

worship notes



from the United Reformed Church

6th April 2025
The Fifth Sunday of Lent
The Revd Andy Braunston

Call to Worship

We look at all you have done for us Majestic One, and we are dazed,
as if in a dream, and yet:

we come to worship.

Our mouths brim with laughter, Risen Lord,
joy is in our lips gushing and burbling like a stream as:

we come to worship.

As we worship we look for guidance in the desert places from you, Most Holy Spirit.
We yearn for your Word as a stream in the wilderness.

Where we've been in pain we look for joy.

Where we've been in sadness we find your presence to inspire and cheer us as:

we come to worship.

Prayers of Approach, Confession, and Grace

We come with our prayers and praises today,
Most Holy Spirit, courage in our darkness.
We know You are solace for the weary,
pardon for the sinner and splendour of the Living God.
We sense your presence as perfume in the air,
as static electricity ready to crack,
as the warmth in our souls,
and we bring You our thanks and praise.

We come with our prayers and praises today, Lord Jesus,
for in the face of death You offer life,
in the face of anger You offer calm.
in the face of gloom You offer light.
We hear Your call to understand and love our world,
even as we try to make sense of all that goes on in it.
We hear Your insistent voice telling us to tell truth,
heal wounds, and stand up for righteousness,
and so we bring You our thanks and praise.

We come with our prayers and praises today, Eternal Majesty,
yet know we have failed:
we have failed to recognise you amongst us
preferring only to see ourselves.
We have failed to see you in the poor and the least,
preferring only to see the great.
We have failed to see you in the gloom,
preferring only to see the shadows.
We have failed to tell Your truth,
preferring the lies of our world.
Forgive us, O God, and wake us up,
that we might bring You our thanks and praise. Amen.

Like a father running to welcome an estranged child,
like a mother gathering her young to herself,
like a rock on which we stand, God is loving and faithful.

Where there is true repentance God forgives our sins;
so turn back to God, accept the love that is offered,
forgive others, and have the courage to forgive yourselves,
that you might be free. Amen.

Prayer for Illumination

Make a way in the wilderness of our hearts, O God,
that we may drink from the deep refreshing rivers of Your Word.
That as you call us to see the new things you are doing,
we may hear, understand and respond,
that captives may be freed,
powers of evil exposed
and truth be told, Amen.

Readings

Isaiah 43:16-21 | St John 12:1-8

All-Age Activity

Get some nard – best as oil. Get some strips of old fabric. Give the fabric out putting a few drops of nard on each one. Ask people to smell and describe the smell. Talk about the great cost of Nard in NT times, how it would have cost a year's wages to buy a pound of it. Then maybe explore how the presence of the Holy Spirit might be like perfume in the air, an intangible presence that has an effect. We can't see the Spirit but we can tell where She's been by the perfume left in the air.

Sermon Notes

Each of our readings today has an interesting, political, context; a context different to our own but with some similarities as we wonder what we might need to say in our own deeply troubled times.

Isaiah 43: 16 – 21

This passage is from what scholars call Second Isaiah. It is thought that the book we know as Isaiah is a collection of writings from three different period. The context for this passage is Exile and questions about why God allowed this traumatic event to happen. Why were God's chosen people defeated in battle and carted off into Exile? The prophets answered different ways; Jeremiah and Ezekiel understood it as punishment by a faithful God on an unfaithful people but the writer in Second Isaiah ministered a little later in a changed political context. Cyrus, who had defeated Babylon in 539 BC, changed the political situation allowing Jewish exiles to return home. The writer brings comfort, seeing God at work in the political shifts of his age. The same God who brought the Jews out of Egypt will bring them out of Babylon. This new exodus will be an example of God's steadfast love. Reading the politics of the day through a theological lens the writer sees Jerusalem's punishment as being over and redemption being at hand. The writer asserts God's ability and willingness to intervene in daily life (or at least to see the politics of the age as being used by God for God's own purposes). Liberation is promised for God's chosen ones so they may again sing God's praise.

Many, perhaps most, of those who read or hear your sermon will have not experienced exile in the real tangible way that the asylum seekers and refugees amongst us have. Most of us can't appreciate the profound trauma and dislocation that comes from having to sing the Lord's song in a strange land, to find new ways of speaking, maybe learning a new language, to navigate strange customs and social expectations, to live in profound poverty, dwell in substandard housing, and wait for a deliberately slow process to assess one's asylum claim make its way slowly through Home Office and Court. Most of us don't know what it is to live with such precarious hope; those who do can understand this passage, and the experience of Exile, most vividly.

