

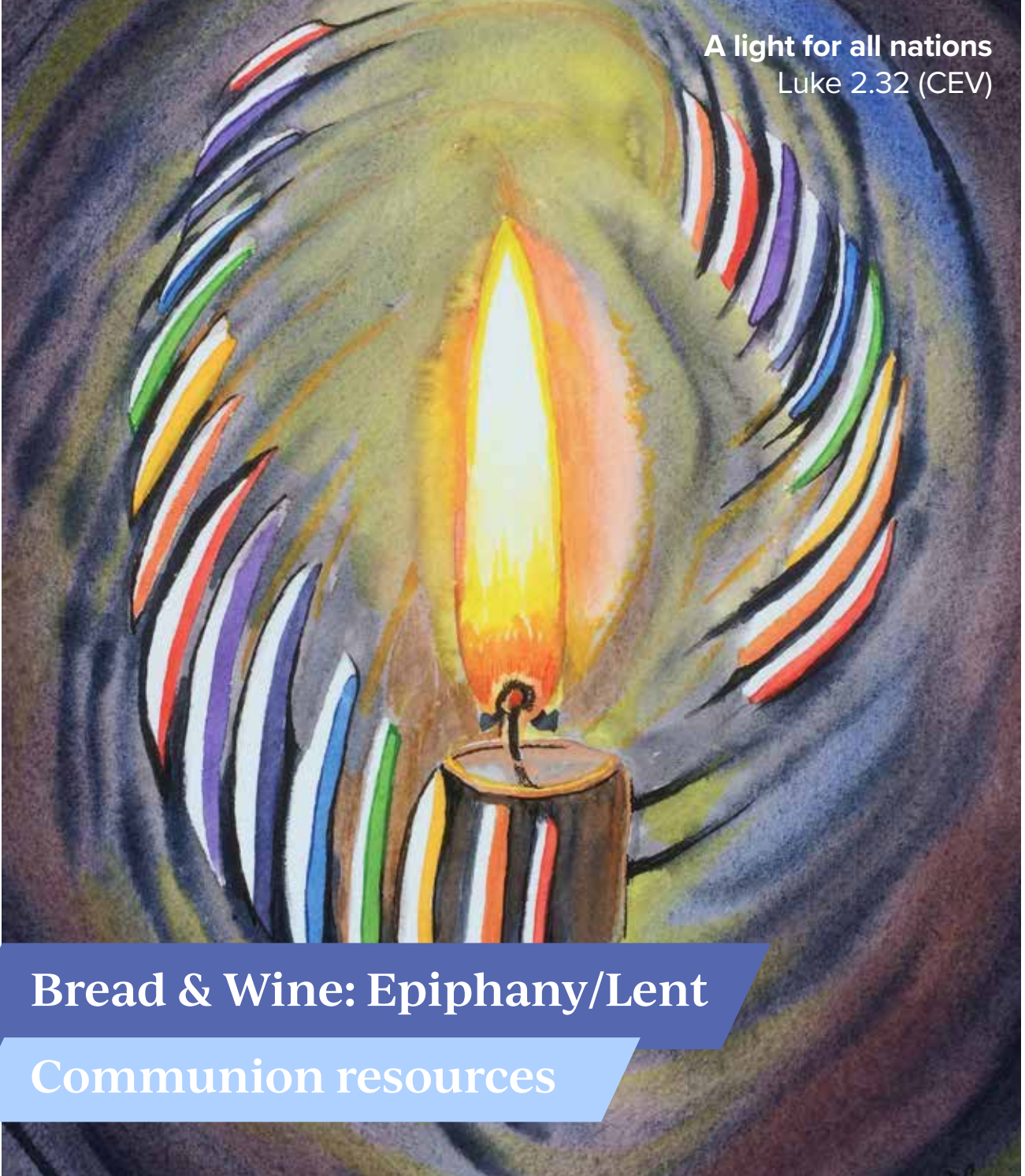
Roots

RESOURCES FOR CHURCHES

Jan-Feb 2024
Issue 129

Adult & All Age

A light for all nations
Luke 2.32 (CEV)



Bread & Wine: Epiphany/Lent

Communion resources

NEW WEEKLY LECTIONARY RESOURCES

rootsforchurches.com

January/February 2024

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Front cover: Daisy Barnes

Welcome to Roots

Key to Spiritual styles: **W**ord, **E**motion, **S**ymbol, **A**ction

Canadian scholar Joyce Bellous identified four pathways of spiritual expression in her books *Educating Faith* and *Conversations that Change Us*. David Csinos, a former student of Bellous, used these styles as a framework in his research into the spiritual lives of children. **WEB** Find more in Worship & learning support.

More resources on the website: Look out for the **WEB** icon in the magazine, which prompts you to access extra materials on our website **rootsforchurches.com**.

Download templates for craft activities, images, dramas, printable Activity and Colouring sheets, Thrive resources and much more. Not a subscriber? Take a four-week trial at rootsforchurches.com/freetrial

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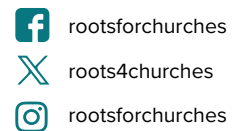
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Contents

2

Scripture in context

God is in your neighbourhood



7-13 January

God shakes things up

RCL Baptism of the Lord Year B: **Genesis 1:1-5**; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11



14-20 January

Recognising when and how God calls

RCL Epiphany 2 Year B: **1 Samuel 3:1-10, (11-20)**; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51



21-27 January

How we respond to God's call

RCL Epiphany 3 Year B: **Jonah 3:1-5, 10**; Psalm 62:5-12; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20



28 January – 3 February

How we discern what comes from God

RCL Epiphany 4 Year B: **Deuteronomy 18:15-20**; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

4

Presentation of Christ/Candlemas

6

10

14

18

Editor's highlights



Welcome to the first issue of 2024, covering the whole of the Epiphany season and the first two weeks of Lent. There is a significant difference in the way we are approaching the readings this year. In response to many requests, this time we have honed in much more on the Old Testament readings. In Epiphany and Lent, these are closely related to the New Testament and Gospel readings, but shifting the focus has given rise to fresh themes and insights, which we hope you will find inspiring and useful. Later in the year, we will follow some of the semicontinuous Old Testament readings (track one in the lectionary), and you can read more about this in the article that is printed on the back of the new year planner, enclosed with this issue, or on the [WEB](#).

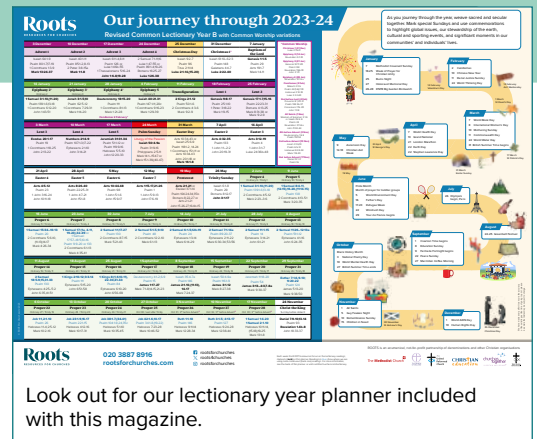
This issue is also my last. By the time you read this I will have retired, after nearly nine years with Roots. I have enjoyed it very much. The work has been challenging and demanding at times, but also greatly rewarding. It has been an honour and a privilege to work with so many different creative and scholarly writers, and to be responsible for shaping resources that – if your feedback

is anything to go by – is used and appreciated by so many people and churches in so many different contexts.

And I must also pay tribute to my wonderful colleagues in the Roots' team, without whom none of it would be possible. My successor, Tracey Messenger, is already in post and will no doubt introduce herself in the next issue. But from me, it is farewell and 'God bless'.

Martin

Martin Adams
Adult & All Age Editor
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Look out for our lectionary year planner included with this magazine.

Roots is a partnership of denominations and Christian organisations.



4-10 February
You are not forgotten by God
RCL Epiphany 5 Year B: **Isaiah 40:21-31**;
Psalm 147:1-11,20c; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

22



11-17 February
The importance of witness and telling
RCL Transfiguration Year B: 2 Kings 2:1-12;
Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; **Mark 9:2-9**

26



18-24 February
God's good news of a covenant
RCL Lent 1 Year B: **Genesis 9:8-17**; Psalm 25:1-10;
1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

30

Drama [WEB](#): *Somewhere, over the mountains of Ararat...*



25 February – 2 March
Trusting God when we don't understand
RCL Lent 2 Year B: **Genesis 17:1-7,15-16**;
Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

34



Bread & Wine
All-age Communion
Epiphany
Lent

38

The **Methodist Church**



CHRISTIAN
education



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God is in your neighbourhood

Simon Jones reflects on new starts, creation and good news.

The New Year is always a time of fresh starts, making resolutions, putting the old behind us and moving on. This is captured by the Christian season of Epiphany, which all our Bible readings speak into. Three passages in particular speak of the new thing God is doing, and we will focus on them in this introduction. So many in our neighbourhoods – even in our churches – feel God is distant at best, if he’s there at all. Epiphany reminds us that God has drawn close in Jesus, moved into our neighbourhood and is keen to meet us in new ways. Sometimes the Bible speaks clearly to us but sometimes we don’t get it at all; its message is lost to us because we don’t know where the text is coming from and can’t see how it can be speaking to us. So, we’ll explore three of the passages here to see how they still speak to us in our situation.

Does the big bang reduce God to an also-ran?

Genesis 1 purports to be an account of the origins of all things. But it is not a scientific account of how God created everything. Rather it is a rich poetic theology that seeks to give shape to our lives, providing what Rowan Williams terms, ‘the steady backdrop to our faith’. Here God is pictured as the one who is active as the cosmos came into being. The author, probably writing in the sixth century BC, when Israel was in exile, contrasts the God who leads them with the gods of their captors and finds in the God of Genesis 1 a steady backdrop to their faith, even in dark and uncertain times. So, however the world came into existence, God is at work in it, bringing light and peace to those who trust him.

Is the good news of God only for us?

