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**Sunday 15th January 2023**

**Epiphany 2 / Ordinary 2**

**The Rev’d John Proctor**

**Call to Worship**

Happy are those who make the Lord their trust,

**who do not turn aside to the proud.**

I delight to do your will, O my God;

**your law is within my heart.**

Do not, O Lord, withhold your mercy from me;

**let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever.**

Put a new song in my mouth,

**a song of praise to our God.**

*(from Psalm 40)*

**Prayer of Approach and Confession**

*(Tomorrow is ‘Blue Monday’. This time of year can be difficult for many people.)*

God of light and hope,

the grey days and long nights of winter

are not lonely and dark to you.

When the sky is cold and the curtains are closed,

we may welcome your presence.

Amid frost, fog and flood,

we declare your sure and steady grace.

We trace your purpose in the slow turning of seasons,

and we name your goodness in the waiting time.

In this hour of worship, we ask for new perspective,

for courage in our difficulties,

fresh love for our neighbours,

and a patient spirit of service,

That even in trials and fears

we may live as people of Jesus.

God of mercy,

we bring you the lives we have,

far from perfect, marred by selfishness and deceit,

and we ask again, humbly and confidently,

to receive the forgiveness for which Jesus died,

that we may go forward pardoned, clean and hopeful.

**Assurance of Pardon**

God shows his love for us,

for while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

So we rejoice in God, through Jesus Christ,

in whom we are now at peace with God.

*(based on Romans 5:8, 11)*

**Prayer of Illumination**

Jesus, called Lamb of God,

named and known for your sacrifice,

for your life offered up as service, as offering, as gift,

In you evil loses its power,

and wrong and sin and fault and blame

are overcome by love and pardon and hope.

Jesus, resting place for the dove of heaven,

you release the Spirit across the earth

to flow as living water in parched and painful places,

to bring green and gladness amid the deserts of our days,

to slake and satisfy the thirst of our years.

Jesus, summoning and speaking as teacher,

in your company there is a world of new understanding.

You fulfil our dreams and deep desires,

we start to see ourselves as you see us,

and grow in ways we had not expected.

Jesus, of many names – love and life and truth,

we turn to you – to receive, to discover, to be changed,

and to you we give our trust and praise. Amen.

*(from URC Prayer Handbook for today)*

**Readings**

Isaiah 49:1-7 | *Psalm 40:1-11* | *1 Corinthians 1:1-9* | *St John 1:29-42*

**Notes on the Readings**

There is enough in each one of today’s readings, from Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel, to make a substantial sermon on its own. But there are also some touching points that link the three and create opportunities to handle them as a group. However, the suggestions ahead are too many to use in one sermon. Be selective. Take up one or two ideas that you can explore with confidence, and be prepared to set some interesting material aside.

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There is a common theme in the idea of calling. The servant in Isaiah is called and chosen, shaped and prepared by God for a task that will be dispiriting, difficult and even dangerous. The church in Corinth is a people called, summoned by the gospel to a holy life as ‘saints’ (v.2) and invited into the companionship of Jesus (9). And the gospel reading, as climax of the three, sees Peter called by a new name. Here is some more detail on all of this.

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Isaiah 49:1-7 is full of meaning, along with some mystery. It is rich but not easy. And maybe that is exactly what it says about the call of God. The servant of God is a privileged person with a special role to fulfil. This role involves careful preparation on God’s part, which we can trace through the verses, all the way from ‘called’ (1) to ‘chosen’ (7). Along the way we learn that the servant has been ‘named’ (1), ‘sharpened’, ‘polished’, ‘hidden’ (2), ‘formed’, ‘honoured’, ‘strengthened’ (5) and offered as a light to the world (6).

Yet the focal point of this kind of divine purpose is not an entirely comfortable place to be. We read also of wasted work and frustrated effort, of strength that has ebbed away (4) and of a person despised and humiliated in the eyes of others (7).

So is this a picture of Jesus? Many will say that it is, even though it appears in the depths of the Old Testament, several centuries earlier. Certainly there is much here that matches the ministry of Jesus – privilege and suffering, relationship with God and rejection by the world. But perhaps there is also a wider message about calling. When God has a purpose for our lives, God will prepare us with wisdom and love. Yet fulfilling the purpose may be a task of great tension and difficulty, living as people of grace in a world that too often moves to a very different tune. So value the service to which God calls you. Do not fear it. But do not take it lightly; it may be a heavy burden to carry.

