - because God is "*good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love*." This pattern is typical of many of our modern prayers and encourage us to find confidence to address God in our deepest need. The pattern shifts to an exuberant praise for God so complete that the Psalmist anticipates such a God will become more attractive than any other god and fittingly concludes with generous thanks to God for responding to the prayer.

Psalm 69:7-10, (11-15), 16-18

This psalm of lament has significance because it appears to be cited so frequently in the New Testament. The psalmist almost expresses his 'right' to get help because it is for God's sake that he is experiencing this rejection and isolation. He has done nothing wrong but rather because of his 'Zeal for your house' that has put him on the receiving end of these woes.

The psalm continues with the 'I' and 'me' passages: 'I have borne reproach' and 'shame covers my face', I have become a stranger to my kin and an alien in my home. He then moves on to the complaints about 'them': 'They' insult you, 'they' insult me, I am a byword to 'them', 'they' gossip about me and so it continues. The Psalmist is still aware that God can protect him or her, answer and save from the miry pit and delivered from enemies. All because of God's steadfast love and abundant mercy.

We remember from the New Testament that Jesus when overturning the money changers' tables (John 2:17) is explained by 'Zeal for God's house' (vs9). Paul recognised the enemies he faced in terms of this Psalm and even Revelation appears to reference this psalm (vs 28 Lamb's book of life).

Romans 6:1b-11

Paul's question in v 6b is in response to the previous chapters, where Paul has outlined God's grace revealed in Jesus Christ. So, Paul poses the obvious question his readers might be thinking: "Because we are under grace should we sin that grace may abound?" And the reply is **of course not**. The rest of this chapter will say how that will work.

It will be responded to from two major viewpoints. Firstly, the believer's union with Christ and the believer's freedom from sin. Baptism demonstrates and affirms the believer's union with Christ and in doing so, it affirms the idea that believers are included in Christ's death. In the believers' case, not physical death but death to the old self and death to sin. So believers are encouraged to see that they are dead to sin and alive to Christ.

Another image is also applied. That is, the believer has been freed from slavery to sin and now is in the household of God. It is an image of location. We are no longer located as slaves in one house (sin), we have been freed to live in another house (God's). In the verses following this lectionary reading, Paul will elaborate how believers become 'slaves' to God. This is not a freedom to sin as we want (v 6) but freedom to serve and love God in Jesus Christ.

Matthew 10:24-39

While this is a difficult passage to contend with, it is, however, certainly worth wrestling with. We may be tempted to say the words are directed at a generation and situation that no longer applies to modern readers. Yet it calls for the same response today as it did then.

The first movement has to do with the reality that the followers of Jesus cannot expect different treatment to that of the master. If they maligned Jesus, they will malign the followers. Earlier in this gospel the authority and power has been passed on to the disciples. The disciples need to know that that mission comes with tough consequences.

The second movement indicates that God will be with them. The reassurance comes at least three times: do not fear, things will soon change. What has been whispered and kept secret between Christ and the disciples will become something proclaimed. A movement has started that cannot be stopped. The disciples' part in it is crucial. God's ever watchful eye that notices when a sparrow falls, will be far more interested in the more valuable sons and daughters of God.

Thirdly the disciples must know that their actions count. If they acknowledge Christ before others, good and well but if not, they can expect less acknowledgement of their actions from God.

Lastly it shows that the gospel will be a dividing factor even in our own families and homes. The passage from Micah 7:6 is used to demonstrate that commitment to Christ will even challenge family loyalties. Astonishingly, the first of the Ten Commandments is superseded by commitment to Christ. The deep loyalties of family members will be challenged by an even deeper loyalty.

Interpreting the Word

All these passages invite us to note that life is full of threats of one sort or another. Perhaps our life is only threatened with death in certain particularly dangerous situations. However, many people know the feeling of lostness. Many people know that their integrity is challenged, and many know that their perception of how life works can be challenged at the deepest level by circumstances in life.

In this we are no different to the Psalmist or to Jeremiah when we cry out to God in lament. The shift in focus that the Psalmist makes and Jeremiah makes to understand that God remains faithful in dire situations is a wake-up call to us to turn in faith to God. Often, if not always, we can cite times in our own life when the cry of lament has worked out through God's faithfulness in ways impossible to predict from the troubles we experienced. God remains faithful.

When the Gospel reminds us that the disciples cannot expect more favourable responses than their master underwent, we can soberly look differently at those events. The promises to the disciples are the promises to us. We are more valuable than two a penny sparrows and God is always watching.

Often these passages are isolated from what went before and after. So, a reading of the later and earlier passages in Romans and the Gospel will make some of the statements there clearer.

Earlier in the Gospel passage the disciples are warned that they are going out as sheep among wolves. So, the consequences cited in our lection have context, it will be dangerous out there but no less dangerous than they have experienced with Jesus.

The Romans passage has been preceded by talks of God's free gift of grace. This would have been foreign to a people who believed the favour of God needed to be earned. Also, any unfortunate circumstances had been earned by displeasing God. Our passage is, in a way, a counter to a charge modern readers have posed that we beware of 'cheap grace'.

Preaching the Word

There is a persistent thought that somehow, as believers, we should get better treatment in life. People claim certain passages of scripture (usually out of context) to protect their houses. We cite other passages that God has only plans for our welfare. And welfare is interpreted frequently as 'good'. Yet nothing in today's readings supports those claims. We are assured by the prophets, the psalmists, and Paul's and Matthew's writings about Jesus, that life will be tough and have severe hardships at times.

All of us will, at some stage, be bringing our own lamentations to God. When we are surprised that family members turn against us, it is almost as if we have forgotten the Micah passage quoted in the Gospels. When illness strikes or persecution arises from colleagues or grief bowls us over, we are often taken aback. Every part of the lection has suggested we should not be surprised. These are often the consequences of following Christ. Opposition to the Gospel of Christ is nothing new.

The good news is that is that every one of these passages remind us that God is there in the midst. We should not be afraid that we think God may have left us. Every passage declares God's faithfulness and trustworthiness. Something monumental has been started and cannot be under threat from any challenge because God is in it. Ageing congregations, Christian Nationalists and conmen pastors threaten everything we believe in, but do not be afraid, God has never let God's people down and our time will be no exception.

What should our actions be? Well, those actions include turning quite deliberately to God. Whether that turning is in prayer, in worship or meditation or some other way that serves us well. This turning will call to mind how God has been faithful in the past and assure us that that faithfulness is not coming to an end in our time. Secondly, we are instructed to ‘acknowledge God before others’ and this frees Christ to acknowledge us before his ‘Father’.

Living the Word

There is so much that South Africans could lament over. While there may be legitimate places to make those laments known in the hope that some action will be taken, there is also a danger of slipping into a perpetual complaining pattern. That is not the pattern of today's readings. The laments and dangers are real, but for people of faith there is the corresponding sense that God is in all of this. More importantly, is the assurance in these passages that God is there in faithfulness and compassion. Comparisons are odious, the saying goes, and comparing the South African situation to some idealistic past or to other countries where things are perceived to be better, is not helpful. Far better to see how God is working God's plan out in our situation now and in our context.

Liturgical Suggestions

Suggested Songs/Hymns

“Zeal for Your House Consumes Me”

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Word and Life for the 5th Sunday after Pentecost – 28 June 2026

James Gribble

Texts

Semi-continuous track:

Genesis 22:1–14 Psalm 13

Related track:

Jeremiah 28:5–9

Psalm 89:1–4, 15–18

Romans 6:12–23

Matthew 10:40–42

Introduction

The seminal reading from Genesis is about Abraham's anguished obedience and the test of his faith in setting out to sacrifice his son Isaac. The accompanying Psalm tells of the intense suffering of a sick person whose faith is being severely tested.

In the related track the prophet Jeremiah's letter to the Babylonian exiles offers realistic down-to-earth advice to the exiles in Babylon, unlike the soothing words of those he calls false prophets. Psalm 89 is a prolonged celebration of the faithfulness of Yahweh and, in the contrasting closing section (46–52), a devastating reflection on what had happened to the nation and its king.

The reading from Romans is a link in a chain of readings over 15 Sundays of the season.

In the Matthew reading Jesus identifies apostles he sends out as his emissaries. The reception they would receive was effectively the reception accorded him.

Hearing and Interpreting the Word

Genesis 22:1–14

When Abram was at an advanced age (Genesis 17) God made covenant with him, changing his name to Abraham, promising that he would become the father of many nations. In fulfilment his wife (renamed Sarah) would bear him a second son. God would also establish his covenant with him and his descendants after him. God saw in Abraham one who would be instrumental in furthering God's purposes for all humankind. But the question is: had God found the right man? Hence this story of the testing of Abraham's faith. Did Abraham's love for God go as far as obeying a directive to offer his precious son Isaac as a burnt offering on a mountain in the land of Moriah?

Burnt offerings were probably the typical Hebrew form of sacrifice, present from the beginning and noted already in the story of Noah (Gen. 8:20). It became a regular rite and was never omitted on great occasions. It remained dominant to the latest times in the history of Israel. It was a way of paying homage, of offering thanksgiving and seeking expiation of sin. Its character as gift was seen in the sublimation of the burning elements into a form, smoke and smell, in which they could be transported to God and prove, so it was thought, pleasing to God.

We may deem all this abhorrent, but Abraham lived in a world and at a time when child sacrifice was not uncommon among Semitic peoples and others. This is borne out by references to the practice of sacrificing first-born sons in certain circumstances (see 2 Kings 3:27 and Micah 6:7). Abraham clearly believes that God might legitimately make such a demand of him. He was faced with a choice between God's promises and God himself. Would his devotion to God's promises prove to be stronger than his devotion to God's cause?

Seen from a different angle, we are presented with a picture of how the divine plan survives apparent difficulties. God's purpose that the world was to be blessed by Abraham's many descendants here teeters on the verge. It would be finally frustrated by the death of this key agent. This is a recurring theme in the ancient story. Human disobedience and expulsion from the Garden nearly derailed God's plan. The wholesale disobedience of all humankind nearly ended it all in an all-destroying flood, but for the faith and obedience of a Noah. The story of our salvation is marked by the ways God finds to triumph over these obstacles. God offers us the supreme gift of life under him. It is always imperilled but never destroyed. In every age God's investment is risky. This story will climax in the person of Jesus the Christ whose death, ostensibly a tragic reversal, would be followed by resurrection and new life.

The story of Abraham's obedience is a magnificent piece of literature. We sense the mounting tension in that long walk over three days to 'the mountain in the land of Moriah'. While Abraham is in anguish at the prospect of what lies ahead, Isaac innocently and insightfully remarks that the fire and the wood are in hand, 'but where is the lamb'? It was the key question, and always is. Abraham could only reply that God would provide, but he had no idea how. At the crucial moment God stayed Abraham's raised hand and provided a surrogate. 'Now I know that you fear God'. Despite the earlier prevailing tradition, God's people now also knew that God does not in fact call for child sacrifice. Abraham had been 're-educated'.

'Moriah' is also mentioned in 2 Chronicles 3:1 and identified as the site of Solomon's Temple. Abraham was directed to go to 'one of the mountains'. The hills on which Jerusalem now stands are visible at a distance. The distance between southern Philistea (whence Abraham journeyed) and Jerusalem is about 80 km and could well have taken three days to traverse. It is a tantalising thought that the scene of Abraham's aborted sacrifice would later become the site where sacrifice would daily be offered in the Temple.

Psalm 13

This short Psalm tells of the profound inner distress of one who is very ill. He suffers physical pain, experiences mental anguish, and is taunted by the apparent futility of his faith. The repeated cry is 'how much longer, O Lord?' The sufferer feels bereft and forgotten. He faces the horror of a silent

God. His enemies have reason to mock his illness, reading it as a clear sign of God's punishing him for some sin. His death would likely prove to them that they were right. The Psalmist's lamentation is a cry for health and justification before his pressing troubles.

But light breaks through in verse 5 with a quiet confidence in God's goodness, kindness, mercy and love (Hebrew *hesed*). Lamentation and petition give way to a certainty of God's help and, in closing, to a song of praise.

Jeremiah 28:5–9

Though the northern kingdom of Israel had fallen to the Assyrians in 722 BC, the kingdom of Judah lasted until 587 BC before it fell to the Babylonians after a siege of 30 months. Given the policies followed by the nation, Jeremiah the prophet had long foreseen the disaster. When Jerusalem fell King Zedekiah was forced to watch the murder of his children before he was blinded and led out of the city with other community leaders on the long walk to exile in Babylon. Prophetic voices such as Hananiah's were quick to predict an absence of short duration. Jeremiah disagreed, insisting that the exiles should prepare for the long haul, for a long stay in the place of exile.

Thus his famous letter to the exiled community, advising them to settle down in their new surroundings, build houses, plant gardens, enjoy their produce, and live normal lives. They were to multiply as their sons and daughters entered marriages. Above all they were to seek and pray for the welfare of the city where they had been taken, 'for in its welfare you will find your welfare'. He warned them against the dreams and deceptive utterances of the false prophets and diviners who promised a speedy return to Judah. They were not speaking in the name of the Lord.

Psalms 89:1–4, 15–18

This Psalm is headed 'A Maskil of Ethan the Ezrahite'. A maskil was probably meant to be meditative, a song imparting some lesson of wisdom or piety. Ethan (the name means 'enduring, firm') was the name of a boy at the court of King David, described in 1 Kings 4:31 as being wise, yet not as wise as King Solomon.

It is thought that this is a Psalm from the exile experience. Much of it is a profound and sustained reflection on the implications of God's covenant with David, lauding God's enduring faithfulness. A short introduction (1–4) is followed by three distinct sections: a hymn of praise to Yahweh (5–18), a prophetic promise that the Davidic dynasty will never come to an end (19–37), and a searing lament over the defeat of the king (38–51). Some commentators believe the Psalm may have been part of a liturgy used in formal worship.

If, as is thought, the Psalm was written in the light of the exile disaster, the early sections could be read as encouragement to displaced people. Despite the defeat of the nation, the humiliation of the king and the predicament of the exiles, Yahweh could be counted on to remain faithful and true to the terms of the covenant. The covenant promise to David did not fail, even though the monarchy had come to an end and Israel had become a subject people. Awareness of the covenant would be a continuing source of strength and persevering faith.

Romans 6:12–23

In the earlier part of this chapter Paul has argued that, in baptism, something happens in the experience of the Christian believer that changes everything. The believer is baptised into Christ's death and effectively buried with him. Then, 'as Christ was raised from the dead ... we too might walk in newness of life'. This mystical and emotional experience changes our status, our outlook and our behaviour.

We are no longer slaves to sin and wickedness. Sin cannot be allowed to rule in our mortal bodies. We are those who have been brought from death to life, sharing in Christ's resurrection life, now intent on serving God as instruments of righteous living. Sin has no claim on us, for we are now not under law but under grace. But this does not mean what we can continue sinning with impunity because grace is plentiful and forgiveness easily accessible. The fact is that we are no longer slaves to sin but have, in Christ, become slaves of righteousness. Set free from sin our lives have a new controlling centre. As 'slaves to God' we belong to him alone and wish to serve him alone. What we once were paid the wages of death. Now, in Christ Jesus our Lord, we enjoy the free gift of life of an eternal quality.

Matthew 10:40–42

These verses constitute the close of a chapter that begins with Jesus sending out the twelve disciples on a mission in his name. It was accepted by the Jews that receiving a person's messenger was tantamount to receiving the person himself. Hospitable reception was an accepted duty. Thus, the reception these disciples would receive was effectively the reception accorded to Jesus who had sent them. In fact, it went deeper: 'He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me' (v. 40). Christ's ambassadors were to be true to their sender, to love those to whom they were sent.

Being welcomed as 'a prophet' implies hearing and heeding a prophet's words. The provision of food (v. 10) and openness to hearing the words of the prophet (v. 14) were implied in receiving one sent. The welcome as of a 'righteous man' recognises in the messenger the integrity and goodness of a faithful follower of Jesus. And coming as 'little ones' suggests coming with no airs and graces but in simplicity and openness. The 'little ones' has an echo in Matthew 23:34ff in 'one of the least of these my brothers'.

Preaching the Word

That the three Abrahamic religions each portray Abraham as a model of faith obviously invites a discourse on the nature of faith. How is true faith to be recognised? Obviously, it must find expression in visible action. Faith and action ('works') are intimately connected (James 2:14–26). Abraham's faith and his obedience went together hand-in-hand.

The **Genesis** reading also indicates that, besides being a man of simple trusting faith, Abraham was man of his time. He apparently did not question what he understood to be God's call that he should sacrifice Isaac, the precious child of promise and of his old age. But God holding back his uplifted knife and providentially providing a surrogate lamb means that Abraham's faith was being re-educated.

So Abraham fell out of step with the prevailing assumption of the period and came to understand God's call differently. Faith and consequent behaviour must constantly be tested, questioned, and perhaps re-educated. It is not a static thing.

Writing to the **Romans** St Paul makes the important point that our new life in Christ inevitably requires a new and different way of living. The old enslavement to sin has ended, in Christ we are under new management. We are his servants (slaves), and that should be evident to those we encounter as his emissaries. As the reading from **Matthew** puts it, when we are true to our new status and calling, it is as if Christ is being received in the reception accorded to us. calls for great responsibility in living and acting with integrity as those belonging to Christ.

The **Jeremiah** reading is immensely practical as the prophet offers the exiles valuable advice about coping with life in captivity. It was not going to be over soon. While maintaining their faith in Yahweh they were to invest their lives in their new setting, not standing apart but seeking the welfare of the place where they had been dumped.

The two Psalm readings both speak of clinging to faith in Yahweh despite adverse circumstances. Such persevering faith in a faithful God enables us to hold on when the going is tough, assured that God has not forgotten or abandoned us.

Living the Word

We can appreciate the anguish of the people carried off from Jerusalem and taken to captivity in a strange place. It was a regular policy of conquerors of the time. It served to quell uprisings and maintain peace. South Africans should never forget how a previous government saw fit to uproot whole communities, dumping them in inhospitable places where they were left to fend for themselves in barren wastes. The war, if that is the appropriate word, that has raged between Israel and the people of Gaza, has been frighteningly cruel and inhumane. In our sinful world the possibility of this kind of response to people seems to be ever near. In today's South Africa the presence of informal settlements in and around our cities and towns is seen by some as a problem to be moved elsewhere, instead of recognising the huge challenge and opportunity to provide care and ministry and hope to people who, in truth, have no great desire to live in such circumstances.

A liturgical suggestion

The early verses of Psalm 89 can be effectively adapted to serve as a litany of praise.

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Word and Life for the 6th Sunday after Pentecost – 5 July 2026

Lynette Petersen

Introduction

The readings for the day may open the way for the preacher to help the congregation to discern the movement of God's Spirit in the way we are led to make decisions. Marriage is one of the difficult areas in which our society struggles. While culture plays a part, how do we inspire God's people when there are so many opinions presented within our world?

Texts

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

Psalms 45:10-17 or Song of Solomon 2:8-13 or Psalm 145:8-14
Romans 7:15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Hearing the Word

Genesis 24: 34-38, 42-49, 58-69

What a romantic story of God's direction and provision! The time has come for Abraham to find a wife for his son, Isaac. Eliezer, his servant, promises that he will return to his country to find a suitable partner for Isaac. In biblical times, as in some traditional societies today, marriage between cousins was the preferred arrangement. Rebekah is the daughter of Isaac's first cousin Bethuel. By God's direction his people were not to find partners for their sons from those who were not of the covenant family. Eliezer leaves on his search with several gifts, but he goes prayerfully (vv 12-14) knowing that this must be God guided. He almost draws up a plan of how this is to happen if God is to give him success. Obviously, the servant has been so influenced by his employer. Prayer is his first port of call! He stops at the town of Nahor, the place where he hopes his prayers would be answered. Right enough, Rebekah, a relative of Abraham's brother, Nahor, turns up and offers to water the servant's party and his camels. In the culture of the time, it was the women who were the water carriers. Men were dominant and only some of the Old Testament women are given any prominence. Rebekah is one of them. *'Abraham's servant had good reason to think he saw in her spontaneous actions... the fearlessness of a pure and unspoiled spirit, friendliness, and a quick and generous impulse to be kind.'* (p655, *Interpreter's Bible*.) Here is evidence of the character of Rebekah, and as the servant's confidence grows Rebekah appears to accept the divine guidance. She returns home to inform her family. Laban, her brother then goes to invite the party to their home. Laban recognises, in confirmation, the gifts she has been given. He gets to know of the encounter, offers the party food and a place to stay. Here is the example of typical eastern hospitality. The servant retells the story of clear guidance in his search for a wife for Isaac and asks for the permission of Bethuel, her father, and her brother Laban. Convinced of the truth of the guidance, they consent for Rebekah to go with him to Isaac, but not before she has given her consent. Surprisingly, she decides to go immediately even though the family had wanted her to

stay for a few days. She simply says, *'I will go!'* The meeting is true to custom. Isaac appears to be waiting in the field, and when the servant identifies him for her, she veils herself according to their custom. The amazing story is concluded with three simple words. *'He loved her.'*

Psalms 45:10-17

This is a royal psalm headed a *'wedding song' of the Sons of Korah*. It is in the flamboyant oriental court style which some commentators suggest was composed for the wedding of Ahab to Jezebel. It was so popular that it was used in later royal weddings and even in the festival of the enthronement of the King. In the first verses the poet addresses the royal bridegroom, but in these set verses the psalmist addresses the bride adopting a wisdom-teaching mode: *'Listen, O daughter'*. She is admonished to forget her foreign origin and to devote herself to her new master. The poet reminds the queen of her royal entry into the palace and assures her of her permanent fame which will rest, not with her pagan ancestry, but with her children who will occupy the Israelite throne for ever.

Romans 7:15-25a

Paul continues his argument about law and grace, this time using the illustration of marriage. For clarity on this passage, one must begin earlier in this chapter. From v 3 Paul argues that just as a woman is released from the law of fidelity if her husband dies, so too those who die to sin through the death of Christ are set free, to live according to the Spirit. He acknowledges that we struggle with sin. We are unable to do what we should or should not do and find ourselves doing the opposite. The role of the law is to help us recognise sin. The commandment that was intended to bring life, brought death. Our human problem is that while the law is good, unfortunately, left to our unspiritual selves without Christ, we are incapable of living God's way. But all praise and thanks to God for the gift of Christ. He sets us free from sin and death!

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Jesus illustrates the fickleness of human beings. They are like two groups of children being 'contrary' and accusing one another of not liking their suggestions. This is how the crowd responded to John whom Jesus confirms as their Elijah, the one who came to prepare the way before him. They criticised John for who he was, what he said, and how he acted but, truth be told, they did not want to listen and just found excuses to disregard his message. Those who are determined not to make a response will stubbornly remain unresponsive no matter the invitation. Wisdom is shown to be right by her deeds! As opposed to this, Jesus gives thanks to his Father for the revelation of the truth to 'little children', presumably his disciples. It is not the wise and learned who respond, but those who are humble and to whom the Father has chosen to reveal the Son. To them there is the special invitation to turn to Jesus as their Lord and find

rest, 'wearing' his yoke (like a team of oxen) so they may walk together, humbly learning from him and by so doing experience his peace.

Interpreting the Word

Today's texts have much in common and are about decision making. Three of the four have reference to marriage. Apart from the favourable comment on the character of Abraham who, like the others, Eliezer and Rebekah, act out of faith, this is a story about traveling and hospitality, about meeting strangers who become family, and about taking risks and leaving home to find one's true home. It is a story that testifies to the power of love that comforts and heals grief. Most of all, it is a story of faith journeys with paths that providentially cross. The servant's witness emboldens us to move into the future, confident that God's angel leads us on our way.

In the royal psalm the theme of marriage is present once more. It has been seen by many as referring to Christ, and his bride—the church. JH Eaton in his commentary on the Psalms suggests that the content of the psalm fits well with the theology of the Davidic dynasty and might be seen as a divine blessing bestowed by an inspired prophet. As he comments: *'The marriage is treated almost subordinately in the context of the glorious destiny of the royal house; blessed by God, the union will serve to carry forward the world-wide rule of Davidic descendants.'* (p123) In the earlier verses it is possible that the marriage was celebrated as a sequel to an annual re-enthronement of the king in the autumnal festival. As the psalmist turns to the queen's preparation for marriage, he adopts a wisdom-teaching mode: 'Listen, O daughter'. The first point made to the new queen is that she should 'forget' her 'own people' and her 'father's house'. This sounds much like Rebekah who leaves her family, although she is to go to be joined in marriage to Isaac, her 'own people' as a relative of Abraham, her tribe or extended family and not another nation. But if this is to be seen as a 'Royal Psalm' and ultimately about the prophetic voice admonishing us to leave our own ways and begin a new life of devotion to Christ, this means that the queen is a foreigner. She is called upon to make the break with the old identity and the old ties.

This is surely what Paul goes on to urge the Romans: to be done with sin and rely on the power of Christ's death for us. Only then can we live the Christ-like life. When we as the Church come to Christ there must be a death to the past and our sin, and reliance on the Holy Spirit to choose God's way. The gospel passage confirms the fickleness of human choice and encourages the humble, reliant disciple to come to Christ where true peace may be found. Disciples who wear the yoke of Christ walk with him in his ways.

Preaching the Word

We live in a society that rejects the norms and standards of past generations precisely because they have seen the failure, and witnessed the hypocrisy, of many who should have been examples of faithful living - particularly in terms of both human relationships and in marriage relationships. Many have experienced and endured the pain of gender-based violence and divorce. No wonder there is a hunger for love which is truthful and selfless, which respects choices and honours faithfulness. The question of Jesus, 'to what can I compare this generation?' is still relevant.

The preacher might want to pursue the theme of the Church as the 'Bride of Christ', her unity with him and within the body of the Christian community. A sermon on the Genesis text could focus on the characters of *'Eliezer and Rebekah: two servants'*. *How do servants serve?*

Moral and Christian standards espoused by the scriptures are seldom taught in homes or schools of South Africa. Communities who hold to cultural values are questioned and disregarded, and selfless, loving behaviour is regarded as outdated. How does the Church respond to this except by teaching the principles of scripture, of love for others and respect for people's choices?

It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that the Church must continue to teach, instruct and demonstrate amongst members, committed couples and friendship groups, that love overcomes fear, corruption, selfishness and strife, even though they might be judged for following the ways taught by Jesus.

In the liturgy of the wedding service, we hear the words: *'the union of husband and wife is in Scripture compared to the union of Christ and his Church, for he loved the Church and gave himself for it'* This Sunday might be an ideal opportunity to preach on marriage and what makes for a Christ-like union of commitment, compassion and understanding.

Living the Word

Central to living the Word is the emphasis given to the life of Christ seen at work by the power of the Spirit, where love, joy and peace is the fruit of the Spirit. Emphasis on prayer for direction, wisdom in decision-making, and putting to death the sinful nature by self-denial is called for. We are to hear the Master's call to come to him.

We should encourage all to strive to be ambassadors for Christ, living his life of joy and fulfilment, and not become discouraged or disillusioned by peers who might judge, poke fun at or reject them for their convictions or their walk with God. We are to trust and be obedient to the Spirit of Christ and lead and guide through the challenges faced by our communities.

Liturgical suggestions

A Call to Worship

Come all who labour and are heavy laden,

And God will give you rest.

Take God's yoke upon you,

For the Lord is gentle and lowly in heart.

Come and find peace for your souls,

For the yoke of the Lord is easy, and the burden is light.

An Invocation

Lover of the unlovable, we are captives of the world.
Recapture our loyalties, not by defeating our will
but by drawing it to yours.

Seize our spirits, not by forcing us into your grasp,
but by freeing us from sin.

Adore us, love us, desire and seek us.

Our ears strain for the sound of you,

our eyes for the sight of you;

our hearts tremble in anticipation of your presence.

Come into our midst, Lord,

and make us your captives. ***Amen***

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- “Be still for the presence of the Lord”
- “For the beauty of the earth”
- “God of all power and truth and grace”
- “I heard the voice of Jesus say”
- “Guide me O, Thou great Jehovah”
- “We’ll walk this land”

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Word and Life for the 7th Sunday after Pentecost – 12 July 2026

Larry Ort

Texts

Genesis 25:19–34 and Psalm 119:105–112 (Track 1)

Isaiah 55:10–13 and Psalm 65:(1–8), 9–13 (Track 2)

Romans 8:1–11

Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

Introduction

Matthew's account of Jesus' Parable of the Sower is undoubtedly the key text for this Sunday. The seed is God's Word and God's love which spring up within us. Romans 8 assures us there is "no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," for the law of Christ's Spirit has set us free from the law of sin and death.

In track 1, the reading from Genesis reveals how conflict can arise from differences in human nature and how those differences naturally lead to favoritism. Yet God may use our differences for kingdom purposes. The reading from Psalm 119 emphasizes how God's law (word) is a lamp unto our feet and a light to our path; how God's decrees may be the joy of our heart

In track 2, the reading from Isaiah emphasizes the fact that God's word that goes forth from God's mouth shall not return empty but shall successfully accomplish God's purpose. Psalm 65, a song of thanksgiving for earth's bounty, assures us of God's forgiveness for our transgressions when we are overwhelmed by deeds of iniquity, and of the happiness we will experience when we are chosen to live in God's presence.

Hearing the Word

Exegetical comments on each of the four (or six) readings for the day

Genesis 25.19–34

The Jacob Cycle encompasses Genesis 25–36. The case of twin sons appears to present problems. The wrestling in the womb combined with the fact that Jacob was born grasping Esau's heel is interpreted to mean that Jacob desired the birthright, and plotted as to how he might obtain it. Esau clearly does not regard the birthright in the same manner. Verses 27–28 provide insights into Jacob's and Esau's personalities and interests, and the favoritism displayed by Isaac and Rebekah. The fact that Isaac favored Esau while Rebekah favored Jacob further complicates the dynamic. In the final analysis, Isaac stole the blessing intended for Esau but later received the blessing originally intended prior to his escape. When Isaac met Esau several years later, his actions revealed him to be returning the blessing which he originally stolen from Esau.

Psalm 119:105–112

Psalm 119, the longest of the psalms (176 verses), depicts the glories of God's law. The law was cause for rejoicing, for at last, God has told the people what was necessary in order to have a right relationship with God and our neighbor. The psalm consists of 22 8-line stanzas, each stanza and each line beginning with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This is the fourteenth stanza; thus, it begins with the fourteenth letter (*nun*). Throughout the psalm, God's law is referred to in numerous ways, e.g., decrees, word, statutes, precepts, ordinances. In this stanza, the psalmist is rejoicing that God's word is a lantern to his feet, a light upon his path, which permits him to withstand the traps the wicked employ against him. Consequently, the psalmist proclaims God's law to be an everlasting inheritance, the source of his joyful heart.

Isaiah 55:10–13

The Prophet Isaiah brings a message of hope to those who have endured the Babylonian captivity. This passage is akin to the message of Isaiah 40.8 which assures the people that even if the grass withers and the flower fades, the word of God will endure forever. The manner in which God's word goes forth from God's mouth and returns in fullness, having accomplished the ends for which it was sent, is compared to the manner in which rain and snow water the earth and cause it to bear abundantly. God's people will go out from their captivity in joy and return to their homeland in peace. The mountains, hills, and trees will rejoice when they meet God's people; instead of being met with thorns and briers, they shall be met by the cool green shade and refreshment of the cedar and the myrtle. The passage closes with the assurance of God's everlasting love.

Psalm 65:(1–8), 9–13

This psalm depicts the world as alive with God's bounty and expresses thanksgiving for the same. It begins by praising God, and by acknowledging how God answers prayer and forgives our transgressions. Those who live in God's presence, those whom God has brought near, are happy. Verses 5–8 celebrate God's might through which God not only creates and controls nature but also delivers us. Verses 9–13 celebrate God's care for the earth and the resultant bounty which ensues.