God’s people have always struggled with the thought of sharing their faith with those who don’t share perspective. The book of Jonah tackles this issue head on. Whether it is an historical account or a work of theological fiction, it tells us that God wants everyone to hear about him. Jonah doesn’t share this view. So, he runs away, ends up in the belly of a fish, is vomited on the beach, walks into the city of Nineveh and calls on the citizens to repent. When they do, Jonah is livid. How dare God want others to share the goodness he thought was only for him and his. It’s a reminder in Epiphany that the good news of God is for the whole world and not just for us. The book of Jonah is a witty and provocative push to us to share what we know with our neighbours.

Where is God when we feel abandoned?

Isaiah seems to have been Paul’s favourite book because he quotes from it more often than other Old Testament text. But it is an intimidatingly dense work that seems to have come from three time zones, written by at least three prophets. Chapters 1 – 39 come from the eighth century BC and chapters 56 – 66 from the early fifth century BC. The middle section comes from towards the end of the time of Judah’s exile in Babylon, the late sixth century BC. The people feel abandoned, left to languish far from home. But a prophet comes to inspire hope and urge them to get ready because the tectonic plates of history are shifting, which will result in them going home. And this is God’s doing says the unknown prophet. Far from being abandoned as 40:27 implies they felt, God is coming for them. In the middle of global events that make us feel insignificant, Second Isaiah reminds us that God never abandons his people. They are words of searing hope.

The Revd Dr Simon Jones is senior research fellow (formerly VP) of Spurgeon’s College, London, a writer and Baptist minister.

Step up



Ian Stackhouse, senior pastor at Millmead Baptist Church, Guildford, offers tips for honing your preaching skills.

Preaching is a high calling. Despite what people say, it doesn't get easier the older you get. In some ways it becomes more challenging, especially as the generation gap gets wider. But experience does give at least some insight into what works in that mysterious space that lies between the pulpit and the pew. Here are a few practical tips that might help both experienced and novice preachers, as they engage in this unique mode of communication.

First, try to **get to the Bible text early in your sermon**. After all, it's Scripture that has the power, so the quicker we engage with it, the more we come alive. Indeed, instead of relying on illustrations from sermon central, try to develop the art of letting the text speak for itself: in other words, linger with the text in preparation, and then allow the images from the passage to explode among the congregation. And how about not always using PowerPoint? As scary as that might feel to an inexperienced preacher, what it will achieve is an appreciation that as much as a picture can create a thousand words, so a word can create a thousand pictures. (For a fuller articulation of this iconoclastic approach see Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005, 24-27)

Go for shorter sermons and shorter sentences. What I mean to encourage by this is a kind of speech that is crisp, concrete and, like Scripture itself, to the point – what we might call blunt Anglo-Saxon speech as opposed to the more flowery Latinate words and sentences that come to us from medieval French. Try it. It makes a difference. Just as it makes a difference to try to make eye-contact with your congregation. Preaching should be more like theatre than a lecture, so the more we can create immediacy with our listeners, the more we can recapture the drama. I have always rehearsed my sermons beforehand. It certainly makes you less reliant on the notes, if not completely free, and often fresh thoughts come as you preach to an empty room.

What I should like to major on, however, in the short space of this article, is not technique as such, but something more fundamental, and that is the ability to **trust that when we get**

up to preach, God is going to be there. It might seem an odd thing to think about – the sort of thing that might come a bit later on in one's preaching career. My own view, however, is that this instinct – let's call it an act of faith – ought to be developed early on, not least because one can be so anxious in the early years to get it right that you end up saying it all wrong; so self-conscious about how the sermon might come across that you end up not preaching but retching. The antidote to this nervousness, according to Robert Farrar Capon, is to go dead [web]. What he means by this is something very practical: namely, the discipline of putting down one's manuscript, putting away the commentaries, resisting the temptation to keep going over the points, and simply trust that by going dead on the sermon, some considerable while before the actual event, God will bring about resurrection in the pulpit. After all, isn't this what the gospel is all about? 'Death and resurrection' is at the heart of what we believe. All that Capon is asking us to do is replicate this in the pulpit. The times I have had the courage to do it, it really works. And it's not that we renege on preparation. Preparation is important. But there comes a point where preparation must give way to faith and prayer.

Keep learning and growing. For years now, I have been hosting small gatherings for local preachers. Each time, we select some aspect of preaching – like the topics I listed earlier – and spend a good hour or so chewing the cud. In this way, we have all honed our preaching skills. Always, however, we come back to this very point: that skills without power is not preaching but oratory.

Where could you discuss preaching? Who could you mentor? Who could give you feedback? Roots provides support weekly for preachers through Bible notes, sermon ideas, interactive intergenerational ways to explore the passage and training in our knowledge hub. [WEB](#)

You may want to explore membership at LWPT: www.preachweb.org/membership

Presentation of Christ/Candlemas

Resources and ideas for events, celebrations, services and more – indoors and out.

What is Candlemas?

Forty days after Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph went to the Temple in Jerusalem for a ritual presentation of their baby to God, as required by Jewish Law. We read about this in **Luke 2:22-40**.

They met a man named Simeon, who described Jesus as a 'light' for all the people of the world. They also met an elderly prophet, Anna, who thanked God for Jesus. Anna recognised Jesus as key to God's plan of salvation for all people.

The Christian festival celebrating these events – formally known as 'The Presentation of Christ' – is also called 'Candlemas' because on this day, in the times long before electricity, people would bring candles to church to be blessed in recognition of Jesus the 'light of the world'. On Candlemas night, many people place lit candles in their windows at home.

Somewhere to start

Here's a way to introduce the theme.

Display a selection of candles – tealights, scented, birthday cake, different shapes, sizes and colours. Ask people to identify them. Can anyone think of other types or uses for candles? Why do we use them? When? Invite everyone to choose and hold a candle and then explain the reasons why they like it. If appropriate, encourage people to light their candles.

Thank you, O God, that you said: 'Let there be light', and the world was no longer in darkness.

Thank you for the gift of your Son who brings light into our lives. **Amen.**

Somewhere to finish

Cut out current news headlines from around the world. Stick these onto a large sheet of paper – if possible, covering the paper completely. Cut a large candle shape from coloured card and stick it on top of the headlines. Beneath the candle, write 'Jesus – light of the world' with marker pens or by cutting letters from card and sticking them on.

Lord, light up the path for me wherever I may go, that I may know your presence, and be grateful for your love. **Amen.**

Follow-up ideas

- Decorate the base of a candle with tissue paper and light the candle on the evening of Candlemas: <https://easypapercrafts.com/tissue-paper-candle-craft-2/>
- Make little candle cakes and give some to a person of a different generation: <https://www.sainsburysmagazine.co.uk/recipes/cakes/candle-cakes>
- Watch a video of the *Song of Simeon*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-53wzYwzGY>



Daisy Barnes

Something from the Bible

Luke 2:22-40

This is the last of the stories about Jesus as a baby in the Bible. It is read 40 days after Christmas, echoing that this is how long after his birth, Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the Temple for a purification ritual required by Jewish Law. What makes the occasion unique is that a man called Simeon recognises in the baby Jesus, the coming of the long-awaited Messiah, and the Saviour of the world.

A read and share idea

Light a candle, torch or lantern at appropriate moments in the story (12 in all), saying: Here is a light for Jesus. Here are lights for Joseph and Mary. This one lights them to Jerusalem. Here are lights for the Law and the Temple. These are lights for Simeon and the Holy Spirit. Here is a light for the Gentiles, and one for the falling and rising. Here is a light for Anna. And this one lights the family home.

What could we learn from this passage?

Simeon looks back into Jewish history and the promises God made to his people; but he also looks 'forward to the consolation of Israel'. Are you more oriented to look back or look forward? What does God want to remind you of? What does God want you to look forward to?

Simeon's words to Mary warn that the gift of the Messiah comes with complications – it will shake things up and bring anguish as well as joy. What examples are there in your life of things that have this double effect?

Explore... Candlemas

Choose from these activities to help people explore the theme. Use the spiritual styles indicated by the coloured letters (see Spiritual styles key on the inside front cover) to help you plan and cater for the different ways in which people connect with God.

Craft activity

You will need: candle design template (see [WEB](#)), printed on white or pale yellow A4 card; crayons or paint.

- Cut each card in half and fold along the dotted line. Colour the flames in rainbow colours – it will give the effect of light passing through a prism.
- Write a message inside such as: 'A greeting at Candlemas bringing you light and blessing'. Or you could write the words of the prayer of thanksgiving (below).

Musical activities

Listen to:

- 'Simeon's Song' by Tommy Walker: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHP-mMZVwUo>
- 'Light of the World' by Lauren Daigle: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_cLhaZIBSpo

Or, join together and sing:

- 'When to the Temple, six weeks young' (WGRG, HSNW 76): <https://www.ionabooks.com/when-to-the-Temple/>
- 'When Jesus Christ was eight days old' (Michael Perry – in *Singing to God*) https://jubilate.co.uk/songs/when_jesus_christ_was_eight_days_old

Intergenerational activity

- Set up four stations, for four parts of the story: waiting, seeing, blessing, thanking. Invite people to visit each station, spending as little or as much time as they wish at each one.

1. Waiting

You will need: roll of paper, pens, images of big events from the last century.

- Roll out a long strip of paper to make a timeline, marking on it decades from the 1920s to the 2020s and beyond. Provide images of big events and news stories from the last 100 years for people to add to the appropriate place (include some local stories if possible) along the timeline.
- Encourage people to mark on the timeline their birth or significant moments in their life or that of the community/church, and to share stories with other generations present, about things they remember happening. Invite people to write their hopes for the future. Where is God in the waiting and hoping?

2. Seeing

You will need: images that can be seen in more than one way, such as the classic 'candlestick or two faces?' <https://www.optical-illusionist.com/category/double-meanings/>; the painting 'The Presentation in the Temple' by Alvaro Pirez: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437298>

- Display some double meaning images, and ask: What do you see? Are the images one, or the other, or both?



- Then display the Pirez painting, asking again: What do you see? Add some commentary: 'Mary and Joseph saw two elderly prophets who bless their baby. Simeon and Anna see an infant who is the anointed one of God (Messiah). What do you see in Jesus? What do you see in those who are younger and older than you?'

3. Blessing

You will need: cards with a simple printed blessing (e.g. 'Go in peace and be light to the world.')