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1 Corinthians 1:1-9 begins a sequence of readings from this letter over five lectionary weeks. If you preach regularly, you might want to tackle a few of these; there are plenty of accessible issues to explore. In today’s passage the theme that repeats is ‘calling’. Paul is ‘called to be an apostle’ (1). The Corinthians are ‘called to be saints’, and they in turn ‘call on the name of Jesus as Lord’ (2). Finally, God has called them ‘into the fellowship of Jesus’ (9).

Leaving aside Paul’s individual role, his words to the Corinthians open up several aspects of what it means to be Christian.

* We are people in relationship. We share our lives with Jesus. That is the meaning of ‘fellowship’ – having something in common with another person and relating to that person in a spirit of partnership and togetherness.
* We are Easter people, who declare that Jesus is risen, when we call on him as ‘Lord’. In the New Testament ‘Lord’ is a resurrection word, the confession of faith of a people who have stood in the Easter garden and marvelled that the stone is rolled away. It is the glad praise we offer to one who was dead and is alive.
* We are a holy people, named holy by God and called to realise this identity in practice. ‘Saints’ in the New Testament are not a tiny minority in the church, the superstars of our earthly fellowship. But saints are all of us, invited to be holy, called to be God-like in heart and in practice, beckoned to live out the generous wisdom of God in the commitments of our days and years.

As with Isaiah 49, all of this could be a costly calling. But it is the life that God has in mind for us. If we know what we’re aiming for, we’re more likely to hit at least some bits of it.

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John 1:29-42 only gets to calling at the very end. Certainly we see Jesus meeting new disciples, as they will turn out to be. But he does not call them, in the way he does in some other gospel passages. Indeed he says very little to start with. ‘What are you looking for?’ (38). ‘Come and see’ (39). There must have been a lot of conversation as the afternoon drew on and darkness fell, but we are not told its detail. We only hear that Andrew, who started by seeking, now felt he had found God’s anointed one. And then the calling comes.

Andrew brings Simon, who comes with – we may guess – a mixture of curiosity, interest, hope, maybe even embarrassment. And he is found. As he encounters Jesus, he discovers himself in a new way. Jesus calls him by name and calls him by a new name. He is changed, renewed and invited to become the rock-man, for Jesus’ sake.

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Calling – always purposeful on God’s part, but unlikely to be simple to follow on ours. So says Isaiah. Marked by the holy presence of God and the risen life of Jesus. That’s the message for Corinth. Opening up possibilities and potential in ourselves that may jolt us and surprise us. This is what Simon Peter found. All of it in the companionship of the one who says, ‘Come and see.’

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Now, briefly, for a different tack through the texts, attending more directly to the seasonal theme of epiphany, the revealing of the life of God in the world.

Isaiah 49 tells of light and salvation reaching across the earth, through the costly ministry of the servant of God. This thought certainly relates to the work of Jesus, with light spreading wide through his Good Friday experience of deep darkness. More generally, it is rarely an easy thing to spread the light of God’s goodness into dark places. Yet it is often in and through costly service that the life of God is made known in the world. Epiphany costs. Setting a light in the world often involves bearing the heat of the flame.

1 Corinthians 1 is a passage of epiphany. The life of Jesus has been known in the Corinthian church through the spiritual gifts they have been given and the testimony to Christ that has been brought to them (vv.4-7). Do you ever think of your local church as a little piece of epiphany? Yet if we are a place of testimony and a people gifted for the service of Christ, then his life will be evident through us. Our activity, witness and fellowship will make Jesus known, to us and to others.

Finally, John 1 has plenty of epiphany in it. John the Baptist’s words about Jesus are revealing. ‘Lamb of God’ (vv.29, 35) – the hint of sacrifice and suffering echoes with today’s Isaiah text. ‘The one who spreads the Spirit’ (v.33) might remind us of a richly endowed church in Corinth. ‘Son of God’ (v.34) tells of one who is close to the Father, one in whom we should surely expect to see the life of heaven. There is epiphany too in the encounters that people have with Jesus. As he reveals himself, he also reveals new realities and hopes in their lives. Epiphany happens within them too. And this newness will be part of his own life, growing in them and declaring through their deeds and days his presence in the world.

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**Affirmation of Faith**

We believe in God,

whose purposes are loving and sure,

whose light reaches across the nations,

whose call to service is renewed in every generation.

