

# worship notes



from the United Reformed Church

Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> July 2026  
Proper 9 | Ordinary 14  
The Revd Andy Braunston

## Call to Worship

Come to worship the One who is gracious and merciful  
**slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.**

Come to worship the One who is good to all,  
**and who showers compassion over all that has been made.**

All your works shall give thanks to you, O God,  
**and we, and all your faithful, shall bless you.**

We shall speak of the glory of your kingdom;  
**we shall tell of your power!**

We shall make known your mighty deeds,  
**and the glorious splendour of your kingdom.**

## Prayers of Approach, Confession and Grace

Eternal Majesty, You reign from before the ages began,  
Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,  
and your rule endures throughout all generations.  
You are faithful in all Your words,  
and gracious in all Your deeds.  
And we, Your people, praise You.

Risen Lord Jesus,  
You uphold all who are falling,  
and raise up all who are bowed down.  
You are our humble, donkey-riding king  
who came to free the unjustly imprisoned,  
proclaim mercy, and offer hope to a downtrodden people.  
In You we find our freedom and dignity.

And yet we struggle;  
the good we wish to do, we do not do.  
The evil we do not wish to do, we do.  
In our inmost selves we know what is right,  
but so often we rebel against You,  
finding Your yoke uneasy, Your rest disturbing, Your burdens heavy.  
We find ourselves wretched and forget that You free us

from all that drags us down.  
Forgive us, good Lord, for our rebellion  
and for the times when we forget who we truly are.

Raise us up, Most Holy Spirit,  
re clothe us in our rightful mind,  
that we remember we are redeemed,  
freed from Sin's grasp, and given time to change  
not only ourselves but our world. Amen

### Prayer for Illumination

Your Word, O God, has great power,  
it cuts off war, breaks the bows of battle, and commands peace.  
Your word frees prisoners from the waterless pit  
and gives hope to the imprisoned.  
Open our minds now as we hear Your powerful Word read and proclaimed,  
that we may hear, understand, and change. Amen

### Readings

*Zechariah 9:9-12 | Psalm 145:8-14 | Romans 7:15-25 | St Matthew 11:16-30*

### All Age Activity

Open the Gospel reading with some fast flute music. There are various recordings and YouTube performances of Rimsky Korsakov's Flight of the Bumble Bee, but anything else would be appropriate. If you have a flautist among your congregation, invite them to play. Begin to read once the music is under way. When the text reaches verse 19, arrange for someone to appear with a plate packed with food and hold it up. Another person walks past, looks at the plate, points and looks disapproving. Stop reading here, fade out the music and remove the plate. Pause, then carry in a comfortable chair with a rug over the back of it. Invite someone to say the words of Jesus in verses 25-30. The Jesus figure stands behind the chair and as the words of verses 28-30 are said, the speaker picks up the rug, opens it out and makes it ready to wrap around a person, indicating that someone can come and sit in the chair enveloped in the rug.

We try to unravel the contrasting puzzles found in today's reading. The Bible is full of puzzles to explore even if we can't fully understand them. A first task for today is to learn the meaning of some uncommon words, some significant biblical vocabulary. What is a yoke and what is a burden? A yoke is a way of carrying or pulling heavy things. Farmers who cannot afford tractors still use yokes to enable their cattle to pull simple, wooden farm machinery. And in places where people have to carry heavy loads and have no transport, a yoke helps them bear the weight. A burden is a heavy load. Jesus tells the people that he doesn't impose heavy burdens or ask people to do more that they can manage. He wants to help us: 'Come to me, and I will give you rest.' The first section of

the reading is more of a puzzle. Jesus seems to be describing a busy market scene where there is a group of cross, disgruntled people. We all know people who never seem to be content with what is going on, or with what they are offered. Whatever you do for them it is just not right. Perhaps we are all like that sometimes. As we read the Gospels we find many occasions when people were rather cross about what Jesus was doing. Possibly Jesus is letting people know that he has noticed this. There is a final mysterious sentence though: 'Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.' Perhaps Jesus is looking forward: he seems to be saying something like 'just wait and see'. We all know, don't we, that in the end, although things seemed to be working out very badly, Jesus overcame the very worst, the cross, and rose again.