To a people in Exile Isaiah offered hope and the light of God's presence; not just spiritual succour but tangible acts of love; steams in the desert to nourish on the way back home, safety in danger, hope in despair.

Psalms 126

The psalm is paired with our OT reading as it is thought to date from after the return from Exile. The nature of Hebrew verbs means it's difficult to get the sense – this may be a song thanking God for what God has done, or it may be a dream of what God will do.

The Psalm continues the joy that we saw in our Isaiah passage - joy we find hard to understand. In our contemporary world we know of people in Exile but are taught to think of those folk as having some sort of choice about it. We realise things are bad for asylum seekers and refugees in the West in general - and the UK in particular - but comfort ourselves by believing it's better for them here than in their home countries. However, we have no idea of the pain of dislocation, the disorientation of exile, the yearning for a land that gave meaning and cultural belonging. Maybe we read the OT texts and believe, along with the prophets, the theology that said God was using the Exile as punishment – but we have laws now to stop the punishment of a whole people. It wasn't just the king and political advisors that were taken into exile, but, almost, all of the people. Did the people learn much of a lesson? We'll not know as we only have a few voices left preserved in Scripture; voices which saw the captivity as desired by God. The captives, of course, may have disagreed!

If we want to think of the Psalm's joy to be about promises still to come, and if we want to think about Jesus' words about release for captives, we might want to think about who the captives are in our society. We might ponder the poor forever condemned to go to loan sharks, kept ever in unmanageable and criminal debt. We might think of victims of what we've come to call 'modern' slavery, trafficked into the country to work in car washes, massage parlours, the homes of the rich, cannabis farms or the sex industry. We might think of the woman trapped in a violent relationship unable to leave due to fear for herself and her children. We might think of the addict trapped into illegality to fund their addiction. What might release look like for them? How might God be at work with the captives when the Church proclaims it is God's mission to the world?

St John 12: 1 - 8

Our Psalm could be interpreted, due to the peculiarities of Hebrew grammar, as looking forward rather than back; our Gospel reading is a mix of looking back (to the raising of Lazarus) and forward (to Jesus' betrayal and death). There's an elaborate context, of course, to this passage:

- Lazarus' raising is fulfilment of Jesus being the way, the truth and the life. In Jesus we find abundant life; but it leads to this act of huge, extravagant generosity which angers Judas and so leads to Jesus' death. Working for life can mean a dangerous backlash.
- The writer of the Gospel has a theological purpose to Jesus' death – just as the writer of Isaiah had a theological message in Cyrus' decision to release the Jews. But Jesus' death was not about theology for Judas or the Romans; it was an expression of empire – an empire often mitigated through puppet kings and rulers. Caiaphas, for example, saw his collaboration as necessary to protect the Jewish people; given the revolt a few years later and the utter destruction of the remnants of the Jewish state one can see why.
- Both resistance and collaboration were daily choices that Jewish people in Jesus' time, and like all under occupation now, had/have to make. Believing in Jesus as

saviour was edgy in an age when imperial coins referred to the emperor as the “saviour of the people.” Thanking Ceasar for good harvests and plentiful grain made an idol out of him. Jesus, the living bread who feeds his people stands in stark contrast. No wonder Caiaphas saw him as a threat, no wonder the collaboration that gave him power, and the people peace, was something of the utmost importance. In our own age we all collaborate, to a greater or lesser extent, to the forces of empire. Despite our best efforts our lives are beset by plastic which chokes our earth but enriches the powers of money. Despite our careful investing we can never really ensure our pension funds aren’t making money from oil, armaments, alcohol, pornography or the occupation of other people’s lands. Even our ethical funds struggle to be totally separate from evil. Even lesser collaboration is problematic; do we think much before ordering from online companies that refuse to pay their workers well and hollow out the economies within which they are situated?

- Then there’s the immediate context of the meal. Lazarus, in whose new life must have been one of the reasons for the meal is silent. Mary is silent. In this snippet only Jesus and Judas speak. Mary has no words, only actions, to express her gratitude, Judas has no sense of gratitude or love only anger at what he sees as extravagance. Standing like a po-faced Puritan of later years, extravagant generosity seems not to have moved him. The editor tells us Judas was a thief and maybe wants us to believe his outrage was about not having the money that had been used to buy the nard; yet nothing suggests this nard came from the common purse. Mary presumably had a sense of where the confrontation with empire was heading – in the previous chapter Caiaphas argues for Jesus’ death as his sign of raising Lazarus was leading many to believe in him and so undermining the fragile forces of resistance and collaboration with the Romans. So, Mary sees the writing on the wall and with extravagant generosity thanks Jesus for raising her brother and anoints him for death.