Romans 8:1–11

In this passage Paul contrasts the conflict between life lived in the flesh with life lived in the Spirit. While setting one's mind on the flesh leads to death, setting one's mind on the Spirit leads to life and peace. One whose mind is set on the flesh is hostile to God and to God's law. As Christians, we live in the Spirit, for the law of the Spirit of life in Jesus Christ, the law of love, has set us free from the law of sin and death. Hence, there is no condemnation for those who live in Christ Jesus. If Christ lives in us, the body is dead because of sin, but inasmuch as the Spirit of God which raised Christ from the dead is also in us, it will give life to our mortal bodies such that we are resurrected from the dead.

Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

Jesus' teaching and healing ministry has drawn crowds. As he had been sitting by the seashore, he climbed into a boat, sat down, and began to teach the crowd using parables, the first of which was the parable of the sower. As the culture was in large part agrarian, many of Jesus' parables are grounded in agrarian practices. One who sows customarily would not sow where it had little chance of producing a good crop – why would one sow costly seed on a beaten path, on rocky ground, or among thorns when seed was expensive?

Interpreting the Word

You may wish to read the entire Jacob cycle (Genesis 25–36) to have a good overview of the context. Also read Deuteronomy 21:15–17 which sets forth the right of the firstborn son. Note how the firstborn was to receive a double share of the inheritance; also, cultural expectations dictated the firstborn was to assume leadership of the family upon his father's death, and the firstborn typically assumed his father's profession. Some might feel that Jacob is taking advantage of Esau, but it is apparent that Esau prefers the satisfaction of his own immediate needs over the long-term blessings of his birthright. The Bible actually sets forth several stories in which God overlooks the firstborn for God's greater purpose (Genesis 4; Genesis 21; Genesis 48, etc.). God knows us better than we know ourselves.

Psalm 119:105–112 portrays God's word as a lamp unto our feet, a light upon our path, which enables us to stand against the wicked (v. 110). We may experience affliction, indeed, most likely will experience affliction, but God's precepts are our guide. We are to use our will and our intellect in holding fast to God's precepts.

Isaiah 55:10–13 is addressed to those who have suffered prolonged captivity in Babylon. It assures the people that God is faithful to God's word ("it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it"). When permitted to return, the people would go out in joy and return in peace.

Psalm 65:(1–8), 9–13 reminds us of our obligation to praise God and to keep our vows. When we are overwhelmed by iniquity, it is God who forgives our transgressions. Happiness comes from living in accordance with God's precepts. We find our hope in the mighty acts of God, in God's providential care for creation, and the bounty of the same.

Romans 8:1–11 contrasts life in flesh with life in the spirit. As the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, reminds us in *Either/Or*, our life is not a matter of becoming eternal, for we are born a unique admixture of the material and the spiritual. In life, we must choose which we shall maximize – either life in the flesh or life in the spirit. If we choose to live in accordance with God's word (life in the spirit) God's Spirit empowers us to live victoriously such that we no longer stand in condemnation.

Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

The usual interpretation is that God is the sower, and the seed is God's word. When hearing God's word, God would have us produce abundantly. But if we understand the seed to be God's word (or love), the parable also reveals God's profligate nature, for God sows wildly, freely, with abandonment. As Christians, we are called to be sowers of God's love and word, and we are expected to sow profligately. It is worth noting that verses 10–17 (not included in the reading) explains Jesus' use of parables; only those whose hearts are open to God's word can understand the message. Parables are intended to provoke thought and introspection.

Jesus' interpretation of the parable reveals how the seed may be snatched away, may spring up but endure only for a while, or may be choked out by the cares of this world and the lure of wealth. Only when the seed is understood and taken to heart does it bear good fruit.

Preaching the Word

As N. T. Wright observes, there are many Esaus in the Church today, i.e., those "who despise their hundredfold blessings through hearing and understanding the word."

Psalm 119:105 ("Your word is a lantern to my feet and a light upon my path.") ties in very nicely with the gospel reading and with the story of Jacob and Esau. God's word is to be cherished (not forsaken or despised like Esau's birthright) for it brings light and life.

Isaiah 55:10–13 observes that God gives seed to the sower and bread to the eater, and the word which goes forth from God's mouth shall not return empty. Those who abide in God's word, though they may have experienced captivity, will experience joyous delivery and be at peace

Psalm 65:(1–8), 9–13 reminds us that it is God who provides the earth's bounty; we can respond in a grasping or a gracious manner. God is our deliverer and the hope of all the ends of the earth. It is easy for us to believe we are self-sufficient, or self-made, but reflection reveals that all good things come from God.

When considering Romans 8:1–11, hold Jesus in mind as the sower. God's word, God's son, calls us to new life in the Spirit. As Paul notes, "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit." God's word offers us a choice between death or life and peace; will we be hostile toward God or will we love God and our neighbor? If we accept God's word, if we permit it to dwell in us and to grow such that it transforms us, then we have the assurance of everlasting life.

Barbara Brown Taylor raises some excellent questions about the parable of the sower which you may wish to share with your congregation:. As she observes, this parable

has been known for centuries as the parable of the Sower, which means that there is a chance, just a chance, that we have got it all backwards. We hear the story and think it is a story about us, but what if we are wrong? What if it is not about us at all but about the sower? What if it is not about our own successes and failures and birds and rocks and thorns

but about the extravagance of a sower who does not seem to be fazed by such concerns, who flings seed everywhere, wastes it with holy abandon, who feeds the birds, whistles at the rocks, picks his way through the thorns, shouts hallelujah at the good soil and just keeps on sowing, confident that there is enough seed to go around, that there is plenty, and that when the harvest comes at last it will fill every barn in the neighborhood to the rafters?

If this is really the parable of the Sower and not the parable of the different kinds of ground, then it begins to sound quite new. The focus is not on us and our shortfalls but on the generosity of our maker, the prolific sower who does not obsess about the condition of the fields, who is not stingy with the seed but who casts it everywhere, on good soil and bad, who is not cautious or judgmental or even very practical, but who seems willing to keep reaching into his seed bag for all eternity, covering the whole creation with the fertile seed of his truth. (**Barbara Brown Taylor**, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*)

Living the Word

You might find the following illustration helpful in terms of understanding life in the Spirit: An old Rabbi once asked his pupils how they could tell when the night had ended and the day had begun. “Could it be,” asked one of the students, “when you can see an animal in the distance and tell whether it’s a sheep or a dog?” “No,” answered the Rabbi. Another asked, “Is it when you can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it’s a fig tree or a peach tree?” “No,” answered the Rabbi. “Then what is it?” the pupils demanded. “It is when you can look on the face of any man or woman and see that it is your sister or brother. Because if you cannot see this, it is still night.”

(https://www.templeisraelcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Parashat-Vayishlach_RA-1.pdf).



The Parable of the Sower challenges us to consider how we might work with Christ to increase our own yield as well as that of the Church. What are the seeds we can plant, and where might we best plant them to obtain the best yield? These questions accord with the more traditional interpretation of the parable. Alternatively, we might focus on God’s sowing with seeming abandon; there is ample love (seed) to sow it everywhere, for our God is a God of abundance. You may even consider using both interpretations.

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Word and Life for the 8th Sunday after Pentecost – 19 July 2026

Steven Lottering

Texts

Genesis 28:10-19a or Isaiah 44:6-8
Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24 or Psalm 86:11-17
Romans 8:12-25
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Introduction

The Genesis text shows how God's covenantal promise is not thwarted by human imperfections. God's love is not based on our worthiness of that love but is given unconditionally. It is up to us to simply respond to and accept the love given. When we do, we see God at work in ways and places we may least expect. The Psalm echoes this: God knows us intimately, and yet we cannot escape God's loving presence. As we surrender to God's love, God leads us in the way that leads to life. The Epistle reading demonstrates that this is accomplished by God's Spirit at work in us, not by our own strength. God's Spirit joins with our spirit to declare that we are children of God, adopted into God's family. The Gospel reading challenges our zeal to eradicate those we consider 'evil'. We are to practise God's patient love and mercy.

Hearing the Word

Genesis 28:10-19a

This reading is part of a larger story of deceit and betrayal, and of forgiveness and reconciliation. It is also part of the even larger story of the call and covenant with Abraham to be a blessing to the nations – revealing God to all – that begins in Genesis 12.

Jacob and Esau were twins born to Isaac (son of Abraham) and Rebecca. We read that the children struggled together while still in Rebecca's womb (Genesis 25:22). Esau was born first and 'afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel' (Genesis 25:26). He was therefore named Jacob, which means 'heel grabber'. This name can also mean 'supplanter' and has connotations of one who, in order to succeed, will seek to trip another up, which is exactly what Jacob did. He first persuaded Esau to give him his birthright and then cheated him out of Isaac's blessing by deceiving Isaac and receiving the blessing meant for Esau.

In today's passage Jacob flees in fear of his life when Esau threatens to kill him. He sets up camp and encounters God in a strange dream. In the dream God re-affirms the promise he made to Abraham, and then to Isaac, that their descendants would be a blessing to the nations (v 14) by revealing God to all.

Significantly, God's promise is not thwarted by Jacob's deceit. God doesn't abandon Jacob despite his deceit. We'd expect God to choose someone more worthy of being the one whose descendants will reveal God to the nations. Significantly, God's blessing is not about worthiness.

Some writers have suggested that the ladder stretching from earth to heaven is a foreshadowing of Christ, who reconciles all things on earth and in heaven (Colossians 1:20).

Jacob comments, 'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it!' (v 16). This echoes the theme in Psalm 139 that we cannot escape God's presence.

Jacob responds to God's presence and promise with his own vow. Here is a familiar pattern – where God initiates and we respond accordingly.

Jacob and Esau are eventually reconciled in Chapter 33.

Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24

This psalm is about the omniscience and omnipresence of God. In form it hovers between a hymn, a personal prayer and a confession of faith. No attempt is made to objectify or describe God. Rather, the psalmist bows down before God in reverential awe, addressing the One whom he knows in personal experience.

That we cannot escape God's presence can be very reassuring or disturbing. That God knows our every thought before we can express it can be quite daunting. The promise that God's hand of protection surrounds us (v 5), even though God knows our every thought and action, is a powerful image.

It all comes down to our picture of God; if we see God as Love (see 1 John 4:7) then this Psalm offers profound comfort and hope. If however, we see God as some cosmic policeman, waiting for us to trip up so that we can be punished accordingly, or as a divine Santa Clause rewarding good and punishing bad, then this is a frightening Psalm.

It is here that the other lectionary readings offer insight. In Romans 8:14-16 there is a beautiful image of being adopted as children of God, no longer slaves to fear. The gospel reading shows that God does not judge indiscriminately or rapidly but is patient. In the Genesis reading, we see that nothing thwarts God's promise, not even Jacob's deception. God leads Jacob to a place of forgiveness and reconciliation with Esau and God's promise is fulfilled.

The last few verses of the Psalm (23-24) invite God to examine us, to see where there is the potential for hurtful feelings, actions or thoughts, and to lead us in the way that leads to life. This prayer puts the first section in context. God is always present, not to punish us the moment we step out of line. God knows us intimately and wants what's best for us, for others, and the world. God seeks to guide us as a loving parent nurtures a child.

Romans 8:12-25

This pericope continues to explore life in/of the Spirit, i.e. the indwelling Spirit of God that fills/empowers us with the fullness of life God that intends for us. This life begins now; it is not about life after death, but the fullness of life God intends for humanity here and now.

Because of this life in/of the Spirit we no longer have any obligation to our *carnal nature*, for ‘we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh’ (v 12b). We are not slaves to a purely instinctual way of life: we can choose our responses and reactions. We take our lead from the Spirit of God dwelling within us. ‘Being led means being moved or activated by the Spirit. Paul is still talking about the ongoing process in which the Spirit frees us to love and so more than fulfil what the Law intends.’ (Loader)

‘For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.’ (v 14). We are no longer slaves that live in fear but **adopted** as children and heirs of God! The consequences of adoption under Roman Law were significant:

‘The adopted person lost all rights in his old family and gained all the rights of a legitimate son in his new family. In the most binding legal way, he got a new father ... he became heir to his new father’s estate ... even if other sons were afterwards born, it did not affect his rights, he was inalienably co-heir with them. In law, the old life of the adopted person was completely wiped out ... all debts were cancelled ... he was regarded as a new person entering into a new life with which the past had nothing to do. In the eyes of the law he was absolutely the son of his new father.’ (William Barclay)

For Paul this meant that the new Christian entered the family of God, having done nothing to deserve it. God takes the lost, helpless, poverty-stricken, debt-laden sinner and adopted him/her into God’s own family. The debts are cancelled, and the glory is inherited.’

This glory is not restricted to humanity: ‘... creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God’. (Loader) Creation groans as with the pains of childbirth, awaiting that which must be born.

‘Glory’ is Paul’s favourite image of God’s presence and being. Paul’s hope is not golden streets and shinier rewards, but God and God’s presence ... (Paul) is not a gnostic who can’t wait to escape this evil material world. He is not a dualist who limits the focus of God’s goodness to just some segments of creation. He is not one of those ancient and modern Christians who see salvation in terms of the salvation of souls. His passionate heart goes out to all creation. He looks to its renewal, its rebirth. (Loader)

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

This is one of a series of parables of Jesus about the *Kingdom of heaven*. ‘This radically relational metaphor ... proposes nothing resembling any historical kingship, empire, patrilineage dictatorship, or top-down power, let alone the ahistorical place that came to be meant by “heaven” ... Jesus meant it to be a world in which God’s will is done, God’s purposes are fulfilled. He saw his work and that of his community as “foreshadowing” that world by beginning to actualize it here and now’. (Keller)

In the prayer Jesus taught he prays, ‘Your Kingdom come ... on earth as it is in heaven’ (Matthew 6:9-13). He wasn’t just talking of some future reality but of one that begins in the here and now. His parables have a very *earthy* feel to them; he uses examples drawn from the lived reality of his hearers.

‘Tares’, found only here, derives from the Greek word *zizanian*. This was probably a type of weed known as bearded darnel, *lolium temulentum*, common in Palestine and resembling wheat except for its black grains. In its earlier stages it was indistinguishable from the wheat stalks, so that it had to remain till near the harvest. As Roman law prohibited the sowing of darnel among the wheat of an enemy, the scenario Jesus painted was realistic and contemporary.

It must be noted that Jesus speaks of the deliberate sowing of the *zizania* by an enemy at night. ‘A sense that there is an enemy marks many societies, religious and otherwise. A mild paranoia keeps some people going and gives their lives meaning. We define life as “them” against “us”. This is the stuff of prejudice. Tragically, religion is exploited to hold these prejudices in place. This parable and its interpretation are well suited to serve such ends.

The parable suggests that it is not for us to be ‘divine weed whackers’. We are in real danger of labelling certain individuals as ‘weeds’ to be eradicated. Richard Niebuhr noted, ‘Human beings often have a way of responding to evil with acts that produce more evil, however unintended. In our determination to “do something”, we often act in ways that - beyond our best intentions - perpetuate violence, rather than repelling it’ (*On the Grace of Doing Nothing*). William Loader writes, ‘This does not mean that we avoid challenge and confrontation – it means: never ceasing to have compassion, never writing people off’.

When considering this parable, it is best to focus on the fruit we bear, and on working for a world that is more aligned with God’s intention, rather than on weeding out people we consider ‘bad’. As the old Chinese proverb puts it, ‘It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness’. God sees the heart and judgement is God’s alone.

We should be as patient and loving with others as God is with us. ‘The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.’ (2 Peter 3:9)

Interpreting the Word

Our world is becoming more polarised and, in the light of ‘cancel culture’, it becomes all too easy to write people off or shut them down, rather than seeking to listen and honour the sacred worth of all human beings. God does not give up on humanity as quickly as we might. God continues to use Jacob the deceiver and cheat, and God’s indwelling Spirit allows us to no longer be subject to base instinct but to respond with love and compassion.

We may reflect on why God deals so differently with us? Does this help us to understand why some forms of suffering might be allowed to remain in the world? Again, is it our experience that all things work together for good, and that God can be found both in the light and in the dark? How does the vision of God’s love, care and glory help to turn the place of stones into a gate of heaven? (Hulme). Why do we find it easier to identify evil in individuals than we do in systems (political, social, etc.). Why are we quick to do something about the problems in other people but we leave the social evils to others (like politicians)?

Preaching the Word

Some possible themes could be:

- Surely God is in this place, and I did not know it.
- God's irrepressible love and mercy.
- All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

Some questions that could be explored include:

How do we understand the fundamental nature and activity of God? Where in our individual and congregational lives do we experience wheat and weeds growing side by side with no dramatic discernible difference? In a world where oppression and injustice abound, is anyone exempt from evil-doing? What are our assumptions about the nature of God's judgement, and what experiences have shaped that theological belief? What does this parable teach us about challenging and confronting the presumption of human judgment? How are we to think of the mystery of God's judging activity in time and at the 'end of time'?

Living the Word

In this polarised world how can the Church practise reconciliation and practically demonstrate God's unconditional love and mercy?

Liturgical suggestions

Call to Worship

When we feel lost:

God is there.

When we feel powerless:

God is there.

When we look for wholeness:

God is there.

When we rejoice in our worship:

God is here.

(from 'Starters For Sunday', Church of Scotland, 2014.)

Litany (based on Psalm 139)

God, you know us through and through.

That's amazing!

You know everything we do.

That's scary!

You understand all our thoughts.

That's weird!

You know all our actions.

That's awesome!

You know what we're going to say.

That's more than I do!

You're all around us on every side.

That's comforting!

You protect us with your power.

That's great!

(from 'Ideas for Worship', Uniting Education)

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- "O love of God, how strong and true"
- "There's a wideness in God's mercy"
- "Thy ceaseless, unexhausted love"
- "Father God, I wonder"

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Word and Life for the 9th Sunday after Pentecost – 26 July 2026

Newton Brandt

Texts

Genesis 29:15–28/1Kings 3:5–12
Psalm 105:1–11, 45b or Psalm 128/ Ps 119:129–136
Romans 8:26–39
Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

Introduction

Light and understanding comes through God's word as the sun's light through an eastern door.

The Old Testament lessons portray God in God's mercy availing opportunities to individuals (Jacob and Solomon) and to God's nation to overcome their challenges. The lessons record their passionate reaction to these chances in life. The New Testament texts, likewise are invitations to side with the best and attain the kingdom of heaven. Those who put their hand to the plough can be assured of God's Holy Spirit being in them strengthen them and being with them that no harm or challenge can separate them from the love of God.

All are welcome to draw near, even those still uncertain of their status before God. They only need to long for guidance and instruction.

Hearing the Word

Comments on Genesis 29:15–28

The pericope is about Jacob, the cheater, son of Isaac, who brought a blemish to his name due to his selfish human strivings. He had to flee from his brother's wrath to family in a foreign land. Without any hope and a vision for his future due to lack of money and cattle, he is afforded the opportunity to offer his labour to gain his own wife and a family. All it would take is to work seven years to marry the beautiful Rachel. He does so with vigour and joy, expectantly and fully trusting Laban. He then encounters the cultural expectation of the oldest sister marrying first, and the shock when he is tricked into marrying not Rachel, but the veiled Leah. Laban remedies this disappointment by permitting Jacob to take a second wife in Rachel.

Comments on 1 Kings 3:5–12

The context of this passage is the transition in the monarchy from David to his son Solomon. Solomon went to worship and make sacrifices at Gibeon when he had a divine encounter. God appears in a dream to the young and inexperienced king Solomon to enquire about his wishes. He firstly acknowledged the God of history and his faithfulness towards his family before he requested from God to assist him in this massive task in leading his subjects with an understanding heart and spiritual discernment.

He is heaped with favour from the Living God far beyond his understanding to attain the position of the one with riches

and glory far beyond the monarchs of the past and future. In addition, long life will be bestowed upon him with a prerequisite of obedience as he must faithfully walk in the prescribed ways and commandments.

Comments on Ps 105:1–11, 45(b)

The portrait in this Psalm is sincere gratitude to God for His mighty acts in the past. Our section in focus can be divided in two sections viz. 1–6 Exhortation to praise God, and 7–11 The covenant with the patriarchs. Verse 45 is a call to faithfulness in the light of God's mercy bestowed on them. Section one calls for public proclamation of God's gracious attributes as God's dealing with Israel is a matter of universal concern. Furthermore, there must be a constant striving to be conscious of the presence of the Lord and to remember God's marvellous works.

In the second section God is portrayed as standing in a special relationship with Israel, but God is not merely a national deity as the judgements of God are in all the earth. God is faithful to the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and will extend it to many generations granting them their inheritance.

Comments on Ps 119:129–136

Ps 119 comprises of 22 sections, each 8 verses long, starting with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This section uses the introductory letter *Pe* to start each of these 8 verses.

The Psalmist extols the Torah and her testimonies. Verse 130 likens God's words to a doorway through which light flood, illuminating even the person uncertain of him/herself seeking guidance and instruction. An eager longing for the spiritual food is expressed and a plea to God to look favourably upon him (v131).

Guidance is next being pleaded for to prevent violation of the moral law when temptations come. As oppression might prevent the carrying out of his obligations, redemption is prayed for to continue observing Gods precepts ((v134).

Confidence is expressed that when God makes God's face to shine on us, the darkness of oppression is dispelled. In concluding this section, the Psalmist is overcome with sorrow at the lawlessness of the wicked.

Comments on Psalm 128

This is the ninth of the fifteen Songs of Ascents.

This precious Psalm encompasses the overarching blessings that flow from a committed life to God. What started out as a choice to show reverence to God through worship and obedience, like a seed germinates and bears fruits in all spheres of life to the delight of the recipient.

The hearers/readers are encouraged to follow suit and experience the same results in attaining success in his labour and a Godfearing family that spills over onto the blessed co-existence with the next generation.

This is one of the psalms used during the three pilgrimage festivals in Jerusalem, and so the welfare of the pilgrim is linked with the city and the temple where intercession should be made for a peaceful co-existence with others.

Comments on Romans 8:26–39

These verses are part of a larger teaching where the individual is judged (1:18–3:20), forgiven (3:2–5:21) and then sanctified (6:1–8:39) by God. So, what can believers expect whilst we persevere and hope for the *Parousia*?

Verses 26–27 Compassion will be bestowed when the intercession of the Holy Spirit will augment our ineffective prayers.

Verses 28–30 God's divine intended purposes and promises for our lives cannot be derailed as we are incorporated into a new family. All things will work together bringing about Christlikeness in the believer.

Verses 31–34 Justification can be counted on as God's sacrificial love brought a Supreme offering to secure righteousness for all.

Verses 35–39 There is no need to fear as despite trial and tribulation we will be inseparable from Christ who declares us more than conquerors and nothing can isolate us from God.

Comments on Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

The Gospel of Matthew ushers in the term '*kingdom of heaven*' (appearing 30 times). The Jewish roots of the author caused him to soften the general term *kingdom of God* for fear of speaking irreverently about the name of God.

According to Pawson, Matthew left us 'a manual for discipleship' for new believers (as envisaged in the last chapter the Great Commission). Five educational sections are interspersed with the actions of Jesus (cf. Chapters 5–7, 9:35–10:42, 13:1–52, 18:1–35 and finally chapters 24–25.) To this extent summarizing statements can be found in chapters 7:25, 11:1, 13:53, 19:1 and 26:1.

As the first section, the so-called Sermon on the Mount dealt with the *lifestyle* of the kingdom, our passage is dealing with the *growth* of the kingdom. Three of these parables, the hidden treasure, the goodly pearl, the dragnet are only found in Matthew.

The *kingdom* theme is prominent to Matthew and thus the introductions to each of the parables: *The kingdom of heaven is like ...*

Verses 31–32 relates to a process under God's direction where a mustard seed that is seemingly insignificantly, germinating and after some time, when full-grown become a tree that draws all to its protection and comfort.

Verse 33 relates it to be like leaven that silently, effortlessly, unstoppably transform the flour. It is an analogy of the saturation of the whole universal Church.

Verse 44 relates it to be like a hidden treasure that is found and creates excitement. The immeasurable find calls for decisive and deliberate action to possess it and all efforts are made to acquire it without hesitation.

Verses 45–46 relates the inestimable value of the possession of the kingdom to a merchant seeking precious pearls. He discovered a pearl that superseded all others in value and made a supreme sacrifice when he relinquished all his life efforts for the possession of this gem.

Verses 47–50 relates it to a dragnet cast out to catch fish. When drawn unto the beach a differentiation process commences between those fit and unfit (for the kingdom). Judgement will be inevitable and the decision final.

Verses 51–52 can either relate to an evaluation or a reality check for discernment, followed by another similitude of the kingdom (Thompson) or as McKnight (2003:222) indicated another parable depicting a householder or landowner mixing both old and new to provide for his family. With his fresh teachings, Jesus brings many new insights to the traditions of the past. Both are essential for those who belong to the kingdom of God.

The disciples have a treasure and are here likened to scribes who are blessed due to their understanding and insight (cf. 13:16).

Interpreting the Word

In Genesis, Laban is the benefactor and posed a question to Jacob that caused him to fathom what is worth working for (with all of your heart)? Where to do I direct my life energy? What matters to me? Where to do I sacrifice my time and energy? Will it stand the test of time? He opted to work for Rachel and he did it with such zeal that seven years seems like days.

In 1 Kings 3 the Sovereign Lord asked Solomon what he wants from life? We find a king who feels inadequate compared to the feats of his father David. He opens the distress in his heart to God. What is the road to justice? How to rule to prosper the nation? Where will he find guidance?

In Psalm 105 likewise zeal is encountered by the Psalmist in response to the question: what should our attitude be for the bestowal of God's favour? In remembrance of God's faithfulness all his innermost being and abilities are evoked to extol the Sovereign God for God's mighty deeds on behalf of his people. In joy and gratitude songs, prayers and exultation must be employed even beyond the borders of Israel.

In Ps 128 a right and committed relationship with God (living in awe of God) can see the floodgates of blessings open and overflow each sphere of the believer's life. The rewards will be visible in undertakings in labour that will result in yields during harvest that will bring joy over the providence. Marriage and family life will thrive bringing security as generations thrive. Hereto long life will be given to experience all God's favour.

In Ps 119 the highest regard for the Torah is displayed as the best guide for life and satisfaction in life. In the superlative the passion, wonder and enlightenment are described. It is a feast to spend time and to enact the directions achieved.

God is implored to be present and personal to prevent injustice from occurring. Sorrow is expressed towards those blind and unwilling to come under the protection and guidance of the Law.

In Romans 8:26–39, like with Solomon, God, the Holy Spirit, overrides our weakness and ushers in rewards far beyond human comprehension. This time its not merely royalty that benefit but to all who aspire for these gifts. On them they are freely bestowed. Nothing can disrupt our relationship or undo the salvation that incorporated us. Neither can any challenge, onslaught on our lives leave us abandoned or forsaken.

This brings us to Matthew where the Kingdom of Heaven was the central theme of the teaching of Jesus. Jesus' whole person and work was at play in this kingdom. It denotes Gods invitation to participate in something so marvellous it will fulfil our lives and wishes. Living as one of Jesus' disciples and as a member of the church can be the most rewarding experience, but zeal and effort are needed to obtain it. Action is needed from our side to participate in the kingdom of heaven.

Preaching the Word

Zeal /commitment to life and the forthcoming reward (for a committed life) can be two expressive linking words to connect the lessons. The parables depict expectation, dedication, sacrifice, joy. We need to try in our sermons to proclaim and transmit the same emotions.

The parables and related lessons indicate that action is required on revelation. Knowledge alone is futile without action. God's reign is depicted as present and already the signs of its activity are manifest. Human beings are called to make a response to the claims it lays upon them.

The knowledge of the parables may be well known to Generation X and Y, yet is possible that our hearers in these categories may never have appropriated the claim of the kingdom to themselves personally? Did they find the Truth? Do they live from the 'Treasure'? Did they surrender all to gain the 'Pearl'? We can address these in the sermon and call on them to witness that they are disciples of the kingdom.

Generation Z and Generation Alpha must be exposed to these parables to integrate the ideas in the psyche. To them everything might be relative and it is not necessary to make extensive effort towards the claims of Christ. How do we alert them that to believe in God is supposed to be the most wonderful thing that can ever happen to them?

Be it as it may be, we must display our allegiance to the One who never allows his glory to be given to another.

We can draw attention based on the mustard seed to the apparent insignificance of the Incarnation/Calvary however through the ages that ultimate drawn multitudes to the cross and into the kingdom. Likewise, an honest conversion might seem insignificant, however, an inner transformation will ensue and the fruit of the Holy Spirit cannot be mistaken where a selfish life becomes a selfless life favouring everyone around beneficially.

The draw net will result in a separation phase. Our lives matter and will have consequences when judged. In the light of the supreme sacrifice, we need to make every sacrifice to attain the kingdom of God.

Living the Word

The work ethic of Jacob can be exemplary. Seven years felt like a few days as everything was done in love and total commitment. Living in South Africa, many citizens have become complacent. The government must provide for their every need, and it is not necessary to play an active part in the enhancement of the country through any labour of love.

This is not a healthy state of affairs. Psalm 128 can remedy the situation and gratitude like that find in Psalm 105 is essential in response to Gods favour and gifts.

FOMO (fear of missing out) must be applied to the kingdom of God. Time must be set aside to analyse what really matter? The psalmist (cf. 119) was filled with sorrow about those not interested in godly principles. In each of the parable's effort was required to bring about the establishment of the kingdom of God. Likewise, a committed life is required to grow spiritually and attain the bliss set before us.

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Liturgy for the 9th Sunday after Pentecost – 26 July 2026

Newton Brandt

Introduction

The lessons of this Sunday deal with invitations to individuals (Jacob and Solomon) and Israel as a nation, to enhance their lives. They responded positively and the rewards spilled over to those they interacted with. The similitudes of the kingdom in the parables show people who took action and were richly rewarded.

Likewise, our hearers can participate in something so marvelous and exemplary as the kingdom of God. All must be encouraged to join this venture as the fruit of the Holy Spirit will ultimately bring contented lives, visible with benefit to others.

Texts

Genesis 29:15–28/1Kings 3:5–12
Psalm 105:1–11, 45b or Psalm 128/ Ps 119:129–136
Romans 8:26–39
Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

Gathering in God's Name

O God, Fountain of light and truth, give to your Church a new vision and a new charity, new wisdom and understanding. Let the eternal message of your Son, not be confused by the traditions of humans, but be hailed as the good news of a new kingdom. We praise Jesus Christ our Lord who made all things new.

Call to worship (from Ps 119:129–136)

Your statutes are wonderful;
therefore I obey them.
The unfolding of your words gives light;
it gives understanding to the simple.
I open my mouth and pant,
longing for your commands.
Turn to me and have mercy on me,
as you always do to those who love your name.
Direct my footsteps according to your word;
let no sin rule over me.
Redeem me from human oppression,
that I may obey your precepts.
Make your face shine on your servant
and teach me your decrees.
Streams of tears flow from my eyes,
for your law is not obeyed.

Act of Penitence

O Lord Jesus Christ, who is faithful in all your words and promises. You are holy in all your ways. We do not know how to pray aright. Grant, therefore that your Spirit may intercede for us. Please sanctify us with your gifts here and now as we endeavour to participate in your kingdom. May others benefit from our lives and give the glory to You. Crown us with blessedness, through your mercy, when your angels will usher in those who belong to your final kingdom. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer for illumination

Lord, we thank you for life and the possibility to hear your word. Thank you for the promised Comforter. We now implore you Holy Spirit to come to our aid. We do not know how to pray and act aright. Intercede for us at the Father according to His will. Give us perseverance to know that all things will work together for good for those who love Christ. Open our minds and hearts to realize who we are in Christ. That nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Remind us that no encounter, no matter how bad can leave us forsaken from You. Upheld us with you right hand till we encounter that we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us and brought us into his kingdom. Amen.

Responding to the Word of God

Lord Almighty God, we praise you that you, despite your sovereignty, are a God of visitations to the lowly and the inadequate. Thank you for the experiences of Jacob, Solomon and Mary. We thank you for the gifts and accompaniment you bestowed on them.