## Sermon Notes

### *Zechariah 9:9-12*

Zechariah was written after the return of the Jewish people from exile in Babylon which gave rise to high hopes of a restored Jewish nation. Those dreams, however, were not fully realised as new empires arose and subjugated the Jewish people – the foreign kings of Persia were overlords for the 200 years after the return from Exile to be succeeded by the Greeks and then the Romans. Zechariah engaged with these post exilic realities of crushed dreams. Today's reading speaks of the persistent hope that good will come even when the long-promised freedom seemed more and more unlikely. There's a hope here of a good, just, and honest ruler who rides a donkey not a war horse. There are denunciations of violence where weapons of war will be destroyed even though the future held more defeat and warfare. The coming king will identify with the poor and oppressed; this good king will free the unjustly imprisoned who are awaiting vindication; they will be restitution for victims of wrongdoing. This was the long hoped for good that was yearned for. No doubt various kings and rulers wished to act like this, to model themselves on this virtuous ruler but all too often they failed. Politicians get a bad press these days yet very few enter public service for their own ends or enrichment; they want to help, they want to make the world better, they want to make a difference. Of course, we might debate what better might mean and whether the differences they bring are good or evil – but that's the political process. We should remember Paul's insight that what we want to do and what we end up doing are often two very different things.

### *Psalms 145:8-14*

The Psalmist reminds us to rightly orient our lives keeping God as the focus our lives knowing that God cares for us, often in ways which are as mysterious as Paul's dilemma on the human condition, but which echo down the years.

### *Romans 7:15-25*

This is one of those passages where the Lectionary's short selection means it's easy to go off at tangents which are foreign to what we think were Paul's intentions in his writing. Without a bit of wider context it would be easy to read this passage as Paul saying that

the human condition is one of struggle against sin with no end but that's not a problem due to God's grace revealed in Christ. This, however, is a theological approach that Paul himself rejects in Romans 6. If Paul believed that baptism transfers us from the realm of sin it doesn't make any sense for him to teach that we're still stuck in sin. Reading Romans 8 ("Therefore there is no condemnation...") makes more sense of this passage as does understanding a little of its context. In the *Jewish Annotated New Testament* Mark Nanos notes that Paul wrote to Christ-following assemblies of Jews (and some Gentiles) in the Roman empire. Paul was, of course, a Jew who believed the sub-group of Jews who followed Christ were an authentic expression of Judaism. He understood his mission to bring to all people the fullness of Jewish aspirations seeing Christ as the vehicle for that. His mission to other peoples, gentiles, was because he believed that, in Christ, a new age of God's restoration and rule had dawned – starting with the Jewish people. Nanos holds, then, that Romans was written to a group of Christ-following gentiles in Rome who needed to know how to live with their new faith and how to interact with the larger Jewish community. Sheila McGinn, however, writing in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* identifies, from chapter 16, a variety of ecclesial communities in Rome that Paul was writing to showing that the names listed indicate a cosmopolitan collection of individuals (as you'd expect in the metropole) with mixed communities of Jews and Gentiles, Romans and Greeks, slaves and free people. All scholarly NT study is, to some extent, conjecture but it is worth remembering the Jewish context of these ancient writings. In today's passage Paul, in moving words, identified the good and bad impulses that rage within us – in this he followed Rabbinic thought. Universal norms mean everyone is aware of what is right before God, so no one has an excuse to not know what is sinful; as members of the human family we know what is right but often do the wrong things. Paul attributed this to "nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh" which is something really quite counter cultural to the way we want to see our bodies as good. Contemporary readers focus on the tortured soul that seems to be writing the text but it's not always wise to read back into these texts contemporary insights. Craig Hill in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* thinks this passage is suggesting that without Christ one is spiritually dead and unable to obey God's law, more that the law – either the natural law known to humanity or "the law of God" is useless to free humanity from sin – only Jesus can do this. Sheila McGinn, however, is clear that as a Jew, Paul is not going to see that a God given institution, the Law, is the cause of death. The problem is not with the Law but with human beings who follow sin. Sin "shows it's true colours as a revolt against God." Indwelling sin makes us rebel against God and against God's law – even the inner self yearning to follow God's edicts is not free to do so because of the power of sin – hence the cry in v24 "miserable one that I am! Who will deliver me from this mortal body?" McGinn notes that threatened with this defeat human beings find deliverance in in God's loving kindness revealed in Christ. Paul is describing the human condition from which God has delivered humanity in and through Jesus Christ. Of course there is a tension between our ultimate deliverance and the lived reality in the here and now; the war is one but battles still rage. Maybe the passage should be read as more about our identity in Christ than our struggle in sin. In an age which still seeks to earn salvation these are powerful words. Of course, our age doesn't see salvation as anything really spiritual – it's about having the right body, the right lifestyle, the right wealth, the right social media

profile, the right friends. All these things are what modern folk strive for but all have within them the seeds of their own destruction; all will enslave us, only Christ frees us.