Weaving the Threads

With Isaiah we may wish to look at our politics and wonder where God is at work. This is a dangerous thing to do; some may see the powers at work in our age as being heaven-sent and risk the Church being merely a lackey of the state; others may see nothing but evil at work in the powers of our age and be tempted to see the world travelling to Hell in a hand basket. Deeper reflection will see where the powers of our age need repentance, where God is at work in unexpected places with unlikely people and where there’s hope in the gloom.

If following the theme of captivity from today’s Psalm the preacher might want to think about ways in which the congregation might be able to help in the divine work of captive-freeing. Could the church look at ways to offer long term support to local charities seeking to free captives – Woman’s Aid, Drug and Alcohol Services, a local legal aid centre working with those subject to immigration control?

Our Gospel passage is profoundly political when read in the context of the Establishment's fearful reaction to Jesus' ministry – just read the verses before this. When bringing life, Jesus poked the forces of death, and they reacted. The editor of John's Gospel weaves meaning into Jesus' death, but Caiaphas just wanted a quiet life, a complacent people and either the ability to protect himself or, maybe, to protect the people from the Roman overlords. Either way the peace was to be kept, the Romans not upset, and the people kept calm. It's tempting to go along with the quiet life, and not to turn against the tide. In 1932 Karl Barth broke with academic etiquette and started teaching sermon preparation to students. The etiquette he broke is that it was someone else's job to do this. The German Church was extremely cool to the "religionless" Weimar Republic, elections had produced Parliaments which struggled to get laws passed and so the government relied on presidential decrees. The growth of the Nazis, wanting a strong leader and the idolisation of the German people and state, was a profound temptation and danger to the Church filled with people who succumbed to this message. Barth's sermon classes taught a generation of clergy how to preach clearly in an age where power, language and politics had become poisonous. We are not in 1930s Germany but the desire for strong leaders remains, the impatience with politics as usual is intense and, for many, our politicians don't offer answers which improve life. How might we preach in such times?

Affirmation of Faith

We believe that Jesus Christ, testified to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God that we must hear, trust, and obey in life and death. **Jesus said: I am the way, and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me.**

Jesus Christ is both God's assurance of forgiveness but also God's mighty claim on our lives; through Jesus we are delivered from the godless fetters of the world to a free, grateful ministry to God's creation. Christ Jesus, whom God has made to us **wisdom and righteousness, sanctification and redemption.**

Jesus Christ is Lord of the Church where he feeds pardoned sinners through Word and Sacrament. With faith, obedience, proclamation, and good order the Church testifies that it, alone, is Christ's property and it lives, and wants to live, only from his comfort and instruction in expectation of his coming again. And so we strive to speak the truth in love so may grow up in every way **into him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body is joined together.**

We believe that Jesus Christ gives his Church a government distinct from the government of the state. In things that affect obedience to God the Church is not subordinate to the state, but must serve the Lord Jesus Christ, its only Ruler and Head. Civil authorities are called to serve God's will of justice and peace for all humankind, and to respect the rights of conscience and belief. **While we ourselves are servants in the world as citizens of God's eternal kingdom.**

We believe the Church's commission, upon which its freedom is founded, consists in delivering the message of the free grace of God to all people in Christ's stead, and therefore in the ministry of his own word and work through Sermon and Sacrament as Jesus tells us: **See, I am with you always, to the end of the world.**

*adapted from the Barmen Declaration and the
URC's Statement concerning its Nature, Faith, and Order*

Offertory

Mary anointed Jesus with a costly gift – a gift costing a year's wages for a labourer. Her gratitude at the restitution of her brother Lazarus was immense and could not be contained in a simple 'thank you.' Whilst it's always good to speak our thanks, it's also important to give through random acts of kindness, through our time and energy and, where possible, through our financial gifts. Giving is one way in which our discipleship is measured. So, let's thank God for all that is given in our church – the time spent listening, the acts of kindness to the wider community, the gifts of skill and the financial gifts given in the plate and direct to the bank.

God of every good gift,
we thank You for Your extravagant generosity to us,
and pray You teach us to give without counting the cost.
Bless all that is given to our church,
the time, the talents and the treasure,
that we may use these gifts wisely in Your service, Amen.

Intercessions

Eternal One we bring our prayers for our world, the Church, and those we love to you.

O Most High,
we remember before you the nations of our world,
swayed with disinformation and hate,
where borders, social norms, and institutions
are threatened by the lies of evil men.