This day you have visited us through your Word, inviting us to a marvellous opportunity to partake in your kingdom. Help us to surrender all and make every effort to have You, our Treasure, in our lives.

We thank you Lord, for the gift of the Holy Spirit to assist us in our prayers and the transformation from unbelief to true faith in You. Thank you that nothing and no-one can separate us from your love and the salvation you earned for us so dearly.

May we be a shelter from the storms and the heat for others and may our heart be in sorrow for those wandering without a Shepherd, till they embrace your love too.

We pray for the establishment of your kingdom, but plea that those you died for will speedily respond to your mercy and turn from their ways. Through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.

Sentence of Scripture

Therefore, every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old. (Matt13:52)

Benediction

May the Almighty God visit you with His favor.
May He bestow upon you his wisdom and discernment.
May your surrender to the proclamation of Jesus Christ usher you into His kingdom.

May you have a peace that surpasses all understand as the Holy Spirit transform you; underscore your prayer and assure you that nothing can separate you from the love of Christ. Amen

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- “The Gospel bells are ringing”
- “I love thy Kingdom, Lord”
- “Savior, Thy dying love”
- “Have it all-surrender”
- “I found it all!”

Word and Life for the 10th Sunday in Pentecost 2 August 2026

Bruce Theron

Text

Psalm 17:1–7, 15 and Psalm 145:8–9 & 14–21
Genesis 32:22–31 and Isaiah 55:1–5
Romans 9:1–5
Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30

Introduction

In writing this outline I am aware that this is woman's month, and so I acknowledge my limitation as a male in crafting a sermon outline for women's month. I would like to think of myself as non-discriminatory, yet I cannot extract myself from my context as a male and as a result my male bias. I will nevertheless try to be sensitive enough to explicate the inclusiveness of the texts and to build on that a gender sensitive focus.

Hearing the Word

Genesis 32:22–31

Before we mete out sympathy to Jacob for what seems like an unprovoked attack by a man at midnight, be reminded of what has gone before. Jacob had defrauded Esau by taking the blessing that Isaac intended for Esau (Genesis 27). And then he fled from the consequences of his actions. Not only did he flee, but he also stayed away a long time, possibly hoping that Esau would forget. Now, 20 years later, the brothers are to meet up again. Jacob expects the worst, and prepares for this meeting by preparing a gift for his brother (Gen. 32:13–16). Jacob learns that Esau will come with four hundred men – Gen 33:1. In Jacob's imagination they will be armed with swords. Jacob took every precaution in the run-up to meeting his brother, no doubt with much trepidation. The irony is that all these precautions were unnecessary. We are told that Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him.

Today's text lies between the two appearances of the Lord at Bethel (28:10–22 & 35:9–13). Just as God encountered Jacob when he fled the promised land because of his brother's anger, so also God encounters him at the point of re-entry and again anticipating his brother's anger. The second encounter is when Jacob is on his way home, fearful of how he might be received by his brother Esau. Here he wrestles with 'a man until daybreak', indeed, until he receives a blessing. The author of Genesis does not identify the assailant, other than referring to him as "the man." However, it becomes evident that the 'man' is none other than God who blesses Jacob and gives him his new name, Israel. Jacob calls the place Peniel saying "*For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved*" (32:30). We do not come out of wrestling with God unscathed, because change is painful. Jacob appears vulnerable and alone, in need of divine care. But that it is in this way that God's promise and purpose is fulfilled.

Isaiah 55:1–5

This text speaks of grace abounding. It is believed that this poem by Second Isaiah is written for the consolation of Israel, in exile. This is reminiscent of the words in Ch.40:1: "*comfort, comfort my people*". The poem continues the major theme of Ch.54, which speaks of the covenant with its bond of covenant faithfulness, the assurance of well-being and peace, and the appeal to the compassion and everlasting devotion are common in both poems. In the first strophe (stanza) (55:1–2), the invitation is to the hungry and thirsty. The poet symbolizes the gift of the new covenant by the figure of food and drink, which give life to all who partake of them.

The second strophe is an invitation built on the "come". To come implies a summons to hear. For there is a promise of a new covenant promised to David, whom God has made a witness and leader. Though the emphasis falls on David, the covenant is intended for the people of Israel.

Psalm 17:1–7:15

Psalm 17 is a psalm and prayer of lament. The psalmist pleads to the Lord for deliverance from enemies, who are out to destroy me, from my mortal enemies who surround me. The Psalmist's prayer is an appeal and a petition, listen to my cry, hear my prayer. The psalmist ends, expressing a conviction of being heard.

Psalm 145:8–9 & 14–21

This psalm in turn is a psalm of praise. The previous verses build up to the affirmation that the Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The psalmist then extols the goodness, the faithfulness of the Lord who is righteous and faithful, who is ever near, who fulfils the desires of those who fear the Lord and one who watches over those who love the Lord.

Romans 9:1–5

Paul is the object of much suspicion and hostility. In Ch 8 he expresses a kinship to his people in Rome and he feels that the whole human race, Jew and Gentile needs to be put right with God. After his threefold affirmation, Paul admits his continuing love for his fellow Jews.

Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30

In this text, the ministries of John and Jesus are juxtaposed. John is the serious prophet, with strong ascetic tendencies: he came neither eating nor drinking. His life mirrors the prophet Elijah but is accused of having a demon. Then Jesus is accused of being in league with tax collectors and sinners because he both ate and drank with all manner of people.

Matthew 11:25–27 is the first time where Jesus claims unique sonship to God: note in particular v. 27, "*no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son.*" This is different to where it was previously presupposed that the believers knew God and God's character from the Old Testament.

Interpreting the Word

Jacob, now married to both Leah and Rachel and family have finally left Laban, his father-in-law. Soon he is to deal with meeting his brother, Esau. Because of his earlier deceit, he is terrified. His prayer for protection against Esau is very telling, *“I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness... save me, I pray from the hand of my brother Esau”*. This agonizing struggle was only between Jacob and God. No human intervention would make any difference.

The man touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Jacob knew he could no longer walk with lofty arrogance. And what must’ve been sheer desperation as opposed to his former arrogance, Jacob exclaimed. *“I will not let you go.”* Jacob is holding on for dear life. And in this act of desperation two things come though. The one is the awareness that life has a divine meaning and just maybe he saw his life for what it really was. One of deception and in the presence of the stranger, maybe he saw an element and sensed the presence of the divine. Secondly, he was holding on until something happened. He could no longer hide, nor ignore his sins. He could not allow daylight to rob him of his blessing.

Jacob is renamed as Israel, something confirmed a little later in a third encounter with God, once again at Bethel, when the promise given to Abraham is also reaffirmed. *‘The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you.’* (35:12) In these encounters, all the promises already made to Abraham are now brought together and focussed on Jacob. From this moment Jacob has a new sense of vocation as the bearer of the promise. Indeed, the whole point of the stories is to reaffirm God’s promise to Abraham now lived through Jacob. Keep in mind those who collected these stories compiled and edited them much later after Israel was settled in the Promise Land. Keep in mind the audience, the people of Israel, who heard the stories being told and retold. For them, Jacob’s story becomes their story, just as Jacob’s name becomes Israel.

The appeal in Isaiah is an inclusive one. All you who are thirsty. Does this suggest that already the prophet is beginning Israel’s message to all people? They are in Babylon and no doubt concerned about issues as to what to eat for their survival and progress. To this end, he makes his plea. Come for water, bread, wine and milk. This infers the basic elements. Then he prepares them for the new covenant and renewed relationship with God.

Despite **Paul’s** newfound faith in Christ, he is loyal to his heritage: *“I have great sorrow and anguish in my heart.”* He has accepted what his friends rejected in not accepting the Jesus as the Son of God. With so much intensity and conviction he expressed the wish that he was cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people. He was willing to forego abundant life in order that they might discover what he knows.

In **Matthew 11** Jesus relates a parable about children in the marketplace. Jesus describes John’s ministry and his own ministry in vivid contrasting metaphors. John’s ministry is like a funeral, meaning gloomy, sincere and stern. His own ministry is like that of a wedding, one of joy and good news.

There is a deeper meaning to this joy, namely a consciousness of oneness with God. Behind these metaphors, there is a deeper cause for joy, it being a deep awareness of being Christ conscious and a oneness with God. And in the words of Jesus, V.27, *yes Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.*

The great invitation surely, must also be directed at those who burdened with the “works of the law.” That burden, that heavy yoke that must be weighing people down. This must clearly be a reference to the burden of the yoke of the law. That “all” is an open invitation that knows no bounds or limit. It is an invite of embrace and welcome to all – come to me!

Preaching the Word

At this point let me state the obvious: August is Women’s month. But not one of the texts reference any woman! Despite my best intentions, I am challenged to do justice to the text and also to the day. I am convinced that the context interprets the text, and so I encourage us to use the context of Women’s Month to aid us in interpreting the text.

The theme has to do with wrestling with God: Nobody can wrestle with God and be unchanged. Change is painful, but that it is only in this way that God’s promise and purpose is fulfilled. Throughout scripture we read of those who debated, prayed and showed resilience in the face of adversity. Abraham, Moses, Ruth, Mary the Mother of Jesus, and later Paul, to name but a few. The prime example is Jesus, who in the days leading up to the crucifixion was in constant prayer, culminating in his prayer: *“my Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”*

Jacob: In the process of wrestling with God Jacob does not come out unscathed. The wrestling of Jacob and the stranger captures the image of grappling, reasoning and staying present to the promptings of God. All too often sermons are moral lessons on how to live and how to be prosperous. Yet this wrestling recalls the well-known devotional exercise of ‘dwelling in the word.’ It calls for an engaged reading of a text to listen for what the text is saying. And as we wrestle with Jacob’s story there might be a moment of discomfort in the way Jacob sends his wives ahead of him to Esau as if they are expendable ‘cannon-fodder’ to be used for Jacob’s protection. Let us struggle with the way our society assumes women ought to raise and protect our families while the men do more important things!

In **Isaiah**, *“listen, listen to me. And again, give ear and come to me.”* This is not a passive engagement, but a call to engage earnestly and grapple (wrestle) with the Lord. The invitation for the thirsty to come is feminine – it is most often the mothers who call the hungry and the thirsty to the table to be nourished. Let us grapple with the way we confine the preaching and exercise of Christian ministry primarily to men. Let the women extend the invitation to come to the Lord.

In Romans **Paul** also speaks of unceasing anguish in my heart. This engaging wrestling does not end in one being crowned victor. It is the act of being engaged with the divine that leads to weeping and anguish for the people of God.

This evokes the image of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem “as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings” (Luke 13:34). This decidedly feminine image of hugging those who are scattered is helpful when all words fail. This resonates with the timely words in Psalm 145, where we are reminded that the Lord is gracious and compassionate... the Lord watches overall. The month of August calls the church to make a preferential option for the marginalized women who can teach us the attributes of God.

Living the Word

In modern culture of male dominance, underwritten by a yearning for prosperity, re-reading these texts through the eyes of women become a difficult challenge. Encourage women to speak out and draw attention to the obvious and also, more subtle ways of gender discrimination and

alienation. It may be very prophetic to juxtapose what Christians are called to be and how to live, with the reality of the violence and abuse in society and in families. The church as the body of Christ is mandated to stand up and stand out and be the voice of those whose voices have gone silent. It may also be very prophetic if a public pronouncement can be made where the church takes a stand against all the violence meted out to women and children. Maybe a press statement too, where the church calls on the authorities to act swiftly in bringing perpetrators to book.

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Liturgy for 10th Sunday in Pentecost – 2 August 2026

Bruce Theron

Introduction

August is Women's month. This month is different to a mothers' day celebration. Where mothers' day may be joyful, albeit a wee bit sad, women's month is different. It conjures up stories of neglect, violence, abuse and femicide. The texts do not obviously relate to this, so we will need great sensitivity to create awareness and consciousness of the scourge of domestic violence and of gender abuse.

Texts

Psalm 17:1–7, 15 and Psalm 145:8–9 & 14–21

Genesis 32:22–31 and Isaiah 55:1–5

Romans 9:1–5

Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30

Gathering in God's name

Call to worship (Psalm 145)

The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich to love.

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

The Lord is good to all, he has compassion on all he has made.

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

The Lord upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down.

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time.

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

The Lord is Righteous in all his way and faithful in all he does.

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

The Lord is near all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

He fulfils the desires of those who fear him, he hears their cry and saves them.

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

The Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

My mouth will speak in praise of the Lord.

Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever.

Act of Penitence

Absolution or Assurance of Forgiveness

Hear our prayer, Lord, our plea is just, listen to our cry.

Hear our prayer, it does not rise from deceitful lips.

Let our vindication come from you, may your eyes see what is right.

Lord in your mercy.

Hear our prayer and may our cries and pleas be heard.

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer for Illumination

Loving and eternal God, in this season of Lent and in the spirit of Women's month, as we turn to the Scriptures, open our ears to hear, our eyes to see and may our hearts be receptive as we prepare to reflect and meditate on your word.

Amen

Responding to the Word of God

In anticipation and preparation for this month, it may help to have posters of awareness put up. Have invites for requests for prayers well in advance. (Be careful to maintain anonymity.) If there are survivors who are willing to share their stories, that will also be meaningful.

Lord, we are sorry for the many times we have left you
And chosen to satisfy our own selfish desires.

For the times we have hurt the members of our families
By refusing to do our share of building up your kingdom.

Father we have sinned. Forgive us.

For the times we were unkind and impatient

And ignored the hurt we witnessed in those who needed our time.

Father we have sinned. Forgive us.

For the times we were too weak to stand up for what was right,

And allowed others to suffer because of our cowardice.

Father we have sinned. Forgive us.

For the times we have refused to forgive others.

Father we have sinned. Forgive us.

Then sum up the prayers by praying for

- Families
- Victims of violence
- Those who constantly suffer abuse
- Agencies working to combat the scourge
- For the church to remain a safe space and a beacon of hope.

Celebrating at the table

Sharing of the Peace

Peace, I leave with you. My peace I give you. I do not give you (peace) as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. (John 14:27)

Invitation to Communion

The sacrament of Holy Communion to be celebrated according to individual traditions.

Sending

Go in peace as the reaffirmed church of Jesus Christ.

We go to be his body in a broken world.

May the grace of God and the love of Christ go with you.

Amen

Benediction

The Lord will bless you and keep you;
The Lord makes his face to shine upon you
And be gracious to you
The Lord turns his face toward you
And give you peace. (Numbers 6:24–26)

Amen

Word and Life for the 11th Sunday after Pentecost – 09 August 2026

James Harris

Texts

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28
Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45
Romans 10:5-15
Matthew 14:22-33

Introduction and Rationale for the Key Text

The Gospel narrative is about faith in Jesus and faith in his word, ‘word’ here meaning his invitation, his sustaining grace and power, and thus his divine persona as embodied in ‘Word’. From being frightened nearly out of their wits to adoring worship is a considerable journey in a short space of time. It was Peter who gave opportunity for their experience by his usual ebullient response to the circumstance. ‘If it is you, Lord, bid me come to you!’ ‘Come!’ says Jesus. Over the side of the boat Peter goes, eyes on Jesus; but then – he realises that walking on water is not something he normally does! He becomes conscious of the storm, and reality hits home; he begins to sink, and so cries out for help. Jesus prevents Peter from drowning and together they get safely into the boat. Faith processes from initial trust into adoration. Jesus’ actions and words create faith to do and to adore.

So, to Romans 10: 5-15, and the faith that is exercised in this passage. It is faith in the incarnation, in the resurrection, in the proclamation of those features of the divine message, and I would venture, even faith in the method of preaching the message, that is emphasised here.

At the centre of Paul’s comments about the message of the Messiah, is having faith that God can and will bring all the Gentiles and all the Jews to salvation. And the call to faith is no small thing; against all odds, it seems, for people do not normally walk on water, gods rarely if ever become human, dead people do not usually rise from death, and nations, in their entirety, do not embrace a different religious conviction.

Hearing the Word

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

In this story we follow the steady arrival of the twelve young men born to the two mothers, Leah and Rachel, as well as to their maids, Bilhah and Zilpah. Here, for the first time, we encounter Joseph, son of Jacob’s favourite wife Rachel. Joseph is his father’s favourite son and is given a long robe with sleeves. The other brothers are not at all happy about Joseph’s gifts from his father, nor about the dreams that he had and revealed to them.

The ten older brothers moved to Shechem to pasture their flocks, and Jacob suggested that Joseph should go to them to see how they were getting on and to bring news back to Jacob. This when these jealous brothers seized the opportunity to get rid of him.

The first plan was to kill Joseph, kill a goat and put the blood on some clothes to suggest that an animal had attacked and killed Joseph. But Reuben, the oldest of the sons of Jacob,

suggested that they should sell Joseph to the travelling merchants passing by. Joseph is sold to traders who are bound for Egypt, the brothers return to Jacob with clothes covered in blood. Jacob is distraught.

On the surface there seems little connection between this Joseph story and today’s other texts. But read carefully and you see human cruelty, familial favouritism, bitter jealousy, and conflict. Further, given the Psalmist’s portrayal of providence, the story of Joseph reminds us that even human evil is utilized for the outworking of God’s ultimate purposes. It is only faith that enables reason to see the complexity of the interplay between personal and communal histories.

Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45

The selected verses enable us to reflect on the mighty works of God in history. John Durham (1971:383) draws attention to the record in 1 Chronicles 16 where these words are included as part of the record of King David’s returning of the Ark to Jerusalem.

The providence of God is poetically portrayed in verses 16-22, where another aspect of Joseph’s story is referred to. Note how the poem embellishes the Genesis record in verse 18, where the Psalmist adds that Joseph was chained by leg fetters and an iron neck collar. Then, once freed, Joseph is given an instructional role over and above his political and economic responsibilities (v 22). Providence reminds us of a big picture philosophy in our faith journey.

Verse 45 neatly sums up the psalm and history: ‘The meaning or objective of all this is so you may obey the revealed will and purposes of God, and to praise God for such care for creature and creation alike’. Faith includes having a sense of meaning and purpose in both personal and total histories.

Romans 10:5-15

First off, we need to read the whole chapter carefully, and then re-read it to ensure the link is clear. Follow thus up by read chapter 11 and see how Paul puts the whole argument together. There is always a danger of just reading the assigned text. Get the big picture clearly in your mind. Concomitant with this is to grapple with Paul’s use of the texts from the Hebrew Bible. Käsemann comments that John Calvin ‘...was shocked ...’ by the seemingly free way Paul used the Hebrew Bible texts (1980:284). Perhaps this was Pauline rhetoric: free use to make his point.

Related to this is Paul’s view of the Law. It is commonplace today for Christian theologians to disparage the Law. Some have argued strongly for doing away with the Law altogether. Such a view is based on English translations of passages where Jesus, for instance, is spoken of as ‘the end of the Law’. Thus, Fedler (2011:326) suggests that Jesus ‘...terminates the Law as a means of salvation’. Again, ‘...the Law no longer serves the function of reconciling humans with God’ (*ibid* 328). I am unconvinced that the Hebrew Bible ever taught that the Law was a means for reconciliation, righteousness,

or salvation. Jesus himself said that he came not to abrogate the Law but to fulfil it, to bring it to its proper purpose. Further, Paul has honoured the Jewish tradition in Chapter 9 by referring to Law as part of the rich heritage from God. Thus, 'end' in this context is not rejection but fulfilment, completion. Elsewhere, Paul speaks of the Law as a 'school master to Christ' (Galatians 3:24). The Law was designed not as a means to salvation but a guide to seeking salvation. The sacrificial system portrayed in the Hebrew Bible is a corollary of Law. God's ancient people were not required to have faith in the sacrifices, per se, but in the God who was behind the meaning of sacrifice. The Epistle to the Hebrews uses the sacrificial system as a shadow of Christ's work on the cross. There the principle is the same: faith is exercised in the meritorious nature of the death of an innocent animal (in an earlier era) and of Christ (as the fulfiller of all things). Thus it is through the 'blood' that salvation is gained.

Matthew 14:22-33

Early in the morning the fishermen, disciples of Jesus, see a figure appearing before them. Initially they think it a 'ghost', an apparition (remember such belief was common in those days). Given that they had been on the water all night fishing, they were now tired and somewhat prone to hallucinations or mind tricks. This is an observation that some commentators suggest. Fair enough, but the rest of the story indicates a very different interpretation.

Peter and the other fishermen testify that it is in fact Jesus who is walking on the sea towards them. Is it credible that all of them would agree to construe, to fabricate such a remarkable myth? Certainly, for modern and post-modern minds, such a story is bizarre.

We must remember, however, that the record is not designed merely to tell a story, but to focus our minds on the character of Jesus. Walking on water is not possible for a human, but for God, why not? None of the miracles are ends in themselves, they always point to the matter at hand. God is present in the person of Jesus.

Interpreting the Word

I have a sense that the texts and stories before us offer the possibility for imaginative interpretations, for a 'hermeneutic of imagination'. Theologians have used terms like 'hermeneutics of trust/suspicion' in grappling with texts. Both means are valuable to get to the heart of stories. We are to ask: what is actually being said; what is left out; does the wider context reflect something different; do other texts throw any light on the meaning of the story? Imagination is not mere flight of fancy, though. It is a mechanism that can degenerate into the absurd; but not necessarily so. Imagination can take the stories of a narrative and open them up for insightful interpretation and application to life.

The texts for today certainly do some of this. The Psalm gives insight into the Genesis narrative. The exercise of faith in the Gospel story suggests a parallel in Romans. The idea of 'providence' intersects all four passages of Scripture. To what degree, do you think, would the Joseph story, the walking on the water narrative, or the hope of Israel's salvation, all be helpful by an imaginative retelling

for a contemporary congregation? Put another way: is there something of the common person in these narratives?

Preaching the Word

There are two prominent ideas or themes that could be preached here. The central idea of faith must not be overlooked, however, for it is dominant. Related is the theme of providence, a topic not mentioned often, even as an aside in sermons. Providence is a rich theme and could benefit hearers in every setting. It is a topic for which personal illustrations can be appropriate, as long as they are apposite! Be sensitive in your manner of preaching here. This is 'big picture' preaching, with a broad sweep of ideas historically and experimentally. And much of this is indeed 'interpretive', and idiosyncratic at that. Providence cannot be preached dogmatically, assertively; only gently and tentatively.

Living the Word

To preach either on faith or providence will, it seem to me, require some personal experience in both realities. Here are topics that almost demand personal stories as illustrations of these experiences. How has your faith revealed God's grace, love, and provision, especially in adversity? What stories can you tell of God's providence when looking back on your life? These themes pose some of the greatest challenges for a preacher: how do we give contemporary credence to what is being said? These themes require lived encounters with God. And, while we must not embellish or exaggerate our experiences, personal illustrations will give greater credibility to the sermons.

But outside the preaching context, how do we live out our faith? Are we conscious of noticing providence in our own lives? These two questions raise the need for caution: preacher, please be careful how you use personal illustrations. Try not to give the impression that because this is your experience, it has to be the experience of your hearers in just the same way. Making our own experience a benchmark for others is dangerous, and often harmful. Be pastorally gentle.

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Word and Life for the 12th Sunday after Pentecost – 16 August 2026

Michael Craig

Texts

Genesis 45:1-15 or Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Psalm 133 or Psalm 67

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

Introduction

The central message of our Christian faith is the gospel. In Romans 1:16-17 the Apostle Paul writes that the gospel 'is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."' The gospel is about our salvation. It is about God's righteousness being revealed in Christ and the righteousness that we receive through our faith in Christ.

Hearing the Word

Genesis 45:1-15 or Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

The Genesis passage is the story of Joseph being reunited with his brothers. Joseph was sold by his brothers as a slave. He ends up in Egypt, where he rises to become an influential leader in Pharaoh's house. In this passage Joseph reveals himself to his brothers who have come seeking food because there is famine in the land. Joseph does not blame them for what they did to him. Rather he sees the hand of God in it. God has sent him to Egypt where, through his influence, he will be able to 'to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors' (Genesis 45:7). In all this God is saving God's people with whom he made an everlasting covenant through their patriarch Abraham and all his descendants. This was a promise that God would be their God, and that they would prosper and walk blameless before God (see Genesis 17:1-8).

The Isaiah passage also concerns God's salvation, a deliverance that will soon come and be revealed. The exhortation from God is to keep justice and do righteousness. The passage, though, points to foreigners, those who previously were not included amongst God's 'covenant' people. They, too, would join themselves to God and hold fast to God's covenant. It is not difficult from a Christian perspective to see how in Christ God is incorporating these 'foreigners', Gentiles, into God's covenant people.

Psalm 133 or Psalm 67

Psalm 133 celebrates brothers dwelling in unity, living together in a place of prosperity. There is reference to Aaron and the anointing oil that runs down his beard, the oil used in the ordination or consecration of the priests. This image means that when Israel is true to God's calling and purpose, this will be displayed before the world. The closing verse speaks of the dew of Mount Hermon, which falls on Mount Zion. Mount Hermon is the highest mountain in the north

of Israel. From here comes the moisture that is dropped on Jerusalem. It is there that God has commanded the blessing, life for evermore.

Psalm 67 is a prayer for God's blessing, that through God's people all the world will see their God. It is pointing to the universality of this faith in the one true and living God of Israel.

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

In Romans 11 Paul is dealing with the question of how Israel is included in God's purposes in Christ. He asks: has God rejected God's people? His answer is 'no'. God's calling is irrevocable; God does not go back on God's promises. It is through their disobedience, their unbelief, that God has been able to show mercy. Paul concludes that all are disobedient and so God in Christ can show mercy to all. It is a pity that the passage does not include the intervening verses where Paul likens the Gentiles to a wild olive shoot grafted on to Israel the olive tree, that both may share in the nourishment of its roots.

Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

Here a Canaanite woman seeks healing for her daughter who is oppressed by demons. Jesus has withdrawn from his Galilean ministry into the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon. The Canaanite woman is a Gentile. Jesus insists that his ministry is first to the lost sheep of Israel. The disciples want him to send her away because she is a disturbing annoyance to them. Yet Jesus hears the woman. He recognises her faith and the daughter is healed, instantly. When we compare this to the previous passage (vv 10-20) we may see the deeper significance of the Gentile healing. Here Jesus makes the point that it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, in this case food eaten with unwashed hands, but what comes out of the mouth that defiles a person. What comes out of the mouth comes from the heart. If the heart is 'defiled' so too will that which comes out of the mouth. Evil heart, evil deeds. This is in reference to the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and scribes who insisted on the Law but their hearts were impure. In contrast Jesus honours the heartfelt faith of the Canaanite woman, regarded as an impure Gentile.

Interpreting the Word

The overarching theme of all these readings can be expressed in this question: "who are the true people of God?"

We see a development of the idea of God's people in our readings. In the Genesis passage God is saving a remnant of God's people through the events surrounding Joseph and his brothers. These sons of Jacob form the twelve tribes of Israel, but Joseph is excluded. We may well ask why? Does he represent the outsider, the Gentile, the Egyptian, in God's purpose?

The Psalms celebrate the idea of God's people. In Psalm 133 it is the unity of brothers under God's covenant. Psalm 67 celebrates the idea of all nations being called into this covenant people. Here is the universality, or to be more accurate, the catholicity of our faith, a faith that starts in Israel but proceeds to the furthest corners of the world.

In Romans Paul deals with the issue of how his Jewish brothers and sisters are included in the plans and purposes of God in the gospel. His answer is that both Jew and Gentile (Greek have been) disobedient may receive God's mercy.

In the reading from Matthew the healing of a Gentile, a Canaanite woman, the question is asked: what makes a person pure? The answer is the heart. It also points to the ministry of Jesus, a ministry which begins amongst God's chosen people the Israelites and then is shared with all the world as the gospel message spreads from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

The key Romans passage indicates that God's people are all those whom God calls, for the gospel of Jesus is a global and inclusive message.

In interpreting these passages and others we may well end up in the controversies of our time.

On the one hand we may encounter Replacement Theology, the idea that the Church replaces Israel, it is the 'new' Israel. This way of thinking would ignore many passages of Scripture, including Romans 11, where Paul points to the promises of God being irrevocable. God will not go back on God's promises to Israel. It is also a way of thinking that has a bad record in the virulent and destructive anti-Semitism of our time.

On the other hand, we may encounter Christian Zionism which conflates the biblical Israel with the modern State of Israel. It sees the reinstatement of Israel as a fulfilment of prophecy. Prophecies are ripped out of their biblical context and made to further what is essentially a political ideal. God's standards of justice and righteousness are discarded to further a political ideal. The rights and even lives of others are expendable.

Both extremes are diversions from the centrality of the gospel. In Christ God is calling and uniting and reconciling all people to himself. It is a call of inclusion, of grace, and a call to righteousness and justice. Our starting point should be the gospel and not a particular ideology or theology. We should also be mindful that the essence of Jesus' teaching was Kingdom and not Church, inclusion rather than exclusion.

Preaching the Word

The readings today offer a wonderful foundation for preaching the gospel:

We see in the scriptural record how God has called a people to himself. We can follow a theme of God's purposes to save and deliver God's people. We reach the final outcome – which is the teaching and example of Jesus. The essence of his message was purity of heart. Romans tells how God has gone about reconciling God's chosen people and the Gentiles. For God's promises are irrevocable and the state of all humankind, both Jew and Gentile, is the same – that of disobedience. This is the gospel, and here is an answer to the disobedience (sin) and a call to be a people of all nations, reconciled to God and to each other.

Living the Word

How do God's people, receiving this message, live by it? How do we become both hearers and doers of the Word? Perhaps a good starting point is to ask what values are embedded in the gospel? How do these values influence the way we proclaim the gospel, not only in our preaching but also in the witness of our lives? Are our motives pure? Is our need that of the Canaanite woman? Will we be the scribes and Pharisees of our time, puffed up with our own knowledge and opinions but lacking in grace and love? Does what comes from our mouths come from hearts that are pure?

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Word and Life for the 13th Sunday after Pentecost – 23 August 2026

Craig Morrison

Texts

Exodus 1:8 – 2:10 | Isa 51:1-6
Psalm 124 | Psalm 138
Romans 12:1-8
Matthew 16:13-20

Introduction

Year A of the Revised Common Lectionary for the thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost brings a bold challenge to confront the powers of “empire.” On sacred ground, God calls Moses by name, revealing Godself to this exiled Hebrew who once failed to free God’s people. In the wilderness, the fugitive Moses meets God, finds a profound new sense of belonging, and receives a life-changing mission.

Hearing the Word

Exodus 1:8 – 2:10

Moses was minding his own business, tending his father-in-law’s flock, when everything changed in an instant. On the edge of an ordinary day, Moses stumbles upon something extraordinary: a bush that burns but doesn’t burn up. The fire in that bush speaks volumes: it mirrors the suffering of the Israelites, oppressed, yet not destroyed. This miraculous sight is not just a random anomaly but a divine encounter that will forever alter Moses’ path and calling. The flame, symbolizing God’s enduring presence, becomes a beacon of hope for a people who are struggling yet unbroken. And where does this all unfold? At the very foot of the mountain that will later be named Sinai, where Moses’ mission to free the Israelites will come full circle. The goal? To bring God’s people into the freedom they were destined for, and to claim them as God’s own.

Isaiah 51:1-6

The prophet Isaiah bursts onto the scene with a powerful, life-altering message: hope is coming, and it will be beyond what anyone could imagine. The familiar tone of judgment is nowhere to be found. Instead, Isaiah flips the script and paints a picture of a transformed future. The wasteland of Israel is suddenly envisioned as a flourishing Eden, reversing all expectations. The prophet isn’t just speaking words, he’s pushing the people toward a new reality, one that promises redemption and renewal where they once only saw desolation. Isaiah’s words call for radical change, inviting the people to believe in the unimaginable.

Psalm 124

Imagine being swept up in the collective cry of an entire people, looking to the heavens with desperation, wondering: “If the Lord had not been on our side...” This psalm, sung as the Israelites made their way to the temple, asks a daring question: Does God really take sides? The scandalous answer is yes, but not in the way we expect. God is on the side of both you and your enemies.

