

worship notes



from the United Reformed Church

Sunday 9th February 2025
The Fifth Sunday of Epiphany
The Revd Neil Thorogood

Call to Worship

We give thanks to you, O God, with all our hearts.
We join with your people of all places and ages as we bring our praise.
We come to worship because we rejoice in your love and faithfulness.
We come to worship because your steadfast love endures for ever.

(adapted from Psalm 138)

Prayers of Approach and Confession

Who are we, God of all, to come before you?
Who are we, bringing our fickle faithfulness and our fragile lives?
Who are we to dare to pray in praise and confession? Who are we today?

We are your children, gathered as your people.
We are named amidst the countless host you have called and blessed across history;
so it is that we bring our deepest thankfulness,
so it is that we join our songs to the worship of ages and angels,
so it is that we belong here, pray here, believe here, trust here.

All this can be because you are.
All this can be because, in Jesus, you have come to find us, sought us out, brought us home.
All this can be because your Spirit is your passionate presence in our hearts;
weaving our many lives into your one great and beautiful chorus of praise.

We need you, dear God!
How we need your presence, and the promises you share!
For all is not well within us or amongst us.
Our lives break with the sadness and shame of things done and left undone,
words spoken without thoughtfulness or silence held without the courage to speak.
We share in sins that shatter creation, tear communities and nations apart
and trap so many in lives without hope or dignity or safety.
Forgive us, merciful God.
Help us to change, and to trust that change can happen everywhere as your will is done.
Heal us of the hurt we hold.
Help us to grow in trust and hope as we let Jesus change everything for us.
We believe he died for us.
We believe he took upon himself all the brokenness of creation, undoing all that steals life away.

Give us a new start and fresh courage, strength and hope to follow him.
We ask, in the name of Jesus, and in the power of the Spirit he shares. Amen.

Declaration of Forgiveness

We believe as the apostles believed:

“The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance,
that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners...”

Through the cross and empty tomb, our sins are forgiven,
our shame is washed away and new life has come. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayer for Illumination

Thank you for the gift of these ancient words,
treasured and shared down through the ages.
May they become for us your Word of life today. Amen.

Readings

Psalm 138: 1-8 | Luke 5: 1-11

All-Age Activity

You will need:

- Enough fish pictures cut out for everyone in the congregation to have one. You could either draw these yourself or download images from the internet. I suggest you aim at 2 per sheet of A4 paper (one above the other in landscape orientation) so they are big enough to work with.
- Some sort of container to put all your fish in – a basket might be ideal.
- Enough pens or pencils for everyone to have access to one.

What to do:

1. Before the service, put out the pens and pencils so that everyone can access one when the time comes. Also put out the fish – ideally having some reasonably visible and others hidden away around your worship space.
2. Introduce the activity by retelling the story of Luke 5: 1-11 in your own words. Emphasise that Jesus comes to where the fishermen are, into their world and work. And that it is here that he helps them.
3. Then say that we are going to turn this old Bible story into our story now. Explain that there is a hidden catch of fish around the worship space. Invite volunteers to search for them. As the fish are found, ask that they be given out so that everyone in the service has one.
4. When everyone has a fish, invite people to think about what they hope Jesus will help them with in their lives. What would they want to ask him? How do they want his help for themselves? You could encourage people to share their thinking

where they are sitting if they wish.

5. Invite people to write down on their fish some of what they've been thinking. Invite volunteers to gather up all of the fish and place them in your container.
6. Offer a simple prayer, such as: "Jesus, we remember how you helped the fishermen. Here are lots of things we need help with. Please help us too. And help us to help each other and the people we meet this week when we can do things for them. Amen."