We pray for those called to lead in these times,
that they may resist the deceits that surround us,
speak truth to new empires, and maintain democracy.

God, in your mercy...**hear our prayer.**

Risen Lord Jesus, with extravagant generosity, gratitude, and love
You were anointed for death.

Teach us to have the same generosity, gratitude, and love
as we care for those on the move in search of safety,

for those learning to live in exile,
for those trafficked into the UK into modern forms of slavery,
and for all held captive by the evil forces seeking only profit.

God, in your mercy....**hear our prayer.**

Most Holy Spirit,
We bring before you those known to us in any kind of need....

Silence

We hold them in Your great love
and pray they feel the comfort of Your presence.

God, in your mercy....**hear our prayer.**

Eternal Trinity of Love,
hear our prayers we bring before You,
as we pray as Jesus taught saying...Our Father.

Holy Communion

God is here!	God's Spirit is with us!
Lift up your hearts!	We lift them up to God!
Let us give God our thanks and praise!	It is right and proper so to do.

It is right and proper, always and everywhere,
to give you thanks, O Most High, our light and our salvation;
to You be glory and praise for ever.

From the beginning You have created all things
and all Your works echo the silent music of Your praise.

In the fullness of time You made us in your image,
the crown of all creation.
You give us breath and speech,
that with angels and archangels
and all the powers of heaven
we may find a voice to sing your praise:

**Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts.
Heaven and earth are full of thy glory
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord:
Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest.**

How wonderful the work of Your hands Most High.
As a mother tenderly gathers her children,
You embraced a people as Your own.
When they turned away and rebelled Your love remained steadfast.

From them you raised up Jesus our saviour,
born of Mary, to be the living bread,
in whom all our hungers are satisfied.

He offered his life for sinners, and with a love stronger than death
he opened wide his arms on the cross.

On the night before he died, he came to supper with his friends
and, taking bread, he gave You thanks.
He broke it and gave it to them, saying:

"Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you;
do this in memory of me."

At the end of supper, taking the cup of wine,
he gave You thanks, and said:

"Drink this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant,
which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.
Do this, as often as you drink it, in memory of me."

Let us proclaim the mystery of our faith:

Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

Most High, we plead with confidence
his sacrifice made once for all upon the cross;
we remember his dying and rising in glory,
and we rejoice that he intercedes for us at Your side.

Pour out Your Holy Spirit as we bring before You
these gifts of Your creation; may they be for us
the body and blood of Your dear Son.

As we eat and drink these things in Your presence,
form us into the likeness of Christ,
and build us into a living Temple to Your glory.

Remember, O God, Your Church in every land,
reveal her unity, guard her faith, and preserve her in peace.

Bring us at the last with all the saints,
to the vision of eternal life for which you have created us;
through Jesus Christ our Lord, by whom, with whom, and in whom,
with all who stand before you in earth and heaven,
we worship you, Eternal One, in songs of everlasting praise:

**Blessing and honour and glory and power,
be yours forever and ever. Amen.**

*The Book of Common Worship
of the Church of England (Eucharistic Prayer G)*

Post Communion Prayer

God of Grace
You renew us at Your table with the bread of life.
May this food strengthen us in love
and help us to serve you in each other.
We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord, Amen

*The Book of Common Worship
of The Presbyterian Church (USA).*

Blessing

May the One who works in our world despite the politics of the age,
the One whose presence is like sweet perfume in the air,
and the One who allows us to interpret the signs of the times
allow you to respond to the movements and powers of the age,
fill you with the perfume of divine presence,
and give you the grace to respond to God's call,
and the blessing of Almighty God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, **or** Eternal Majesty, Enfleshed Word, and Fire of Love,
be with you now and always, Amen.

Hymn Suggestions

	RS	CH4	StF	MP
Sing of the Lord's Goodness, Father of All Wisdom		157	65	
The God of Abram Praise	121	162	91	645
How Shall I Sing That Majesty?	661		53	
O God of Earth and Altar	346			
Christ is the World's Light; He and none other	600		346	
Christ is the World's True Light	601	456		
For the Healing of the Nations	620	706	696	
God of freedom, God of justice*	625	263		
For Your Generous Providing		655		
I Come With Joy a Child of God	447	656	588	
Put Peace Into Each Other's Hands	635	659	712	
Lord for the Years	603	159	470	428
Guide Me O Though Great Redeemer	345	167	465	201

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

* CH4 sets this to the haunting tune Piccardy

There's a lovely sung version of Psalm 126 which goes to the American folk tune Wayfaring Stranger called *When God First Brought Us Back* [which you can find here](#).