In the tension of this strange truth, we realize that God’s commitment to us, and to all humanity, is boundless. This psalm doesn’t just express gratitude; it challenges us to see God’s love as something that transcends our divisions, uniting all people in divine purpose.

Psalm 138

Psalm 138 sings with the voice of an individual, yet its praise echoes the faith of the entire community. With deep gratitude, the psalmist lifts up personal thanksgiving for God’s goodness, but in doing so, invites all of us into the same act of worship. It’s a call to recognize God’s hand in our lives, not just as individuals but as part of a larger, shared experience of faith. The psalm’s message resonates with everyone—each of us, in our own way, participating in the collective outpouring of praise and thanksgiving to the One who binds us all together.

Romans 12:1-8

Paul’s letter to the Romans is nothing short of revolutionary. It’s a blueprint for a new way of living, one that turns conventional wisdom on its head. Rather than individualism, Paul calls for a radical embrace of community, where each person’s unique gifts are celebrated and used to build the body of Christ. Every member of the church, regardless of their role or talent, is essential in advancing God’s kingdom. The message is clear: when we act with humility and offer our gifts in service to others, we are not just enriching the church—we are magnifying God’s glory on earth. This is no mere letter; it’s a call to transform the world through selfless love and sacrificial service.

Matthew 16:13-20

Peter nails it: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” In that moment, his declaration shines with clarity, no doubt, no hesitation. It’s no surprise that Peter gets it right; after all, he’s been with Jesus from the start, soaking in every lesson, every miracle, every moment. But in this moment of divine revelation, Peter steps forward with a confession that marks a turning point. Jesus isn’t just a teacher, a prophet, or a healer, he is the long-awaited Messiah. And Peter? He’s the first to declare it. This is just the beginning of something monumental.

Interpreting the Word

Exodus 1:8 – 2:10

Moses, just another shepherd tending his father-in-law’s flock, stumbles upon something that will change everything. A bush on fire – but it doesn’t burn up. Intrigued, Moses decides to investigate, and in that moment, God speaks. This isn’t a cold, distant deity; this is a God who connects, who responds when we take the time to listen. Though God is supreme and sovereign, this passage reveals a deeply relational God who calls Moses by name, inviting him into a mission of liberation. Despite Moses’ past failure,

God chooses him, a mere human agent, to carry out the impossible task of freeing the Hebrews. Though God could act alone, he deliberately chooses to involve people in the fight against oppression, reminding us that confronting injustice requires human participation. Even when the task feels overwhelming, we can trust that God will empower us to make a difference.

Isaiah 51:1-6

Isaiah speaks to a broken, exiled community, calling them to rise from despair and see the future through new eyes. Instead of the usual judgment, the prophet brings hope, urging the people to listen and look for God's promise of restoration.

This is no passive message. Isaiah is calling the people to engage, to activate their faith and trust in God's ability to transform desolation into abundance. The wasteland will bloom like Eden; the hopeless future will be a story of redemption. This passage ignites a sense of possibility, urging the people to believe in a future that is not shaped by their past failures but by God's transforming power.

Psalms 124

This psalm is a collective cry for help, reminding us that without God's intervention, we would have been overwhelmed. The imagery of a bird escaping its trap speaks to the freedom that comes through divine intervention. The psalmist declares that the help we need isn't just a small boost, it's the kind of help that makes the difference between life and death. God is not just a helper; God is the ultimate source of freedom, the one who rescues when all seems lost. This psalm calls us to recognize God as the only true source of liberation and life.

Psalms 138

Psalms 138 is a bold declaration of thanksgiving, sung by an individual but resonating with the entire community. The psalmist praises God's unshakeable faithfulness before all other powers, acknowledging that God's sovereignty reigns supreme over everything else. It's not just a personal thanks, it's a public testimony to God's greatness. The psalmist's gratitude points beyond personal blessings to the broader picture of God's divine authority. It's a reminder that our praise is not just about us, it's about acknowledging God's control over all aspects of life.

Romans 12:1-8

In Romans 12, Paul calls us to a radical life of service. This isn't just about personal sacrifice, no, it's about living in a way that embodies humility and selflessness. Paul challenges us to abandon individualism and instead embrace a life that reflects Christ's love in every action. This "testimonial living" isn't about preaching; it's about *showing* the world what God's grace looks like in real life. Transformation, Paul says, happens through a renewed mind, a shift that turns us from self-centred living to humble service. Paul himself is the prime example, showing how a life completely transformed by Christ becomes a beacon of hope to others.

Matthew 16:13-20

In the region of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his disciples two powerful questions: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" and "Who do you say I am?" The disciples offer answers based on popular figures like John the Baptist and Elijah, but Peter cuts through the noise with a bold declaration: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus affirms Peter's insight, revealing that this understanding isn't from human knowledge but divine revelation. This passage highlights that recognising Jesus as the Messiah goes beyond intellect, it requires spiritual discernment. Peter's declaration sets the stage for a deeper understanding of Jesus' true identity and mission.

Preaching the Word

Exodus 1:8 – 2:10

In the conversation between Moses and God, the question of human identity is closely tied to the question of God's identity and actions in the world. When God calls Moses, Moses raises two objections that are framed as questions, which inadvertently connect his sense of self to God's nature.

God's name, "I will be whom I will be" or "I am who I am," reflects the unfolding nature of God's self-revelation. God's identity is continuously revealed through actions, particularly as a liberator.

Moses is told that God's name signifies divine companionship in the mission of liberation. The shift from Pharaoh's oppression to serving and worshipping Yahweh marks not only a release from forced labour but also an entrance into a covenantal relationship. This transition highlights the importance of defining identity through God's call, rather than past failures or external opposition.

Isaiah 51:1-6

The passage begins with a series of imperatives, commands to listen and look, aimed at shifting the audience's perception. The people are living under divine judgment, yet the message is one of impending change. God is about to act in a new way, offering comfort and hope to a people in exile. Isaiah portrays a vision of transformation from desolation to flourishing, moving from a barren land to a garden, and from captivity to freedom.

The message emphasises that God's actions will bring abundant restoration. Even during hardship, a new vision is necessary for the people to participate in the deliverance God promises, symbolizing the emergence of a new reality in their relationship with God.

Psalms 124

This psalm reflects on God's ability to deliver, affirming that the Creator of heaven and Earth is the one who can truly help. The psalmist contrasts the devastation that could have occurred without divine intervention with the reality of being saved by God's grace. The reminder that God has helped them in the past serves as both an acknowledgment of divine power and a call to gratitude.

Psalm 138

Psalm 138 can be understood as a song of praise by the restored community, rather than solely an individual expression of thanksgiving. It focuses on God's steadfast love and faithfulness, with particular emphasis on the community's responsibility to witness God's greatness in a world where many "gods" vie for attention. The phrase "before the gods" reminds the faithful that God is the true source of refuge and healing, even amidst competing powers.

Romans 12:1-8

Paul's message in Romans emphasises that human beings were created to partner with God in transforming the world. Through grace, believers are called to be part of a community, the "body of Christ," where individual identities are shaped by a common faith in God rather than by external characteristics. Paul advocates for a transformation that affects every aspect of life, cultural, social, political, and more, driven by the Holy Spirit. This passage underscores the importance of each person's role within the community and the collective responsibility to embody the gospel.

Matthew 16:13-20

The term "messiah" had multiple meanings in first-century Judaism, depending on interpretation. In this passage, Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah, though the full understanding of this title has yet to be revealed. The gospel narrative unfolds the implications of Jesus' messianic role, which is lived out in the context of human history.

This passage is set against the backdrop of a post-revolt Jewish community, grappling with the destruction of the Temple and questions about God's covenant with Israel. The gospel writers reflect on these issues from a post-resurrection perspective, considering what it means to understand Jesus as the Messiah in light of the events that followed.

Racism Note:

It is important to note that Egypt is often portrayed as a place of oppression in biblical traditions, particularly in the Exodus story. However, other biblical texts present Egypt as a place of refuge, and in Isaiah 19:18-25, when the Egyptians themselves are oppressed, God rescues them and declares, "Blessed be my people Egypt." Preachers can use this context to avoid essentializing Egypt only as a symbol of oppression.

Living the Word

This passage highlights the intersection of divine action and human agency in the process of liberation. Moses receives a sign from God, a future confirmation that he has been sent to lead the Hebrews when they return to worship at the mountain. The nature of this sign suggests a forward-looking assurance rather than an immediate proof. While the burning bush may serve as a present symbol, the sign itself refers to an event yet to come.

The process of liberation involves both risk and trust. It is not only about release from oppression but also about transformation into a new way of life. The Israelites move from serving Pharaoh to serving and worshipping YHWH.

This shift signifies a transition from a system of economic exploitation to a covenantal relationship that emphasises justice and human dignity. The passage illustrates that liberation is not just freedom from oppression but also a call to ethical responsibility and community restoration.

Isaiah 51:1-6

Isaiah 51 focuses on divine action in the midst of despair. The audience addressed in this passage has experienced profound suffering and loss, described elsewhere as having "drunk from the cup of God's wrath" (51:21-22). However, this period of judgment has ended, and now the message is one of comfort and renewal.

God's reassurance is presented as enduring and unshakable, more permanent than the heavens and the Earth. The passage highlights the restoration of joy, gladness, and gratitude, transforming sorrow into celebration. This theme is echoed throughout the chapter.

Both divine and human efforts play a role in liberation. When oppression intensifies, acts of resistance, such as those by the midwives, Moses' family, and Pharaoh's daughter (Exodus 1:15), create opportunities for change. Even when human efforts seem to fall short, as in Moses' initial failure (Exodus 2:11-15), there is always the potential for a new beginning. The cries of the oppressed are a catalyst for divine intervention (Exodus 2:23-25).

Psalm 124

This psalm is an expression of gratitude, acknowledging deliverance from danger. Praise in the Hebrew Scriptures often includes both a positive declaration of trust in God and a rejection of other sources of power or false security. In contemporary contexts, this dual function can serve as a reminder to recognise and challenge forces that demand misplaced allegiance.

Psalm 138

The psalm reflects on personal and communal experiences of divine deliverance. Gratitude for salvation is not an isolated experience but part of a broader testimony to God's faithfulness. The psalm also suggests a universal dimension, pointing to how God's goodness is revealed beyond individual believers to wider communities and nations. The assurance of salvation is both present and future-oriented, highlighting trust in God's ongoing work.

Romans 12:1-8

This passage calls for a way of life that integrates worship with daily actions. St. Paul urges believers to offer themselves as "living sacrifices," signifying a commitment that extends beyond religious rituals into every aspect of life. The significant question raised is how faith is reflected in daily living.

The message of transformation in Christ challenges contemporary individualism, advocating instead for communal renewal. Paul stresses that each person has unique gifts, and the diversity of these gifts contributes to the well-being of the whole community. The passage underscores interdependence, encouraging a faith that is both personal and socially engaged.

Matthew 16:13-20

This passage invites reflection on discernment and recognition of divine activity in the world. Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?", calls for an individual and communal response. The conversation with Peter highlights the significance of understanding Jesus' identity and the implications for those who follow him.

The passage also raises broader questions: Where is transformation happening in the world today? Where do we see signs of justice, compassion, and renewal? What does it mean to affirm faith in Jesus within contemporary social and cultural contexts? This moment of recognition is not just theological but also practical, influencing how faith is lived out in community and action.

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- "Guide Me O, My Great Redeemer"
- "Go Down Moses"
- "Welcome Table"

Word and Life for the 14th Sunday after Pentecost – 30 August 2026

Craig Morrison

Texts

Exodus 3:1-15
Jeremiah 15:15-21
Ps 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c
Ps 26:1-8
Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 16:21-28

Introduction

Year A of the Revised Common Lectionary's texts for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost invites preachers to reflect on the burning bush experience of the prophet Moses, and the self-revelation of the divine name. It is a call to live out faith through the transformative power of God's presence in the world.

Hearing the Word

Exodus 3:1-15

While tending the flock of his father-in-law in the quiet wilderness, Moses stumbles upon a moment that would forever redefine his life and purpose. Amid his ordinary routine, the extraordinary breaks through: A bush ablaze with fire, yet mysteriously unconsumed. From within the flames, the messenger of the LORD appears, later revealed to be none other than YHWH, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

This burning bush becomes a profound symbol: Like the burning bush, the Hebrew people are themselves oppressed and aflame with suffering in Egypt. Like the burning bush, the promise is that they will not be destroyed. Even the word *sene* (bush) quietly echoes the name of Sinai, where God will later appear to all the entire nation. Here at Horeb, another name for Sinai, Moses is called into a divine mission: to lead the Hebrews out of bondage, toward a future where they, like Moses, are claimed as God's own people. Liberation is not just an escape; it is a summons into a Covenant with YHWH.

Ps 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c

This psalm bursts forth in praise, recounting YHWH's unwavering faithfulness across generations. It tells the sweeping story of Israel's journey, from the joy of promise, through the anguish of slavery, to the hope of deliverance. The sending of Moses and Aaron is portrayed not only as a divine intervention, but as a fulfilment of God's Covenantal love. These leaders are raised up to guide the people into a life shaped by God's laws and love. The psalm reminds us that remembering God's deeds is itself an act of worship and hope and faith.

Ps 26:1-8

Psalm 26 is a bold and intimate prayer, both a declaration of integrity and a yearning for divine affirmation. For the morally confident, its words affirm a life lived with honesty.

For the broken or falsely accused, it offers sanctuary in God's just gaze. Whether proclaimed in the sanctuary or whispered in a crowded street, this psalm articulates the soul's deep desire to live rightly and remain in the presence of YHWH. It is a prayer for every place, every season, and every heart seeking to walk in covenant fidelity.

Jeremiah 15:15-21

In this raw and unfiltered dialogue between prophet and God, Jeremiah lays bare his anguish. Called to a life of isolation, forbidden from marriage or communal joy, he has spent years proclaiming a radical message of personal accountability in a world resistant to change. Now, exhausted and rejected, he pleads with God, not for comfort, but for justice. His cry is urgent, his pain unvarnished. And yet, in this moment of weariness, God does not abandon him. Instead, God reaffirms the prophet's purpose and promises to make him an unshakable wall, upheld by divine presence and strength.

Romans 12:9-21

In this stirring section of Paul's letter, *love* becomes the heartbeat of Christian community. Paul moves from theology to transformation, calling believers to embody the Gospel in radical ways. Love must be genuine, an active force that resists evil, clings to good, and honours others above self. Hospitality, empathy, humility, and peace-making become signs of a mind renewed and a spirit transformed. In Paul's vision, the church becomes a countercultural space where love overcomes hatred, and enemies are disarmed by grace. This is not a sentimental love, but a powerful, world-shaping force.

Matthew 16:21-28

This passage stands at a pivotal point in Matthew's gospel. Just after Peter boldly declares Jesus as the *Messiah*, Jesus begins to reveal what that identity truly entails: suffering, death, and resurrection. His path shocks the disciples, because it is not the triumphant route they expected, but is instead the suffering way of the cross. Jesus invites them, and us, to follow him not with crowns, but with crosses. In this paradox, we find the core of discipleship: to lose one's life is to find it. This moment sits between miracles and revelations, anchoring Jesus' divine mission in the call to sacrificial love. Here, Jesus redefines messiahship and invites us to be transformed and reshaped alongside him.

Interpreting the Word

Exodus 3:1-15

Names carry meaning. They tether us to one another. So, it is no small thing that when Moses encounters God in the burning bush, he doesn't just receive a mission, he also learns God's name. This moment in Exodus is not just a divine encounter; it is a sacred introduction. God already knows Moses. God remembers the Covenant, the promises, the people in bondage. But for Moses, this is just the beginning. The bush burns but is not consumed, much like the people of Israel, suffering but not destroyed.

This divine name, YHWH, often called the tetragrammaton (literally 'four letters'), has inspired reverence and careful speech for millennia. In Hebrew tradition, it is too holy to speak aloud, replaced with Adonai, or "LORD." That same reverence carries into the New Testament, where the Greek word *kurios* (LORD) stands in its place. But here in Exodus, we see something personal. God is not distant or abstract. God says, "I have seen, I have heard, I know, and I am coming to act."

Jeremiah 15:15-21

Prophets do not predict the future, but they speak into the heart of the present. And Jeremiah, more than most, knows the cost of that calling. He doesn't dazzle with miracles or float above the fray. He preaches, again and again, into a society that would rather not listen.

In Jeremiah 15, we overhear one of his most vulnerable conversations with God. He's tired, isolated, and rejected. He's sacrificed family, friends, and the comforts of ordinary life to speak a hard truth. "Remember me," he pleads. "Avenge me." This isn't polite prayer, it is raw, aching honesty. In the bible, "prophecy" has nothing to do with *predicting* the future. For the prophet, biblical prophecy has to do with speaking God's word into a specific situation, like exile or social injustice, or violating the Covenant relationship.

Psalms 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c

Psalms 105 is a joyful recounting of God's track record, God's unwavering faithfulness in the life of the Hebrews. It is a song of memory and celebration, walking us through God's promises and actions, especially in Egypt. Here, Moses and Aaron are not just characters, but they are living proof that God sends help, keeps promises, and shows up when it matters most.

The first fifteen verses of Psalm 105 are also found in 1 Chronicles 16:8-22 and are presented there as a song of David, written and sung for the bringing of the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. Most psalms are not specifically attributed to David, although some are. One can imagine that as king, he might both have written specific psalms and commissioned the writing of others. An example of this might be the "royal we." Besides, the Chronicler is famously pro-David whilst being critical of his son, Solomon, so it would be unsurprising for the Chronicler to hold to the pro-King David narrative. The preacher should not become bogged down in authorship squabbles, however. The psalm is still a profound contemplation of God's faithfulness towards the Covenant people.

Psalms 26:1-8

This psalm is a personal prayer with a bold premise: "Test me, Lord. Examine my heart." It is the voice of someone striving for *integrity*, not perfection but authenticity. The psalmist knows that trust in God is easier when your conscience is clear. But even for those who feel unworthy, Psalm 26 offers a model of *vulnerability*: an invitation to be seen and still stand.

Whether prayed in the temple or muttered in the chaos of life, these words pull us back to the centre of faith, to a life lived in honest relationship with God and fundamental trust.

Romans 12:9-21

"Love is (to be) unpretentious!" (*hē agape anypokritos*, Romans 12:9). This is Paul's opening message to the Roman believers, who are learning to live out God's faithfulness together as a group of "saints" (Romans 1:7) right in the heart of the Roman Empire. The adjective is the opposite of *hypokritos*, a word linked to *hypokritēs*, a term commonly used for stage actors, those who perform behind masks. It carries connotations of pretence, of putting on a show or playing a part in a charade.

"Let love be genuine." With that simple sentence, Paul shifts the entire weight of the Gospel onto our shoulders, not as a burden mind you, but as a calling. In a world of posturing, Paul warns against performative love. The Greek word *anypokritos* (unpretentious) literally means "without masks." Love, real love, does not act. It lives.

Matthew 16:21-28

The scene unfolds in three phases. The first, Matthew 17:1-4, highlights Jesus' transfiguration. In the second, 17:5, God speaks. In the third, 17:6-9, the disciples respond. The setting on a mountain suggests something significant will unfold (compare to Matthew 4:8; 5:1; 14:23; 15:29-38). The presence of three disciples indicates continuity with the previous, important scene of Jesus' teaching (Matthew 16:21-28).

This scene is filled with mystery. Jesus is transformed before their eyes. Moses and Elijah suddenly appear, then just as quickly vanish. Peter is confused, while James and John remain in the background. The disciples are filled with awe. Jesus tells them to say nothing about what has happened! Both mystery and divine presence are pervasive. This passage marks a turning point in the gospel. According to Matthew, immediately after Peter proclaims Jesus as the Messiah, Christ offers a vision of messiahship that no one expected: suffering, rejection, and death. For the disciples, it's a hard pivot. For Jesus, it is the way of the cross.

Preaching the Word

Exodus 3:1-15

Here is a profound opportunity to explore key prophetic concerns, viz. justice, liberation, self-revelation, the power of a name. When Moses dares to ask, "Who are you?" God answers with mystery and clarity all at once: "I AM WHO I AM." Or more literally, "I will be what I will be." It's not just a name, it is a self-revelation of God's active, living, and faithful presence. "Tell them I AM sent you," God says. Then comes the anchor: "The LORD, the God of your

ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, this is my name forever.”

It’s a little like hearing someone say, “You don’t remember, but I once made you a promise.” God speaks as one re-entering the room, not for the first time, but for the first time in a long time. For Moses, and for the Israelites in slavery, this name is a reassurance that they are not forgotten. Their relationship with God is not a relic, it is still alive. Liberation is a divine and a human responsibility.

Jeremiah 15:15-21

Prophecy most often serves as a wake-up call to the people of God. This is what prophecy looks like. It is not just public proclamation, but private wrestling. Like the psalmists, Jeremiah calls on God to act, and not just for the people, but for his own battered soul. And in that honesty, we glimpse the heart of the prophet’s vocation: not performance, not popularity, but fierce faithfulness born of real encounter with the living God.

Moses once cried, “Would that all God’s people were prophets!” (Numbers 11:29). The invitation stands. Prophetic speech is not reserved for the chosen few. It arises whenever we speak God’s truth into our world, whether in church, in protest, or in a quiet word to a friend. But it always begins, like with Jeremiah, in the depths of honest prayer.

Ps 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c

The psalm is very deliberately paired with Psalm 106, where these two psalms then tell both sides of the story: God’s steadfast love on one hand, and human frailty on the other. But in Psalm 105, the focus is on the divine side of the relationship. It’s the psalmist’s way of saying: “Remember who God has been. Remember God’s faithfulness. That same God is still with us.”

Ps 26:1-8

A key consideration in this psalm is the matter of its theological interpretation. How do we incorporate in Christian worship a psalm that seems to proclaim self-righteousness? We uncover the theological depth of the psalm by engaging with its unique rhetorical structure and literary features. For this particular Sunday, the lectionary focuses on the first eight verses of the psalm, most likely a deliberate choice made for thematic emphasis.

Romans 12:9-21

Here, we see Paul engaging in the work of community formation and performing the work of theological-ethical imagination. Paul addresses several general and concrete situations that pertain to “real life” in “the real world,” albeit one that now distinguishes between life in “this age” (see also 12:2) and the experience of the life of believers, in the light of what God has accomplished for them in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 16:21-28

Here in Matthew 16, Jesus redefines greatness. “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.” This isn’t a call to martyrdom for its own sake but a call to lose our lives in love, so that we might truly find them. Peter, understandably, pushes back. And Jesus rebukes him, not harshly, but urgently... because the stakes are high. The cross is not just the method of Jesus’ death; it is the *model* of his life. It is the shape of discipleship. In our world that prizes power and success, Jesus points to sacrifice and service. And in doing so, he invites us into the mystery: that in dying to ourselves, we come alive in God.

Living the Word

Exodus 3:1-15

The text emphasises God’s deep concern for justice, freedom, and societal well-being. True fasting, according to God, is not merely abstaining from food but actively working to eliminate oppression and meet the needs of the hungry.

God remembers the Covenant, the promises, the people in bondage. The bush burns but is not consumed, much like the people of Israel, suffering but not destroyed. The same with us: our suffering in discipleship will not destroy us but God will show Godself to be faithful to us. The people of God can respond, “Great is your faithfulness, Oh God our Father...”

“I Am Who I Am,” is only one name among many for Scripture gives us a rich tapestry of divine titles, “The God Who Sees” (Genesis 16), “My Shepherd” (Psalm 23), “Ancient of Days” (Daniel 7), each one born from a moment of awe, deliverance, or intimacy. Every divine name is a witness to a divine act, something God has done. Remember that in this Middle-eastern culture, names speak about the character of the owner.

Jeremiah 15:15-21

The story of his life and message still resonates as powerfully today as it did in his own time. Embracing and repenting of our emotions is an essential part of the faith journey. As ministers, we would be wise to follow Jeremiah’s example.

Ps 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c

It seems to me that a perfect rewording of the psalm is, “In him we live, and move, and have our being.”

Ps 26:1-8

This psalm is a public proclamation of a very personal faith in God. The preacher can use specific items for expressing this personal faith. Walking in integrity and faith; praising God’s faithfulness; watching the company we keep; honouring the church/place of worship.

Romans 12:9-21

Here, St. Paul's theology speaks to life on the ground. Hospitality. Patience. Humility. Kindness, even to enemies. This is what transformed minds look like (Romans 12:2). This is what it means to "put on Christ" (Romans 13:14).

Paul understands that Christian life happens in community, and community is always messy. But the fundamental standard remains: love that does not pretend; love that does not give up; love that does not retaliate but seeks peace. In this section, Paul becomes both pastor and poet, sketching the contours of a new kind of world, one shaped by unshakeable grace.

Matthew 16:21-28

God's power is not displayed in the polished corridors of influence, but in the dusty backstreets of human struggle and suffering. That is where Jesus walked and that is where he calls us to follow. It's in those places of pain and weakness that he equips us to carry the weight of discipleship.

The burden we bear is his, and we can only do so in his strength. On our own, we can do nothing. But through him, everything changes. Without Christ, Peter was not a rock, but a stumbling block. With Christ, Peter became the foundation of the Church. And with Christ, we are not helpless in the face of self-denial or sacrifice. We are empowered to carry whatever he entrusts to us. Lloyd Ogilvie once said, *"We say, 'But Lord, I cannot.' And God replies, 'I am glad you finally see that. Through you, I can.'"*

Word and Life for Feast of Creation Sunday – 6 September 2026

Rachel Mash

Texts

Ezekiel 33:7–11 and Psalm 119:33–40
Romans 13:8–14 Matthew 18:15–20

Introduction – Feast of Creation Sunday

The Feast of Creation of September 1, also known as Creation Day or World Day of Prayer for Creation, marks the start of the Season of Creation (1st of Sep to 4th of Oct)

Inspired by a rich tradition of the Orthodox Church, it was later embraced by other bodies and churches such as the World Council of Churches in 2008, the Anglican Communion in 2012, and the Catholic Church in 2015.

In Orthodox Christianity, there is an ancient practice of observing September 1 as the “Day of Creation”, marking the day in which God began the creation of the universe as described in the first chapter of the Bible. September 1 is the very day that symbolizes the expression “In the beginning”, the famous opening of both the Book of Genesis and the Gospel of John. It represents the very day in which God said, “Let there be light.”

Building on that rich tradition and reading the “signs of the times” of the ecological crisis, in 1989 the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios expanded the day’s symbolism to also be a day of prayer for creation in the Orthodox Church and wider Christendom, a day to offer “prayers and supplications to the Maker of all, both as thanksgiving for the great gift of Creation and as petitions for its protection and salvation.”

The symbolism of the Feast of Creation is much broader and deeper than Earth Day or Environment Day. Not only because of the centrality that God has in the feast, but also because we celebrate not just this tiny planet but also Creation at large. Both Earth and stars. Both ecology and astronomy. Both Earth’s web of life and the cosmos’ web of matter.

Moreover, when we celebrate the Feast of Creation (and the larger season flowing from it), we celebrate two distinct meanings of the word “Creation”: God’s act of creation and the fruit of such act (aka cosmos). We commit ourselves to worship the Creator God and to care for God’s Creation.

More resources for the Season of Creation can be found here:
www.seasonofcreation.org



Hearing the word

Ezekiel 33:7–11

In verse 7, Ezekiel is called to be a “watchman” for Israel, warning them of their moral failures. This imagery resonates with the modern responsibility of environmental scientists, activists, and communities who serve as “watchmen” for the earth. Climate change, deforestation, pollution, and biodiversity loss signal looming ecological disasters, yet warnings often go unheeded. The climate scientists are calling out and yet politicians, businesses and many others fail to heed the call. Just as Ezekiel was tasked with speaking truth regardless of the response, so too must humanity continue advocating for ecological responsibility, even in the face of resistance.

Verses 8–9 highlight the consequences of ignoring warnings. If the watchman fails to speak, the blood of the wicked is on his hands, but if he warns and they refuse to change, the responsibility is theirs. This parallels today’s environmental crisis: when warnings about ecological destruction are ignored, entire communities – especially vulnerable populations – suffer. However, if societies act, restoring damaged ecosystems and reducing carbon emissions, they fulfil their moral duty. Environmental repentance requires not just acknowledgment of harm but tangible changes in behaviour, policies, and sustainable practices.

In verse 11, God declares, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live.” This divine preference for life over destruction aligns with the biblical call to care for creation. God desires flourishing, not devastation – both for humanity and for the earth. Ecological destruction contradicts this divine intention, leading to loss of biodiversity, climate refugees, and weakened ecosystems. Repenting from destructive environmental habits is part of aligning with God’s desire for life.

Psalm 119:33–40

In verse 33, the psalmist asks God to “teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes.” This reflects humility and willingness to learn. These are qualities essential for addressing today’s environmental crises. Humanity must seek wisdom not only in spiritual matters but also in how to live sustainably. Scientific research, indigenous ecological knowledge, and theological reflection all contribute to understanding how to care for God’s Creation. The traditional knowledge of indigenous people has often been rejected in favour of ‘modern’ methodologies, and we are realising now that we must learn from that wisdom.

Verse 36 states, “Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain.” Greed and exploitation are major drivers of environmental destruction, such as deforestation for profit, pollution for industrial convenience, and overconsumption for material gain. This verse warns against prioritizing economic gain over ethical responsibility. We need to call

for policies and lifestyles that respect the limits of creation rather than exploiting it for short-term profit.

The psalmist prays, “Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways” (v. 37). In an ecological context, this can be seen as a rejection of consumerism and wasteful habits that harm the environment. Excessive consumption leads to pollution, plastic waste, and the depletion of natural resources. Instead, the psalmist’s plea invites a shift toward simplicity, sustainable living, and valuing what truly gives life, such as healthy ecosystems, clean water, and a balanced relationship with creation.

Verse 40 declares, “Behold, I long for your precepts; in your righteousness give me life!” The longing for righteousness aligns with the call to environmental justice. Many communities, especially the poor and marginalized, suffer the most from climate change, deforestation, and pollution. True righteousness includes restoring the land, advocating for policies that protect vulnerable ecosystems, and ensuring environmental justice for all people.

Romans 13:8–14

Paul writes, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law” (v. 8). Love extends beyond human relationships. It includes the way we interact with the earth. Environmental degradation disproportionately harms vulnerable communities, violating the command to love our neighbours. Deforestation, pollution, and climate change impact food security, clean water, and air quality, making ecological justice a key aspect of fulfilling God’s law of love.

In verse 9, Paul references the Ten Commandments, stating that they are summed up in the command to “love your neighbour as yourself.” Destructive environmental practices such as overconsumption, wastefulness, and exploitation of resources can be seen as violations of these moral principles. For example, “You shall not steal” (v. 9) applies to corporations and individuals who exploit land and resources without considering the long-term consequences for future generations. True love for God and others includes responsible stewardship of creation.

Paul urges believers to wake up because “salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed” (v. 11). This urgency resonates with the current ecological crisis. Scientists warn of irreversible damage due to climate change, deforestation, and biodiversity loss. Just as Paul calls for spiritual awakening, this passage challenges us to recognize the pressing need for ecological repentance and sustainable action before it is too late.

Verses 12–13 call believers to “cast off the works of darkness” and live honourably. Consumerism, greed, and excessive resource extraction reflect the “darkness” of modern society, leading to environmental destruction. Paul’s call to live in the “armour of light” (v. 12) invites believers to embrace sustainability, such as reducing waste, conserving resources, and adopting lifestyles that honour God’s creation.

Paul concludes by instructing believers to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” and resist indulging selfish desires (v. 14). This includes resisting unsustainable habits that harm the planet. A Christ-centered life fosters humility, simplicity, and care

for creation, aligning our actions with God’s purpose for the world.

Matthew 18:15–20

Verse 15 states, “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault.” This principle applies not only to personal wrongdoing but also to ecological harm. When individuals, corporations, or governments exploit natural resources irresponsibly through pollution, deforestation, or overconsumption there is a moral obligation to confront these actions. Just as the church holds individuals accountable for sin, society must hold accountable those who harm the environment, whether through activism, policy change, or advocacy.