### *St Matthew 11:16-30*

The wider context of this reading, chapters 11 and 12, is a recount of the failure of “this generation” to accept God’s messengers and a failure to accept the Messiah’s actions and message. Not all is bleak, though, as despite general rejection, some accept. The Lectionary leaves out a middle section with the woes and condemnation of various cities, no doubt hoping to help preachers, but it’s good to address more difficult passages too. Today’s passage follows on immediately on from an episode where John the Baptist sent word to Jesus asking “are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?” and Jesus replies affirming through his reported deeds rather than words – presumably to stop him being liable to arrest by Herod too. Jesus went on to praise John the Baptist which then brings us to today’s passage. The opening verses have Jesus complaining that John was rejected for being too sombre, like prophets are meant to be whereas he was criticised for not being sombre enough and dining with those who had rejected the community’s common good – tax collectors who profited from the hated taxes used to pay for the Roman occupation. Jesus’ deeds however are like those of Lady Wisdom (Proverbs 1- 9 and Wisdom 7) and these deeds exonerate him and his message. The condemnation of the three cities uses the common prophetic formula “woe to you”. Chorazin and Bethsaida were Jewish cities on the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee, Tyre and Sidon were Pagan Mediterranean cities rebuked in the OT in various places for extravagant wealth. Matthew uses these as a cypher for those who have not turned to Jesus and accepted his message – the consequences he forewarns will be devastating but it will be worse for the Jewish cities – who should have known better – than it will for the Pagan cities who can’t be blamed for not knowing. Sodom was destroyed, according to Ezekiel 16.49, for a lack of charity and hospitality to visiting angels – indeed the townsmen sought to sexually brutalise them. Jesus’ harshest rebuke, to his adopted hometown Capernaum, is sharp as Sodom, the supreme example of inhospitality and lack of charity, will be treated better on Judgement Day! Take care to differentiate between these words of condemnation of particular cities in particular circumstances do not become a condemnation of all Jewish people whom, the Church teaches, are the people of God. The thrust of the passage is Jesus looping back to earlier in his instructions (in chapter 10) to the disciples to expect hospitality and foretelling woe to those places who don’t offer it. We’re on easier ground with the final verses and we often use these words as “comfortable words” to introduce Holy Communion. In v29 “yoke” is connected in the OT to the study of the Law (see Sirach 51:23, 26) as well as to discipline and obedience. Jesus words are a surprising invitation to his disciples to take on his yoke – his radical understanding of the law – knowing that he shoulders this burden with them (animals were yoked together). This is surprising as often Jesus was more conservative in his interpretation of the Law than his fellow Pharisees – do not murder becomes do not get angry, do not commit adultery becomes a condemnation of lust etc. Preachers might want to ponder if much has changed between the generation Jesus was frustrated by and our own. Jesus describes a generation who can’t recognise the truth in front of them; we

live in an age where Pilate's question "what is truth?" haunts us as facts are contested, recollections vary and "alternative facts" are used to browbeat in political argument. Jesus is judged by the company he keeps; I write these notes a member of the Scottish Parliament, Pam Duncan-Glancy, has been pilloried for maintaining a friendship to offer support to someone who is a sex offender. She has not condoned his actions nor sought to excuse them. As reported, she simply wished to maintain a relationship to offer support. She was dropped by her party, attacked in the press, and decided not to run again for elected office. Yet, it seems, all she was guilty of was maintaining contact with someone who had committed crimes, albeit crimes which disgust and repel us and where there are victims that need to be safeguarded and supported. We know that offenders are more likely to offend if isolated and friendless yet guilt by association is the name of the game in our current world; perhaps more supportive relationships (wise ones, accountable ones which are informed by good safeguarding principles) might actually reduce offending and keep people safe. Of course, in church contexts we insist on firm safeguarding protocols to ensure that involvement by offenders is accountable and monitored (and your Synod Safeguarding Officers can advise on this). How often are we, like Jesus, judged for the company we keep? (Maybe we should be judged more and be more radical in our friendships!) How might Lady Wisdom guide us in word and deed to make a difference in our friendships and associations, to show hospitality even when it might give rise to shame and condemnation – even a firm hospitality grounded in caution and a realisation we might be manipulated? John Bell's verse from *Will You Come and Follow Me?* has Jesus ask us: "will you risk the hostile stare, should your life attract or scare?" Will we?

