

worship notes

from the United Reformed Church



Sunday 27th Sept 2026
Proper 21 | Ordinary 26
The Revd Sue McCoan

Call to Worship

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust.

Show me your ways, O God, teach me your paths

Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation.

Show me your ways, O God, teach me your paths

Remember, O Lord, your mercy and constant love which you have shown from long ago.

Show me your ways, O God, teach me your paths

Forgive the sins and errors of my youth, remember me according to your goodness

Show me your ways, O God, teach me your paths.

(based on Psalm 25)

Opening Prayers

God of wonder,
we praise and thank you for the wonderful world we live in,
for sun and moon, stars and seasons,
for earth, water, wind and fire,
for the living creatures including ourselves.

God of love,
we praise and thank you for friends and family,
for fellowship and community,
for new love and faithful commitment.

God of praise,
we praise and thank you for your love,
Your calling, your forgiveness, your blessing on our lives.
We praise you for all that you are,
and all that you call us to be.

God of wonder, love and praise,
we come to you in worship.

Confession and Assurance of Pardon

Loving God,
we come to you in trust and hope.
We know that we have much to learn,
that our understanding is incomplete
and that we never see the whole picture.
We confess the times when we have fallen short of even our own standards,
when we have caused hurt or harm,
when we have failed to act in ways that could help.

silence

In your loving kindness,
forgive the sins and errors of our past,
help us to learn from our mistakes
and to keep growing in faith and love.
In the name of Jesus, **Amen.**

Jesus said: Your sins are forgiven.
Give us the grace to accept your forgiveness
and to live again to your praise and glory. **Amen**

Readings

Exodus 17:1-7 & Psalm 78:1-4. 12-16 or Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32 & Psalm 25:1-9
Philippians 2:1-13 | St Matthew 21:23-32

All-Age Activity

Play a game of 'Simon Says'. Discuss when it is all right to do what somebody else tells you, and when it is not all right.

Prayer for Illumination

God of Word and Wisdom,
guide our hearts and thoughts as we hear the words of Scripture,
that through them we may hear your living Word. **Amen.**

Sermon Notes

Exodus 17:1-7 & Psalm 78:1-4. 12-16

The Exodus passage comes straight after the story of manna from Heaven, and follows a similar pattern. The people, safe at last from their Egyptian oppressors, start to face the reality of their new situation: in a desert, without water or food. Their fear turns to anger against Moses; Moses calls on God; and God provides an answer. Moses has no idea where to find water, but he is confident that God has not brought them into the desert to die. He follows God's instructions, unlikely as they seem, and water is provided from the rock. Psalm 78 starts with a promise to pass on the teachings and stories of God's people to future generations. Verses 12-16 are a recap of the escape from Egypt, of God dividing the Red Sea, leading the people with fire and cloud, and splitting rocks to provide water. Unlike the Exodus version, there is no mention here of the people's fear and grumbling; it is all about the actions of God.

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32 & Psalm 25:1-9

While much Old Testament prophecy is addressed to the people as a whole, this passage is about individual responsibility. V1-4 challenges a proverb, 'the parents eat sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge', suggesting children suffer because of the parents' sins. This was the prevailing view of sin, set out in eg Exodus 34:7. Here, God says, all human life is mine, and only the person who sins shall die. (V5-24, not included in reading: if a man lives rightly, he will live. If his son is violent, the son will die but not the father. If the son sees his father sin but does not follow, he will live. In other words, sin is not transferable. But – an important point for Ezekiel - it is forgivable. If someone sins but then turns away from sin they will live. If they are righteous but then turn to sin, they will die.) V25-32 People complain that the way of God is unfair. Ezekiel challenges this: maybe it is their thinking that is wrong. The call is to live rightly, regardless of how good or bad a person has been in their past. This is a message of hope for those who have done bad things, and a warning for all people to turn back to God and live. Psalm 25:1-9 is the song of someone who seeks to follow God's ways, asking for guidance and teaching and for forgiveness of past sins. V7 appeals directly to the mercy that Ezekiel describes: the psalmist calls on God to remember them not for their past, but according to God's steadfast love.

Philippians 2:1-13

The opening of this chapter suggests some disunity among the Philippian Christians, which Paul seeks to address. V1 in Greek contains four 'if' clauses: 'if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation from love, if there is any sharing (koinonia) in the Spirit, if there is any compassion and mercy...'. The repetition, usually

lost in translation, is a rhetorical device used for emphasis. Paul is not doubting that these things are true; he is calling on them to remember their faith, and to let that inform the way they deal with one another. V2 balances this with four phrases expressing unity of minds and hearts: be of one mind (*phronein*), have the same love (*agape*), be united in soul (*sumpsuchoi*) and be united in mind (*phronein*). Paul then sets before them the example of Christ Jesus, who could have claimed the highest honour but instead chose the lowliest path, even dying a horrible human death. He reminds them that the glory and honour they give to Jesus is because of his humility, not his earthly achievements. Paul writes this letter from prison, where his own earthly achievements are severely limited. Even when he can't be physically present, he can still pray for these people and support them by letter.

St Matthew 21:23-32

At this point in the gospel, Jesus has just staged his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and cleared the traders out of the Temple – both provocative acts which might well lead people to ask 'Who does he think he is?' The chief priests and elders are responsible for upholding the Jewish faith, so it falls to them to ask Jesus about his authority. Jesus responds with a challenge of his own: what did they think about John the Baptist? Jesus knows that many people in Jerusalem recognised John as a prophet, and that the chief priests and elders did not. His challenge does two things: it aligns Jesus with John the Baptist, adding to his credentials in the eyes of the crowd, and it puts the chief priests and elders in a position where they are unable to answer other than with a feeble 'we don't know'. They had set out to question the authority of Jesus but it is their own authority that is weakened by this encounter. Jesus pushes his point home with the parable of the two sons. This is a parable to highlight the different responses to John the Baptist. The tax-collectors and prostitutes are like the first son – they didn't say the right things or keep the right company, but they responded to John's preaching and were welcome in God's kingdom. The chief priests and elders are like the second son, who say all the right things, who see themselves as faithful, and yet who did not believe John and so missed their chance.