- Simeon blessed Mary, Joseph and Jesus. Invite people to take a card and to read it as a blessing to someone older or younger than them; give their chosen person the card and ask them to do the same, setting up a chain reaction of blessing.

4. Thanking

You will need: candles of different sizes.

- Elderly Anna gave thanks for the child. Encourage people to think of someone from a different generation who is a blessing to them, and invite them to light a candle in thanksgiving.

Prayer in the Celtic style

This could be spoken during a procession or while candles are being lit. Each line could be followed by a response such as: **Lighten our darkness.**

As we light/carry our candles, light in our hearts a flame of love for all we meet this day.

As we light our candles, light in us a flame of love for family, friends and neighbours.

As we light our candles, light in us a flame of love for people near and far, friend or enemy.

We light/carry our candles in the presence of our creator, who separated the light from the darkness.

We light/carry our candles in the presence of the Son, who is the light of the world.

We light/carry our candles in the presence of the Holy Spirit, with us at all times and in all places.

Additional resources on the [WEB](#): **prayers of intercession, Celebrating Candlemas outdoors, and A Candlemas outdoor community refugee event.**



God shakes things up

Genesis 1:1-5

In this description or imagining of creation, before God creates the heavens and earth, there is only a formless void, complete darkness and endless water. God's first act is to create light, and then to separate light from dark, day from night – the first day.

This week, we are looking at ways in which God's Spirit moves to shakes things up and begins new things. God brings light in the darkness and order from chaos and calls us to join in the work.

Bible notes

RCL Year B Baptism of the Lord

Genesis 1:1-5

At the start of everything is God, bringing order in chaos and light in the darkness. Whatever this account is saying about cosmic origins, one thing is certain: God is at work. The words about God creating light are echoed at the start of John's Gospel (1:5,9). The word for wind also means breath and spirit, a reminder that God is personally involved and invested in everything that happens around us and within us. God is at the start of everything but is also the throbbing heartbeat in everything. In another creation song, the psalmist sings of God's active involvement in the world God has made (Psalm 104). Isaiah looks forward to a time when God will do all this again, making a new heaven and new earth (Isaiah 65:17-25), and both John and Paul speak of Christ as the one who creates and sustains and brings about what Isaiah saw. The picture of the creating and sustaining God is a thread running through the whole Bible story.

Psalm 29

The poet calls the gathered community to sing the praises of the one who creates and sustains all things. The poem is replete with images of the creative activity of God, especially as one who controls the flood waters, a strong echo of Genesis 1. It also emphasises that God accomplishes this through the power of voice, of word. We are called to acknowledge God's power and majesty and to stand in awe that God is the one who gives us strength and peace.

Acts 19:1-7

At first glance this is an odd story: how can people be 'disciples' but seem to know nothing about the Jesus movement that Paul is part of? The answer is simple. For about 400 years there was a movement centred on the ministry of John the Baptist. He is mentioned five times in Acts (1:5, 11:16, 13:25, 18:25 and 19:1-7), always positively. And here Paul is keen to fill out the experience of these believers who knew about John and the coming Messiah, but seemingly not about the Messiah himself. So, Paul fills in the blanks and then baptizes them in the name of Jesus and they are filled with the Holy Spirit as the first followers had been on the day of Pentecost. The significance of this happening in Ephesus is that this city was a place of power – commercial, political and spiritual – and here the gospel arrives unleashing the power of God in these new disciples.

Mark 1:4-11

John the Baptist marks a fresh start in God's story of redemption. Just as God's word had unleashed creation, so here the word of the prophet jump-starts a new movement of repentance and renewal. The significance of this is shown when, in the river Jordan, John invites folk to re-enact the exodus, to make a journey through water from slavery, exile to new life. It happens as they leave old ways behind. That's what repent means – it's about changing the way I think about God, the world and my life; it's about believing what God says about me and the world and acting on that belief. This is why Mark sneaks in a reference to Exodus 23:20 in verses 2-3 – God came to rescue his people then; he's doing it again. Can we see it? Are we up for it?

There was nothing attractive about John apart from his message. He looked odd and, given his diet, probably smelled pretty odd too. But his voice was compelling. A people languishing under occupation, ruled over by godless Romans, heard this strange prophet telling people to ready themselves for God to come in a new way. His message was that God was sending the king they longed for, a rival to Caesar, the one who would restore Israel and renew the earth. In many ways, this is start of the denouement to the story of creation that began in Genesis 1.

The one who was coming was vastly more powerful and worthy than John because he would baptize the repentant not with water but with the Holy Spirit. The same spirit, breath, wind that blew across the chaotic waters at the start of everything would blow into the lives of all those gathered on the banks of the Jordan listening to John. He would bring the transformation they longed for, the new world they so desperately wanted to see emerge in their lifetime.

Hymns & songs

Songs in italics are suitable for all ages. **WEB** Song categories, themes and rationale, web links and additional Welsh suggestions.

Awake, awake: fling off the night
Come and join the great uprising
*God has spoken to his people, through
his prophets*

Here I am

*In the beginning was the Word and the
Word was God*

Lift up his name within the sanctuary

Lord, pour out Your spirit

Mercy ev'ry morning, rising like the dawn

Of the Father's love begotten

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry

Praise to the God who clears the way

Startle us, God, by the signs of your spirit
around us

The greatest love song, the greatest story

The kingdom of God is justice and joy

When he was baptized in Jordan

When Jesus came to Jordan

When the faith of God's people was low

When your heart is all but broken

Why join a large and noisy crowd

*You have taken the precious from
the worthless*

Sermon ideas

Ideas for a sermon or interactive talk. See **WEB** for a 'thought for the week' to read out in place of a sermon; and *In touch*, linking the readings to the news.

- God doing a new thing is a theme worth tracing through the Bible, starting with Genesis 1, taking in Psalm 104, Isaiah 65, and landing in the Gospels with something new stirring on the banks of the Jordan. Is it significant that God often starts new things on the margins rather than at the centre of society? Perhaps, for example, in the Celtic movement centred on Iona and Lindisfarne? Or in the civil rights movement started by Rosa Parks' protest? Can you think of other recent or contemporary examples? Movements blown by the Spirit of God often ripple from the edges to the centre.

- Reflecting on the story from Acts 19, how do people learn about the Christian faith? What are the things that Paul sees as essential? They're probably the same as we do, but we might look also at the link between knowing or believing something and experiencing the consequences of that belief. How can we ensure that people in our congregation experience the Holy Spirit in their lives, and are not just signing up to a statement of beliefs? What might this mean for the way we organise our worship (or, indeed, other aspects of church life)?

- 'She sits like a bird, brooding on the waters, hovering on the chaos of the world's first day'. This is how the song 'Enemy of apathy' begins (John Bell, 1988). When Paul's listeners in Corinth say, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit', they had some serious catching up to do. Presumably, having been baptized with water, they knew something of John the Baptist's mission to introduce 'the one who was to come after him'. Maybe, they just needed reminding. They certainly learnt quickly about the power of the Holy Spirit and what it could do in their lives. As John Bell's song continues: 'She dances in fire, startling her spectators, waking tongues of ecstasy where dumbness reigned...Enemy of apathy and heavenly dove'.

- Back to school, back to work, subdued and short of cash, or raring to go, looking for new beginnings? We may be looking for new targets, or working on those set by others. Maybe it is, for you, 'Veganuary' or 'Dry January'. Maybe we could devise our own name for January, an expression of our own new year targets. What might we call it if we focus on God's targets? During Epiphany, we may think about the Magi looking for the new thing that is being revealed to them. Perhaps we should be doing the same; looking for new things that God is seeking to show us. And if our experience is anything like that of the Magi, the answers may be found in unexpected places.

Prayers

More prayers overleaf. **WEB** Welsh translations. Topical intercessions **WEB** each Wednesday.

A prayer of approach

God of new beginnings,
as we gather on the first Sunday of a new year
blessing our worship, our church, our world and us,
shine your light into our lives,
your peace into our hearts,
your healing into our woundedness,
your strength into our struggles.
Empower us with your Spirit that we may serve you afresh.
In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

A prayer of adoration

Living God, in the beginning
you called all life into being to reflect your creativity:
we celebrate your generosity.
At his baptism you called Jesus to reflect your purpose:
we celebrate his coming among us.
Today you call us to receive your Holy Spirit, and
to reflect your love in the world:
we celebrate your trust in us. Amen.

A prayer of confession

*Response after each phrase: **Forgive us and shake us up.***
O God, when compassion should begin with us, but doesn't:
When justice should begin with us, but doesn't:
When unity should begin with us, but doesn't:
When understanding should begin with us, but doesn't:
When hospitality should begin with us, but doesn't:
When hope should begin with us, but doesn't:
In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

Assurance of forgiveness

All powerful God, giver of life, as you affirmed your Son at his baptism, so you affirm us as your children, forgiving us that which has marred our past and offering us a new beginning. So with confidence and trust, we set out afresh on our journey of faith to your glory. **Amen.**

A prayer of thanksgiving

All powerful God, you shake us out of complacency,
you remind us of the meaning of service,
you restore our relationship with you and others,
you empower us with your spirit and bless us with your grace,
you speak your words of reassurance over us.
Thank you for each new day, each new beginning,
and each touch of your grace in our lives. **Amen.**

God shakes things up Genesis 1:1-5

These two pages offer an outline for worship, with choices at various points. Individual items can be used alone or as part of your own worship design. Bible notes, more prayers, and suggestions for hymns and songs, and sermons/talks, are on the previous two pages.

WEB Resources on the reading to use with under 5s.

Gather

Introduction to worship

Use the activity and prayers to gather the group and introduce the theme.

Sorting out the mess

You will need: a box of assorted Lego™ or other building bricks.

- Ask if anyone has tried to make sense of Lego instructions when the pieces are completely mixed up, or some are missing. Pour some Lego into a pile on a table – the more muddled and diverse the better! Ask if it would make it easier to build (whatever it may be) if the pieces were sorted into different types, e.g. bricks, wheels, windows and doors, people. If you have a picture of something that could be made from the bricks, show it and ask people where or how they would start. How do you begin to sort the mess out?
- This week's Bible readings help us explore how God moves with power, bringing light and order, separating light from darkness, and so on, putting the pieces in the right places, filling in the missing bits, and help us to sort out the muddle and the mess of our lives.