Sermon Notes

Psalms 38

This is a psalm of thanksgiving. It celebrates God's power, kindness and faithfulness. Notice that it doesn't assume that there is only one God, because God is praised "before the gods" in verse 1. The context here is a world in which different gods compete and rival each other as the people of Israel hold to their faith in the God who has been faithful to them through their history. And this is also a world in which worship centres around the Jerusalem Temple (verse 2). The psalm offers thanks to God because God has been known in Israel's history. But also (verse 3) because the writer has personal experience of God's answering of prayer. You might want, in a sermon, to reflect upon the ways our histories (as congregations, denominations, families, friends, in the stories of other people of faith) can offer rich evidence of God's faithful action. But just knowing what others have experienced and shared also invites us to wonder about our own experiences of faith – what stories do we tell as we witness to God's activity? What might be hard here (such as times when prayers don't seem to be answered or God is silent)? What is joyous here?

From verse 4, the psalmist draws a much broader horizon. Now the praise is no longer just Israel's voice and experience – it has touched all nations and all who have great worldly power. By verse 6, the psalm picks up a powerful biblical theme, highlighted in much of the world's liberation theology from places of great inequality and injustice. This is God's preferential option for the poor – the psalm can celebrate the rulers bringing praise and then, instantly, notice that God's special focus is not upon the powerful but upon the "lowly." You might want to reflect, as you think of the context of the world and community you are preaching in, about who God might be particularly focussed upon now?

Thanksgiving and praise move on into asking God for help as we reach verses 7 and 8. What the exact nature of the "trouble" and "enemies" was, we don't know. Perhaps this emerges from national disaster as powerful nations invade and attack. Perhaps it is more personal; sickness, mistreatment. There are connections invited here with our own experiences. The psalmist almost reminds God to be faithful. It is not that the troubles are wished away, but that God is sought in their midst – a very present help in times of trouble. How might that resonate and even challenge your listeners and you?

There could be powerful connections to be made between what this psalm says and what you will be singing in your hymns for this service. Why not draw out such connections because our singing can be as important as our praying and listening.

Luke 5: 1-11

By the time we reach this part of Luke, Jesus is already attracting big crowds – so big that he needs to turn a fishing boat into a floating pulpit! There is something attractive about Jesus that draws people to him. But there is also plenty about him that remains mysterious – he works the miracle, Simon feels overwhelmed with his own sinfulness in the presence of Jesus, and the three fishermen leave one life to take up another as they follow him into the unknown. All of these threads are wrapped together in this text. You might let them gradually unfold as you explore this passage in your sermon.

The passage combines a miracle story (which seems to have resonances with the one at the end of John – 21: 3-11) with the call to discipleship. It might be helpful to explore the significance of miracles in the gospels – they are not so much simply stories of astonishing events. Instead, they are events that say things about who Jesus is and what his mission is. Notice that the story very quickly moves from the miracle to the way Simon responds – the event of the catch moves Simon to confession and that paves the way for Jesus to greet him with a word of consolation and confirmation in his “Do not be afraid” followed at once by the call to follow. That pattern – an act of God, making us aware of who we really are, leading to forgiveness and following – could shape a sermon here.

A sermon might explore what it means for us to “be catching people.” There will be all sorts of ideas and anxieties floating around concerning evangelism and witness today. We don’t want a model of sharing the gospel that ensnares or traps people. Importantly, the original Greek text here has a nuance – to catch in this context includes the ideas of drawing people fully alive, awake, involved and responsive to what is being shared and offered. We might add to this the way that the text suggests these fishermen already know something about Jesus. He seems not to be entirely unknown to them given that he’s attracting crowds where they live and work, and given that Simon seems to know Jesus and Jesus seems to know him (notice that Luke 4: 38-39 has Jesus healing Simon’s mother-in-law).

In our contexts, people outside the Church may have some sort of knowledge about Jesus as a figure they have heard of. The sermon might wonder, how can we as individuals and as a congregation offer some sort of witness that intrigues people enough for them to want to discover more? How might we use whatever connections we have to spread rumours about the Jesus we know and love and worship? How does our building do this day and night? How do we show that we, like Simon, have found Jesus to be far far more than just a figure we vaguely know about?