We believe in Jesus, Son and Servant of God,

who challenges and bears the sin of the world,

who receives the Spirit from heaven,

who reveals, renews and remakes our human living.

We believe in the Holy Spirit of God,

who comes as a dove, in hope and freedom,

who is sent by Jesus, in gentleness and strength,

who touches earth with the life of heaven.

We believe in God’s call to serve,

in the wholeness to be found in Jesus,

and in the Spirit’s presence and power.

# **Themes for Intercession**

Today is the birthday of Martin Luther King (1929-1968) and tomorrow is a national holiday in America in his name and memory. Pray for racial justice, for people who work for this in our own country and in the States, for honesty in our societies about the evils of past and present and commitment to a better future.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is coming up. Pray for preparations and events taking place in your area. More broadly, pray for other churches in your community, for their faithfulness, joy and success.

Pray for people who find winter tough for any reason – loneliness, mental health, finances, heavy work responsibility. Pray also for local emergency and health services, who may be especially busy through the depths of the winter months.

**Offering Prayer**

God who calls us to serve,

we give that your service may grow,

through the Church, in your world, among human need,

and with our gifts we offer again

the discipleship of our lives

in the name of Jesus. Amen.

**Holy Communion**

This is the Lord’s table. The Lord Jesus invites us to share this joyful feast.

On the night of his arrest, the Lord Jesus took bread and after giving thanks to God broke it and said: ‘This is my body, which is for you; do this in memory of me.’ In the same way he took the cup after supper, and said, ‘This cup is the new covenant sealed by my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this in memory of me.’ For every time you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord, until he comes.

So as the Lord Jesus took bread and wine, we take these elements of bread and wine to be set apart from all common use for this holy use and mystery. And as Jesus gave thanks and blessed, we draw near to God with our prayers and thanksgiving.

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Lift up your hearts.

**We lift them to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

**It is right to give our thanks and praise.**

Our holy and heavenly Father, it is our duty and our joy at all times and in all places to give you thanks and praise.

By the power of your word, you made the universe.

From the depth of your love, you gave us your Son Jesus.

By the life of your Spirit, you fill the hearts of the faithful.

Therefore, with all your people in heaven and on earth we declare your glory.

**Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,**

**heaven and earth are full of your glory, Hosanna in the highest.**

**Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord**

**Hosanna in the highest**

As we acknowledge your glory, we bless you that in the fullness of time you sent your Son to be our Saviour. We give praise for his taking of our flesh, his holy human life, his suffering for us, his mighty resurrection, and the promise of his final coming in honour and victory.

In this Epiphany season we praise you that he is the light of the world, through whom we are brought out of darkness into light, and that by him your glory has been revealed to the nations.

Together we affirm the mystery of faith

**Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.**

So as we call on the name of Jesus, we ask that the Holy Spirit may breathe among us to bless these gifts of bread and wine, that in receiving them we may share in the body and blood of our Lord, and grow in grace, to the glory of your name.

In Jesus’ name we pray, and in his words we say together … **the Lord’s Prayer**

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The bread which we break, is it not a sharing of the body of Christ? We, though many, are one body, for we all share in one bread.

**SHARE BREAD**

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? We take the cup of salvation, and call on the name of the Lord.

**SHARE WINE**

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Gracious God, your love brings us food from heaven, the life of your dear Son, and binds us in the company of all his faithful people in heaven and on earth. Strengthened by this food and fellowship and by the power of your Holy Spirit, may we continue the work of Christ in the world, until we come to the glory of your eternal kingdom.

(this prayer based on the Church of Scotland’s, *Common Order*, p141).

**Blessing**

May the light of the glorious gospel of Christ

shine in your hearts, transform your lives,

and brighten the world.

And the blessing of God Almighty,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

be among you and remain with you always. Amen.

(from the Church of Scotland’s, *Common Order*, p599).

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| **Hymn Suggestions** | | | | |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| The voice of God goes out to all the world | 131 | 283 |  |  |
| How sweet the name of Jesus sounds | 277 | 461 | 322 | 251 |
| Will you come and follow me? | 558 | 533 | 673 |  |
| I heard the voice of Jesus say | 349 | 540 | 248 | 275 |
| Jesus invites his saints | 434 |  |  |  |
| For ourselves no longer living | 520 |  |  |  |
| He comes to us as one unknown | 525 |  |  |  |

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

Thanks to the Church of Scotland for allowing us to reproduce parts of *Common Order*.