

worship notes



from the United Reformed Church

Sunday 28th April 2024
The Fifth Sunday of Easter
The Revd Sue McCoan

Call to Worship

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures for ever!

Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.

The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvellous in our eyes.

This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures for ever!

from Psalm 118 v1,19,22-23, 29

Opening Prayer

God of steadfast love,
we praise you for your love poured out in Creation,
in the glorious diversity of creatures,
in the splendour of the heavens
and the fertility of the earth.

We praise you for your love poured out in Jesus,
in healing and teaching, in signs and wonders,
in his humility and obedience,
in his death and rising again.

We praise you for your love poured out in the Spirit,
inspiring and guiding,
giving words and understanding,

building community and renewing faith.

We praise you for your love poured out on us,
God our creator, redeemer and spirit.
In this time of worship, may we abide in your love,
and share that love with those around us.

Confession

Loving God,
we confess that there are areas in our lives
we would rather you did not see:
the blighted patches that we hardly notice,
the twisted thoughts that we have learnt to live with,
the fruitless stems of half-forgotten dreams.
In your incisive mercy,
prune us of our dead, diseased and damaged wood;
cut back our selfish growth,
clean us of unnecessary baggage.
Heal our wounds,
and train our new shoots into shape,
so that we may grow again in health and strength.
and bear much fruit.
We pray in the name of Jesus, Amen.

Prayer for illumination

May the light of scripture open our eyes,
may the words of scripture stir in our hearts,
and may the truth of scripture fill our lives. Amen.

Readings

Acts 8:26-40 | Psalm 22:25-31 | Psalm 118:19-25 | 1 John 4:7-21 | John 15:1-8

All Age Activity

You may find some good activities here

<https://urc.org.uk/your-faith/children-young-people/faith-adventures-for-children-together/>

Don't forget the prayer prompts on the website:

<https://urc.org.uk/your-faith/children-young-people/children-youth-work/prayer-prompts-for-children/>

Sermon Notes

We are spoilt for choice in the readings this week. Any one of them would form the basis of a strong sermon. There are notes on each passage, and then at the end some suggestions of ways they could be combined to draw out common themes.

Acts 8:26-40

Philip is one of the seven appointed to the task of serving (Acts 6:1-6). These are gifted men, full of the Spirit and wisdom. One of them is Stephen, whose charismatic preaching so upsets the authorities that they stone him to death and instigate a severe persecution. Far from silencing the followers of Jesus, the persecution serves only to scatter them and so spread the gospel even more widely. Philip goes to Samaria, where he attracts the crowds with his healing and preaching. From there, the Spirit sends him southwards towards the desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza. Philip's route south intersects with the Gaza road at Eleutheropolis. Just as he arrives, he coincides with the Ethiopian official travelling west towards Gaza and then, presumably, home via Egypt.

The man is wealthy and privileged: he is a court official of the Queen of Ethiopia, in charge of the Treasury; he has his own chariot and, even more rare in those days, his own copy of the scroll of Isaiah. He has been to Jerusalem to worship, so we know he is a God-fearing man. But he is an outsider. He is a Gentile, and he is a eunuch. Philip, prompted by the Spirit, opens up a conversation to which the official, despite their difference in status, readily responds. It's as if he has been waiting to find someone who can engage with all his questions.

We are not told what happens to the official after his baptism, and he is not mentioned again. The significance of this incident is way God had been working in both Philip and the official to prepare them for the encounter – including setting them both travelling so that they would meet as they did. The rapid progress from enquiry to baptism is a sign that both were really ready for the encounter. In this sense, it is a foretaste of the encounter between Saul and Ananias in Acts 9, and between Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10.

Psalms 22:25-31

Psalms 22 is an interesting one to read in the Easter season. The first 18 verses have such a strong resonance with the crucifixion: the mockery and insults, the physical indignities. V1 is quoted by Jesus in his cry from the cross, and v18 by the gospel writers, about casting lots for his clothing.

Then, in verse 21, the psalm changes direction and tense. The psalmist turns to praising God for what God has already done – and in verse 24, 'he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not turn his face from me but heard when I cried to him'. This is a statement of faith; it has echoes of Jonah, praising God for rescue while he is still

in the belly of the whale. We might set this beside the resurrection, where even in the face of death, when all hope is lost, God is still at work.