Call to worship

It all begins here!
We begin a new day, a new week, a new year.
Let us begin again by listening and looking for God's Spirit,
and expecting God's light to shine in dark places.

A gathering prayer

The voice of the Lord is over the waters,
the voice of the Lord is powerful,
the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.
May the Lord give strength to us, his people.
May the Lord bless us with peace. **Amen.**

Share the Word

Genesis 1:1-5

This activity is designed to help people hear, see and feel the difference between chaos and order.

In advance, plan for a group of people to play percussion instruments – real ones or make your own. For example, make simple shakers by putting a few dried beans or pulses in plastic bottles or small boxes. Tins or pans and spoons make effective drums. The group needs a conductor – it doesn't have to be you! The group should start to 'play' when the conductor gives a specific signal, making a lot of noise and creating a disturbing, chaotic din! After a while, the conductor signals them to stop. They then begin again, conducted to play with a clear and regular beat, following the conductor's lead, and getting louder and softer as indicated by appropriate hand signals. With enough preparation time the group could divide into two, each playing a different rhythm. You could add to the effect by arranging for someone to turn the lights off before the band starts, and on again as the band begin to play an orderly rhythm.

When they have finished, ask the people how they felt when the band was playing chaotically, and when they played rhythmically. What made the difference? The creation story in Genesis is perhaps the ultimate example of a conductor who brings order from chaos. Now read Genesis 1:1-5.

Mark 1:4-11

Place a bowl of water where it can be seen. Blow across the surface of the water. Suggest that, as the wind blew across the waters at creation, so we see the Holy Spirit moving in today's Gospel reading. People are coming to John the Baptist to turn their lives around and make a fresh start, and John announces the one who is to come in a new way in the power of the Holy Spirit. Now read Mark 1:4-11.



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First impressions WEB

Questions on the theme

- If you made a snow globe, what would you put in it?
- If you could shake the world and start over, what would you want to see emerge?
- What can you do to help your vision take a step towards reality?

Explore and respond

A sequence of active worship ideas; individual items can stand alone.

WEB See children's **Activity sheet**, **Colouring sheet** (Welsh versions available) and resources for use with **Under 5s**.

God's voice now

W S

How might a 'psalmist' write about God's voice today?

- Read Psalm 29 together. Suggest to people that, today, they are writers of psalms. Working in small groups, invite them to come up with phrases they would use if they were writing Psalm 29 today, phrases that begin 'Ascribe to the Lord.', 'The voice of the Lord...' (and/or 'The Spirit of the Lord...'), and 'May the Lord give/bless...'. To keep things manageable in the available time, you could limit the groups to, say, two 'Ascribe...', four 'The voice/Spirit...' and two and 'May...'. Invite the groups to read out their psalm.

Lights out

E S

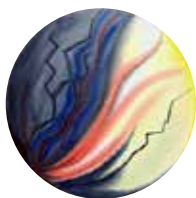
An activity to feel the change that light and order can bring.

- Turn out lights and play some really loud music. Gradually turn down the volume and re-introduce light. If the main lights can only be off or on, you could do this with lamps and torches – perhaps with young people involved in making it happen. If you have the technical means, you could fade the music from something loud into a something much quieter and calmer.
- Invite people to reflect on how this activity made them feel.

A simple worship activity

W E S

Use two circular creation paintings **WEB** as a focus for reflection and worship.



- Display, or give out copies of, the two creation mandalas. These are a starting point for the following guided meditation. Keep a time of silence after each phrase. You could play quiet ambient music in the background – it should be something that eliminates the silence but doesn't distract people's attention.
At the moment of creation, everything was dark and chaos reigned...
The wind of God moved over the waters; movement and glimmers of light spread through the darkness...
With sounds like a thousand thunderstorms, and blinding flashes of lightning, the light began to split away from the darkness...
God divided light from darkness, day from night, the beginning of all time...
Lord, bring order from our chaos...
Lord, bring light in our darkness...
Lord, make new beginnings for us and for our world. **Amen.**

A craft activity

E S

Explore the separation of light and dark.

You will need: paper or white card circles; black, yellow and blue card; scissors, glue.

- Invite people to make a collage representing the separation of light from darkness, by cutting shapes from the coloured card and sticking it to the white disk. If/where you want white to appear, just leave the background uncovered. You could draw a line to represent the 'wind of God' moving over the waters. You could look at the mandalas from *A simple worship activity* for inspiration.

A prayer for all ages together

You stir things up, Lord. (*stirring motion*)

You bring light in the darkness. (*starburst with fingers*)

You bring order and peace. (*smooth horizontal movement*)

When things need changing

may we stir things up, Lord. (*stirring motion*)

Where places are dark,

may we bring your light, Lord. (*starburst with fingers*)

Where there's conflict and hate,

may we bring your peace. (*smooth horizontal movement*)

Amen.

Go with God

Consider together what you have explored, what that means for you and how you will live your faith this week.

- Listen to or read a verse of 'She sits like a bird' (John Bell **WEB**). Reflecting on today's worship, invite everyone to think about how or what might help us to better recognise how God's Spirit is starting new things in our world today. **S A**

A sending out prayer

Help us to look for you, Lord, around every corner,
in every place and at every time.

Help us to be in tune with new things you are doing,
and help us to join in.

Amen.

Go with God 24/7

E S A

Encourage everyone to put their faith into action.

Look for new beginnings in simple things such as snowdrops. Look for places where there is light, but previously it was dark. Inspired by such things, ponder how you personally can help God bring light.

Faith 24/7 **WEB** **Thrive** – a resource to encourage everyday faith in every generation; **Bible study** – based on the week's resources, suitable for a home group.

Recognising when and how God calls

1 Samuel 3:1-10,(11-20)

The young Samuel hears the Lord call to him, but thinks it is his master, Eli. After this happens three times, Eli tells Samuel to answer the Lord, saying 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening'. Samuel does so and receives a vision that God was about to do something new. After sharing his vision with Eli, and receiving more encouragement, Samuel grows up to be a renowned and trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

God calls in many ways, so we need to be alert in order to recognise the call. This week we look at ways in which we might be called by our God, who is caring and understanding.

Bible notes

RCL Year B Epiphany 2

Common Worship readings, see footer.

1 Samuel 3:1-10,(11-20)

In the dark days at the tail end of the time of the judges, a time in Israel when life was chaotic and violent, and when the people had forgotten their links with God, a child is born. The birth of a child is often the harbinger of a new move of God's. Samuel was born to a faithful mother, Hannah, who pledged to give her son to the service of God. So, here he is in the Temple with the old reprobate priest, Eli. People had forgotten what God's voice sounded like.

But one night, God calls Samuel's name. The boy had no idea it could be God, so he runs to Eli thinking he's called him for something. After this has happened a couple of times, Eli twigs that it is God calling Samuel. So, the old priest tells him what to do and, when God calls again, Samuel is ready.

As ever, when it comes after a long absence, God's presence is both welcome and unsettling. The new move of God would involve judgement on the house of Eli before renewal of the house of Israel. And the young Samuel faced a stern test. Eli instructed him to repeat all that God had said. What a tough ask for a young boy who had been raised by this elderly priest. But Samuel delivers the message God has given him and Eli believes it and submits to his fate. Samuel grows in stature and Israel is reborn under his leadership. It is an object lesson in God choosing who God pleases – even a child – to be both the messenger and instrument of renewal.

Psalm 139:1-6,13-18

This famous and popular psalm is a reminder that God knows us. It is a celebration of this knowledge as the poet is at pains to show that God's knowledge of us is not only wonderful, it liberates us to live our lives certain that God is with us through the ups and downs. The poet's faith tells him that God has written the story of our lives and keeps them in his book, an image of God's protective grace and mercy.

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Who is Paul talking to here? It appears there were some in the church who thought the body was destined to be destroyed, so it didn't matter what you did with it, any kind of indulgence was okay. (At the opposite end of the extreme, some thought you should live lives of extreme asceticism – see 7:1ff.) Paul is almost certainly quoting these people in verse 12 (he quotes this again in 10:23), and again in verse 13. They argued that the body is made for fun, especially sex. The context of this was probably private parties of some kind rather than visiting prostitutes. Paul says that the body is for God and that he will raise it up on the last day; so it does matter what we do with it (6:13-14). The context envisaged here was when young men achieved their majority and were allowed to don the *toga virilis* and try out their new-found sexual freedom at a wild party. So maybe Paul is addressing the behaviour of just a handful of his original hearers; but they – and the Church generally – needed to hear what God thought of their behaviour.

John 1:43-51

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus is collecting a band of travelling companions, a bunch of likely lads, who he hopes to mould into the future leaders of his movement. Some are well known to us – Peter, James and John – others less so. Here we have the first encounter between Jesus and Nathanael. With rhetorical flourish and considerable wit, we are treated to an encounter between a Jesus we are still getting to know and a wily Israelite. Nathanael has a dim view of Nazareth, probably because it is Galilee, which had been widely settled by non-Jewish people and so was not somewhere that one 'long-prophesied' was likely to come from. Jesus, for his part, sees in Nathanael a true unblemished Israelite.

There then follows a story with strong echoes of Jacob's dream from Genesis 28. Nathanael had been resting under the fig tree before being summoned by Philip, much like Jacob. Jesus then tells him that he will see the same things Jacob saw in his dream. In between, Nathanael has decided that Jesus is the one the prophets said would come; he is the Son of God, the king. In the middle of this witty exchange is Jesus calling Nathanael to join him on the road.

Hymns & songs

Songs in italics are suitable for all ages.

WEB Song categories, themes and rationale, web links and additional Welsh suggestions.

All I am, I lay it down
All I once held dear
 Dear Lord and Father of mankind
 God has chosen me
 God's Spirit is deep in my heart
 Happy are they, they that love God!
 I cannot tell how he, whom angels worship
I have tried my very best
 I know not why God's wondrous grace
 In heavenly love abiding
I was nowhere, you came to my rescue
 O for a closer walk with God
 Sometimes a light surprises
This city belongs to the Lord.
Underneath this skin is a heart
that's bleeding
We call to you, the living God
We could try to count the stars
 Will you come and follow me
You knew me at the start

Sermon ideas

Ideas for a sermon or interactive talk. See **WEB** for a 'thought for the week' to read out in place of a sermon; and *In touch*, linking the readings to the news.