### *Weaving The Threads*

We have rich themes to weave together and you may wish to focus on only some of the readings instead of trying to weave them all into one piece. Perhaps the thread between them is orientating our lives to God and God's purposes. In Zechariah we see ancient yearnings for justice in following God's Law – a yearning echoed in the praise of the Psalm. Paul asserts that in Christ we have freedom from sin – even though we are continually tempted to disobey God's laws. In the Gospel Jesus invites us to share his easy yoke, even though, on the face of it, his understanding of the Law is rather more demanding than many of his contemporaries. Maybe this is why he describes his way as narrow even though it leads to life. We now follow recognising the freedom that Christ promises is still coming, the Realm of Sin still wreaks havoc even as we long, like Zechariah of old, for just leadership that puts things right. Of course, in our longing we realise that we're part of the solution; we can lead with justice, we can advocate for mercy, we can sing God's praises with our voices and our lives.

### **Affirmation of Faith**

We do not understand our actions;

**for we do not do what we want, but the very things we hate.**

The power of sin means we cannot do what is right despite wanting to.

**We do not do the good we want, but the evil we do not want.**

Yet we delight in the law of God in our inmost selves,  
**but so often we have an internal battle  
between the power of sin and God's powerful law.**  
Who will rescue us from this battle?  
**Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!  
For in him there is no condemnation!**  
For the law of the Spirit of life in Jesus Christ  
**has set us free from the power of sin and of death.**

*From Romans 7 & 8*

## Intercessions

Eternal Majesty,  
we want to pray but often don't know what to say.  
We yearn for Your presence but then become distracted and our minds wander.  
We long for the good of prayer but the weight of our worries leads us astray.  
So, we come before You now with the needs of the world on our hearts.

*pause*

We bring to You places of war and conflict, bitterness and division,  
and ask You strengthen those who work for peace.

*pause*

We bring before You the anger and rage of our world, the lies and the hatred,  
and those who seek to improve our cities, towns and streets.

*pause*

We bring to You all those on the move this day,  
driven out by hatred and violence, prejudice and persecution,  
and ask that we become, again, a people of compassion and love.

*pause*

Jesus, Enfleshed Word,  
we want to follow You, to take Your easy yoke and Your light burden,  
but find the trials and tribulations, as well as the tedium and tiredness, of life intrude.  
We yearn for Your comfort yet find ourselves discomforted by our world.

*pause*

We pray for those who dare to serve in public office –  
those recently elected to councils and parliaments across these islands  
that they may seek and serve the Common Good.

*pause*

We pray for all who engaged in public service, in the Health Service,  
in the police and the armed services that the values of  
compassion, integrity, and honesty shine through.

*pause*

We pray for all who research and develop public policy,  
that those who will be affected by policy will be involved in developing it,  
that partnership and participation will lead to flourishing.

*pause*

Most Holy Spirit, Eternal Fire of Love,  
We yearn for Your power, we want Your wisdom, and we long for Your presence,  
but find the power of politics, the wisdom of the world,  
and the presence of possessions to be more enticing.

*pause*

We lift before You those who are ill in mind, body, or spirit

*pause*

We lift before You those whose death is near and those who mourn.

*pause*

We lift before You this Church, that You may guide and guard us.

*pause*

And we lift ourselves before You who know all our needs.

*pause*

O God, our Source, Guide, and Goal hear us as we pray as Jesus taught saying...

## Offertory

If we get confused about our behaviour – doing those things we don't want to do even when we know they are wrong – we can get even more confused about how to manage our time, talents and treasure!

We live in a world where time is a precious commodity we never seem to have enough of, where demands for our skills and talents are ever increasing and where our money is a resource we never seem to have enough of.

Against those cultural realities we have the significant Christian practice of giving – we give of our time, our talents and our treasure. We're told to give and not count the cost – though that's quite a counter cultural thing to do – it's part of accepting Jesus' easy yoke and gentle burden. We give to those people, institutions and causes we care about. We give because it makes a difference and embodies the justice we wish to see come.

So, we give thanks for all that is given in this church. Let's pray.