A sermon might also notice how the text ends. They head off, teacher and disciples, Son of God and fledgling followers. Ahead will be much to discover, learn, let go of, misunderstand, remember, accept, believe, trust in. These disciples will fail and fall away on Good Friday. And yet, through them, the world will hear good news. How might these be our realities too?

Intercessions

Jesus, you came and found Simon in his world;
the waves and the breeze and the gulls, the smells of fish and the charcoal fire,
the fishermen at work on their nets and the crowds pressing forward.
You found him where he was,
and changed the world for Simon and James and John and their families.
Now it's our turn.
We bring to you all that we are and all that we carry.
We come with hopes, and we come with sadness.
We come with a world around us and within us so in need of your transforming touch.
Hear us, we pray, just as you heard Simon's fears.
We pray for places and people devastated by violence;
where wars continue to rage, where streets remain unsafe,
where workplaces, homes and social media hide abuse.
We pray for places and people condemned to injustice and poverty;
where lands no longer produce crops, where systems become inhuman,
where power is used to corrupt and coerce.
We pray for places and people burdened by sickness and sadness;
where care is at breaking point, where healing is slow and difficult,
where death is coming closer.
We pray for churches everywhere, and the churches dear to us;
where worship and prayer are faithful,
where welcome and outreach are generous,
where challenges and burdens are real.
We pray for ourselves, and those on our hearts this day;
where life has been blessed, where life has turned difficult,
where the future feels uncertain.
In all of these complex, beautiful and risky places and moments, dear Lord,
come close, we pray.
Bring your healing and your help.
Hold your aching world and give strength to those we pray for.
We ask it as you have taught us to, trusting that you hear, and care, and act. Amen.

Offertory

We now bring to God our offering, in thankfulness for the gifts we have received.
Let us pray:
God of goodness and love,
you have gifted to us the wonders of your world and the possibility for life.
We now offer back to you something of the blessing we have received.
Take and use all that we can offer for your work and to your glory. Amen.

Blessing

May the Spirit bless, empower and guide us as we travel on in the way of Christ.
 May the hope and vision we have shared together sustain us in the days ahead.
 May the songs of praise not fall silent as Sunday becomes Monday.
 May our prayers and our work as God's people continue.
 And may God go with us, each and every one of us, now and for ever. Amen.

Hymn Suggestions				
	RS	CH4	StF	MP
Amazing Grace	92	533	440	31
Called by Christ to be disciples			660	
Children of God, reach out to one another		521		
Come with me, come wander, come welcome the world			462	
Dear Lord and Father of mankind	492	485	495	111
Father, hear the prayer we offer	495	255	518	132
Fill now our life, O Lord our God	406	183	73	146
Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty	34	111	11	237
I shall praise you, O God, from my soul		95		
I want Jesus to walk with me		539		
In a byre near Bethlehem			324	
Jesus calls us here to meet him		510	28	
Jesus calls us! O'er the tumult	355	509	250	359
Let all mortal flesh keep silence	454	591	666	
Longing for light, we wait in darkness		543	706	
Lord, in the strength of grace			448	
Lord, make us servants of your peace		527		
Lord, speak to me, that I may speak	613	542		
Lord, you have come to the seashore		532	558	
May the mind of Christ my Saviour		536		463
My eyes be open to your presence			560	
My Jesus, my Saviour, Lord there is none like you		531	363	1003
Praise to the Lord, the Almighty	74	124	88	564
Stand up and bless the Lord	391	202		616
Take my life, and let it be	371	502	566	624
The Church is wherever God's people are praising	583	522		
The strife is o'er, the battle done	250	412		670
This is a day of new beginnings		526		
We do not hope to ease our minds		537	717	
When I needed a neighbour, were you there		544	256	
With all my heart I thank you, Lord			602	
Will you come and follow me if I but call your name	558	533	673	
Would I have answered when you called			674	