Verses 16–17 outline a process of escalating communal involvement if the individual does not repent. This reflects the necessity of collective ecological responsibility. Individual efforts, such as reducing waste or conserving energy, are important but insufficient. Communities, churches, and nations must work together to address environmental challenges through legislation, corporate responsibility, and sustainable practices. If warnings about environmental destruction go unheeded, society faces long-term consequences such as climate disasters, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion.

In verse 18, Jesus declares, “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” This suggests that human decisions have both earthly and spiritual significance. When applied to environmental ethics, it underscores the weight of ecological choices. The way humans treat creation has lasting effects. Deforestation binds the land to infertility, pollution binds oceans to destruction, and greenhouse gas emissions bind the planet to climate instability. Conversely, when societies choose restoration through reforestation, conservation, and sustainable policies they set “loose” healing and renewal for future generations.

Verses 19–20 emphasize the power of collective prayer and decision-making: “If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them.” This highlights the importance of unified ecological efforts. Environmental movements often require collaboration across communities, faith groups, and policymakers. When people unite for creation care, their efforts align with God’s will, ensuring a sustainable future.

Interpreting the Word

The Watchman: Humanity’s Role as Environmental Stewards

Ezekiel 33:7–11 presents the prophet as a watchman, responsible for warning the people of impending judgment. The passage emphasizes personal and communal responsibility, repentance, and God’s desire for life rather than destruction. When viewed through an ecological lens, this text speaks to humanity’s role as caretakers of creation, the urgency of responding to environmental crises, and the call to repentance for ecological harm.

Walking in God's ways, ecological wisdom

Psalms 119:33–40 is part of the longest psalm in the Bible, a meditation on the beauty and necessity of God's law. The psalmist expresses a deep desire to follow God's ways, seeking understanding, guidance, and renewal. From an ecological perspective, this passage highlights the connection between divine wisdom, ethical living, and the responsibility to care for creation.

The Commandments and Environmental Ethics

Romans 13:8–14 calls believers to live in love, fulfil the law through ethical behaviour, and awaken to righteousness. From an ecological perspective, this passage highlights the moral obligation to care for creation, the urgency of environmental responsibility, and the call to live sustainably as an act of love.

The Role of the Community in Environmental Action

Matthew 18:15–20 focuses on reconciliation, community accountability, and the presence of Christ in collective decision-making. While traditionally applied to conflict resolution within the church, this passage also offers insights into environmental ethics, emphasizing responsibility for creation, collective ecological action, and divine presence in sustainable stewardship.

Preaching the Word

The Ezekiel passage is a clear call to advocacy and prophetic action – to stand as the watchkeeper. The passage calls people to “turn back” from their wicked ways (v. 11), a direct parallel to the need for societies to turn from unsustainable practices. Extractive industries, pollution, and deforestation can be seen as ecological “wickedness” that harms both people and the planet. True repentance means not just reducing harm but actively restoring creation—reforesting lands, cleaning polluted waters, and developing just environmental policies.

Psalms 119:33–40, from an ecological lens, emphasizes the need for wisdom, rejecting greed, resisting consumerism, and seeking restoration. The passage invites believers to align their lives with God's righteous ways, which includes responsible stewardship of the earth. By following God's statutes, we can cultivate a world that sustains both people and creation for generations to come.

Romans 13:8–14 calls for love-driven ecological responsibility, urging believers to wake up to environmental realities and reject wasteful living. True discipleship includes caring for creation, ensuring that future generations inherit a thriving, sustainable world.

Matthew 18:15–20, through an environmental lens, emphasizes accountability for ecological harm, collective responsibility, and the power of unified action. Stewardship of creation is a communal and spiritual duty, requiring both confrontation of environmental wrongdoing and collaborative restoration efforts. Where two or more gather in Christ's name to protect and restore creation, God is present, affirming the sacredness of environmental care.

Living the Word

There are many practical calls for action in these passages

- The Ezekiel passage reminds us to listen to the ‘watchmen and women’ – the client scientists, the climate activists. It is important that we avoid fake news, sharing environmental education. However, we must not just share ‘doom and gloom’ as that can also lead to paralysis. We must share positive stories of actions that people can take.
- The Psalm reminds us to turn from greed and consumerism. How can one do that in today's world? You can unpack ideas for simple celebrations or ways to reuse and recycle ‘vintage clothes’, such as clothing swaps. There are many fun ways to live more simply
- Romans reminds us of the call for intergenerational justice as churches let us make space for young people's voices to be heard. Can they be the ‘environmental rep’ on your parish council? Will you give your climate activists a chance to speak in church?
- Matthew's gospel reading reminds us that we need to work collaboratively. The Feast Day of Creation is an ecumenical feast and we encourage churches to come together to pray and act. Churches can clean the community, or plant trees together. Or perhaps to hold a community forum looking at the impact of heat on your community and what could be done about it.

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Word and Life for the 16th Sunday after Pentecost

– 13 September 2026

James Gribble

Texts

Semi-continuous track: Exodus 14:19-31
Psalm 114 *or*
Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21

Related track: Genesis 50:15-21
Psalm 103:(1-7), 8-13
Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

Introduction

Today's readings provide a glimpse of some divisive issues that troubled both Joseph and his brothers, as well as the early Church, and important teaching from Jesus in response to Peter's very human question about forgiveness.

Hearing and Interpreting the Word

Exodus 14:19-31

On their way from Egypt the Israelites stop by the 'Sea of Reeds' at the northern end of the Gulf of Suez. When it becomes apparent that Pharaoh has changed his mind, and his forces with their fast chariots are now in hot pursuit, fear and panic set in. Recriminations are flung at Moses for landing them in this predicament (v11). The guiding pillar of cloud now moves behind them as the day ends, effectively separating the pursued and the pursuers – suggestive, perhaps, of a blanket of fog? During the 'morning watch' (between 2 and 6 am) the Israelites safely pass through the sea as the waters separate. When the Egyptians attempt to follow, their chariot wheels are clogged in the mud and, when the waters recede, the entire force is drowned. Chariots are speedy and intimidating on dry ground but useless in mud.

Cecil B de Mille's famous portrayal of the event in the film *'The Ten Commandments'*, picturing two massive walls of water between which the people could cross, is probably the image many of our hearers have in their mind's eye from Sunday School days. Note the echo here of the story of the creation, where the 'waters under the heavens' were bidden to 'be gathered together into one place' for the 'dry land to appear' (Genesis 1:9). A few theories have been suggested, from Moses knowing a good spot where pedestrians could safely wade through the shallows, to earthquake activity that may temporarily have raised the bottom of the sea, the waters flowing back when the upheaval subsided. Certain phrases in the accompanying Psalm 114 appear to support this. 'The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs' (v6).

There is no suggestion that Moses' upraised rod was in any sense magical. It was symbolic, a signal showing the way for the people to go or indicating that what was to transpire was more than mere natural phenomena, saying in effect 'Stand back and see the hand of God at work!'

For a former straggle of slaves this experience of deliverance became the constitutive event that - together with what subsequently took place at Mount Sinai - moulded Israel into a defined people. Prior to this the accounts in Genesis and Exodus tell of individuals and their experiences of God's dealings with them. But from this point onwards the biblical record tracks the story of a people. Their experience of deliverance became a central pillar of their faith and an assurance and promise of deliverance in every experience of trouble in after years (see for instance Isaiah 43:1-2, 16-19). The thankful remembrance of this event was to be at the very heart of their confession of faith for all time.

Moses, portrayed as the strong resolute leader, also had his moments of uncertainty, so that the Lord asks him, 'Why do you cry to me?' (v15). He is told to tell the people of Israel to 'stand firm', to 'go forward!' When all was said and done 'the people feared the Lord ... and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses' (v31). They had learned, too, that God was the controller of chaos as much as of the natural course of things.

Psalm 114

The opening words, 'When Israel went out from Egypt ...' recall the wonder of the Exodus deliverance. The Psalmist emphasises God's choice of Israel (2), the crossings (5) of 'the sea' and of the Jordan when its waters were stopped (see Joshua 3), and the provision of water in the desert (8). The references to the mountains skipping like rams and the hills like lambs (4,6) may refer to the lawgiving at Sinai, or the wonders of creation, or times when Yahweh was believed to have come down to visit the earth or, as alluded above, to seismic activity (see also v7). The miracles at the 'sea' and at the Jordan are significantly linked as evidence of Yahweh's providential interventions on behalf of his people. The crossing of the Jordan is, of course, referenced in lines from the well-known hymn by William Williams, *'Guide me, O thou great Jehovah/Redeemer'*: 'When I tread the verge of Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside ...'.

Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21

This is an excerpt from the extended song of praise and thanksgiving (vv1-21) offered to the Lord by Moses and the people following their dramatic escape. 'I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously ...' (v1). It effectively relives what happened at the sea.

Genesis 50:15-21

The entire family of Jacob had taken up residence in Egypt at Joseph's behest. When Jacob dies, his restraining and mediating influence is gone too. The brothers are uneasy, fearful of what the powerful Joseph might do to them in revenge of their treatment of him some 20 years before. While there had been a tearful moment of recognition and a measure of reconciliation (see chapter 45), there is no

suggestion of his having forgiven them. The question ‘what now?’ troubles them deeply. Joseph is the second most powerful figure in Egypt. They send a message to him that the father’s dying wish was that he should forgive his brothers. Joseph is moved to tears and expresses a wider, longer-term understanding of what had happened between them. Despite the evil they had done him, he believes God meant it for good, so that ‘many people should be kept alive, as they are today’. Because the brothers ‘realise that their reaction to an aggravating, spoiled little brother was completely out of proportion ... they cannot quite believe in Joseph’s forgiveness’ (Williams p108). To allay their fears, he gives an assurance that he will provide for them and for their little ones. They are reassured and comforted.

There is a greater, wider significance to this passage. The story of Joseph and his jealous brothers opened with hatred; it ends with hatred being swallowed up in love. God’s influence can defeat the evil and sin that seem all-powerful. Peace and unity is brought to a family once split wide open by fierce and unlovely emotions. In a moment of ‘purifying insight’ we ‘glimpse through the darkness the controlling hand of a gracious and benign providence’ (Gibson p319). We sense God’s gospel being set in motion, to be given finer definition in time to come.

Psalms 103:1-7, 8-13

The selected verses provide all the reason in the world for one to ‘bless the Lord’. They speak of his justice, mercy and grace; that God is ‘slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love’, never dealing with us according to our sins. ‘... as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him’ (v11). ‘As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us’. The juxtaposition of this Psalm with the Genesis reading echoes the way a mere mortal, Joseph, finally responds to the brothers who had once intended him such grievous harm. ‘We are amazed that one living before the time of Christ should have attained such an understanding of the Christian Way’ (Rodd, p 59).

Note that the first five verses are the thanksgiving of an individual. Then ‘I’ becomes ‘We’, and a hymn praises God for his goodness to *Israel*. What is more, the Psalmist sees that all creation must extol this exalted God. He calls on the heavenly beings to join him in adoration. God’s wide love is only truly apprehended when we see it reaching out to all people.

Romans 14:1-12

Questions of what was appropriate for a Christ-follower to eat or drink, and special days or seasons to observe, were a source of tension within the early Christian communities. A complication was the possibility that meat purchased in the market-place might earlier have been sacrificed to an idol. These issues were highly divisive – see the discussions in 1 Corinthians 8-10 and Colossians 2:16-23. People readily criticised and condemned each other. The principle of Christian love went out by the window.

Paul’s argument is that we should respect the convictions and practices of those we may regard as ‘weaker’ brothers and sisters in matters pertaining to diet and the observance

of particular days (by ‘weaker’ understand ‘weak in faith’). The stronger are presumably more liberal Christians who do not feel bound by such strictures or fads. But they must accept that the weaker members are as much ‘the Lord’s’ as they are. Both parties seek to serve God and do as they do in honour of the Lord. God welcomes both. Ultimately, we shall all stand before the judgement seat of God (v10), to whom ‘every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear’, quoting Isaiah 45:23. Our being subject to judgement together, we have no business to pass judgement on, or to despise, another brother or sister whatever their predilections. Later, (vv15-21) Paul will enjoin an abstinence, if necessary, out of a sense of loving responsibility for those of tender conscience, lest the freedom of the ‘strong’ should endanger the faith of another believer.

Matthew 18:21-35

Peter’s famous question is about the extent of the forgiveness one is expected to extend to one who has wronged us. He fondly imagines that his ‘seven times’ is generous. He is rocked back by the Lord’s response: ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven times’. And, we may add, that does not equate to 490 times, for it is not a matter of arithmetic but of love and grace without limit. It is what Paul was writing about to the Romans, and was Joseph’s response to his undeserving brothers for the unspeakable way they had treated him.

In the parable Jesus now tells, a servant who has been generously released from a significant indebtedness, perhaps because of his bad management of his master’s financial affairs, churlishly refuses to do the same for a fellow-servant who owes him a paltry sum by comparison. His fellow servants are, rightly, indignant. When the master of them all hears of this, he is angry. ‘Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-servant, as I had mercy on you?’ This always the question.

In the family prayer our Lord taught us to pray for the forgiveness of our debts ‘as we have forgiven those indebted to us’. It means that, to the extent that we hold out on offering forgiveness, we effectively negate the free flow of the forgiveness we seek from God, as it were putting ourselves out of range. It is a chilling thought. As Jesus puts it, ‘So my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart’ (v 35). When will we learn?

Preaching the Word

In the account of the safe passage through the sea we note how the people were quick to resort to recrimination and blame when things became difficult. Is this a lack of confidence in God or even subtle unbelief? What can we teach our people about confidently confronting uncertainty and unwelcome circumstance as they cope with the hardships of life’s way? What is the secret of doing so with calm serenity and confidence?

With the passage of time the sons of Jacob might have largely forgotten what they had cruelly done to their younger brother Joseph. But then they discover that the Egyptian official at the forefront of famine relief was none other than Joseph. Now they are in fear of their lives, desperate for

reconciliation and forgiveness. Forgiveness can be difficult both to give and to receive. Here is a theme that arises frequently during daily living. Is there a sermon here on forgiving and being forgiven?

Living the Word

Significantly, an awareness of a people or nation, henceforth to be known as Israel, emerges following the experience of liberation from the earlier bondage in Egypt. Their being addressed by God at Sinai was a further contributing factor. In South Africa we have marked 30 years since the inception of the new democratic order. But it must be asked to what extent we have truly become an identifiable and united nation. Tensions, suspicions, anger and rejection of each other are rife among us. We are divided by our various histories, our many cultures and languages, and our differing political convictions. What is necessary, what can be done, for us to become a bonded nation where everyone who lives in this land feels altogether at home, proud of our country, and welcoming of the other no matter how much we may differ? Staging a football World Cup tournament helps a little, as do victories in Rugby World Cups. But these don't go nearly far enough. Deeper issues need to be faced together. What is God saying to us? Here is a large theme, not for the faint-hearted, but one to be addressed nevertheless. And remember, doing so is not to be regarded as 'politics' in any sense of party-politics. It goes to the heart of our life together in the city, the *polis*, where we have our existence together under God.

Liturgical suggestions

A litany for the day:

The Lord does not call us to conform to the demands of the world.

The Lord calls us to transform the world by our obedience to the demands of God.

When our neighbours curse us, let us not curse them in return.

Let us love as you love, O Lord. Let our love be genuine.

When our neighbours seek our help, let us not leave them to the charity of the wealthy.

Let us love as you love, O Lord. Let our love be genuine.

When our neighbours disturb the peace at our expense, let us not avenge ourselves.

Let us love as you love, O Lord. Let our love be genuine.

When our neighbours hunger or thirst, let us minister to them according to their need.

Let us love as you love, O Lord. Let our love be genuine.

Let us not be overcome by evil. Let us overcome evil with good.

(From *Litanies and Other Prayers for the Common Lectionary*, Everett Tilson & Phyllis Cole, Abingdon, Nashville, 1989) The hymn *Guide me, O thou great Jehovah/ Redeemer* connects powerfully with the Exodus reading.

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Word and Life for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost

– 20 September 2026

Ken Leverton

Texts

Exodus 16:2–15 / Psalm 105:1–6, 37–45
Jonah 3:10–4:11 / Psalm 145:1–8
Philippians 1:21–30
Matthew 20:1–16

Introduction

In our scripture passages this week we discover both negative and positive reactions to life's circumstances. The travelling Israelites grumble and complain, looking for someone to blame for their discomfort. It's a very human response. Then we have Jonah who is not at all happy that God had decided to spare the Ninevites from destruction. For him, God's grace and goodness were not what he wanted to hear. In this I can relate to Jonah when God blesses those I don't like! The workers in the vineyard who had worked the longest were full of complaints against the landowner's generosity – it wasn't fair! We can all relate to that. And then on the other hand, we have Paul's positive and even joyful response to his difficult circumstances as a prisoner. Then we have the Psalmist affirming and celebrating God's faithfulness in all circumstances.

Hearing the Word

Exodus 16:2–15

The long 400 plus years of servitude were over. Pharaoh had been 'persuaded' to let the people go and the Israelites had left Egypt. The Red Sea had been safely negotiated. God's power had undoubtedly been demonstrated. But now, after the refreshment of Elim (15:27) the journey took them into the Desert. Just a month into their journey to the land God had promised the Israelites, and the challenges began to present themselves. Trust in God is shown to be a very fragile thing. And so the grumbles and complaints, and the blame game begins. Sentiments were expressed such as: Wasn't it better back in Egypt? At least there was some kind of security and we knew where the next meal was coming from. And so the past is idealised, and Moses has to step in to make the point: *the hand of God has accomplished all that has happened; you are not complaining against us but against the Lord.* But God is gracious and will provide for this complaining people. Despite their moaning, God will provide 'bread from heaven' and continue to guide with the glory of his presence. And we read of the quail and the manna. Apparently at certain times of the year, large flocks of quail migrate northwards from Africa. Generally, the birds would avoid the desolate desert areas such as the Sinai Peninsula, but in God's provision their flight pattern is modified and supplied the grumbling people with the meat they craved. Manna, possibly the dried excretion of certain insects, is described, and its use explained in Numbers 11:7–9.

Psalm 105:1–6, 37–45

The psalmist had no doubt that God could be trusted. God had shown utter trustworthiness in the events of the Exodus and other mighty acts, and therefore it was entirely right for God to receive honour and praise. As a matter of interest, when the ark of the covenant was returned to Jerusalem, this was the Psalm David used to give thanks, and to express confidence in the fact that God always keeps covenant (1 Chronicles 16:8ff).

Jonah 3:10–4:11

This story is told as a reaction to the exclusivism of the Ezra-Nehemiah post exilic period. During the Babylonian exile, the remnant of the Jewish people who had not been taken into exile intermingled with people of surrounding nations. After the return from exile, leaders such as Ezra and Nehemiah identified the importance of rebuilding the Jewish nation, which in their opinion required re-establishing the purity of the race and the faith, even to the extent of insisting that 'foreign' wives should be sent back to 'their own people'. As a counter to such exclusivism, the book of Jonah emphasises God's love and care for all – even the hated Ninevites. Jonah had to learn, and the Hebrew people had to be reminded, that their mission was to be a 'light to the Gentiles'.

Psalm 145:1–8

This Psalm is an alphabetic acrostic in four poetic paragraphs, of which we read the first. God is exalted as the Great King, whose faithfulness and mighty acts provide ample reasons to offer praise. These mighty acts are the signs of the presence of God's kingdom.

Philippians 1:21–30

Paul seems to have had a special affection for the Philippian church. Even though the letter was written from prison (see 1:13,14) the general tone of the letter is positive and joyful. Paul knew all about challenges, but unlike the Israelites in the wilderness, his trust in God did not waver. Despite our very human propensity to grumble, to find someone to blame for our misfortunes (like the Israelites in the wilderness), Paul sees a positive side to his troubles, even if – as, being a prisoner, may have been the case – those troubles resulted in his death. In fact, to be 'with Christ', far from being an outcome that would occasion grumbling, is the best of all possible outcomes. Paul's biggest concern is not for his own safety as such, but rather that his continuing 'in the body' may facilitate the growth and progress of the Philippians in their witness for Christ. There will be those who provide opposition; there will be times of struggle, but standing firm will ensure salvation.

Matthew 20:1–16

This parable, as with so much else in Jesus' teaching, illustrates the wonderful/disconcerting way in which God takes our human ways of thinking and turns them on their head. In chapter 19:30, Jesus speaks of the first and last, and this parable simply develops this motif. The first will be last and the last will be first. The values of life in the Kingdom are not always what we might expect. This Kingdom parable highlights one of the great principles of life in the Kingdom: it's all about grace. The disciples have just asked what special treatment they may expect to receive for having left everything to follow Jesus. They wonder, perhaps they will get more than others? And yes, perhaps they will – but only more responsibility, not a more favourable reward (19:27–29). And then follows this parable in which Jesus makes it clear that Kingdom life is not about 'fairness' as measured in our human terms, but about unmerited, unearned, grace. No one is more loved, more favoured, more important than anyone else. Again, this parable may say something about inclusivity – there is no room for anyone to feel superior to anyone else.

Interpreting the Word

Grumbling is a very human response to any setback. The Israelites quickly seemed to have forgotten their enslavement in Egypt and the miracle of their escape. Food and comfort were more important than freedom. Learning to trust God was apparently not on their agenda. This is familiar to us all: in the difficult days of post-apartheid South Africa, there are the occasional voices that hark back to the old days, arguing that it was better back then. An idealised past is always more appealing than a tough and challenging present.

In certain Christian circles, a lot of spiritual energy is expended on the question of just who is acceptable to God, i.e. just who is 'in' and who is 'out'. Many of us are very quick to exclude others based on colour, class, religion, sexual orientation, liberal or conservative, and so on. Jonah had to learn (and maybe we do too) that 'There's a wideness in God's mercy', as the hymn-writer puts it. Smug and self-righteous attitudes on the part of some Christians, do a great deal of damage to the overall Christian witness. If you don't see things in the same way that I do, then the reality of your Christian commitment is suspect. Is the church an exclusive or inclusive community?

Paul challenges us to consider what is most important: life or death? And if life, then what do we do with that life? For Paul it seems that life takes on its supreme value when it is lived in the service of the gospel, and of other people. For Paul there is always a bigger picture. Life with its temporal circumstances is not the be all and the end all. This life, with its struggles is important, but is always worked out against the backdrop of something worth struggling and suffering for.

The parable in Matthew too easily offends our sense of what is fair. But of course, no injustice was done to the disgruntled workers. They received what they had been promised. The problem for them only arose when they compared what they thought they deserved with what they thought others

deserved. But God does not reward any of us based on what we deserve – which is just as well. If God treated us on the basis of what we deserve, we'd all be in serious trouble! The landowner, however, is gracious, generous, and not bound by what is 'earned' or deserved. He treats his workers based on grace – unearned, undeserved, unmerited kindness. Perhaps he knows that all the workers, no matter how long they had worked, needed the day's wage in order to feed a family. So not only is he generous, but compassionate as well. In our South African context today, this parable surely challenges some of our taken-for-granted assumptions. If the readings from the psalms remind us of the goodness of God, then perhaps it is incumbent on us, who have received grace, to begin to break the accepted patterns and extend generosity beyond what would normally be considered fair and reasonable.

Preaching the Word

There are several possible preaching themes which can be explored.

God can be trusted to provide. The Israelites had to learn it. The vineyard workers discovered that their employer knew it. Paul had already learned it. God's grace ensures it.

Wilderness experiences are not always bad. Entering a wilderness, whether real, symbolic or imagined, always tests faith. But it can also be a place of learning and growth, giving God an opportunity to teach us new things.

The church as an inclusive community. It is not our job to decide who is 'in' and who is 'out'. The challenge is to be open and welcoming to those who are different from 'us'.

The generosity and grace of God. We cannot earn God's love. As we receive from God in so many ways, so we are challenged to do the same for others in compassion and generosity. There is certainly plenty of opportunity to respond to the many needs within our communities.

Living the Word

Living as God's people in South Africa in these days is challenging. We can grumble, complain and criticise as much as we like, and none of that will change anything. We can also do our best to recognise that this is still God's world and strive to show that God is still at work in his world, working through people like us. A positive trusting attitude, striving to be part of an inclusive church, responding to human need with compassion and generosity – these are the ways God's presence and activity is demonstrated.

Liturgical Suggestions

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- "There's a wideness in God's mercy"
- "O Love of God how strong and true"
- "Guide me O Thou great Jehovah"
- "In Christ there is no east or west"
- "What shall our greeting be"

Word and Life for the 18th Sunday after Pentecost

– 27 September 2026

Ken Leverton

Texts

Exodus 17:1-7 / Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16
Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32 / Psalm 25:1-9
Philippians 2:1-13
Matthew 21:23-32

Introduction

The faith journey continues, with lessons to be learned about the nature of God and about learning to trust this God. The Israelites had left slavery in Egypt, but enslavement can take many forms. Their journey to freedom reveals that although the Israelites were out of Egypt, Egypt was not out of the Israelites. As they were called on to face new challenges, their first reaction was to look back and to idealise the past. Learning to cope with freedom can sometimes be just as difficult as having to cope with enslavement.

The exiles of Ezekiel's time were also given to whingeing. In their case they looked back to blame the actions of others for their current plight rather than facing up to their own challenges.

Perhaps Psalm 78 picks up, not so much a common *theme* running through all the various readings, as a common *attitude*: a positive attitude of trust and the assurance that God wills the best for God's people.

The New Testament passages call for a more far-reaching attitude of trust and obedience. Jesus himself is the model for the way God's people are to live.

Hearing the Word

Exodus 17:1-7

From the time the Israelites left Egypt, they seemed to do nothing but complain. First, at the Red Sea as Pharaoh's army closed in on them (Ex 14:10ff), then a few days later when there was no water (Ex 15:23ff), then, as we saw last week (Ex 16:2ff) when there was no food, and now again, when there was no water to drink. There seem to be just two themes running through the whole wilderness saga to this point – complaint and mercy; the grumbles of the people and the mercy of God. One can easily understand Moses' cry of exasperation: "What am I to do with these people?" Yet even for an undeserving people, there is mercy.

It's interesting to note that the rod with which Moses is to strike the rock, is the same rod with which he struck the Nile (cf. Ex 7:14ff). In one instance it made the water undrinkable for the Egyptians, but this time it provides water for the Israelites to drink.

Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16

The form of this Psalm suggests its use in festival gatherings. The verses providing our focus reflect the miraculous deeds of a faithful God, despite the complaints

of a rebellious people in the wilderness. Still, the psalmist draws inspiration and encouragement from the past. These reminders of God's actions in the past will nourish the faith of future generations.

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

Ezekiel was a prophet of the Exile. The exiles themselves were blaming their plight on the "sins of their fathers", thereby dodging any responsibility for their own sin, and presumably, avoiding any responsibility for dealing constructively with their present circumstances. Why must we suffer when this exile is all the fault of our forefathers? Ezekiel will have none of it, because apart from anything else, this way of thinking could reflect badly on the justice of God. Hence Ezekiel's emphasis on "*the soul that sins shall die*".

Psalm 25:1-9

An alphabetic acrostic poem requesting protection, guidance and forgiveness. It ties in with the Ezekiel passage in that seeking for forgiveness, the psalmist knows he can trust in God's perfect justice. God's ways and God's justice can be trusted.

Philippians 2:1-13

There is so much in this well-known extract. We are urged to follow the example of Christ and to learn from the humility of Christ. Attention is drawn to the humiliation and exaltation of Christ. Verses 6-11 are believed by most scholars to be an early Christian hymn. Bearing in mind the relatively early date at which this letter would have been written, this passage, taken as a whole, reveals the extent to which Christological thought had developed. Clearly early Christian thought about the person and purpose of the life of Jesus had developed quickly.

Matthew 21:23-32

Jesus was rattling a few cages. The question of just who Jesus was and what he was about was becoming an increasingly urgent issue for the Jewish religious leaders. Understandably, they didn't like being shown up by this populist upstart of a teacher. Every time they tried to catch him out, they came off second best. It's not surprising that their thoughts were turning to ways to be rid of him. And so they try to trap him by asking an awkward question about Jesus' authority. Can he justify his right to be saying the things he is saying and doing what he is doing? But Jesus is aware of their subterfuge and turns the question back on them. He then follows up by telling the parable of the two sons, leaving the religious leaders to work out that maybe he is questioning their authority.

Interpreting the Word

The “wilderness” has become a metaphor for tough times, times of testing. People of faith everywhere and in every age have had to contend with wilderness experiences. Times of trial, times of doubt, times of disappointment, times when God seems distressingly absent. But as the experience of the Israelites illustrates, and as thousands of people down the ages will testify, the wilderness is also a place of learning. The Israelites may have been slow learners initially, but there were some things they could only learn in the wilderness. Was there really a better, quicker way for them to learn that their God could be trusted to provide – whatever their need was? Maybe sometimes our own wilderness experiences are actually the only way we can learn certain lessons about God, about faith, about life.

These early days of wandering in the wilderness were not working out as the Israelites might have hoped or expected. Things were not easy, and they looked for someone to blame. Moses became the obvious target. Again, the very human response of grumble and complaint raises its head. Before we judge them, we need to ask if we are any better than the Israelites. The fact is that when things don’t work out as we want, there must be someone to blame. Who’s fault is it? Preacher, teacher, husband, wife? ... Certainly not ours.

This reflects perfectly the complaints of the exiles with whom Ezekiel was dealing. Except in this case, people were suggesting that the reason for the suffering of the exiles lies with God. God is to blame. God’s justice is in fact unjust. It is true that God does tend to get blamed for all sorts of things. Some of our language reflects that: the “Acts of God” so beloved of the insurance companies; the attitude which piously says “Everything happens for a reason”, as though that reason must have something to do with what God wants. The implications of this way of thinking of course means that God gets blamed for some pretty horrible things. But at the end of the day, Ezekiel is clear: God’s justice is truly just.

That passage in Philippians calls us to follow an awesome example – that of Jesus himself. And don’t miss those last two verses in this selection: “Continue to work out your own salvation”. Our part in that is to be obedient, which allows God to do God’s own work in us.

Part of the great commandment has to do with loving God with our minds. Jesus seems to have wanted to make people think. He told many parables, and only explained a few of them to his inner circle of disciples. Most times, he told the parable and left it to the hearers to work out what it meant. And Jesus often asked questions, again indicating that he wanted people to think. Here is just one example: “What do you make of John’s baptism?” Being a Christ follower surely does require a willingness to use our God-given minds. Perhaps rather too many of God’s people these days want to be told what to think; want to have things made easy. But as the parable of the two sons makes clear, just mouthing obedience is not going to cut it. Doing some work of our own is what is required. And sometimes, as those religious leaders should perhaps have recognised, doing some thinking, reading the signs, bringing a sense of discernment to what was taking place in the ministry of Jesus, would have been helpful to say the least.

Preaching the Word

There’s a good question asked by the Israelites which opens up a range of possible preaching themes. “*Is the Lord among us or not?*” Is God to be trusted, especially when appearances suggest that God is absent or uncaring. In the light of some of the conflicts and tragedies of recent times, this is a relevant question.?

The story of the Exodus raises the possibility of a sermon with a journeying motif. The Christian life is a journey, with its ups and downs, blessings and setbacks, learnings and questions – but through it all, discovering the God who journeys with us.

The Exodus passage also raises issues of enslavement and how difficult it can be to break free. For us today there is always the danger of enslavement to our addictions, our egos, our habits, our prejudices, our negative and critical attitudes.

The wilderness experience as a place of learning and growth can be helpfully explored.

Many of us have had experiences – personal or community-based – which have played a part in our faith development. Psalm 78 reminds us that in difficult times, we can draw strength and reassurance from those experiences of the past. We can draw nourishment from them to equip us for our lives of faith today.