- As we tell Samuel's story, we might ponder how it applies across our congregation. In particular, how might adults hear from God through children? What is the relationship between young and old in our church community? How can we create spaces where both learn together how to hear from God? Might this be the way that God starts something new and exciting in our church's life? How will we all ensure that we not only hear what God is saying, but how together we might put it into practice?
- How do we hear and process tough words from God? God speaks many reassuring words to us – both directly and through the Bible – and we welcome such communication with open arms. But sometimes God speaks a tough word, a word of rebuke or judgement. This is what Samuel heard about Eli, and what Paul delivers to some in the churches at Corinth. These are uncomfortable words; how can we make space for them and help each other, or the church community as a whole, to respond appropriately to them?
- A few years ago, a group of young people at our local rural church (in Yorkshire, UK) were playing recorder and flute at school. It was suggested that they might help to lead music at monthly family services. I was asked to co-ordinate the group. I agreed to help, although I had limited keyboard capabilities, so I enlisted the help of a similarly reticent guitar player. I felt that all our limitations were well known to God (and the congregation too no doubt!) yet felt strongly that we should encourage and use the children's skills and enthusiasm. Working together was a delight and a real encouragement to the church as a whole. It even led to the removal of some pews to make space for the group (in any church, that is no mean feat!), and leading of worship by members of the group. As we listen and look out for God's call to us, it helps us to know that God knows us well. This is plain from today's psalm. He also knows those around us and the situations in which we can effectively serve him.
- 'I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.' We are told that the word of the Lord and visions were rare in those days. Perhaps the people and their leaders were no longer in the habit of listening and looking out for God. It took a young child to be able to listen and hear. At a time of transition for the nation, Samuel was to become a trustworthy prophet and leader. So, what makes our ears tingle? How ready are we to hear and receive messages from God and act on them?

Prayers

More prayers overleaf. **WEB** Welsh translations. Topical intercessions **WEB** each Wednesday.

A prayer of approach

Vibrant God, call us afresh today
to a new vision of your kingdom,
to a new understanding of your purposes,
to a new knowing of how best to serve you,
to a new appreciation of your presence with us,
to a new awareness of all that you would have us do,
as your people in this place and time.
In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

A prayer of adoration

God of all knowing and all loving,
you fashioned us and know us through and through:
we rejoice at your love and care for us.
Lord Jesus, you know the cries of the world
and call us to reach out to those in need:
we rejoice at your love and care for us.
Holy Spirit, you call us deep within, and empower us
to trust the gifts you have equipped us with:
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
we rejoice at your love and care for us. Amen.

A prayer of confession

Response after each phrase:

Forgive me and help me to trust you more deeply.

Dear God, when knowing myself causes me –
to doubt that you could ever want me as your disciple:
to doubt that you could ever love me:
to doubt that you could ever accept me:
In Jesus' name I pray.

Amen.

Assurance of forgiveness

Generous God, thank you that, in forgiving us, you give us
fresh energy to serve you,
fresh understanding of our calling,
fresh wisdom as we share our faith,
fresh purpose as we live out that faith day by day,
fresh appreciation of the gifts of others,
and fresh hope for all that lies ahead.

Amen.

A prayer of praise

We praise you, God of grace, for bringing into our lives
those who draw us closer to you,
those who speak your words of encouragement,
those who believe in your calling for our lives,
those whose testimonies inspire, excite and move us,
and those who reflect your love,
faithfulness and compassion, day by day.

Amen.

Recognising when and how God calls 1 Samuel 3:1-10,(11-20)

These two pages offer an outline for worship, with choices at various points. Individual items can be used alone or as part of your own worship design. Bible notes, more prayers, and suggestions for hymns and songs, and sermons/talks, are on the previous two pages.

WEB Resources on the reading to use with under 5s.

Gather

Introduction to worship

Use the activity and prayers to gather the group and introduce the theme.



A revealing circle

- Display, or give out copies of, the 'So many ways' mandala (circular painting) **WEB**. It was painted by artist Daisy Barnes to suggest, and help us to reflect on, some of the different ways in which God speaks to us today. Invite people to spot these ways in the image – how many can you find? Are some more obvious than others? Which human senses might we use to 'hear' God?
- Together, consider the following questions on the theme:
 - This painting illustrate different ways in which God speaks; how many can you identify?
 - When have you felt or known God calling you?
 - How can we help each other to hear God's call?
- After a while exploring the image, ask if people think there may be new ways for God to 'speak' to us today – ways for our time? Today we explore how God calls us and how we can respond. And we will return to the mandala image later.

Call to worship

God reaches out to us in so many ways,
in beauty around us and silence within,
stirring us to action or helping us wait.
Let us reach out to God now
and give ourselves space to see, feel and hear the call.

A gathering prayer

Speak to us, Lord: help us to hear.
Show us your glory, Lord: help us to see.
May we taste and sense your presence, Lord: help us to feel.
In our time, and in your time, Lord,
lead us where you want us to go,
and show us what you want us to know. **Amen.**

Share the Word

1 Samuel 3:1-10,(11-20)

A simple introduction to Eli and Samuel. You will need a narrator and an actor to play Eli.

Narrator: Eli is a priest who serves in the Temple. And Samuel is a young boy who helps Eli in the Temple. Samuel will later become an important leader of his people. Let's hear what Eli might have been thinking.

Eli: He's like a son to me, is Samuel. My own sons...well, they're not much help to me. They've lost their way big time. And as for me (sighs)... Well, I still fulfil my priestly duties in the Temple. I know the rules, and the way everything should be done. But I've lost the listening ear I once had, the way I could hear and feel what God wanted for me and the people I serve. But Samuel – so young and eager to learn, so willing to listen to my instructions, and so keen to serve God! – maybe, just maybe, God can get through to him and Samuel will hear, will listen. Maybe together we can discover God's plan. I feel sure that Samuel will figure in that somewhere. Perhaps I'll need to step back and listen to Samuel, however hard the message might be.
Now read 1 Samuel 3:1-10, (11-20).

John 1:43-51

This week's psalm tells how God 'has searched us and known us'. This Gospel reading tells of Jesus calling his disciples. You could use the following poem as a reflection before or after the Gospel reading.

You know me well, Lord, what I can do.
You understand me, what I've been through.
And when you call me, I'll follow you.
For I can trust in the things you do.

Explore and respond

A sequence of active worship ideas; individual items can stand alone.

WEB See children's **Activity sheet**, **Colouring sheet** (Welsh versions available) and resources for use with **Under 5s**.

Chat and catch

W E A

Think about how we listen and look at things.

You will need: a soft ball, suitable for indoor use.

- Do some simple throwing and catching in the group. Talk together about the best way to catch a ball. Surely it's not simply a matter of holding out your hands. Maybe it helps to turn towards the person throwing the ball and to watch carefully? And how about keeping your eye on the ball and concentrating? And what about the way we move ourselves and our hands when the ball reaches us?
- Rachel Turner, in the 'parenting for faith' material **WEB**, suggests that the best way to catch a ball is similar to the way we need to listen and look for God. What do you think she means?

Meet the dog!

E S

A chance to think about being called in a partnership of trust.

- If you know someone who has a working sheepdog or a guide dog, you could ask if they could tell your group about the way in which they work with the dog and their relationship with the animal. (You can link this with 'Thought for the week' **WEB**)

Worship activity with Mandalas

E S

Explore different ways that God gets through to us.

- Display again the 'So many ways' mandala (see *A revealing circle*). Invite everyone to think about how the image helps them to think about ways in which God speaks to us. Ask if anyone is willing to share what they see in the image that resonates with them.
- You could follow this with the next activity, then return here. Or continue with a period of silence, ending with a suitable prayer, such as this one:

Master speak: and make us ready,
when your voice is truly heard,
with obedience glad and steady,
still to follow every word.

We are listening, Lord, for you:
Speak and lead us, close to you.

Adapted from Frances Ridley Havergal's hymn

The ball is in your court!

W E S A

A craft activity helping us to explore the ways God 'speaks'.

You will need: circular pieces of card or paper, pencils. If you wish, the circle could have hexagons printed on it, so that it looks like a football.

- Invite people to make their own 'doodle mandala', by writing words or drawing images to represent how God can show or tell us a message.
- Invite some volunteers to share their image, and to speak about their ideas.

A prayer for all ages together

Lord, help us to look for you. (*look from side to side*)

May we listen for you (*cup ears with hands*)

in the silence, (*stand still*)

or in the noise, (*stamp feet noisily*)

at all times, (*hands of a clock*)

and in all places. (*sweeping motion*)

May we wait and listen for you.

Amen.

Go with God

Consider together what you have explored, what that means for you and how you will live your faith this week.

- Having looked at ways in which people have been called in the past and how God can call us today, invite people to consider their 'doodle mandala' one last time, sharing with their neighbours what they feel they have discovered or learned today. Encourage everyone to take their doodle mandala home and add to it, if/when they think of other ideas, and to use it as a focus for prayer with an emphasis on listening to God. **E S**

A sending out prayer

So now we go out with confidence in you,

our loving God who leads us;

you know our weaknesses and our strengths.

**Lord, call us, guide us,
and strengthen us in your service.**

Amen.

Go with God 24/7

W A

Encourage everyone to put their faith into action.

Think of one thing you know you feel called to do by God and make some time to do it, or part of it, this week. Think about how this can encourage you for future tasks.

Faith 24/7 **WEB** **Thrive** – a resource to encourage everyday faith in every generation; **Bible study** – based on the week's resources, suitable for a home group.

How we respond to God's call

Jonah 3:1-5,10

After a perilous journey, running away from God, Jonah finally does as God has asked of him and goes to Nineveh to deliver God's call to repent. Surprisingly (to Jonah), the people do repent and God forgives them.

How do we respond when God calls us to do something hard or outside our comfort zone? Are we reluctant, making excuses, or are we prepared to give it a go or try a bit harder? Today we explore some of these questions.

Bible notes

RCL Year B Epiphany 3

Common Worship readings, see footer.