Preaching on these texts

You could preach any number of sermons based on these readings, and the temptation is to include too much. The selection you make will depend on your context, in your congregation and in the wider world. Here are a few suggestions that could make a starting point.

- a) Exodus/Psalm 78 and Ezekiel/Psalm 25. Could be a basis for exploring the question, 'What will we hand on to the next generation?' What stories will we tell about our own history? What practices might we need to let go of? What might we want to preserve?

- b) Exodus/Psalm 78 and Matt 21. Could explore different ways to tell a story. Exodus tells a story about the people and Moses, the psalm tells the same events as a story about God. The chief priests have a narrative about their faith and their role which does not allow for young, challenging preachers. Jesus tells stories with unlikely heroes. If a church has a story of 'we used to be much bigger', is there a way of telling the story that shows persistence and faithfulness?
- c) Philippians and Matt 21. Paul's emphasis on the humility of Jesus suggests that people in the church were vying for attention and status. Matthew reminds us that even priests – even URC ministers and preachers! – sometimes get things wrong and miss the point. Be wary of using these readings if there is a current dispute in the church, as it could be taken as too pointed.
- d) Ezekiel and Matt 21. Ezekiel shows it is never too late to repent. Matthew shows the most unlikely people repenting. Again, be wary of using this to point out other people who you think ought to repent. This is more about the hope God offers to all of us, even those of us who think we live good lives already – there is always room for improvement.
- e) Exodus and Matt 21. On whose authority do we act? How do we discern the authority of God? Could be used as a way into looking at Christian Nationalism

And if following Creationtide, Andy suggests...

The Exodus passage could be read in an ecological way. We often see the wilderness as a passive backdrop but it could easily be seen as a hostile resource-scarce environment where the newly emancipated Jewish people find themselves – and find themselves anxious about their survival. They, and their animals, had to survive against the odds and only by working in harmony with the resources they were given – in this case water from the rock and manna from heaven. Freedom from slavery was not enough; they needed to find ways to live sustainably. Further, the wilderness forced the people to learn to rely on God not on their own exploitation of the natural resources around them. What lessons from this might we draw for our times now? Can we be freed from all that drags us down in our society yet, at the same time, learn to live sustainably? Can we care for ourselves and creation in ways which depend on God not exploitation? The Psalms paired with this passage has, in vv15-16 a reference back to the harsh environment where environment where the people were dependent on God's gracious provision whilst the opening verses remind us of our responsibility to teach each new generation of God's deeds and our dependence upon God. We have to learn, and teach, how to live sustainably. The Philippians passage might be used to focus on Paul's challenge of the imperial mindset of the ancient world as he urged his readers to look to the interests of others; doing this now involves looking to the interests of the earth herself and developing an ethic of service

which also puts ourselves at the service of Creation. Jesus' self-emptying love in v6-7 might evoke a self-emptying response in us as we challenge the poison of consumerism and the exploitation of our world. v10 and 11 are where we draw the hymn "At the Name of Jesus" from as Paul saw all "on earth and in heaven" bowing at Jesus; this could point to a redeemed cosmos where all of Creation, not just humanity, is reconciled and lives in harmony and peace. If so, what small steps do we take to embody this? The image of the Vineyard in Matthew is one where God's children are commanded to tend for the land; an ecological mandate is given to act as caretakers not as absentee landlords. The religious leaders in the passage might be a cypher for those now who exploit caring only for profit. The two sons in the story might stand for those who say they love creation yet do nothing to conserve and nurture it (not us surely Lord?).

Prayers of Concern

Loving God,
we pray for the world.
We hold in prayer all those in positions of leadership,
and those who influence others online or in print,
We pray especially for those who use their voice to stir up hatred,
or cause division between peoples;
we ask for judgement and wisdom for those who might listen.

We pray for the church.
Guide and strengthen all who exercise leadership in our churches,
especially when difficulties arise.
Encourage congregations that are struggling;
inspire those who are starting new ventures.
Bless our partners in other denominations, faiths and organisations
that we might bear fruit together.

We pray for people who find the world a hostile place:
those caught up in armed conflict,
those struggling to find food or shelter,
those facing discrimination and prejudice.
We pray for peace, for compassion,
and for the courage to speak out against injustice.

We pray for people we know who are in need of prayer today.
We take a moment of silence to name them in our hearts.

Finally, we pray for ourselves,
that we may live with integrity and serve with love,

always open to your voice.

We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, **Amen**

Offertory Prayer

Generous God,
You give us so many good things.
We bring our gifts to you as a way of saying thank you.
Accept and bless all that we bring, and all that we are,
and use us and our gifts to serve you.
In the name of Jesus, **Amen**.

Blessing

May the grace of God support you,
may the love of God surround you,
and may the blessing of God be upon you,
Creator, Redeemer and Spirit,
today and always. **Amen**.

Hymn Suggestions				
	RS	CH4	StF	MP
At the name of Jesus	261	458	317	41
Come and find the quiet centre		716		
Oh the life of the world		141	114	
Your words to me are life and health	321		164	
Lead me from death to life	627			
Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah	345	167	465	201
Rock of ages	365	554	434	582
At the dawning of creation	424			
I hunger and I thirst	449			
I want to walk with Jesus Christ	367			302
I have decided to follow Jesus				272

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