God of every good gift,  
we thank you for the time, the talents, and the treasure  
that is given in this congregation;  
the way listening ears and shoulders to cry on are offered,  
the ways in which the gifts, skills and abilities here are shared and used far and wide,  
and for the money that's given in the plate, to the bank, and to a range of good causes.  
Bless all that is given, that we may be a blessing to our world.  
Amen.

## Holy Communion

This is the Lord's table.

The Lord Jesus invites us to share this joyful feast.

From east and west, from north and south, people will come  
and take their places at the banquet in the kingdom of God.

Jesus said,

'Come to me, all who are weary and whose load is heavy; I will give you rest.  
Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble-hearted;  
and you will find rest for your souls.'

Hear the words of the institution of the Lord's Supper, according to St Paul:

The tradition which I handed on to you came to me from the Lord himself:

that 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.

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**

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.**

It is indeed right, it is our duty and our joy, at all times and in all places,  
to give you thanks and praise, holy Maker, heavenly King, almighty and eternal God.

We give thanks that in the creation of the world,

when you laid the earth's foundation and set its corner-stone in place,

the morning stars sang in chorus and the angels of God all shouted for joy.

By the power of your Spirit, you made the universe;

by the might of your Word, you gave us life.

We give thanks that in the new creation,

when you gave your Son to raise us up again,

since we and all our human race had fallen,

you claimed us for your own people;

that we might proclaim the glorious deeds

of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvellous light.

By the life of your Spirit, you fill the hearts of the faithful;  
by the light of your Word, you give us strength and love.  
Therefore, with your people of all places and times,  
and with the whole company of heaven,  
we proclaim your greatness and sing your praise in the angels' song:

*Sanctus*

[Sing or say the words of the Holy, Holy, Holy.  
These can be found at *Rejoice & Sing 12, Church Hymnary 4 651.*]

In tune with all the heavenly hosts,  
we here on earth acknowledge your glory,  
and give you thanks that in the fullness of time  
you sent your Son to be our Saviour.  
We bless you for his incarnation among us,  
his holy birth, his perfect life on earth,  
his suffering for us, and his triumph over death;  
for his ascension to your right hand and his gift of the Holy Spirit;  
and for the promise of his coming again.

Remembering his work and passion, and pleading his eternal sacrifice,  
we follow his example and obey his command.  
Send down your Holy Spirit to bless us  
and these your gifts of bread and wine,  
that the bread which we break may be for us the communion of the body of Christ,  
and the cup of blessing which we bless the communion of the blood of Christ;  
that we, receiving them, by faith may be made partakers of his body and blood,  
with all his benefits, to nourish us and help us grow in grace,  
to the glory of your most holy name.

And here we offer and present to you our very selves, to be a living sacrifice,  
dedicated and fit for your acceptance; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Through him, with him, in him,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
all honour and glory are yours,  
O Most High, now and for ever. Amen.

Draw near with faith:  
receive the body of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for you,  
and his blood which was shed for you,  
and feed on him in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.  
Taste and see that the Lord is good.

Happy are those who find refuge in him!

The body and blood of Christ given for you.

Adapted slightly from the Church of Scotland's  
*Book of Common Order*

## Post Communion Prayer

Glory to God the Creator,  
who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ  
and crowned him with glory and honour.

Glory to God the Son,  
who lives to plead our cause at the right hand of God,  
and who will come again to make all things new.

Glory to God the Holy Spirit,  
who brings us the taste of the good Word of God  
and the power of the age to come.

Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honour,  
power and might be to our Lord for ever! Amen.

Adapted slightly from the Church of Scotland's  
*Book of Common Order*

## Blessing

May the One whose justice and mercy echo through the ages,  
the One whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light,  
the One who inspires you to follow  
bless you with a yearning for righteousness,  
an eagerness to do good,  
and the willingness to follow.

And the blessing of Almighty God,  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit or Eternal Majesty, Enfleshed Word, Enlivening Flame,  
be with you all, now and always, Amen.

## Hymn Suggestions

	RS	CH4	StF	MP
I heard the voice of Jesus say	349	540	248	275
Come and find the quiet centre		716		
Praise, my soul, the King of heaven	104	160	83	560
Jesus Christ - Perfect Love			325	
Come to me		759		
I need thee every hour		556	467	288
Thou hidden love of God		188		
Lord Jesus, think on me	363	491		
Just as I am	364	553	556	396
Be thou my vision	489	465	545	51
In Christ alone			351	1072
And can it be	366	396	345	33
O Jesus I Have Promised	509	644	563	501

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