Jonah 3:1-5,10

A lot has happened in Jonah's life when God calls him a second time to go into Nineveh. The focus of this part of the story is on the grace and mercy of God: when people respond positively to God's call to repent, God quickly forgives. In fact, what the text suggests is that when the Ninevites repent, so does God; God has a change of heart and mind, and stops threatening to bring calamity on the city.

The story is told without fanfare. Jonah goes partway into the city, begins to share his message, the people hear it and change their ways, so God relents from threatening to bring calamity. End of story! Except we know what preceded these verses (Jonah and the 'whale') and what comes after it in chapter 4 (Jonah and the plant). In particular, we know that Jonah is a reluctant prophet. He didn't want to go because he knew this is what God would do and he was afraid that he'd look a fool. I wonder how often we shy away from telling people about God because we are similarly afraid of the reaction and how we'll look.

Psalm 62:5-12

From the belly of the fish, Jonah prays in terms very similar to this psalm. Here the poet is confident that it is only God who can rescue him from his predicament. In the course of the psalm, the poet reflects on the fact that it doesn't matter whether you are rich or poor, clever or slow: it is only God that has the power to deliver us. And once delivered, he calls us to live lives of gratitude.

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

In the middle of a very practical and pastoral chapter about issues to do with marriage, Paul gives the theological context for this advice. In verse 26 he had spoken of the impending crisis. This is almost certainly economic rather than eschatological. Corinth was hit with chronic food shortages through the mid-first century, times of economic hardship and trouble. Paul's advice is that such times reinforce the urgency of focusing on the things that really matter, namely God and God's kingdom – that has come in Jesus. We shouldn't hitch our wagon to the way the world operates because it will let us down. So, in a series of stark contrasts, Paul reminds his readers that in Christ the old world order is passing away and we should not be too attached to it.

Mark 1:14-20

Jesus explodes into an expectant Judea with something unexpected and new. Verse 15 is a summary of Jesus' intention. Everything he does through this story is about this: it's about bringing the rule and reign of God to God's people; it's about showing us what it's like to live under that rule. 'Kingdom' in both Hebrew and Greek was not so much a realm as a relationship; it is about who we owe allegiance to. What has come in Jesus' arrival is the opportunity for a new relationship with God. This is what being a disciple is all about.

While central to Mark's story, it is not easy to get a precise grip on what the phrase 'The kingdom of God' means. It's part of the mystery that unfolds through the gospel. But as Jesus emerges from the desert of testing, his message has a twin thrust. It is about fulfilment. Although what

he says is new and in part unexpected – hence why some struggled to accept it – his mission had been widely trailed in the prophets. For Mark, the gospel begins way before Jesus appears in Galilee. It starts in the mind of God, who sows the seeds of it in the words of the prophets, before sending his Son who will reveal fully and perfectly God's good government (1:1-3). And it is a call to get involved, to follow. Jesus' call to repentance, and faith is a call to follow in the footsteps of God's king. It's implied in 1:15 and immediately spelled out in 1:16-20 in the response of the fishermen.

To know the government of God in our lives, we have to move out of the spheres of influence of other rulers – be they political allegiances, or personal preferences, the opinions of others or our sinful impulses. This too is what 'repent' means: to stop going any way but God's way. As Mark's story unfolds, we see the shape this following takes on. It is probably not what we're expecting. It is the way of life in all its fullness. It is also the way of personal sacrifice.

Hymns & songs

Songs in italics are suitable for all ages. [WEB](#) Song categories, themes and rationale, web links and additional Welsh suggestions.

And can it be that I should gain
Come, living God, when least expected
Come with me, come wander, come
welcome the world
For the healing of the nations
From heaven you came, helpless babe
*How happy they who hear a call
How many times have you found
me wandering*
I heard the voice of Jesus say
I, the Lord of sea and sky
I want to walk with Jesus Christ
Lord of the church, we pray for
our renewing
Lord, you have come to the sea-shore
O Jesus, I have promised
O magnificent God
One voice it calls above them all
O thou who camest from above
Take control
Take my life, and let it be
Were the prophets apprehensive
Why do you wait to receive him today

Sermon ideas

Ideas for a sermon or interactive talk. See **WEB** for a 'thought for the week' to read out in place of a sermon; and *In touch*, linking the readings to the news.

- A character study on Jonah from this passage is an example to all of us. Having rebelled against God (chapters 1–2), we find him here with a second chance. There is no rubbing Jonah's nose in the mess of his failure. God doesn't hold grudges; forgiveness means the chance to start again. And Jonah's calling is unchanged. God doesn't say that since he screwed up the first time, he's going to get something less challenging to do: nothing puts us beyond the reach of God's restoring grace. Look at Jonah and rejoice: if he can be restored, there's hope for all of us! So Jonah does what he should have done in the first place: he obeys.

- Who is our good news for? Jonah tells us it's for everyone. God loves Nineveh – so, what about the neighbourhood our church is in? The message was good news for all of Nineveh's citizens, from the poor in outlining shanty towns (v.4) to the yuppies and aristocrats (v.6) – God loved them all. Do we limit the gospel to people like us? What we learn about people from this story is that they are open to the possibility of good news. The people of Nineveh gave Jonah a hearing and responded positively – who's to say our neighbours won't respond in the same way?

- Moses, Jeremiah, Jonah, Mary and Paul are notable examples of people who knew they were called by God but were sometimes reluctant, saying 'Why me?' Are we so different today? Are we prone to making excuses when we know we ought to be doing something? Couldn't a young Greta Thunberg have said 'I'm far too young, they won't listen!' Couldn't David Attenborough have reasonably said, 10 years ago, 'I'm too old for this now. Time to hang up my boots!' John Wesley famously said, 'Do all the good you can...to all the people you can, as long as ever you can' **WEB**. So, this can mean a calling to small, as well as large tasks. After all, the things we are usually called to do aren't that unreasonable.

- The well-known 'Prayer for Generosity' is attributed to Ignatius of Loyola (though it may not have been written by him): Teach us good Lord, to serve thee as thou deservest, to give and not to count the cost... To labour and not to ask for any reward, Save that of knowing that we do thy will! Whatever its origins, Gretchen Crowder, a writer on Ignatian spirituality, has suggested that, rather than meaning that we should neglect our own welfare for the sake of others, the prayer is saying that we need to 'have a little faith and lean into the challenge of things'. What challenges can you see, and how will you lean into them?

Prayers

More prayers overleaf. **WEB** Welsh translations. Topical intercessions **WEB** each Wednesday.

A prayer of approach

Faithful God, with Andrew, Peter, James and John, we praise you Father, Spirit, Son; with Jonah who you called and sent to people who could then repent, we'll do what you would have us do and speak of all that's good and true. We'll start today, we'll start right now, and trust you'll show us where and how. **Amen.**

A prayer of adoration

God of the weak and the strong, you turn reluctance into resilience, for you are faithful. **Amen.**

You turn listening into learning, for you are wise. **Amen.**

You turn diffidence into daring, for you are gracious. **Amen.**

You turn failure into fruitfulness, for you are gracious. **Amen.**

You turn obstacles into opportunities, for you are creative. **Amen.**

You turn never into now, for you are timeless, and we worship you. **Amen.**

A prayer of confession

Response after each phrase:

Enrich our vision and soften our hearts, we pray.

God of all, forgive us when we are slow to see you at work in other cultures, in other communities:

forgive us when we limit your mercy to those we approve of, who we think are worth it:

forgive us when we are reluctant to go beyond our comfort zone to share your gospel of love:

forgive us when we are resentful when you bless those we disapprove of:

In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

Assurance of forgiveness

Faithful God, as you forgave Jonah for his reluctance, so you forgive us.

As you forgave the people of Nineveh when they turned from all that was wrong, so you forgive us.

We receive that forgiveness now and pray that your continuing grace will strengthen, guide and surround us through every temptation and every challenge. **Amen.**

A prayer of praise

Response after each phrase:

Enrich our vision and soften our hearts, we pray.

God of now and always, you are our refuge and our shelter:

To you we can bring our concerns and our joy:

With your Spirit we can overcome fear and respond to your call with courage:

With you by our side we can be more than we ever thought we could be:

Enrich our vision and soften our hearts, we pray. Amen.

How we respond to God's call Jonah 3:1-5,10

These two pages offer an outline for worship, with choices at various points. Individual items can be used alone or as part of your own worship design. Bible notes, more prayers, and suggestions for hymns and songs, and sermons/talks, are on the previous two pages.

WEB Resources on the reading to use with under 5s.

Gather

Introduction to worship

Use the activity and prayers to gather the group and introduce the theme.

You want me to do what?

- Make a set of flash cards describing tasks. Some should be straightforward – e.g. find your hat and gloves ready to go out, or choose a TV programme to watch. Make some absurd – e.g. hop up and down the street with your wellies on the wrong feet. Some should be harder, but with good purpose – e.g. bake a cake and take it to a housebound person at the other end of town.
- Draw out cards and ask people whether they would be happy to do each task. Discuss together whether it would make a difference if you knew it was the right thing to do. Maybe there is a good reason to hop up and down the street in wellies!
- Thinking more broadly, are there certain things you would do in an emergency, even if not every day? Are there things you might do if the reward was right? This week we explore how far we are prepared to go to answer God's call to us.

Call to worship

Some things God wants us to do are easy;
some are hard;
some are very hard.
Are we ready to put ourselves out
in order to respond to God's call?
As we worship today, let us seek God's guidance.

A gathering prayer

Lord, sometimes the only reward we have for responding to your call is to know that it is what you will.
Give us courage and strength to do the harder things,
and may we find joy in serving you in all things.
Amen.



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Share the Word

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 'Ever heard the story about Jonah and the big fish?'

Display the Jonah circular painting. Use the poem below as a 'catch up' to fill in the story of Jonah that comes before today's reading. Draw attention to the painting – it illustrates 'what happened next', and follow this with the reading.



Well, Jonah hated Nineveh
where God wanted him to go.
He said 'No Lord, send me elsewhere,
I'm not going. No Lord, no!
But the day was wild and stormy
and he fell into the sea,
where a big fish swallowed Jonah,
(fish for dinner, man for tea!)
After three days in the big fish
you would think that he'd be dead,
but the big fish spat him out again,
near Nineveh, instead.
So, this time, Jonah thought he'd
better do as he'd been asked,
though he made it clear as crystal
that he didn't like the task.
And now you'll hear the story
of the people of the town,
and the way that God forgave them
though they'd badly let him down.