Learning to love God with the mind is another possible theme. The fact that Jesus often asked questions, and told parables without explaining them, suggests that he wants us to use our minds to develop a thoughtful and intelligent faith.

The parable of the two sons graphically makes the point that good intentions are not enough. Obedient action is what counts. But we are great at making excuses. I wonder what the second son’s excuses were?

Living the Word

When South Africa moved into democracy, there were many who said “It is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes.” After 30 plus years of democracy, many are now saying “Is the Lord among us or not?” There are several ways of applying some of those sermon suggestions above to our current circumstances. As a country we are on a journey; are our enslavements to our past still holding us back; what is it we still need to learn in our wilderness wandering days?

There are still too many of our adult church members with a Sunday School idea of God, immature attitudes to the Bible, and a “consumerist” type of faith which seeks God mainly for what God can do for me. There is plenty of scope for a sermon on the need to grow an intelligent faith – to love God with our minds. And to learn to be obedient servants in deed and not just in word.

Liturgical Suggestions

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- “O God of Bethel”
- “Guide me O thou great Jehovah”
- “One more step along the world I go”
- “O loving Lord, who art for ever seeking”
- “Who can save our land and people”

Word and Life for the 19th Sunday after Pentecost – 4 October 2026

Leon Smith

Texts

Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalm 19

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

Introduction

This 19th Sunday after Pentecost encourages the people of God to be good stewards and take responsibility to bear good fruit in our lives. The powerful images in the first reading and in the Gospel reminds us of God's abundant blessing and the privilege we have to use that blessing wisely. Paul in the letter to the Philippians encourages them to live lives that will bear fruit from the good seed that has been planted in them.

Hearing and Interpreting the Word

Isaiah 5:1-7

This chapter begins with what some scholars refer to as the "song of the vineyard"- which is a love song. This love song is not about Isaiah's love for God but it is rather a song of God's love for God's vineyard.

Many Bible commentators agree that the prophet speaks in the first person in chapter 5 "my". (5:1; 9). The beloved - the owner of the vineyard - is God, and the vineyard is Israel. (verse7).

This image of the vineyard representing God's people is used elsewhere in the Bible, such as in Ps 80:8-19. God has proven God's love for the vineyard by selecting a fertile hillside where God's vineyard would produce abundant grapes that would become the best of wine. (5:1-2). Despite all God's efforts and great care, the vineyard produced bad grapes instead of good fruit as was expected.

This parable reflects the relationship between God and God's people, Israel. God called them and placed trust in them by blessing and protecting them. God placed hope in them to produce a harvest of righteousness and justice, but they failed to produce a harvest worthy of God's expectation. They only produced wild (bad) grapes- reflecting wickedness and injustice. They have failed to respond to God's gift to them, unable to produce fruit worthy of God's good blessings.

The farming imagery is only a metaphor of course, but deeply rooted in this parable is the salvation history of God and God's people. This is a story of God's saving grace toward God's people.

The prophet's audience knew very well the wrath of which he was referring to. This parable is addressed to the people of Jerusalem and Judah (Isa 5: 3), some time in the late 8th century.

Psalm 19

This is a beautiful poetic meditation on meaning of human life in God's creation. Theologian Leonard Vander Zee suggest that the Psalm is divided into three distinct parts: a meditation on creation, on the Torah, and on the sinful reality of human life. It begins with creation- like the Bible which begins with the story of creation. "Whenever theology, whether it's soteriology, or Christology or eschatology, loses its grounding in creation, it goes astray. Apart from a grounding in creation, salvation becomes other- worldly, Christ's real human nature as the second Adam gets swallowed up in his divine Sonship, and the telos of a new and new earth is truncated. Theology begin and end with a doctrine of creation." (Leonard Vander Zee).

As said above we should note that the Psalm is a poem, or a hymn. The picture of the sun as a bridegroom or a strong runner bounding from one end of the heavens to another is not meant to reflect scientific truth. It's poetic truth, working through metaphor, is to express the glory of God in creation. We all know that the sun doesn't rise in the east and set in the west, revolving around the earth, but we still use these naive terms in our everyday speech.

Rolf Jacobsen (Lutheran theologian) emphasize with this unifying theme in the concept of "word" or "speech." Thus, verses 1-6 tell us about the inaudible words of the cosmos that praise God day and night. Verses 7-10 focus on the tangible words of Torah (Law) that promise great blessings to those who live by those words. And verses 11-14 are the Psalmist's faithful words of prayer. Psalm 19, then, is a poem of praise focused on the Word of God in both nature and Scripture. The Psalmist offers it to God, knowing full well that he is a mere mortal and, even more, a sinner who needs grace from the God glorified in the Psalm.

The psalm begins by extolling the glory of God as revealed through the natural world, declaring that "the heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims God's handiwork" (Horrell, 2015).

Psalm 19 stands as a compelling testament to the multifaceted nature of divine revelation, offering a dual exploration of God's self-disclosure through both the natural world and the divinely ordained law. This psalm seamlessly weaves together two distinct yet complementary movements: the first extols the glory of God manifested in the cosmos, while the second transitions to a celebration of the perfection and salvific power of the Torah (Horrell, 2015).

Philippians 3:4b-14

Paul wrote Philippians during his Roman imprisonment (60–62 AD). Philippi was a Roman colony with a significant Gentile Christian population but also had strong Jewish influences. The passage addresses the threat of Jewish Christians insisting on adherence to Mosaic Law (Hawthorne, 2004). Paul, a former Pharisee (Phil. 3:5), contrasts his Jewish credentials with the surpassing value of knowing Christ.

Paul's metaphor of an athletic race (Phil. 3:12–14) aligns with Greek competitive ideals, emphasizing discipline and perseverance. Roman society valued success and achievement, yet Paul redefines true success as found in Christ.

Structure and Themes

Verses 4–6: Paul's past credentials as a Jew, his historical place within Roman Empire.

Verses 7–9: The worthlessness of legal righteousness in comparison to faith in Christ.

Verses 10–11: Suffering and resurrection in Christ.

Verses 12–14: Pressing forward in faith.

Contrast

Paul contrasts confidence in the flesh (Phil. 3:4–6) with faith in Christ (Phil. 3:7–9).

Repetition

“Gain Christ” (Phil. 3:8) emphasizes a singular devotion.

Metaphor:

The “race” imagery (Phil. 3:12–14) illustrates sanctification.

Matthew 21:33–46

This parable is part of Jesus' final teachings in Jerusalem before his crucifixion. The audience consisted of Jewish leaders and crowds, with the religious elite being the primary focus. The passage critiques their rejection of God's messengers and foreshadows Jesus' death.

The imagery of a vineyard reflects Israel (Isaiah 5:1–7). Tenant farming was common under Roman rule, where absentee owner of the farm leased land for cultivation. The tenants' rebellion mirrors Israel's history of rejecting prophets and ultimately Christ.

Structure and Themes

Verse 33: The vineyard owner's preparations.

Verses 34–39: The mistreatment of servants and the killing of the son.

Verses 40–41: The owner's judgment.

Verses 42–46: Jesus' application of the parable.

Allusion: References to Isaiah 5:1–7, linking the parable to Israel's spiritual history.

Repetition: The rejection of multiple servants emphasizes Israel's repeated disobedience.

Irony: The builders rejecting the cornerstone highlights their blindness to Jesus' identity (Ps. 118:22).

Preaching the Word

In the first reading from **the prophet Isaiah**, we hear a song about the vineyard that was carefully cultivated by its owner. Despite all the owners' effort and care the vineyard produced wild grapes instead of good fruit. This reflected the relationship between God and God's people. God entrusted God's people with God's blessings- hoping for a bountiful harvest of justice and righteousness, but they failed and disappointed him.

St. Paul sends greetings of peace to the people of Philippi as he prays that they will live lives that bear fruit from the good seed that has been planted in them.

In **the Gospel of Matthew**, Jesus tells a parable that parallels Isaiah's image of the vineyard. In this parable, a landowner leases his vineyard to tenants and sends his servants to collect the produce or the rental. The rent might be paid in any of 3 ways. The tenants might pay with money, or fixed amount of the harvest or even an agreed percentage of the harvest.

However, the tenants mistreat and kill the servants, even murdering the landowner's son when he is sent. Jesus uses this parable to illustrate the unfaithfulness of Israel towards God. They rejected the prophets sent to them, and they will ultimately reject and crucify God's own Son.

The Gospel reminds us that God will hold us accountable for how we have used the blessings he has given us. The parable ends with the landowner taking the vineyard away from the unfaithful tenants and giving it to those who will bear good fruit. This serves as a warning to us that if we neglect our responsibilities as stewards if we fail to bear good fruit, we may lose the gifts that God has entrusted to us.

Preaching Possible Themes:

1. Rejecting Christ's Authority: The religious leaders' mistake must not be repeated.
2. God's Patience and Judgment: God's patience is great, but justice will prevail.
3. Jesus as the Cornerstone: Our lives must be built on Christ.
4. Faithfulness as God's Stewards: The vineyard represents responsibilities entrusted to believers.

Living the Word

We are God's tenant in this world. God blesses us abundantly with talent, resources and opportunities. He has entrusted us with responsibility to use these blessings carefully and wisely and to bear good fruit in all our lives. We are called to make a difference- we are to produce fruit of righteousness, love, mercy and compassion. Wherever we work and play we should act with integrity, justice and seek to help defend the rights of the marginalized. We need to be humble with the gifts God has bestowed upon us- and see like in our readings not how to act and behave as God's good stewards.

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Word and Life for the 20th Sunday after Pentecost

– 11 October 2026

James Gribble

Texts

Semi-continuous track: Exodus 32:1-14
Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23

Related track: Isaiah 25:1-9
Psalm 23
Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14

Introduction

The Exodus reading in the semi-continuous track is part of a nine-week succession of readings from this book. In the related track there is significant resonance in the rich feast images of Isaiah 25, Psalm 23 and Matthew 22. The Philippians reading strikes a similarly joyful note. However, the sacrifice and feast described in Exodus 32 was something alien, incurring God's displeasure and the angry response of Moses.

Hearing and Interpreting the Word

Exodus 32:1-14

Moses has ascended the mountain to commune with God on behalf of the people. His absence caused a leadership void and lack of direction, and the people become agitated and restless. Aaron as the second-in-command is under pressure to provide them with gods to go before them on the continuing journey. The people clamour for a visible 'god', and Aaron yields to their entreaties. He commandeers their gold earrings (see Exodus 12: 25-26 for the source of their jewellery), and an image of a young bull is made of wood and overlaid with gold. John Gibson makes the point that 'calf' is an unintelligent translation of 'egel', which means a young bull in its first strength. A calf would not have been a normal image in ancient idolatry, but a young bull was. Much later Jeroboam would set up similar images at Bethel and Dan (1 Kings 12:28-33).

An altar was built, a sacrifice and a feast proclaimed, and the people 'sat down to eat and drink, and rose to play'. These phrases suggest something akin to a bacchanalian orgy. This is when God bids Moses '*go down ... for your people ... have corrupted themselves*'. The 'salvation project' teeters on the verge when God threatens to punish the people for their apostasy (vv 9-10). Moses intercedes on their behalf and questions God's intentions, pointing out what the Egyptians would likely make of it. '*Turn from your fierce wrath, change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people*' is his entreaty. The people owed a great deal to 'this Moses' whom they were so ready to write off. But, as vv15ff tell us, when Moses descended the mountain, he dramatically vented his frustration and anger on his erring people.

Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23

Like Psalms 78 and 105 this is a so-called 'history' Psalm. It reflects on the sin of the people and of their fathers (v 6), particularly how they behaved on the journey from Egypt, so quickly forgetting what God had done for them. At Horeb they made a (bull) and worshipped a cast image. They forgot God their Saviour and the things God had done for them in Egypt ... and by the sea. They would have been destroyed had it not been for Moses, God's chosen one, who stood in the breach before God on their behalf (v 23).

Verses 1-5 are a call to praise Yahweh for the Lord's unfailing goodness, for God's 'steadfast love' that 'endures for ever'.

Verse 6 brings us to the theme of the psalm: confession against the backdrop of a history of disobedience and apostasy.

Verses 7-12 record how, despite the wonderful manifestations of God's actions in Egypt, the people showed unbelief at the first provocation. Yet God delivered them and their faith was renewed (v 12).

The two Psalms 105 and 106 are like twins, reflecting the same history from different viewpoints. Psalm 105 traces the history of Yahweh's repeated acts of love and mercy, while Psalm 106 dwells on the faithless sinfulness of the people.

Isaiah 25:1-9

The so-called apocalypse of chapters 24 to 27, like other post-exilic passages with their dominant pattern of hope in a 'Day of Yahweh', reflects the 'notion of a final onslaught of the nations against Jerusalem, in which God intervenes with cataclysms and wonders, defeating the foe with frightful slaughter and establishing his people forever in peace' (Bright).

We see this also in verses 6-8 of this reading, with its anticipation of Yahweh's enthronement and coronation feast.

Verses 1-5 are a psalm of thanksgiving, celebrating Yahweh's victory over some unknown city.

Verses 6-8 resume the themes of chapter 24 with an anticipation of a messianic dispensation likened to a sumptuous feast, to which *all* nations are invited, not only the Jews.

Death will be swallowed up or abolished for ever (v 8). This is perhaps the clearest expression of immortality to be found in the prophetic literature, anticipating New Testament statements such as 2 Timothy 1:10, 1 Corinthians 15:54 and Revelation 21:4.

Verse 9 introduces a hymn of praise over the destruction of Moab. This is odd, following so closely after prophecy of good for all people. It sounds like a very different voice when compared with verses 6-8.

Psalm 23

With this Psalm often being headed a 'Psalm of David', we like to think of this 'priceless jewel of the Psalter' (Abingdon) as the work of David, the thought deeply rooted in his reflections while out in the fields watching over his father's flock. The picture is easily treated sentimentally. In Israel, as in other countries of the ancient Near East, shepherd was a title for the king (as in 2 Samuel 5:2 & 7:7) and the messianic prince of Micah 5:4. References to Yahweh as the Shepherd of his people abound in the Psalter. Rodd comments, 'Piety transforms the general truth that God is Shepherd of the nation to the assurance that he is *my* shepherd'.

The shepherd metaphor also occurs in such passages as Isaiah 40:11, Jeremiah 23:1-4 and Ezekiel 34, where Yahweh is represented as the shepherd, not so much of individuals, but rather of the nation Israel. This dependence on the prophetic idea of Yahweh as the leader of the nation, and the reference to the Temple (v 6), suggests that this Psalm is not Davidic but perhaps a product of the Persian period and from someone endowed with rich religious feeling and insight. This does not diminish its precious insights or reduce its impact.

Verses 1-3a tell of Yahweh as shepherd provider who ensures that the flock have the essentials of pasturage, rest and water. In so doing he 'restores the soul'.

Verses 3b-4 see Yahweh as shepherd guide and protector, leading the flock on 'right paths' and safely through dark valleys of danger or evil. The shepherd's rod and staff are a source of comfort (strength).

In verses 5-6 the metaphor changes. Here Yahweh is the host, welcoming those pursued by enemies, and providing generous hospitality at the Lord's table, to which he invites honoured guests.

Philippians 4:1-9

After the warnings in the previous chapter (see 3:17-21) Paul expresses his affection for the Philippian Christians, calling them 'my joy and crown' (v 1). They are exhorted to be steadfast in faith and practice. While this is a general call, he singles out Euodia and Syntyche by name, two women who were apparently at odds. They needed help to be 'of the same mind in the Lord' (note this phrase also at 2:5). With Clement and others, they had been valued partners in the work of the gospel. Paul appeals to his 'loyal companion' (or 'Syzygus') to help the two women. Their strained relationship was no advert for the gospel.

Because 'the Lord is near' (v 5) there was every reason for the members of the community to 'rejoice in the Lord' (v 4). Joy is a dominant recurring note in this warm epistle.

The word in verse 5 (*epieikes*) is difficult to translate, as the renditions in different versions indicate: 'moderation' (AV), 'forbearance' (RV, RSV), 'magnanimity' (NEB), 'gentleness' (NRSV, NIV, JB Phillips), 'a gentle attitude' (GNB), 'be known to everyone for your consideration towards others' (REB).

Together with these virtues of joy and gentleness Paul also advises avoiding needless worry, instead relying on God and addressing prayers and supplications to the Lord 'with thanksgiving'. In this way the surpassing peace that comes from God will fortress their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, Paul indicates the kind of thoughts with which to fill the mind, to be meditated upon. 'Whatever is true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable of excellence, praiseworthy ... think on these things. Taking care to do this always, the outcome is that 'the God of peace will be with you'.

Matthew 22:1-14

This parable of the Wedding Feast in Matthew has a parallel in Luke's parable of the Great Dinner (14:16-24). Luke's version is regarded as a purer and more original form of what Jesus taught. Both forms emphasise God's wide invitation and thus the universal note of the gospel. When the invited guests decline to respond to the call to dinner, Matthew tells of one subsequent sweep to bring others in. Luke has a second emergency call when, after the first, there are still vacant places at the table. This may reflect Luke's wider sympathies that also embraced the Gentile world, while Matthew, very much a Jew writing for a Jewish readership, betrays a narrower horizon. It is noticeable, too, that Luke's account is more light-hearted, even humorous, while Matthew's detail of the guest without the appropriate wedding garment is rather more severe.

Invitations to a feast of this kind would be issued well in advance, on the understanding that a further call would follow later when all was ready. Thus the final summons to come was urgent, immediate: come now! It is in line with the opening declaration of Jesus' ministry: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.' (Mark 1:15) It follows that those left out from the feast are excluded by their own decision not to respond.

Note the excuses offered for not accepting the invitation. Luke's version is more comprehensive. These are all normal everyday concerns of life and not objectionable in themselves. But when they are allowed to absorb all our thoughts, energies, and priorities, they can effectively keep us from a full acceptance of the joys of the Kingdom. In Luke's version these joys are eagerly anticipated by an excessively pious guest at the table. Matthew's depiction of a *wedding* banquet emphasises the joy and gladness of Kingdom life.

In verses 6-7 the King (God) vents his anger against the city (Jerusalem?) This is not found in Luke's version. It does not sound like Jesus and may be a later addition.

The sub-script, that when the people reject God's invitation, God rejects the people, has been regarded by some as indicative of the origin of Christianity. Instead of being a natural consummation of Judaism, it became something separate and other.

The treatment of the man without a wedding garment (11-13) seems harsh. Having just come off the street he has had little or no time (or means) to procure what is required. It is thought that this little parable-within-a-parable emphasises that one is to appear at the King's feast with the pure garment of righteousness. It suggests a note of divine severity, that the day will come when the King sifts the worthy from the unworthy; a frequent note in the teaching of Jesus.

Verse 14 appears to be a detached saying, suggesting that only a few would heed the call to repentance. This pessimistic note may reflect the persecution and difficulties that characterised the period when this Gospel was written.

Preaching the Word

The long time that Moses spent communing with God up the mountain could be regarded, perhaps, as a personal indulgence, his prolonged absence causing confusion among the people. More appropriately it suggests that Moses had his priorities right. He needed this time of listening and reflection to prepare himself for the next stage of the ongoing journey with the people he led. It was never going to be an easy task. What about a sermon on the daily 'quiet time' as intentional time seeking the face of God for the rigours of the daily journey?

The Exodus reading also underlines the ever-present danger of resorting to idolatry in place of God. There are many 21st-century forms of it to lead us astray, such as wealth, power, influence etc. Sometimes the vociferous excitement of a large crowd at a sporting event, with all the attendant talismans, resembles a form of worship. A sermon here, perhaps, on our contemporary idols?

What happens when the early flush of a new experience of God and his love wears thin and the overwhelming force of circumstance causes the sense of God's near presence to vanish together with a loss of conviction? As the poet William Cowper put it: 'Where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord?' How may we help our people fan the smouldering embers of faith and devotion to flame again?

The recurring feast image in today's readings contradicts so much of what religious faith has been allowed to become, with an emphasis on doom-and-gloom, what Marcus Borg calls 'the heaven-and-hell framework' of so much Christian language used. A feast suggests plentiful and delicious provision, good company, joy and laughter. The letter to the Philippians exudes the note of joy. Perhaps a sermon on what a joyful Christian way of life means, and how to avoid the things that keep us from experiencing the joys of Kingdom life?

The Philippian reading helpfully outlines the essential Christian virtues, especially that of 'gentleness', and their place in our daily witness. We need to learn how not to give the Christian life a bad name.

Living the Word

Thirty years into the new South Africa has seen many things change, some for the good and others disappointingly retrogressive. There remain many signs of a lingering 'Egyptian mentality' that people in South Africa need to shake off if we are to experience fully the joys and freedoms possible in living in our land as part of a very diverse community. Many of our people are still paddling in the shallows and need help to do what Jesus told his disciples to do: 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch' (Luke 5:4). How can we as leaders of the flock help those within our area of influence to venture into the deeper water to discover what can be found there?

Liturgical suggestions

Suggested Songs/Hymns that commend themselves are:

- "Guide me, O thou great Jehovah/Redeemer (William Williams)
- "O for a closer walk with God (William Cowper)
- "The Kingdom of God is justice and joy (Bryn Rees)
- "Rejoice, the Lord is King! (Charles Wesley)

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Word and Life for the 21st Sunday after Pentecost – 18 October 2026

Newton Brandt

Texts

Exodus 33:12–23
Isaiah 45:1–7
Psalm 99
Psalm 96 1–9, 10–13)
1 Thessalonians 1:1–10
Matthew 22:15–22

Introduction

A possible common theme of the lessons this Sunday is divine favor.

Our forgiving God in God's mercy is always willing to start again as can be learned from the golden calf fiasco as well the exile. Moses is raised up to make intercession and is given divine favor in the process. The same is bestowed Cyrus to liberate the remnant; the Thessalonians believers to become a model Church and to Jesus to outwit a devious plot to annihilate Him.

Hearing the Word

Comments on Exodus 33:12–23

Chapter 33 starts the aftermath of the tragic incident of the golden calf and the revelry that ensued. This chapter depicts various interactions between Moses and God, ultimately resulting in the pardon of the people's apostasy (34:1)

Turning to our passage, Moses is making intercession as he is struggling with the hopeless situation, they find themselves in. The people have sinned dreadfully before the living God. Moses is unsure of himself and the task ahead is too difficult to undertake. In response to v2, he asks God as to the name of the angel who will accompany them (v12). He also implores God to accompany them again on their journey as God's Presence was the only leverage that made them difference from the other nations (v.16).

Due to the divine favour bestowed on him, Moses pleads with God for a deeper relationship between them enlightening him to God's principles. These will help Moses to know how God is dealing with human beings. This will also enable furthermore to lead and govern the people in accordance with divine will.

To these the Lord agreed, which resulted that Moses asked for further assurance by seeing God's glory. This is deemed the divine aura according to Ex.16:10.

The Sovereign of the Universe partially agreed to this and in God's divine compassion allowed Moses to see God's rear as it was impossible to see God's face and live.

Comments on Isaiah 45:1–7

The exile has run its course, God's enslaved remnant has been purified through their affliction and a new episode must be ushered in. Babylon will not just set their labour force, the captives free. So, it is time for a power change, a shift in the regional and international power.

We are entering into a prophesy that started in Isaiah 44:24. The most astounding thing of this prophecy is the prophesy that Cyrus, the founder of the Persian Empire, is God's instrument or agent used to bring about God's designs in world affairs.

Chapter 45:1–8 contains God's commission of Cyrus who is uniquely and intentionally designed by God for the specific time in history. He is the only non-Israelite deemed to be anointed a term reserved for Israel's kings or high priests.

God will assist and reward Cyrus. All authority is given to the new ruler to bring to naught the oppressors of God's people. Supreme wealth will be amassed in the process of subjugation, but at the centre of it all is revealed. *For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen I summoned you by name and bestow on you a title of honour (v4).*

Though Cyrus does not know the Lord, the Lord of Israel, it is the Lord who has summoned Cyrus. This is to proof that the Lord alone is the creator of nature and controller of history. God controls everything whether good or bad from a human perspective.

God is the God of all people, and nothing shall be impossible to God (Jer 32:17, 26). As the Sovereign of the universe, God can orchestrate developments to favour God's beloved and bring about a complete transformation of their circumstances.

In 536 B.C. Babylon fell and after this event Cyrus ordered a return of the Jews to their own land and furnished them very liberally with the means of rebuilding their Temple.

Comments on Psalm 99

The same theme from Psalms 93 & 97 are continued here. God is King-the universal King!

This Psalm about God's holy and righteous rule can be divided into 3 sections, viz.vv.1–3 God is enthroned; vv.4–5 God's rule is just and vv.6–9 Praise for God's forgiving response to Israel's intercessors.

A new era has dawned after the exile and not only Zion, Jerusalem, but a new universal kingdom will be reconstructed. Herein, Israel's God is enthroned and all the peoples should be conscious and more so overwhelmed as He reigns over the earth.

A call is made to all people to worship God's name due to God's holiness, that induce moral behaviour to all, without favour.

Enthroned upon the cherubim refers to the ark of the covenant (1 Sam. 4:4, 2 Sam.6:2) that accompanied the people in the wilderness.

God is a forgiving God and therefor like the former leaders, prayer can be made again and divine favour be expected as of old.

For intercession by Moses see Ex.32:11–14; Deut.9:26–29; Aaron is to pronounce Num.6:22–26 on behalf of the people. Samuel cried to the Lord for the people in the face of the warring Philistines (cf. 1 Sam.7:9).

Comments on Psalm 96 1–9, (10–13)

This post-exilic Psalm shows that the scorn of the past has gone, and a new song of thanksgiving is fitting. A hymn of praise to God as ruler and judge.

It needs to be noted that the same song can be found in 1 Chron.16:23–33 and there it is linked with the return of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem.

The Psalm can be divided into four sections: vv.1–3 A call to praise God, vv.4–6; He is praiseworthy; vv.7–9 All peoples invited to worship Him and vv. 7–9 All nature invited to acclaim Him.

A clear distinction is made between the Creator God and false gods that are futile idols and vain. Thus, God is exalted in God's honour and majesty, God's strength and beauty. These divine attributes are personified as attending angels before the King of glory.

Access to bring offerings and worship is open to all nations who revere God's holiness and awesome majesty.

Finally, all nature's praise is called to join the adoration to augment the human exultation depicting God's faithfulness and righteousness over all creation.

Comments on 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10

Our *pericope* contains the words of thanksgiving for the faith of the Thessalonian congregation, established during the *second* missionary journey of St. Paul and his companions. These commendation words can be divided into: vs2–4 for faith and loving service; vs 5,6 for spiritual receptivity; vs 7, 8 for the abandonment of idolatry; vs 9,10 for spiritual hope.

Thessalonica was the capital and largest city in Macedonia and was the second congregation to be established in Europe (after Philippi). This letter according to Thompson was likely the first New Testament epistle to be written by Paul and thus one of the oldest books in the New Testament.

Paul and his co-workers wrote to this young congregation commending them for their faithfulness and exemplary witness. They continually kept their remembrances alive by interceding for their brothers before God.

Being unable to return (1 Thess. 2:17,18), Paul was very excited to hear that the fruit of the missionary endeavour (cf. Acts 17:1–9) was evident to all.

Verses 9 and 10 is seen as a concise summary of Paul's initial preaching to the non-Jews.

Comment on Matthew 22:15–22

Our passage follows on the Triumphal Entry which sparked tensions with the religious parties where Jesus' authority was questioned. Jesus' parables of the tenants and wedding guests in returned was directed at the Pharisees, one of the leading parties of the day. The animosity against Jesus was thus brimming over.

Our *pericope* is a plot against Jesus to destroy Him. This goes back to the previous chapter where Jesus made a proclamation implying that the heathen will supersede Israel as the privilege people (Matt.22:5, 8–10, 14)

To understand the plot, we need to take note of the views of the parties, viz. the Pharisees, Sadducees and Herodians. (I will concentrate on the parties in the passage, but it is interesting that directly after these verses, we read that the Sadducees will try their hand at trapping Jesus, also).

The majority of the Jews, through the views of the Pharisees, held the idea that the Law of Moses forbade their subjugation to a foreign power.

The Herodians, supporters of Herod, had a political leaning towards the Roman Emperor (the head of occupying force), and Herod his deputy. They regard it lawful to affirm their allegiance and pay tribute to Caesar. This they did themselves and urged others to do the same. It was furthermore, according to them allowed to adopt the customs and rites of the conquering nation.

Thus, a failproof plot was devised with witnesses from the Herodians to back it up. These were needed to implicate Jesus at a court trial and annihilate him. Matthew describes in detail how the hatred for Jesus was camouflaged. The onslaught of Jesus' visitors used was sugar coated, yet deadly. At the crux of the matter was the question if it was right to pay taxes to Caesar?

Jesus saw through their hypocrisy and wickedness. He did not rush in but displayed his divine wisdom in clearing the citizen's duties to both Caesar and God.

They left astounded at Jesus' brilliance.

Interpreting the Word

The favour of the Lord is a precious gift inspiring, protecting, enlightening, liberating those who follow Him. These are all elements in the texts we encounter today.

In Exodus, the absence of Moses, caused the liberated slaves to feel like sheep without a shepherd and they took matters into their own hands creating an idol that can see them through into the future. In the aftermath of their confrontation by Moses, we see Moses beseeching the Lord to accompany them again. Moses knew that only divine favour will give them the upper hand and victory. God mercifully adhered to Moses' requests. He re-inspired Moses and strengthened him with trust in God. Moses is given a powerful revelation- seeing God's Glory, and he was set for life and equipped for the onward journey through the desert.

In Isaiah, the enslaved remnant of God's people, has found favour with the Lord who decided on their liberation. Cyrus, without his knowing, is given wisdom and strategy to undermine the Babylonian might and fail-proof plans to secure their cities and strongholds. The victory through the Lord was inevitable and the loot immeasurable so that even the slaves were laden with them to start a new life.

The Psalms break forth in praise and adoration to the Living God, the Liberator, for God's forgiveness, justice and mercy. They bow in adoration at God's feet and call upon the nations to buy in to their example and worship the same God

who will be favourable inclined to them too. The invitation is a proclamation that a universal God is at play in this world and He dictates the future of every nation.

The Thessalonians, the divine favour is no longer for an exclusive few, who need to tell others about God, but for each and every one who accept this message in faith. They will be endowed by the Holy Spirit, equipping them to become ambassadors to the new kingdom that is imminent. The divine favour of the Holy Spirit was evident in the lives of the Thessalonians. We read of them who became followers of Jesus Christ. Despite opposition to their new lifestyle and persecution they prevailed and encouraged others to do likewise as a new kingdom will come about soon.

In Matthew we see how futile it is through the minds of humans to trap the Sovereign of this kingdom and undermine God's cause. The paying of tribute was a double-edged sword. Whether you are pro or against you will have enemies to the left or the right. In an uncanny move these enemies found a common hatred in Jesus, who too is undermining their authority and the allegiance of the common people by introducing and advocating for a new kingdom (from heaven). As they see their powerbase eroding, they seek to eliminate the intruder in their sacred space.

Forming an indivisible pact, they embark to trap Jesus and then through his words. But they failed to do so.

We need to focus on the hatred of the Truth and take note of the extent the adversary will go to eliminate the Truth. Jesus was victorious in this round, but the war and hatred just intensified until he was crucified on Calvary.

Preaching the Word

'Tax' has been a curse word through the ages. Even in Church today you can get people hot under the collar by analysing the various forms of tax. The preacher will be well loved pointing out the injustices of tax. He/she can even start a revolution. Our sermon should preferably not be about tax *per se*, but the onslaught against the kingdom of God.

The onslaught is inevitable as the kingdom principles goes against the ways of the world where status, power, money rule our value systems. We are in the world but not of the world. We too need wisdom and insight to negotiate the challenges against Christ's Church. We need to consider:

1. What is our goal in life?
2. Who are we siding with?
3. To what extent will we harness divine favour to get our goal?

1. Jesus' opponent knew exactly what he stood for. They use each of these in their insincere flattery, hoping to trap Him. We need to be wise and humble. Not all draw near to extend love and a positive relationship to us.
2. We need to alert our hearers to the sadness that principles can be bend at will when it suits us, cooperation with the enemy is acceptable where we make common inroads favouring ourselves, disciples can be groomed and used in deception thus continuing a vicious cycle of unrighteousness.
3. How will we be remembered? Honouring God or undermining Him? Hereto the Thessalonians and their exemplary lives can become a model to us.