The last 7 verses of the psalm, which form today's reading, are prophetic. This is the endgame, when the poor shall eat and be satisfied, and all peoples shall turn to God. These verses are a reminder that the psalmist's salvation is not for their personal comfort, but to allow them to play their part in God's purpose for the world. We might say the same for the resurrection of Jesus.

1 John 4:7-21

This passage reminds us that love comes from God, and that our love for God and for one another is our response to the love of God. Love, here, is more than a warm glow. It is rooted in a proper sense of the work of God in Jesus, understanding Jesus as the only Son of God and as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. It is demanding: it rises to the challenge of fear and of hatred, and requires that we face down both. (It may be helpful to identify this fear as being about cowardly and half-hearted living, rather than fear that is the result of anxiety issues or external threat).

John 15:1-8

The gospel reading takes us back to before the crucifixion, to the night of the Last Supper, when Jesus is preparing his disciples for the shock of his death and the need for them to carry on without him. The idea of abiding in God is similar to the 1 John passage, but alongside the life-affirming image is a sharper theme about pruning, cleansing, and discarding in order to bring optimum fruitfulness. There is comfort here, but no room for complacency.

Suggestions for preaching on combinations of these readings

- Take John and 1 John passages on the common theme of abiding in God's love and hence love for one another.
- Start from where we are in the church year, 4 weeks after Easter, 3 weeks before Pentecost. What is the experience of the disciples? What is their understanding of what's going on, and what they need to do? Use Psalm 22 and John. What might this tell us about the response of the church to the world today?
- Take John and Acts and look at the theme of being prepared: of being prepared *by* God, through pruning and cleansing; of being prepared by abiding *in* God; of people being prepared for tasks they don't yet know about; and of others being prepared for a faith they don't even think they are interested in. Philip and the official were both able to respond to their meeting because both had been prepared for it.
- Take Acts and Psalm 22 as an encouragement to preach the gospel to all peoples.

Prayers of Intercession

God who hears the cries of the poor,
we pray for a world where everyone has enough to eat,
a safe place to live,
access to education and healthcare,
and dignity and respect for who they are.

Give us the courage to challenge the structures of inequality,
and to speak for those whose voices are silenced.

God whose word is to be preached to all nations,
we pray for evangelists, teachers and preachers,
for those reaching people in new ways and places,
for those who take risks for the sake of the gospel.
Inspire and uphold them,
so that all they do is rooted in your love.

God who plants, tends and prunes,
we pray for farmers and growers,
that they may balance the drive to maximise crops
with care for the long-term health of the earth,
and that they may be properly paid for their work.

God who commands us to love one another,
help us to abide in your love, and deepen ours,
so that we may make this church a safe and welcoming place
for all who are here, and all who are yet to come.

God who cares for each one of us,
We hold before you the people we know who are suffering in body, mind or spirit...

(silence, or naming people out loud)

Bring your comfort and healing to them and to those who care for them.

We ask all these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Offertory Prayer

God of steadfast love,
we thank you for your many gifts to us.
We bring these gifts to you as a sign of our thanks.
Accept and bless all that we bring, and all that we are,
and use us and our gifts to serve you in the world.
We pray in the name of Jesus, Amen.

Blessing

May the love of God flow around us,
among us and through us,
and may the blessing of God,
Creator, Redeemer and Spirit,
be with us all, today and always. Amen.

Hymn Suggestions				
	RS	CH4	StF	MP
This is the day, this is the day	377	194	152	691
Jesus the Lord says, I am the bread	199		252	
Beloved, let us love	610			
Let there be love shared among us	477			411
A new commandment	745		242	1
Bread of heaven, on thee we feed	442			
I hunger and I thirst	449			
Holy wisdom, lamp of learning		604		
Like the murmur of the dove's song		592	389	
Good Christians all, rejoice and sing!	238			
This Joyful Eastertide	248	415	314	

RS – *Rejoice & Sing* | CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* | StF – *Singing the Faith* | MP – *Mission Praise*