Mark 1:14-20

Ask: Have you ever read a story where you can't wait to read the next chapter, or watched an episode on TV and were desperate to see the next one? In this Gospel story, we see the disciples enthused and ready to follow the call. So, what happened next? Did they follow with the same willingness when things got harder?
Now read Mark 1:14-20.

First impressions **WEB**

Questions on the theme

- Why might this young man have stopped like this?
- The end of a long journey, a special moment – how do you describe your response to God's call?
- Is there something you feel you should be doing, but are not?

Explore and respond

A sequence of active worship ideas; individual items can stand alone.

WEB See children's **Activity sheet**, **Colouring sheet** (Welsh versions available) and resources for use with **Under 5s**.

No and yes

W E S A

Think about why we might say 'no' or 'yes' to God's call.

You will need: printed copies of the black and white Jonah mandala (see **Share the Word**), coloured pens/pencils.

- Invite people to reflect on why Jonah said 'no' and 'yes' as he did, and then to add words or images to the drawing to represent what they might say 'no' or 'yes' to, thinking about why they might respond that way, and what might make them respond differently.

Ninevah, the 'sorry' city

E S A

Exploring the consequences of all calls to repent.

You will need: printed copies of city of Nineveh template **WEB**, scissors, glue, scraps of card and cloth, crayons, charcoal.

- Give everyone a template and invite them to fold it as indicated, glue it then cut out the city shape. Add people to the city by cutting figure shapes from scraps of card and sticking them to the city, or by drawing them. Keep the shapes simple, but try to express how the people are saying sorry and/or how their life might be changed. The cloth – ideally, sackcloth – can be used to illustrate acts of repentance. Charcoal can be used to write words or draw images that express things they repent of together, as a society.
- Encourage everyone to think not only in terms of ancient Nineveh and the Bible story, but also about what we need to repent of today.

Deliver a message

W A

Compare Jonah's experience with today's big stories.

You will need: a selection of today's newspapers.

- Invite people, using phones, tablets, etc. and/or the supplied newspapers, to look at the news headlines and story headlines in this week's news. Young people might be encouraged to look at (e.g.) *BBC Newsround* web pages. Ask everyone to choose one story or headline that illustrates something they think might concern God.
- Invite people to share their headlines. If numbers are large, this could be done in groups first, and the group can choose one or two to share with everyone. Ask people to respond to each headline by suggesting what God's message might be to that situation?

A simple worship activity

W E S A

A reflection about being reluctant to answer God's call.

- Invite everyone to sit still as the following reflection is read. Pause after each verse.

'Not me,' said Moses,
'I'm no speaker,
And I'm not flavour of the month with Pharaoh, either!'

'Not there,' said Jonah.
'That city's evil, I'll go to Tarshish;
it's much better there!'

'Not me,' said Jeremiah,
'I'm too young, I'm not good enough,
And the folk around me aren't much good either!'

'What, me?' said Mary,
'How can that be?
But if you really say so, I'll agree!'

- Invite everyone to reflect on what God might be wanting them to do now/next, and how you/they will respond. After a while, end with a prayer, such as this one:

O Lord, you have searched us and known us.
You understand who we are and what we can do.
Fit us for the tasks you want us to do.
Give us strength and courage to do them. **Amen.**

A prayer for all ages together

Lord, we are looking and listening.
Call us (*megaphone hands*)
and lead us. (*hand gently pulling*)
Sometimes we have to do hard things.
Call us (*megaphone hands*)
and help us. (*reach out to another person*)
When we feel like giving up:
Give us your strength. (*mighty fists*)
When you call, we will follow.
We are looking (*hand above eyes, looking*)
and listening. (*cup hands behind ears*)

Go with God

Consider together what you have explored, what that means for you and how you will live your faith this week.

- Read again the verse that begins "'Not there,' said Jonah..." from *A simple worship activity*. Invite people to imagine a new verse that begins 'What, me?' said [your name]...!. Ask: How would you complete it – that is, what excuses might you make not to do something God was asking? What might persuade you to do it after all? **W A**

A sending out prayer

Lord, some things you ask us to do are right up our street.
Some are more tricky.
Some can be downright difficult.
Help us grow in love for you,
and in confidence and trust,
so that we really want to do them for you – and do! **Amen.**

Go with God 24/7

A

Encourage everyone to put their faith into action.

As you live each day, is there anything you feel you should do but are not? Think about why you are not doing it. Can that change? Or look for something you are doing, but could try to do more/better (however you choose to define that).

Faith 24/7 **WEB** **Thrive** – a resource to encourage everyday faith in every generation; **Bible study** – based on the week's resources, suitable for a home group.

How we discern what comes from God

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Moses, speaking to the people, says that one day God will send another prophet like him. This prophet will speak God's words with God's full authority, such that anyone who refuses to listen will be held accountable by God. The people are also warned against listening to false prophets. An authentic prophet's words will prove to be true.

In this week's Gospel reading, people are astounded by the authority with which Jesus teaches. In the passage from Deuteronomy, we hear of a prophet into whose mouth God will put his words. Both of these readings encourage us to consider the authority of those who seek to influence us.

Bible notes

RCL Year B Epiphany 4

Common Worship readings, see footer.

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

In the middle of a section outlining various laws to do with boundary markers and sacrifices, the compiler of Deuteronomy inserts this word from God about sending a prophet like Moses. It is almost as if God and Moses knew that the people would not be able to follow all this guidance without a person present with the authority to speak for God. It's what the people asked for when the Law was given on the mountain. God honoured this promise with a string of prophets, starting with Samuel, many of whose words we have in the text of the OT. But the final fulfilment of this word came in Jesus as the crowd in John's Gospel noted in 6:14, 7:40. God always sends word in the form of a person.

Psalm 111

Often the psalms invite praise for the God who has spoken – especially in the Law – but here the poet invites us to contemplate what God has done. Our God provides, redeems, and brings justice into the world. But the poet reminds us that this is God because he told us ahead of time that this what he would do. So he also calls us to praise him for his word.

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

One of the big issues facing the earliest communities of Jesus' followers was whether they could eat the meat available in the cities where they lived. It used to be thought that this was simply because all

meat had begun its journey to the plate in a pagan temple being offered in sacrifice to a pagan deity. Christians like Jews were unable to consume such polluted fare. But the picture is not so simple. Many of the street cafes served meat products derived from their own supply chains that bypassed the temples. The butcher might have mumbled a prayer as he was slaughtering the animal but there was no elaborate temple ritual involved. This is the reason that Paul takes three chapters to answer a relatively simple question about meat eating. It is a section rich in theology and practical advice. Two things leap out of this passage. The first is that Paul reaffirms the Old Testament assertion that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. The second is that we should have regard for our brothers and sisters and not do anything that would cause them to question their faith.

Mark 1:21-28

Capernaum was a base for Jesus in the early part of his ministry. He might even have had a house in the town – the one whose roof was taken apart by a disabled man's friends! On the Sabbath, Jesus and his team go to the synagogue. We don't know what he said, but his audience was amazed (v.22) at his teaching. He was not like anyone they'd heard before. Perhaps he was telling parables or some of the material that ended up in the Sermon on the Mount.

But while they were digesting what he said, a man with an unclean spirit cried out and Jesus silenced him by expelling the demon. Again the crowd is amazed (v.27). It's Jesus' authority that gets their attention (vv.22,27). And it is an authority

both seen and heard. This is one of Mark's favourite terms for describing Jesus' ministry (see 2:10; 3:15; 6:7; 11:28-29,33). It indicates two things about Jesus.

The first is that his teaching is new (v.27). Though his coming was predicted by prophets and his message fulfils theirs, Jesus' teaching is also unprecedented. He does not teach like the scribes who refer to the authority of those who have gone before them. His authority is in himself. In this he embodies the prophet that Moses said would come.

The second is that through him God's reign comes not just to the physical realm, but also to the spiritual one; he heals physical ailments but, also silences spiritual opposition. It is as Jesus says when he answers the high priest in 14:62 with words from Daniel 7:13 indicating that he is the one given all authority over heaven and earth.

Hymns & songs

Songs in italics are suitable for all ages.

WEB Song categories, themes and rationale, web links and additional Welsh suggestions.

*A mighty fortress is our God
Called to a battle*

Christ is the world's true light
*From the sun's rising unto the sun's setting
From the thankful heart to the
battle scarred*

Give to me, Lord, a thankful heart
Go forward, people of God today
Jesus Christ is waiting

*Jesus is Lord of all, Satan
Just as I am, without one plea*

King of glory, king of peace
*King of Kings, Lord of Lords
Name of all majesty*

*Not angels, nor demons
Takin' authority we're takin' over*
Teach me, my God and king

To you, King Jesus
When a knight won his spurs, in the
stories of old

Who would true valour see
You are our God

Sermon ideas

Ideas for a sermon or interactive talk. See **WEB** for a 'thought for the week' to read out in place of a sermon; and *In touch*, linking the readings to the news.

- For the early Christian movement, the eating of meat was a complex moral issue. Most meat was associated with the worship of idols and so believers in Corinth and other cities had a dilemma every time they were invited to dinner. How do the principles Paul gives us in 1 Corinthians 8 help us to navigate complicated moral issues that we are faced with? In particular, how can we remain faithful to what we believe while engaging in social activities that would give us the opportunity to share our faith with neighbours and work colleagues?
- This week's psalm can help us to reflect on the relationship between what God says and what God does. Often we treat spoken communication as distinct from what their actions tell us about someone. But the psalm and the Gospel reading make it clear that authoritative communication is both seen and heard. What is the relationship between these in our experience as a congregation? How can we help one another to hear God through what we see in the world around us as well as from his word and one another?
- Moses tells the people that God commands them to heed the words of the prophet who will be sent and warns them against false prophets. Jesus is seen as authoritative, in contrast to the scribes. How do we discern genuine and reliable authority? Some of you may have seen the famous April fool stunt pulled by the BBC in 1957 (and shown many times since) when they ran an item on the 'Swiss spaghetti harvest', showing spaghetti-draped trees and giving other authenticating information **WEB**. Many believed the item to be true. Why might this have been, and what issues does it raise, particularly in the modern media world? How does this relate to spreading the 'fame' of Jesus in the world today?
- When John the Baptist was asked if he was 'the prophet' – the person referred to in this week's Deuteronomy reading – he answered with a firm, 'No' (John 1:22). It is often said that a person who craves high office is probably the least appropriate to take it. When Jesus suspected the people were about to 'make him a king' he withdrew to the mountain (John 6:15). How is this kind of humility regarded in today's world and Church? Are there examples of quiet voices being ignored and their wisdom lost? Who shouts loudest in today's Mark reading?