Living the Word

How do we deal with injustice? How do we deal with SARS? Tax issues are touchy and yet we need to take the higher road.

Where to do we give our time, energy and effort? (Cf. The disciples of the Pharisees and Herodians) Here we see how hatred and lies can be hidden behind words potent to destroy someone completely! *In Him we live and move and have our being*, thus in our choices God wants us to honour him with every thought, idea, intention and action,

Adversity can be opportunities to unknown heights. Divine favour followed on petitioning God. Sometimes being down and out like Moses can open a whole new world, even seeing the Glory of God. Go to your own Tent of Meeting and make intercession to the forgiving God.

Paul is said to have written in the most affectionate and pointed exhortations to the members of the Thessalonian congregation to urge them in all those graces they were so conspicuous for and encourage them to higher attainments and richer consolations in the divine life.

What about us? How do people rate us? How do people speak about our witness?

Word and Life for the 22nd Sunday after Pentacost – 25 October 2026

Neil Vels

The texts for the day

Deuteronomy 34:1-12
Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18
Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17
Psalm 1
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
Matthew 22:34-46

Introduction

As we prepare for the final Sunday of the liturgical year with Reign of Christ Sunday in just four weeks, the words of today's readings come to us as an encouragement after what may have been a long and difficult year in which hopes for the future may have been challenged.

Our readings speak to us of how to find hope during uncertain times; to draw our strength from the living waters of a stream, to find our refuge in God, and in particular to be a source of love during times of uncertainty and persecution.

Hearing the Word (Exegetical)

Comments on the Old Testament readings – semi-continuous (Deuteronomy 34:1-12)

The Deuteronomy passage comes at the end of the Pentateuch as the people of the Exodus find themselves leaderless and about to enter the promised land. The end of this part of the journey has come, but what of the future? In chapter 34 we are offered two glimpses of the source of the Israelites' hope for the future:

The first is the vision of Moses who has led them out of Egypt. His work is done, he dies strong at one hundred and twenty years old, but before he dies, he has a vision of the future: Verses 1-4 describe the land that the Hebrews were about to enter, previously promised through Moses (31:1-8). Gottwald makes the point that it is not possible to view the whole of the land from that vantage point (Laymon 121). Rather this is about painting a picture of where the future of the people lies (and possible justification for later warfare).

The second reason to have hope is the infilling of a new leader with the spirit of wisdom. After a period of mourning Joshua son of Nun, previously anointed by Moses (31:1-8) takes over as leader. Joshua has been alongside Moses for much of the Pentateuch, first making his appearance as a general (Ex 17:8-16), then coming down Mt Sinai with Moses (Ex 32:17), and later going to explore the land of Canaan (Num 13:16-17).

The passage serves to close off the Torah and introduce the new part of Israel's history. This is the time of settling the promised land under the Judges, and also, as a text written later during the Exile, possibly justification for their possession of the land and Joshua's leadership.

Comments on the Psalm – semi-continuous (Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17)

This community lament (Laymon 257) is a song in which the people seek the favour of God despite God's wrath and anger (notably excluded from today's readings). There is a deep recognition of how fleeting the lives of people are in comparison to the permanence of God, and it is to this eternal hope that the plea for favour is addressed, indeed, that can be addressed. Implicit here, although absent from our reading, is the understanding that to be blessed by God one needs to be in right relationship with God

Recognising one's sinfulness and need for God makes a joyful life possible despite limitations (Ibid 287).

Comments on the Old Testament reading – complementary (Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18)

The reading for today begins with an injunction to the Israelites to be holy as God is holy and proceeds to remind them of what that looks like. This passage largely reflects the teachings of the Decalogue together with other ritual laws which together form part of the so-called "Holiness Code", according to Milgrom probably preexilic (Laymon 68) although Leviticus itself as part of the Priestly tradition is probably later.

Verses 15-18 particularly relate to good neighbourliness. What does it mean to be a neighbour to those who surround you? It is notable (especially in the light of the New Testament readings for today) that verse 18 affirms the love of one's neighbour. In this pericope, and beyond, neighbour includes the poor, the alien, the differently abled, and potentially also the fauna and flora.

In this passage one emulates a holy God by living justly in one's environment.

Comments on the Psalm – complementary (Psalm 1)

Psalm 1 presents to us a stark contrast between a fruitful tree well established on the bank of a river, and chaff, the dry, discarded part of grain grown on a field with little water and a shallow root system.

This contrasts those who follow the law and those who do not. Toombs suggests that here the author probably refers more to the guidance and instruction of God rather than a written legal code (Laymon 261). The opening word of the psalm – *blessed* – suggests the future of those who delight in the law, while the closing word – *perish* – speaks to those who are wicked.

Comments on the Second Reading (*1 Thessalonians 2:1-8*)

This pericope from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians - possibly the earliest of Paul's writings - is one which continues Paul's introduction to the letter and seeks to commend Paul and his companions to the church of Thessalonica.

Paul contrasts himself as a faithful servant of the gospel with the "supply of travelling preachers and promoters of cults and religions" (Laymon 686) - People who would proclaim a religious message as a way to enrich themselves. In fact, says Paul, they did not rely on the Thessalonians for financial support as they did not want to be a burden to them (v9). He affirms their work among the Thessalonians stems from their love and passion for them - despite strong opposition.

Comments on the Gospel reading (*Matthew 22:34-46*)

Matthew 22 forms part of Jesus' discussions with religious leaders in the Jewish Temple. In 21:12 Jesus begins a work of overturning the easy assumptions of Jewish religious life and inviting his hearers - both religious leaders and crowds - to something deeper than religious system. His engagements up to the end of chapter 25 are deeply critical of the religious leaders, and so it comes as no surprise to discover the plot against Jesus in 26ff.

In verses 34-46 the Pharisees want to test Jesus' loyalty to Judaism and try to trap him with a basic catechism question: "Which is the most important commandment?" Jesus answers as correctly with the Shema: "love the Lord your God and love your neighbour". However since entering Jerusalem Jesus has shown the religious leaders to be lacking in this area.

The second part of the pericope then brings us into a practical application: if you believe this is the most important commandment, who do you expect the Messiah to be? A warrior like David who would bring violent revolution, or something different?

Jesus suggests that the Messiah should be greater than David and his way must be different. It must be the way of love rather than war! In this way Jesus response seeks to define the Messiah: the Messiah is not a warmonger, but one who would die for all people (Wright 95).

Interpreting the Word

The semi-continuous readings remind us of the importance of a community of God. The Deuteronomy passage tells the story of a people liberated from slavery looking forward to a new phase of freedom - their own land - under visionary and inspired leadership. This is a leader who in both this book and the next is encouraged to be "Strong and courageous" (Dt 31, Josh 1).

It is worthwhile for our interpretation to ask how the Deuteronomy passage may have been used in the past. We discover that as much as it speaks of freedom for one people it also justifies the submission of another involving the violent incursion of Canaan. The passage affirms that the land was given by God for the Israelites and anoints a leader who will lead a violent takeover of the land to claim it for the people of God, a violence continued under the future leadership of Saul and David, both anointed by God to settle the promised land.

The psalm speaks of a people who communally recognise that as the people of God they are not what they ought to be - indeed, their iniquities are laid bare before God - but are also able to appeal to God's infinite compassion in seeking God's compassion and favour.

As we look at the passages before us it initially seems difficult to harmonise the semi-continuous passages with the New Testament readings advocating for love. In our interpretation we should be careful of hearing the passage as condoning any "visionary and inspired leadership" that encourages violent possession of land, literally or figuratively, particularly with the ongoing violence in the Middle East (and elsewhere).

There is, however, still a case to be made for visionary and anointed leadership during difficult times. One would hope that in the Christian world, that leadership would have an ethos of love and peace rather than violence.

There is also opportunity, I think, in light of the New Testament passages, that this history of the Israelites be presented as an unfortunate alternative. Jesus supersedes David because he did not resort to violence, indeed, he took upon himself the violence still being meted out by the people of God and in doing so transformed it into the way of love.

The complementary passages are far easier to work with and present a healthier alternative in today's world in which we are far more aware of diversity. It is perhaps testimony to the diverse writers of the scriptures to find passages that are open to such a wide range of views. Even as the Deuteronomist is advocating for the violent takeover of Canaan, the Priestly author is advising on how to live in that land. While, once again, there is much in Leviticus that we find distasteful in today's world, there is also much that seems prescient, indeed, critical, in creating a just society with a focus on good neighbourliness rather than hostile takeover and, just outside this pericope, a call for justice for the deaf and blind (v14), as well as for the environment (v19).

As we interrogate this passage, we discover that the holiness which God requires looks a lot like love and justice, a theme repeated often in scripture and by Jesus. This is the picture that is painted in Psalm 1 as it describes how a person is blessed, this is the issue that Jesus struggles with throughout his time in Jerusalem as he describes love of God and neighbour being most important, yet fails to find it practised by those who claim to be representative of God. Indeed, the children of David long for a Christ who will come as a warrior rather than one who seeks to bring peace, and Jesus seeks to offer an alternative.

Preaching the Word

As I write and reflect on the passages before us for this Sunday, I'm deeply aware of the challenging and changing circumstances we face not just locally but especially internationally. I believe that our passages today can speak powerfully into those circumstances, whatever they may be, as we prepare for Sunday:

The semi-continuous readings offer the hope of a clear future in the light of changing circumstances - a move from a time in a wilderness to a time of settling Canaan, which in and of itself was a difficult time. Paul engages with

the Thessalonians regarding the opposition and difficult circumstances that they had faced. Each member of the congregation would have a difficult time that they're facing, whether personally or how they engage with the world circumstances.

It may be helpful to identify some of these circumstances such as climate change, international political tension and warfare, economic hardship, the vast difference between rich and poor in our own country. We long for visionary and anointed leaders to tackle these and other problems – and to lead us into a new and promised future.

But we need to honestly interrogate what we want our leaders to do for us. Do we want a strong leader to solve my problems, without disregard for others, to give me my promised land while taking from another? Maybe if that is true, we need to examine our motives and be led into a place of communal repentance. Maybe it is this selfish kind of leadership that is the cause of many of the difficulties we face.

When our current leadership no longer seems up to the task, when strength and incursion no longer seem helpful and when our easy religious answers no longer suffice, we need to find something different. What is it that God calls us to? What is it that we seek from our leaders?

We find the answer in our New Testament texts.

When we find ourselves suffering, insulted and opposed, we need people like those Paul and his companions found in Thessalonica, joyfully receiving the gospel and becoming a joy to Paul and his friends at a time when they were under pressure. It is the love and acceptance of the Thessalonians that encourage Paul and give him hope in his ministry.

And we are reminded again through our gospel that the essence of the law is to love God and love one's neighbour. This basic tenet of the Jewish faith will not only provide strength and comfort during times of uncertainty, but will also lay down a firm foundation for the way we operate as followers of Christ and our message to the world in contrast to a worldly system that looks toward strong men and violence to protect its interests.

Here we can easily bring in the complementary readings as we speak of good neighbourliness – a prophetic voice in a world of leaders seeking domination. We can speak of those firmly rooted in the law (expressed as love of neighbour and love of God) and how they are the ones who are blessed, rather than those given over to wickedness who will face judgment and will perish.

It's easy to proclaim this message in general terms, especially when we live in a world where we can point fingers to others, to demand that they love. It is easy for us in our moments of worship to love God, to enjoy the moment of spiritual closeness, to believe that we ourselves are rooted beside the life-giving stream. But this love of God compels us to love our neighbour, yes, even the ones we hate.

The way of Jesus, the way of love leads us beyond the warfare of Joshua and David, the exclusion of those who are different and invites us to a deep, loving acceptance of our neighbour who may be different – and the visionary and anointed creation of a world that is based not on violent incursion, but on love, acceptance and inclusion even when it is costly.

Living the Word

The challenge we face as people who follow Jesus, is whether we really follow Jesus or are more excited by violent possession of the things that we want.

Our readings today invite us to consider how we respond in the face of changing circumstances, and what we're willing to pay to keep our world safe at the cost of others.

What changes do I need to make to the way I view the systems of the world and my own priorities? What difference would it make I were to choose another way - the way of love and inclusion rather than the way of violence? What are the practical ways I can do this and advocate for this in my life?

Liturgical suggestions

With the focus of the gospel on loving God and neighbour this, together with the psalms, gives plenty of scope for the development of liturgy based around this.

The words of Psalm 90 invite us into the worship and trust of a God who is beyond our temporal struggles, and indeed is beyond our own failings as a people. Being reminded of God's transcendence is a good way to be led into worship and into a place of confession, being reminded of our sinfulness and God's unfailing love.

We could choose songs reflecting those themes and our penitence; the words of both Psalm 1 and Psalm 90 could be used as is, or reworked into prayers of praise, adoration, confession and absolution.

The invitation to love God is another entry point into worship, as the importance of loving God and neighbour could also be a good focus for confession, and loving neighbour for intercession.

The focus on the importance of law helps us in our prayers of preparation for receiving the word from scripture and the preacher.

The same applies for sending out at the conclusion of the service – can we go and love God and neighbour?

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LITURGY FOR THE FEAST OF ALL SAINTS – 1 NOVEMBER 2026

John Goliath

Introduction

All Saints Day is celebrated by many Christian denominations across the world. It is dedicated to the biblical saints, as well as the historical saints that are recognized by some denominations. All Saints Day was originally established by Pope Gregory III in the mid-8th century although there had been earlier forms of this observance.

Saints are thought of as holy people, male and female, who are recognized by the community as being virtuous. I would suggest three categories of saints: (1) the saints of the bible, (2) the saints recognized by a particular denomination and canonized after their death, and (3) living saints. The celebrations and ceremonies of All Saints Day should therefore take all three categories into account. There are many people all over the world who live extraordinarily good and holy lives, who can rightly be called saints.

Revelation 7:9–17 offers the complete picture of Saints: they are an uncountable number comprising all people, all nations, all tribes and all languages.

Texts

Revelation 7:9–17
Psalm 34:1–10, 22
1John 3:1–3
Matthew 5:1–12

Note: this liturgy is intended for use in the context of a Eucharist (Holy Communion) service.

The Gathering

Proclamation Hymn: *Who are these like stars appearing*

Call to Worship

Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne,
Alleluia! Amen.

Saints have overcome the darkness of the earth:
And we walk in their light.

Saints are alive on earth and in heaven:
And we are part of their existence.

Sing Glory to the Lamb on the throne,
who opened the portals of the earth
so that we may walk through them to reach heaven.

The Collect for All Saints

God of holiness,
Your glory is proclaimed in every age to us,
ordinary people on earth,
aspiring to be your saints on earth and in heaven.
Help us to live with boldness and joy
and in the blessedness of the Saints
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you

and the Holy Spirit, One God,
now and forever.
Amen.

(adapted from *Lectionary Year C*,
The Anglican Church of Southern Africa)

Prayer of Adoration

Blessed are you O God,
whose wisdom from above has inspired men and women
through the ages,
to be your saints on earth,
to fulfill your purposes as custodians of all that is good,
to hear the cry of the poor,
to act with mercy, and to live together in gentleness and
peace.

We adore you O Christ and we bless you

(adapted from Philip Newell, *An Earful of Glory*)

Confession

We confess to God almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
before all the company of heaven, and to each other,
that we have sinned through our own fault.
We have been proud in our own conceit.
We have not revered your holiness,
nor have we respected one another.
We have lacked courtesy and consideration for others.
We have not honoured the memory of those we have loved
and lost.
We have despaired of life without them,
instead of believing in the communion of saints.
We pray that we may be forgiven.
Enable us to accept afresh our call to be saints on earth,
through the merits of Jesus Christ our Saviour.
Amen.

Absolution

Glorious and Holy Trinity,
help us to live as sons and daughters of God who created us,
of Jesus who saves and sanctifies us,
and of the Holy Spirit who guides us.
Absolve us from our failures and wrongs,
Through Jesus Christ, Our Lord.
Amen

Merciful Lord,
help us to mark, learn and inwardly digest your Word,
that it may be a light to our path
and inspire us to live holy lives as your saints on earth,
following the example of your saints in heaven.
Amen

The hearing of scripture:

Revelation 9:7 – saints are from all nations and cultures

1 John 3:1–3 – we are God’s children, the fullness of this is yet to be revealed

The Psalm may be said or sung immediately before the gospel is read

Matthew 5:1–12 – a blueprint for saintly living

The Sermon (possible theme: *Saints on earth and saints in heaven*)

The Peace (shared according to local custom)

May the Saints in heaven look upon us
and inspire us to be saints on earth,
and may the peace of the Lord be with us.

Amen

The Prayers of the People

Jesus, Lamb of God,
You are surrounded by your saints.
You are seated on your throne of mercy,
not to judge, but to forgive,
not to hold our sins against us, but to absolve us from them.
Lord, forgive.

Gracious God ,
you do not look upon us as lost children but as people of
hope,
who often sin, but who remain saints on earth enlivened by
your grace;
enfold us and be gracious to us.
Lord, be gracious.

God of love,
We live in an uncaring and loveless world.
Sometimes we embrace this world and become unloving,
and do not live out your command to love one another.
Inspire us to love more.

God of immaculate saintliness,
We can only hope to be as pure as you are.
Help us not to succumb to the weakness of the world,
but to attain the full measure of saintliness, even on earth.
**Lord make us pure and holy,
Amen**

Recognition of special events in the congregation such as birthdays and anniversaries.

While a hymn is sung the offering is received and blessed.

The Eucharist (as per local custom)

The Benediction

Saints in heaven and saints on earth,
Saints who have died and saints still living,
Pray for us

God of great care, bless us and make us holy;
Jesus, who walked the earth,
Walk with us.

Holy Spirit, who dwells in our hearts,
Guide our path.

The blessing of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be with us now and in the ages to come.
Amen

The Sending

Children of God, saints on earth,
Go in peace and be at peace .
Amen

Suggested Songs/Hymns

– “For all the saints who from their labours rest”

Note: While the hymns can be found in *Ancient and Modern New Standard* or *Ancient and Modern Revised*, and also in other denominational collections, the preacher and celebrant may use any appropriate hymns of their choice.

WORD AND LIFE FOR ALL SAINTS DAY – 1 NOVEMBER 2026

John Goliath

Texts

Revelation 7:9–17
Psalm 34:1–10, 22
1 John 3:1–3
Matthew 5:1–12

Introduction

On All Saints Day the Christian Church remembers men and women who have lived extraordinary lives of holiness, which includes moral rectitude, veritable ethical behaviour, outstanding contributions to society, love for creation (like St. Francis), and a passion for introducing people to the way of Jesus, to name but a few of their attributes.

Saints are not only people who have died, but also those who are still living, from every culture, tribe, nation or race, who show the characteristics described above. 1 John 3:1–3 alludes to us being saints, or becoming saints, ‘Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is’

Hearing the Word

Revelation 7:9–17

Revelation is an example of apocalyptic writing, which means it makes use of visions, dreams and symbols which can only be understood when interpreted in the context when it was written. In Revelation’s case this was in 96 AD, when emperor worship threatened Christians and Christianity. This literary genre was a tool used to hide its true meaning in order to protect the identity of those it was meant for, namely the Christian community.

The early Church did not see ‘Israel’ and the ‘New Israel’ (the early Church) as any different, the one from the other (vv.4ff). Thus, the twelve tribes as described in vv. 5–8 could also include the early Church and the Church today. This thought process can be applied to the 144,000 of v.4 and the ‘great multitude that no one could count’ of v. 9. The meaning of this is clear: salvation is for the old Israel, the early Church as well as for the Church today.

The world and the Church in John’s day were in the midst of turmoil. V.16 looks forward to the end of this, when there is ‘no more hunger’. John urges his hearers to look forward to a time and ‘place’ (heaven) where there isn’t any lack of food, spiritual or physical. It is therefore the task of saints on earth to work tirelessly for the relief of hunger and pain. As David Van Daalen points out, ‘By God’s grace, there is an opportunity for the redeemed to be marked out’. (*A Guide to Revelation* p83.) They are ‘sealed’, among other reasons, to alleviate the plight of the oppressed, the poor and the hungry of every nation. The ‘multitude’ who are saints tells us that God’s mercy is worldwide, and it is for everyone.

V. 14 points to the martyrs who are now in heaven. They have remained faithful to the end. What is important is that this does not mean that no one will succeed them, and that they are the only ones in heaven. God doesn’t save because of service rendered. Rather, service is rendered because God saves, and God does it all the time for all whom God has created.

Psalm 34:1–10, 22

This psalm forms part of a body of 13 psalms that are associated with episodes in the life of David, such as David being delivered from Saul (Psalm 18), David mourning his sin with Bathsheba (Psalm 51). Psalm 34 is thought to allude to the episode where David pretended to be insane (see 1 Samuel 21:13) to escape the wrath of King Achish. A heading to the Psalm reads, ‘*Of David, when he feigned madness before Ahimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away.*’

But the real impact of Psalm 34 is David’s praise of God, not as an act of seeking God’s favour, but out of reverence. David is convinced that honouring God is the right thing to do, even if one has to pretend insanity in order to stay alive, convinced that God sees and redeems (v 22).

1 John 3:1–3

One of the most important weapons in the armoury of a saint alongside blessedness is love (*agape*). John, the writer of this letter, would know this from his association with John the author of the Gospel of John. No doubt because of this he saw it fit to remind his readers to act with love, particularly towards those with whom they disagreed. It called for good and righteous actions toward those who had broken away from the Johannine fellowship (see 1 John 2:19, ‘*they went out from us*’). This ‘break-away’ group contended against the writer’s group about the nature of Jesus. They emphasized the divine nature of Jesus, while denying the significance of Jesus’s human reality and his death on the cross as sacrifice for sin (see 1 John 1:7; 2:2, and 3:16). What is significant about John, and as an example of *agape*, is that he refers to them as ‘beloved’, no doubt saying that he didn’t condemn them, but still regarded them as ‘belonging’. This is saintly and loving behaviour, insisting that they, too, are beloved children of God, through Jesus Christ who died for them also.

A saint treats all people with love, whether they agree on doctrinal issues or not.

Matthew 5:1–12

Matthew describes the lives of saints on earth and how God takes care of them. He describes them as blessed. Blessedness is a lifestyle marked by a personal trust in God, obedience to God and faithfulness to what God requires. This is not a lifestyle lived in isolation, but one that is lived in cognizance of society and its woes. Saints are involved in alleviating suffering, especially of the poor and the marginalised. Saints address economic and societal distress.

The Beatitudes have a special link with the saints in Revelation 7, especially those who have come ‘out of great tribulation’. Saintliness is next to blessedness in its ‘spiritual awareness’ that stimulates awareness of the suffering in society. In v 6 righteousness refers to a conformity to what God requires. It is doing what is right in active participation in society in all its facets, bringing about peace and overcoming evil with good. This way of life may result in some form of persecution. It may be from the state or from individuals.

The Beatitudes affirm that Jesus delivers on promises of grace and mercy for all. It should be noted that the fulfillment of the promises of the beatitudes are in the future. So what happens in the present? The present is where the saints on earth live. Their obedience to the Lord Jesus makes life bearable for all, especially for those who are rejects of society.

Interpreting the word

Interpreting the biblical text is important, because it is a tool to make it accessible to all people today. It acknowledges the context within the original life and circumstances of the first hearers. This includes all the circumstances under which it was written, whether historical, societal, ecclesial, the government of the day, and what restraints and freedoms it imposed on its citizens, and how the citizens reacted to these. There is also the question of what role the writer played. Attention should also be given to the influence of the Christian community, how it withstood the onslaught and what advice the writer gave. The advice here is that saintly living is the key not only to survival, but also to making a ‘holy’ contribution to the people in the church and in society. It holds out the remarkable biblical concept of a ‘remnant’, which is faithful under trying circumstances and which, despite persecution and hardship, endures to the end. They do this in full acknowledgement of God in whose grace they are enabled to remain faithful. The text is a pertinent reminder that God’s saving grace is for all people, all nations and all cultures. It is for God’s human race.

1 John talks about *agape* in all relationships and circumstances. Matthew talks about blessedness as a sign of God’s grace.

Today, more than ever, love, grace and holy living should be the cornerstones of adhering to God’s word and living it daily.

Poverty in the last 15 to 20 years has increased and the gap between rich and poor has become bigger and bigger. More people are living on the streets and informal settlements in South Africa than ever before. These facts make it imperative for the Christian to advocate blessedness as well as to be actively involved in ridding society of everything that attacks the dignity of God’s people. Even if Christians and others fail to be merciful, God’s grace will never run out and will always bring new hope.

Preaching the word

In preparing for preaching, we must make optimum use of the comments on the texts.

The book of Revelation – in common with all biblical texts – is not a ‘direct’ word from the Lord and should therefore not be treated as though it is. Any attempt to transport the events the text describes or alludes to into our present-day situation should be avoided. Resist the temptation to identify authority figures in the text and link them with those in authority now. It is best to provide people who suffer now at the hands of governments with ‘tools’ to resist and overcome. It may take the form of supporting legitimate organizations involved in humanitarian work, such as ‘The Gift of the Givers’ and others. The grace of God is not exclusive in any way. Blessedness is a gift to be used for the benefit of all. It is not a privilege of a few. Disagreements in a congregation destroy people and minimize effective ministry and pastoral care. It may be a good idea to visit an informal settlement or people on the street and to strike up a conversation in order to gain firsthand information about their plight, as preparation for effective ministry.

Living the word

Sermons have definite intentions. They are never to be used as entertainment or for settling scores with the congregation. They are for the making and building up of a community that forgives, built on the foundations of Jesus Christ. They should capture the imagination of the hearers and inspire them to act and live out what they have heard. From these texts they should hear that they are blessed and that God’s grace is for everyone. Then they should act accordingly.

All Saints Day is not just about a forgotten history of ‘dead’ people, but is rather about a vibrant holy community of faithful people involved in acts of holiness and love of God and for others. A congregation that acts within a community for the community’s benefit is a congregation that understands blessedness and *agape*.

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Word and Life for the 24th Sunday after Pentecost – 8 November 2026

Jenny Sprong

Texts

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-16
Amos 5:18-24
Wisdom of Solomon 6:17-20
Psalm 78:1-7
Psalm 70
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Matthew 25:1-13

Introduction

This Sunday falls toward the end of the liturgical year and its theme is clearly eschatological. Distance from the context presents some challenges in recognising the urgency for those involved at the time.

Although eschatology is often theorised, it should not only be viewed as the tool to estimate when the world will cease to exist. These texts provide both questions and responses regarding ‘the end-times’.

Joshua’s absolute loyalty to God is shown in chapter 24, and the Hebrews are challenged at Shechem to acknowledge their God and to cling to the hope God promises. This devotion is reinforced in both Psalms that could be read today. The story of the five wise and five unwise young women in Matthew 25 seems to refer to being prepared for Christ’s return. Paul stresses that Jesus’ return is the basis for hope. ‘Commitment, preparation, hope and worship are bold ventures to be risked in anticipation of God’s coming reign’ (Brueggemann).

Hearing the Word

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

This is a significant passage in Israel’s story. The Shechem gathering becomes the turning-point for them because they are bidden, by Joshua, to choose God and to dedicate themselves fully. It is not by accident that their covenant renewal takes place at Shechem. They are reminded of Moses who acted on their behalf at Mount Sinai and now they see Joshua doing the same at Shechem. Joshua reminds the people of their story and of God faithfulness.

Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-16

Wisdom personified (Sophia) is regarded as feminine and this most expressive text follows a graphic description of the final judgment. While alluding to ‘the end-times’, the author is also celebrating those who express a desire for wisdom. The link to the story in Matthew’s gospel is clear. Pastor Dawn (see bibliography) refers to ‘**Wisdom’s Feast: Sophia in Study and Celebration**’.

Amos 5:18-24

In both the Amos and Matthew passages people hope for deliverance. Strangely, in both cases all the people’s expectations are not realised. In Amos, the people who were longing for light experience darkness, and in the gospel story some are excluded from the wedding banquet.

This passage denotes mourning of the dead. Amos suggests that his hearers are dead because of their desires. Israel’s belief that God was for them and against their enemies was closely linked to their understanding of deliverance or salvation. The people were anticipating the coming of *their* God, the One who has always redeemed them.

The story about the various dangers which befall him remind Amos that ‘justice and righteousness’ go hand in hand in the people’s relationship with God. Darkness signifies an absence of both.

Comments on Psalm 78:1-7

This psalm urges obedience to God’s instructions and cautions the people to curb their defiance. The psalm sounds like a teacher, reminding Israel to take heed. The phrase ‘dark sayings’ is uncertain, but the focus on their covenant with God is clear. There is confidence that the young will find ‘hope in God’ and that the children will know about God’s deeds – not so much hear stories about Israel’s accomplishments, but rather of God’s awe-inspiring favours to Israel. The children need to follow God’s ways and live in relationship with God. Israel views both story and instruction as The Law and this psalm examines the stories, ending with instructions on obedience.

Wisdom of Solomon 6:17-20

In this text ‘Wisdom’ is almost synonymous with God and, as in Psalm 78, those who wish to learn or be instructed, are praised and those who are concerned for ‘The Law’ are assured of immortality. This passage is also a firm reminder that world leaders are held accountable for their deeds. There is an allusion to Solomon’s request for wisdom, which also secured him wealth. The connection between wisdom and eschatology is unmistakable with regard to goodness versus evil.

Psalm 70

Psalm 70 is a prayer that expresses a desperate need for God’s help. Those who edited the Psalter might have intended Psalms 70 and 71 to be read together because they seem to follow on from each other. This prayer beseeches God to remember the covenant and deliver Israel. There is a plea for a godly intervention against the psalmist’s adversaries and an expression of commitment by the psalmist.

The virtuous and the evil are juxtaposed, and the psalmist pleads to be counted amongst the upright people whom God redeems. This psalm tells readers that God still listens, hears the prayers of the people and is willing to help today.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

As in most of Paul's letters there is a pastoral concern expressed in this letter. This concern is raised because some people in the Thessalonian congregation had died. At first Paul had believed and preached that Christ would return in his lifetime. Death in their small circle, therefore, caused quite a stir. They were concerned about the status of those who had died. Paul touched on both the doctrinal as well as the emotional anguish of the Thessalonians. They were not to 'grieve as others do who have no hope' and they were to 'encourage one another'.

Christians live in the light, and Paul does not view the resurrection as compensation for Christians. Hope, for the Christian, is comprised of the anticipation of resurrection but, more than that, it is being with Christ Jesus. It is God who safeguards the Christian's hope, and in fact, it is God who is that hope. The imagery used by Paul is as threatening to some readers as are all other biblical apocalyptic writings. Christians remain divided between those who find such imagery so uncomfortable that they want to ignore it altogether, and those who wish to use it to predict the exact time and way in which Christ will return' (Brueggemann). Paul's words need to be examined and not be ignored. The text concludes by again focusing on the pastoral issue, introduced in v.13.

Matthew 25:1-13

The 'second coming' remains an unpopular theme in most mainline Protestant denominations. The apocalyptic language and imagery complicate it so that preachers tend to avoid passages that refer to the *Parousia* or 'return of Jesus'. A critical dimension of New Testament theology might be missed if this key aspect of the early Church's hope is ignored.

Matthew chronicles Jesus' final words to the Twelve as red alerts. The story of the wise and unwise young women raises all kinds of questions, both then and now. Although readiness is important why, for instance, was the Bridegroom delayed? All these complications merely serve to sharpen the differences between the prudent and imprudent young women.

The ensuing conversation is not addressing those outside the faith but rather addresses members already in the community of faith. The unwise ones are those who disregard the responsibility of obedience and, therefore, find themselves excluded. The story emphasises preparedness, but the main aim is not so much the willingness to wait but rather to do the will of God. In the story of these 'ten bridesmaids', five are poorly prepared. There seems to be an emphasis on actively anticipating the future to fully engage with the present.

Interpreting the Word

The Book of Joshua formed part of early Israel's folk tales. Joshua's voice became the strong call to loyal obedience to God. The tribes of Israel had finally arrived and had settled in the Land of Promise. Now Joshua was the one to remind them of their covenant relationship with God. They would no longer be wanderers but a settled people. It is fascinating to note that the town of Shechem had been an 'important

cultic site for the Canaanites and others who lived in the land before the arrival of the Israelites' (Brueggemann).

In both **Amos** and in the key Gospel text, grace becomes judgment. This is a complicated development which challenges preachers to carefully analyse the gospel story. In Amos it seems as though the prophet must minimise the people's hopes so that they might once again recognise the gifts God has already given them. It is plausible that the word-pair 'justice and righteousness' usually refer to the pre-exilic tradition. The spheres of justice and righteousness become God's ongoing, life-giving manifestation in the world.

Psalm 70 is an example of a distinct lament. God entered a covenant relationship with the people of Israel and the community nurtures the memory of God as their covenant God. The suppliant in this psalm is unable to relish the covenant blessings because of tyrannical adversaries. This psalmist creates a covenantal exchange when he asks God to rescue them, before the adversaries destroy the good people. The plea is for God to act as the covenant God of their faith tradition. Both psalms and the two texts from the Wisdom of Solomon stress obedience to God and the importance of wisdom and instruction. Prayer undergirds these themes through the alternative psalm.

Paul, through his letter to the Church in Thessalonica, addresses some serious life and death concerns. To ignore the eschatological imagery that Paul uses would be a serious mistake. Delving into the complexities of Christian hope is an essential discipline for every preacher. It is also important to beware of not minimising the imagery 'by reading it literally or by pretending that they are subject to human verification and testing' (Brueggemann).

Matthew telling this complex story is a key text which most preachers would rather ignore. This parable is made up of several features, which confuse and disturb the reader. Some awkward components of the story include: the extended delay of the bridegroom, his coming at such a late hour, the idea that shops from which to buy oil might be open at midnight, the reluctance of the wise young women to share their oil with the unwise ones, and the final command to 'keep awake' when the fault of the unwise young women was not that they had slept but rather that they had not prepared adequately. What matters most, when the bridegroom finally arrives, is not the doctrine of those who were waiting, or their astonishing endeavours, but whether they were doing God's will. 'Watching means seizing the day, loving God and loving neighbours in each moment, not a passive or speculative stance that soon despairs of a delayed return' (Brueggemann).

Preaching the Word

'Sophia, if you are there, show yourself' (Pastor Dawn, online). This seems like a great way to approach the strange tale about the 'ten bridesmaids'. It is necessary for a preacher to sometimes resort to the unusual (or even bizarre), and 'Sophia, whose playful nature inspired our forebearers to sing, dance, laugh, and play, might just be behind the creators of the lectionary's decision to put today's readings together' (Pastor Dawn).

These texts do cause some disquiet and even (as for Paul) some sorrow. In the Southern African context these eschatological references might also be viewed too graphically because of the political instability and gross ‘unpreparedness’ of many politicians.

The Christian concept of ‘helping one’s neighbour’ does not seem to be applied in the gospel story and this leaves the reader with additional unanswered questions. It seems particularly unusual that the bridegroom doesn’t know five of the young women and refuses to open the door for them when they get back from sourcing more oil for their lamps. Many have heard this story, expounded by those determined to prove that the bridegroom is Jesus and that the congregation is ‘the bridesmaids’. The people are often asked to which five they belong and, more importantly, whether they are prepared?

The psalm seems quite appropriate as an influential prayer. The psalmist’s need for God is emphasised by acknowledging that self-help isn’t working while faith in the covenant God promises life.

Trying to appreciate Paul’s dilemma from a modern perspective is complicated by the context as well as the period between then and now. Today’s Christian cannot fully know what kind of stir the first death of a follower of Jesus caused. Paul himself grappled with this issue and then he recommended that the people of Thessalonica encourage one another. How to view death (and even how to grieve) was a new and growing understanding for the first-century Christian.

Even today people of faith are often reluctant to grieve or at least to show their grief. Christians tend to ‘choke back their own grief’ and are reminded that their loved-one ‘is in a better place’ or ‘rests safely in the arms of Jesus’. People of faith also stifle the sorrow of others by ‘using the promise of resurrection almost as a weapon’ (Brueggemann). Paul did not intend to admonish people for grieving. His letters are full of expressions of human longing. Certainly, the man who often expressed his desire to be with his friends, would appreciate what it felt like when someone in the congregation had died. Paul’s warning differentiates the grief of a believer from someone’s who has lived with no hope.

Paul uses even this sad occasion to teach the people in Thessalonica. It is not only the task of the pastor to offer hope to the people but the congregation also needs to offer hope to one another.

Eschatological statements – in these texts as well as elsewhere in the Bible – all raise concerns for many readers. What does Paul mean when he refers to ‘the archangel’s call’ and ‘the sound of God’s trumpet’ (v.16)? Will Christ actually raise believers up into the clouds (v.17)? Matthew is the only gospel writer who includes this parable. The *Access Bible* commentator suggests that the wedding time (around midnight) might be connected to the story in Matthew 24 about the thief that comes at midnight – another complex story!

Living the Word

The firmness of Paul’s teaching is a vital component in the life of the contemporary congregation. Many members, young and old, are biblically illiterate and mostly ignorant about Church tradition. What gives this congregation its life? How can this sermon infuse hope where much of life in Southern Africa seems to display despair? How can this community of faith make a positive difference in the lives of its neighbours who are in need? A congregation with a healthy and positive perspective can plant seeds of hope. A teacher who carefully instructs adults will also influence young people. As parents and children learn together, so will the next generation come to fully share in the comprehensive passions of this particular community of faith.

Liturgical Suggestions

Some appropriate hymns:
All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name
The Church’s One Foundation
At the Name of Jesus
Love Divine, All Loves Excelling

A responsive prayer of commitment:
Gracious God, I place myself in your hands;
do with me what you will.

Whatever you may do, I thank you;
I am ready for all, I accept all.

Let only your will be done in me.
I wish no more than this, dear God.

Into your hands I commit my life:
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, God,
and I so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands without reserve
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my God.
In Christ’s Name.
Amen

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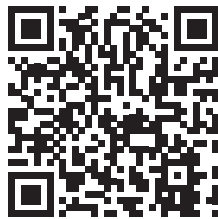
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Word and Life for the 25th Sunday after Pentecost – 15 November 2026

Ian Booth

Texts

Judges 4:1–7
Psalm 123
Zephaniah 1:7; 12–18
Psalm 90:1–8; (9–11); 12
1 Thessalonians 5:1–11
Matthew 25:14–30

Introduction

The last few Sundays of the liturgical year focus on various parables and teachings of Jesus, building up to the celebration of “Christ the King” Sunday on the last Sunday of the liturgical year. The parable that forms the focus for this Sunday is the parable of the talents, which serves as an encouragement to use the gifts that have been entrusted to us wisely and profitably, and not to hide them. Using them is a risk – as is being a true follower of Jesus.

Hearing the Word

Judges 4:1–7: Most scholars agree that the time of the judges was around 1200 – 1050 BCE. The major powers had faded into insignificance, which left smaller nations to pursue policies of expansion. The Israeli tribes occupied much of the hill country, while the Canaanites continued to occupy many of their lowland city states and some cities in the hill country such as Shechem and Jerusalem. Israel’s history during this period was one of consolidating settlements which involved defending the tribal territories from aggression by adjoining groups. The tribes were largely independent, though they were bound by covenants with one another. It seems that an attack or even threat on one of the tribes brought the others together to assist in the defence, and they would be led by one of the “judges” who was raised up for that purpose. The passage selected tells of the only female “judge” who was also a prophet, Deborah, in an intriguing tale with several main characters each claiming their share of the fame.

Psalm 123: Psalm 123 is one of the “Psalms of the Ascents” (120–134) which Jewish pilgrims would sing on their pilgrimage to the Temple to worship. Psalm 123 is a community lament Psalm that petitions God for help in the face of scorn. The Psalm is in two parts: a confession of faith and trust in God; and the presentation of the problem and a petition for help.

Zephaniah 1:7; 12–18: The words of Zephaniah are designed to provoke great fear and trembling in the hearts of his hearers. He speaks of the approaching “Day of the Lord” in terms that evoke terror. The scenes are apocalyptic: wrath, distress, anguish, trouble, ruin, darkness, gloom, clouds, blackness. Why? Because the people have sinned against the Lord. And so: “In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth.” So much for the rainbow, the sign of a promise that “never again will I destroy the earth”. Passages like this are behind the reason many would rather avoid the Old Testament and focus solely on the New. But the New makes no sense

without the Old – the good and the bad and the ugly parts of it. The Gospel tells us that the much to be feared judge – the Lord – becomes the judged on the cross, and the “Day of the Lord” is to be celebrated and no longer feared. The description of the crucifixion scene is much like the Day that Zephaniah describes: wrath, distress, anguish, darkness, gloom, clouds, blackness. There Christ becomes King – which is where we are headed in terms of the liturgical calendar.

Psalm 90:1–8; (9–11); 12: This is the only Psalm that refers to Moses: the superscript, in Hebrew, reads “A prayer to Moses the man of God”. The link is likely because the Psalm deals with the finiteness of life, and Moses missing out on entering the Promised Land. The Psalm is a meditation on God, humanity, and time. God is the one who is infinite, for whom a thousand years are like a day. Humans are finite, returning to dust, our days are numbered and limited. The key message is in verse 12: “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” In these finite bodies, in this measured lifetime allotted to us, this is a plea to God to teach us how to make the most of our time in ways that are pleasing and acceptable to God, which the Gospels will tell us is in selfless service: using the gifts entrusted to us in the most responsible manner

1 Thessalonians 5:1–11: This passage, as with much of the 1st Letter to the Thessalonians, deals with the growing anxiety among the Christian converts about the delay in the much anticipated and promised “day of the Lord” which would signal the end of the world and what is known as “the Rapture” as the saved are taken up to heaven. Here Paul reminds the Thessalonians that no one knows when this will happen, just as the thief in the night does not announce his intentions to strike at a particular hour on a particular date. He encourages his audience to remain faithful and true, to live as those in the light of day, not in the darkness of night, to be self-controlled and defending themselves with the armour of God. He assures them that, if they remain faithful none will be left behind. In the meantime, they are to continue in encouraging each other and building each other up.

Matthew 25:14–30: It can be tempting to use this parable as a motivation for a fundraising campaign, or even as a justification for a capitalist mentality, or a motivation for astute financial management – if the focus is on the money! The words of the master to the servants who risked the talents that had been entrusted to them are important: “Come and share your master’s happiness”. The parable is about an abundance of gifts and talents that are available in the Kingdom of God, and the invitation to enjoy this abundance with the master as our inheritance. Those who turn the talents into profit can only do so by risking losing it all, a risk the master would have understood. Throughout, the talents belong to the master, not the servants to whom they are entrusted. They do not know when the master will return, but in the meantime they faithfully and diligently put the talents to work. In the context of the Kingdom of God, putting talents to work will be in line with what we find in the parable that follows this one, the parable of the sheep and the goats, where the work

that is most rewarded with the inheritance is feeding the hungry, giving the thirsty something to drink, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and those in prison. This is an element that should not be forgotten, or preaching on this parable can become about the money, and not about the conduct of the servants of God. There is obviously concern about the treatment of the third servant, the one who buried the talent. If the parable is a parable of invitation to share the happiness of the master, then perhaps this third servant is unable to hear or accept the invitation. He has not just buried the talent, he has buried himself, and so by his choice loses out on the reward, and condemns himself to a place or a life that knows no joy, just darkness and misery.

Interpreting the Word

Judges 4:1–7: The Book of Judges describes a period in which the tribes of Israel lived in a loose alliance, drawing together under “judges” during periods when they were under attack. There are six major leaders whose stories are told in the book. The word translated as “judge” in Hebrew could refer to a military leader or an arbiter of justice. Most of the “judges” are military leaders who help defend the nation against attacks. The passage assigned for today is part of a fascinating and intriguing story of the rising up of a female “judge”, Deborah, who was an arbiter of disputes, and also the first woman prophet, a spokesperson for God. She turns to a military general, Barak, to assist her in the defence against the latest threat, and used her position as a prophet to convey a divine command and a divine promise to Barak. The question then arises: “Is Deborah the “judge”, or is Barak the “judge” in terms of military leadership?” The lectionary reading ends here, but the rest of the story is where the intrigue comes in with a woman called Jael, who is not an Israelite, but who ends up as the heroine, the true “judge” perhaps. The whole story is worth the telling. We see in this story the importance of cooperation with others in pursuit of a singular goal; we see God using a woman as a “judge”; and we see God using the most unlikely person, Jael, a non-Israelite woman and the wife of a blue-collar worker who made the chariots that made Sisera a formidable foe, as the heroine of the story.

Psalms 123: The most probable historical setting for this Psalm is the post-exilic period, when Israel was under the direct rule of foreign powers. It is a community lament seeking the sanctuary of the temple and the protection of God, and is included in the collection known as “The Songs of Ascents” sung by pilgrims on their annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Zephaniah 1:7; 12–18: This passage makes reference to “The Day of the Lord” which is described in such a way as to strike fear in the hearts and minds of the audience. The description of the “Day” is akin to a Doomsday prophecy, full of darkness and anguish. The passage from 1 Thessalonians also speaks of the “Day of the Lord” toward which the people were looking with eagerness, as it meant that Christ would come again and the present age would end. Christ in fact experienced the elements Zephaniah described during the crucifixion, with anguish, suffering, darkness, clouds etc. in an act of salvation for the world, thus turning what was dread into hope.

Psalms 90:1–8; (9–11); 12: This portion of Psalm 90 speaks to the brevity of life, contrasts this with God’s infinite

existence, and reaffirms the importance of making our time on earth count.

1 Thessalonians 5:1–11: In this portion of the 1st Letter Paul deals with what has become an issue among the Thessalonians: the uncertain time of the end. Since the time of Jesus, where he himself indicated that some of that number would see the “Day of the Lord” there had been an expectation that this was imminent. This letter was probably the first book of the New Testament to be written, and is dated from 51CE, and was written from Corinth. The letter is most famous for the focus on the “second coming” of Christ, which would signify the end of time, technically referred to as eschatology. Paul writes the letter partly to address issues in the church, and writes as a pastor. In contrast to the expectation that this is imminent, which it appears has given rise to some giving up working for a living and contributing to their society, Paul indicates that no-one knows when this will occur, and uses the example of a thief in the night, to indicate the element of surprise at an unexpected time and event. Paul addresses the contrast between day and night, and that Christians belong to the day. Here reference can be made to Zephaniah’s description of “the Day of the Lord” which is all dark doom and gloom. Paul encourages his audience that none will be left behind when the day does come – as this is part of their anxiety. While we wait, live as those who are in the light. Those in the darkness may miss out.

Matthew 25:14–30: The Parable of the Talents is one of a set of three in Matthew 25 that speak to “the Kingdom of God” and include an element of inclusion/exclusion, which would suggest a link to “the Day of the Lord” elements of Zephaniah and 1 Thessalonians. The Parable of the Talents is concerned with the exercising of faithfulness or responsibility over all the gifts that have been received. When we consider that this points to the final judgement, it means investing fully in life and living to the limits of capability. The reward is to share the master’s happiness or to enter into the joy of your Lord. The timid soul who refuses to take any risks loses the future he is living and preserving himself for.

Preaching the Word

It would seem to me that the logical choice out of the various options for readings for this day given in the lectionary would be to use the readings from Zephaniah 1:7; 12–18; Psalm 90:1–8; (9–11); 12; 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11; and Matthew 25:14–30 because of the strong links in these passages to the themes of the “Day of the Lord” and the divine judgement that comes with that Day, the importance of counting our days and making our days count, the new twist that the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus give to these themes, and the encouragement to live in the light and not in the darkness, as Paul encourages the Thessalonians. In a way, the servant who buried his talent out of fear rather than exposing it to the light of day in confident hope had chosen to live in the darkness, and thus brought about his own fate. It is hard to square this kind of talk of anguish and weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth with the general tone of the life and teaching of Jesus, and therefore the possibility exists that this could be later redaction in order to address a particular challenge within the fledgling church.

If the track of Judges 4:1–7 and Psalm 123 is chosen, along with the epistle and gospel set for the day, then there will need to be other links made with these passages. One possibility from the Judges reading is the fact that God chooses anyone to carry out the plans of God, and that there is no certainty as to who will carry the day at the end: the woman “judge” Deborah, the military general Barak, or the non-Jewish Jael. But what counts is that God’s plan for God’s people is fulfilled, whoever it is that does it. This would fit with the theme of utilising the talents given to each to the best of our ability, and could even open up the train of thought that God can choose from outside those to whom we would restrict God. Psalm 123 is there to highlight the community lament and the dependence on God for deliverance – which is important when it comes to the “Day of the Lord”.

Living the Word

In a time of uncertainty such as this (and realising that there will be a significant period between the writing of this and the preaching of it) there will be much thought of the potential end of the world as we know it. The political upheaval caused by the “second coming” of Donald Trump in the US has thrown the world into a great deal of uncertainty as organisations that were set in place to ensure peace in Europe, and the betrayal of long standing allies, has heightened fears of at least a European War – then put the Israel/Palestinian conflict alongside that, with the Middle East caught up in it – and the potential for the conflict to spread, and even become global grows. This is one reason the “Day of the Lord” or the final judgement will be an issue. The other is climate change, which humanity seems unwilling or unable to arrest in time. The preaching will need to be pastoral, encouraging, and challenging people to utilise the gifts that they have been given and the time allotted to them to the best of their ability while they can. And to trust in God who has shown, in Christ, that after Friday always comes Sunday.

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Liturgy for the 26th Sunday after Pentecost (Reign of Christ)

– 22 November 2026

Rachell Hoogbaard

Introduction

Texts

Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24 (both tracks)
Psalm 100 | Psalm 95:1–7a
Ephesians 1:15–23
Matthew 25:31–46

Gathering in God's name

Call to worship

Christ our King invites us to offer our worship and praise.
We come as scattered sheep
Lord gathers us in your fold
We come as frightened strangers seeking refuge
Lord stretch out your hand to welcome and rescue us.
We come broken, lost, and in need of your love.
Lord God, take your place as King of our hearts.

Act of Penitence

We are lost, but refuse the hand and invitation of shelter of the Shepherd.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

We are scattered, but ignore the offer of green pastures.

Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

We remain far off, lost and injured, but we ignore your call for intimacy and wholeness.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Absolution or Assurance of Forgiveness

May God our great King and Shepherd,
bring us back to green pastures,
forgive our sins,
and grant us eternal salvation,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer for Illumination

O God guide us
by your Word and Spirit,
that we may see your light in the darkness,
and that your truth may lead us to wisdom,
so that we may discover your perfect peace,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

<https://www.reformedworship.org/article/june-1999/shedding-light-prayer-illumination>



Responding to the Word of God

Confession of faith

We confess our faith in the one true God.

(Pause)

We believe in the Sovereign God

The Shepherd who calls the scattered flock from the ends of the earth.

**God brings us to green pastures
And rescues and feed us.**

We believe in the Son of Man

**Who sits as King at the right hand of the Sovereign God
Who will come in glory with the angels
To separate his people---his sheep--- from the goats.**

We believe in the Holy Spirit

**Who gives wisdom and revelation to the people of God
Who gives light to the eyes of our hearts
And hope and power to the sheep.**

We believe in one God, the Almighty,
Jesus Christ the Son
and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Prayers of the Faithful

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.” Matthew 25:31
Let us pray

(Pause)

God of mercy and grace,

we praise and thank you for Jesus our King. His kingdom reigns forever.

God of compassion and love

We praise your name for you gave us your Son who is the beginning and the end, The Alpha and Omega.

For the Church (...insert name), that she may be a place of hope for the hopeless and strength for the weak,
A welcoming home for the stranger and safety for the outcast
Lord, hear us
Lord graciously hear us.

For the clergy (...insert name), wisdom and revelation to guide your people.
Courage to stand against injustice and humility to embrace diversity.
Lord, hear us
Lord graciously hear us.

For the sick, those who mourn, and those who wrestle with their faith, grant them comfort.
Renew them with the strength of an eagle and cover them under your feathers.
Lord, hear us
Lord graciously hear us.

**Holy God, grant these prayers
and the silent prayers of our hearts,
through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**

Celebrating at the table

Sharing of the Peace

May Christ our King, gather you from the ends of the earth so that peace may reign in your mind, body and soul.
May the peace of the Lord be with you always.
And also with you.

Invitation to Communion

The gifts of God,
To the people of God.
A drink for the thirsty, clothes for the naked, and a welcome for the stranger.
Come, all are welcome at the table of the Lord.

Sending

Go forth for you have received wisdom and revelation through Christ the King
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
In the name of Christ. Amen.

Post communion Prayer

The body and blood of Jesus Christ, who reign as King at the right hand of God the Almighty, fed you.
May you be strengthened with hope to which he called you as disciples in a broken world.
Continue to walk by the Spirit in wisdom and revelation,
And step out in faith, which comes through the fullness of his glory and grace.
Amen

Sentence of Scripture

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.” Matthew 25:31

Benediction

May the love of Christ our King,
reign in our hearts
so that we may feed the hungry,
clothe the naked
and heal the sick.

And may the Blessing of God the Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with you, now and forever.

Amen

Suggested Songs/Hymns

- “Jesus shall reign where’er the sun”
- “Thy hand, O God has guided”
- “I will enter his gates with thanksgiving in my heart”
- “We are here to praise you”
- “Come now is the time to worship”
- “All hail the power of Jesus name”
- “Crown him with many crowns”
- “Rejoice the Lord is King”

<https://www.oremus.org/hymnal/yeara.html>



Word and Life for the 26th Sunday after (Reign of Christ)

– 22 November 2026

Rachell Hoogbaard

Texts

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 (both tracks)
Psalm 100 | Psalm 95:1-7a
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46

Introduction

The Roman Catholic Church introduced the celebration of the Reign of Christ or Christ the King in 1925 after World War One. The religious climate was that of dread and despair. The question at the time was, ‘Where is Christ amidst the war and violence’. Against this backdrop, the feast aims to affirm the reign of Christ yesterday, today, and until the end of the age.

Celebrating this feast amid turmoil and war serves as a reminder of Jesus’ experience as “King of Kings” and “Lord of Lord.” He is the Incarnate Son of God who experienced the fullness of the human condition. The Reign of Christ as King is therefore a reminder of the hope that we have in Christ amid war, hopelessness, and despair.

Hearing the Word

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 (both tracks)

Ezekiel was a young 6th Century prophet who was carried off to exile in Babylon. The affluent Jews who could work for Babylon were taken into exile, while the poor and the so-called undesirables were left behind in Jerusalem. He was among the first group of Jewish captives taken to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar, and his prophecies were delivered during his exile.

Ezekiel would fail in his duties if he did not alert leaders to their sins, failures, or omissions. Ezekiel warned God’s people about the fall of Jerusalem, and the destruction of the temple, which sounded unimaginable at the time.

He highlighted that leaders are exploiting people and neglecting their core function to shepherd the people. Greed and corruption prevented the leaders from properly caring for the people of Israel. He warned that God would judge and remove leaders who neglect God’s flock. God will step in to protect and care for God’s people.

Psalm 100

The Psalmist gives praise and thanks to God as the Universal and Sovereign King. This praise and worship includes gladness and honour to God who deserves the highest praise from the people of the world. This Psalm contains an invitation to worship in the temple.

Psalm 95:1-7a

Psalms 95 to 100 are familiar Psalms used in temple worship as a Call to Worship at the beginning of worship services. The faith community calls on God as Saviour and Almighty God, who controls the people and the universe. God, Creator of the World, is worthy of the highest praise. The Psalmist alluded to God’s covenant with the people. The Psalmist sings praises to God as the Shepherd of the people. An attitude of praise urges the believer to sing praises to God for God establishes a righteous kingdom on earth.

Ephesians 1:15-23

Paul explains that the church needs to understand the hope that they have because they are called. The church has an inheritance because they belong to Christ. He alludes to the power granted to believers because of the work of the Holy Spirit.

Believers are strengthened with immense power because Christ overcame death. Christ, the King, is seated on high at the right hand of God Almighty. His name is the one to call on over every challenge in the past, present, and in this age because Christ rules and reigns over all things. Paul stresses that the fullness of Christ fills the earth because he is supreme and places everything under his feet.

Matthew 25:31-46

In this lesson, Jesus alludes to his return in power and glory to judge the world. He is clear that despite the nationality or origin, the people of the world are separated into two types--sheep and goats.

The sheep refers to God’s people who show evidence of sacrificial love towards others. This love for others is costly because it may be contrary to comfort and convenience. Sheep live unselfish lives, serving others for the greater good of humanity. On the other hand, they encourage and embrace the kindness of others. Believers sometimes feel that their kindness is fruitless and unnoticed, but Jesus reminds us that he notices the effort of the sheep. Jesus clarifies that whatever is done to others is done to him.

Goats on the other hand do not belong to Christ. Their nature is inherently selfish with no kindness to others, therefore they, in turn, do not show kindness to Christ. They pay no attention to the misery that surrounds the people of the world and through their action, they lose out of a place in God’s kingdom. Condemnation comes because they omit to do what is right and humane.

Interpreting the Word

Ezekiel wrote to the Jews in captivity, who struggled to accept their faith while they were in exile. Their initial thoughts were that this was a temporary condition, that would pass soon, but this was not the case. Jerusalem and their beloved temple were destroyed while they were in exile.

The Psalmist broke out in praise and thanksgiving to the Sovereign King, God Almighty. The Psalmist extended the invitation to Israelites to worship at the temple. God is proclaimed as the Saviour, Almighty, and the ruler over the people. God has a covenant with the people and God acts as Shepherd to the flock whom he loves.

The Early Church struggled with persecution, and they were still anxious and fearful because their leader, Jesus Christ left them. Many wanted to lead the flock, but not all were spiritually suitable. St Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, commends them for their faith in Jesus Christ and their love for God's people. The purpose of the letter was to clarify false teachings and to assure them that he lifts them to the Lord in prayer. St Paul in his prayers to God includes requests for wisdom and revelation, which Paul feels will increase their knowledge and relationship with Christ. In his view, enlightenment meaning seeing Christ and understanding the call for discipleship-is possible by opening the eyes of the believer's heart.

St Matthew records words of warning from Jesus Christ, especially to those who have gone astray. Jesus explains that he comes to judge the world and separate the sheep from the goat. Jesus references the "Son of Man" who will come in glory and the "King" who will gather his followers and grant them their inheritance. This points to the second coming of Christ and the subsequent judgement day. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and comforting the prisoner is the work of the righteous. These words are intended for Jews, Gentiles, and especially for spiritual leaders who oppressed the poor.

Today's struggles are similar, where spiritual leaders push their agenda. Many want to keep up with mega-churches that have large buildings, have huge incomes, and are noticeable on all public platforms. A balance and focus on the marginalised and souls are required over and above all, so that the church fulfils its mission.

The world is still at war. We in South Africa realised we were facing a war inside our borders. Our enemies are gang, domestic, and gender-related violence. Poverty and unemployment lead to extreme social conditions and related mental challenges. But hope is not lost. Believers may cling to the words of St Matthew, "When the Son of Man comes in glory..." We therefore proclaim Jesus as King still reigns from on high despite the current despair faced by many.

Preaching the Word

Scripture readings culminate in one central theme, 'The Reign of Christ'. This feast falls at the end of Ordinary or Kingdom time. It is celebrated with joy and excitement, which are customary to a feast. The liturgical colour is white and, in most instances, the motifs and trims on vestments and linen are gold, which celebrates and points to a king.

The themes include Jesus Christ as the Ultimate, Sovereign King, and Ruler of the universe. Our Lord reigns despite the violence, wars, and rumours of wars that threaten the world's existence. We can trust the Lord to bring us through whatever we face.

Another theme that emerges is that of God as the Shepherd who takes care of God's sheep. God as Shepherd protects and cares for the sheep. The sheep put their trust in the Shepherd who protects his own. St Matthew borrows the same allegories that are found in Ezekiel and uses them to refer to Jesus as Shepherd. The Shepherd not only protects but also judges.

Jesus speaks of the one who will come as Judge who will separate the sheep from the goats. Works of charity will serve as witnesses for or against the people. Answers to questions, 'Did you give me something to eat?', or 'Did you clothe me?', or 'Did you welcome me?' will serve as criteria for separation. The least we do to others is what we do to the Lord.

A sub-theme relates to the highest praise that we can give to the Lord. Christ our King deserves the highest praise. The everyday wonders that God performs in the lives of parishioners and the community led to songs and Psalms of the highest praise. God is a God of miracles and has a hand in the big and small things of life. We look at the gift of life or creation and stand in awe.

Living the Word

Christ the King should be the ultimate authority in our lives; therefore agendas should not override that of the Lord. Believers should embrace his agenda, which includes advocating for justice, diversity, and inclusivity. The Church, as the Body of Christ should strive to align its agenda and priorities to Christ. The five marks of mission (proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom, teach, baptize, and nurture new believers, respond to human need by loving service, seek to transform unjust structures and challenge violence, and strive to safeguard the integrity of creation) are a good place to start.

God reveals God's glory in sacrifice and service. These principles differentiate the reign of Christ to that of a world which prioritises the accumulation of power. Working for the greater good according to the example set by Jesus is the signpost for life and holy living. To serve and sacrifice is to resist systems and programmes that favour our human agendas and comfort. We are to keep Christ at the centre of how we move and live. We therefore need to stand firm on the words, which we use to rededicate our lives.

Father almighty
we offer ourselves to you
as a living sacrifice in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Send us out into the world
in the power of the Holy Spirit
to live and work
to your praise and glory.

Liturgical suggestions

(See specific liturgy for the Reign of Christ)

Prayers of the faithful

The Kingdom of God is at hand – You proclaimed it, Jesus;
But, it often feels like it's a million miles away.
You demonstrated its grace and showed its power,
but the signs often appear faded or absent in our world.

We need Your Kingdom to come, O God,
in all its fullness, in all its glory;
This waiting, this “now and not yet” experience of Your
reign
is hard and frustrating.

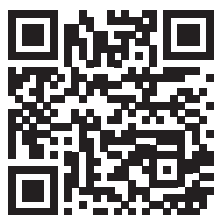
And so we pray for Your Kingdom to be revealed in our
lives,
turning our sickness and sin, our brokenness and fear
into friendship and compassion, wholeness and joy.
May Your Kingdom come to us now.

We pray for Your Kingdom to be revealed in our
neighbourhoods,
turning our division and suspicion, our judgement, and our
competition
into fellowship and care, compassion and service.
May Your Kingdom come to us now.

We pray for Your Kingdom to be revealed in our world,
turning our war and our disparities, our consumption and
our self-interest
into peace and collaboration, stewardship, and reverence.
May Your Kingdom come to us now.

Your Kingdom is here, and it is coming, O God.
**Make us faithful heralds of its message
and tireless practitioners of its ways.
For Jesus sake.
Amen.**

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WORD & *worship*

Word and Worship (16th edition) is a trusted companion for worship leaders across Southern Africa. Compiled by Ekklesia in the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University and published with CLF Publishers, it follows the Revised Common Lectionary – Year A, covering Advent 2025 to Pentecost 2026.

This volume offers rich, contextual exegetical insights, practical sermon helps, and liturgical suggestions for every Sunday and major feast day, alongside seasonal outlines for Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Eastertide, and the Season after Pentecost. It includes notes on sermon construction, ideas for each element of worship – from the gathering of God’s people to their sending into the world – and full liturgies for key moments in the church year.

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ISBN: 978-1-0672561-0-4



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