Prayers

More prayers overleaf. **WEB** Welsh translations. Topical intercessions **WEB** each Wednesday.

A prayer of approach

God of all truth and all wisdom,
of all authority and all power,
we come together as your people in this place,
to reflect on the words of your prophets,
to be inspired by the words and actions of your Son, Jesus,
to be challenged by the spirit of your laws,
to discern the will for us individually and as a church,
to offer you our prayers and praises,
and to grow closer in fellowship with you and one another.
In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

A prayer of adoration

God of all ages,
in you is found all wisdom, all wonder, all love.
Lord Jesus,
in you is found all healing, all truth, all goodness.
Holy Spirit,
in you is found all power, all cleansing, all enabling.
And so, as one and as many, we lift our hearts to you
in awe, in reverence and in humility. **Amen.**

A prayer of confession

God of truth, we bring to you those times when we have used cheap words to avoid costly action.

Forgive us and grant us your spirit of strength.

We bring to you those times when we have hidden behind the letter of the law to avoid the challenge of the spirit of the law.

Forgive us and grant us your spirit of discernment.

We bring to you those times when we have disrespected the authority of those you have called to show us a new way.

Forgive us and grant us your spirit of wisdom.

We ask this in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Assurance of forgiveness

Gracious God, you bless us with the gifts of forgiveness and compassion and encourage us to turn away from our mistakes towards your love, and we pray with that confidence that not our will be done but yours, not our words be spoken but yours, not our authority be revealed but yours, in all we think and do and say. **Amen.**

A prayer of praise

Living God, we praise you for the people you have called to speak your words of power to us and to our world – words of life and death, of opportunity and risk, of comfort and challenge, of wisdom and clarity. Help us to step out to the rhythm of their beat, the beat of justice, of compassion, of reverence for you, so that we might grow in wisdom and confidence, and sing our life's story to the music of your gospel. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

How we discern what comes from God Deuteronomy 18:15-20

These two pages offer an outline for worship, with choices at various points. Individual items can be used alone or as part of your own worship design. Bible notes, more prayers, and suggestions for hymns and songs, and sermons/talks, are on the previous two pages.

WEB Resources on the reading to use with under 5s.

Gather

Introduction to worship

Use the activity and prayers to gather the group and introduce the theme.

Who was that?

- In advance, prime six well-known members of your congregation: give them each a number, and ask them to call out, 'A very warm welcome to church this morning' when their number is called. On the day, ask everyone to close and cover their eyes, fingers tight together, so you can see if they are cheating. Call out the numbers one after another. When all six have spoken, let people open their eyes, and invite them to call out the names of any voices they think they recognised. Ask the speakers to stand to show themselves. Ask if there are any other ways – any distinctive characteristics – by which they might have recognised these individuals? And in general terms, are there other ways that we recognise people?
- In today's worship we explore how to recognise God's voice and authority among or in people we meet, especially those who claim to speak in his name.

Call to worship

As individuals, we have heard God's call to be here today, to listen for God speaking to us through Scripture, through teaching, music, and all we experience together, and through each other.

As a community, we have gathered to help one another in discerning the word of God.

A gathering prayer

God, thank you that we do not have to seek you on our own. As the people who gathered in crowds and synagogues recognised together the authority of Jesus, so may we work together as a community to recognise your voice in our worship and our lives.

Amen.

First impressions WEB

Questions on the theme

- What is this and what is it supposed to do?
- How do you know what is truth?
- How do we know what comes from God?

Share the Word

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

You could accompany this reading with this mime. As the reading begins, someone steps into view from behind the reader, wearing a large sign/label that says, 'Moses'. After pausing to point to the label, they go to the front row and take someone by the hand (a prepared someone!). This second person wears a placard that says, 'The Prophet'. 'Moses' points to the new label, then – leading them by the hand – positions 'The Prophet' at their side. At the end of verse 15, 'Moses' points forcefully to 'The Prophet' and gives a thumbs up. During verse 16, 'Moses' extends both arms towards the congregation. From verses 17 to the end of the reading, 'Moses' cups a hand to the ear and mimes listening to an unseen speaker. At 'put my words into the mouth...' (v.18b), 'Moses' points to 'The Prophet' who puts both hands to the mouth then extends them towards the people. At verse 20, a third person ambles shiftily into view, without a label and without approaching 'Moses' and 'The Prophet'. This new character wanders around and mimes speaking to the people. But this is a false prophet, and at the end of the reading they stand still with bowed head and stooped shoulders.

Mark 1:21-28 WEB Script to print out

In advance, prime a small group to create a disturbance during the reading according to the following instructions. They mutter together as the reader goes to the place from where they will read, low-level so that the reader can speak over it. At the end of verse 21, the reader pauses and one of the 'disturbers' calls out, 'Come on, settle down now, give the lad a chance.' (NB. 'lad' refers to Jesus, who is about to speak, not the reader.) The reader continues, pausing again at the end of verse 22 when another 'disturber' calls out, 'Strike a light! This lad knows what he's on about!' The other 'disturbers' add words of general agreement. *Continues on the* WEB.



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Explore and respond

A sequence of active worship ideas; individual items can stand alone.

WEB See children's **Activity sheet**, **Colouring sheet** (Welsh versions available) and resources for use with **Under 5s**.

Would I Lie to You?

WE

How do we decide who to trust?

- Ask three pre-prepared contributors to tell an untrue 'tall story' about themselves and a fourth to tell one that's true. Select confident, convincing and 'trusted' congregation members. Invite everyone else, by show of hands, to indicate who they believe.
- Ask people how they made their choices, what were the clues or pointers for and against, and how they felt when proved right or wrong? In small groups, discuss whether similar criteria could be applied to knowing whose words come from God.

A craft activity: make a 'compass'

WES

Considering what indicates God's authority

You will need: card circles (approx. 10cm diameter); coloured pens/felt pens.

- Ask if anyone has seen or read Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series and can describe the question-answering 'alethiometer'. You could show some images from the TV or film versions.
- Invite people to make their own 'truth compass'. Ask them to think of four things that could help them decide whether someone was speaking with God's authority. Draw a symbol or picture for each of these factors, one in each quarter. Encourage them to take their compass home to look at, whenever they are wondering whether something comes from God.

The power behind the compass

WES

Reflecting on what guides us to truth

- Ask if anyone knows, and can describe, how compasses work and how they are used.
- Read John 16:13: 'When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.' Perhaps the Spirit is like the magnetism that works a compass. Invite the congregation to close their eyes, picture a spinning compass and imagine the Spirit slowly settling it in the direction of God's truth.

Hearing all the voices

WEA

Practise in listening well

- It's important for all voices to be heard if we are to discern where God is speaking, but not everyone gets the chance to be heard. In pairs, listen to each other describe when you feel God has been at work in some way in your church.

A simple worship activity

EW

Sing a prayer for peace and calm.

- Scams and misinformation can make us mistrustful. We must 'proceed with caution' in the world – but remembering Jesus' words: 'my peace I give to you...Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid' (John 14:27). Quietly sing the last two verses of 'Dear Lord and Father of Mankind' to seek calm in an uncertain world.

A prayer for all ages together

Like a compass that shows us the way,
(*cup hands as if holding a large compass*)
take our hands, Lord,
(*raise and offer hands*)
and lead us to those who speak your truth.
(*take a few steps on the spot, or walk a small circle*).

Amen.

Go with God

Consider together what you have explored, what that means for you and how you will live your faith this week.

- Display/project a running order of today's worship. Invite people to select one or more items that struck them and using the criteria from either 'Would I Lie to You?', their 'truth compass', or the activity of waiting for the Spirit's direction (see the corresponding **Explore and respond** activities in the opposite column), consider where or whether God was speaking to them today. **SA**

A sending out prayer

Lord, like your first disciples
you send us out as sheep among wolves.
Teach us to be wise as serpents
as well as innocent as doves.
Remind us that your peace comes with us
and your hand is there to guide and encourage.

Amen.

Go with God 24/7

WE

Encourage everyone to put their faith into action.

Notice who are the 'influencers' having an effect on your life. Use insights from today's worship to help you analyse them. Do you feel God wants you to heed them or not?

Faith 24/7 **WEB** **Thrive** – a resource to encourage everyday faith in every generation; **Bible study** – based on the week's resources, suitable for a home group.

You are not forgotten by God

Isaiah 40:21-31

The prophet contrasts the grandeur and eternity of God with that of even the mightiest of humans. There is no comparison. No human could ever create the universe and all that is in it. No one could know every single element and creature and person in the universe, as God does. And God will strengthen and uphold his people for whatever they will face.

In this week's Gospel reading, Jesus seeks out and heals Simon's mother-in-law, and those in need throughout Galilee. In doing this, he demonstrates the love of God. In the Old Testament reading, Isaiah proclaims this faithful love, even to those who feel abandoned. Today we explore and share experiences of that same love.

Bible notes

RCL Year B Epiphany 5

Common Worship readings, see footer.

Isaiah 40:21-31

For half a century the people of Judah had lived in exile. After the horror of the Babylonian war, defeat and capture, the prophet Jeremiah told them to make a life for themselves in their new surroundings (Jeremiah 29:7), which they had done. But it wasn't home. And having done what God asked them to do, they now feel abandoned, disregarded, alone in the world. This section orbits around verse 27. A new prophet has arisen who is telling the people of Judah to lift their eyes and look. Something extraordinary is about to happen. God is coming to deliver them and set them off on a journey home. But how can this be? Babylon is, like all empires, impregnable and disregards the Judahites even more than God. But the wheels of history are turning, Assyria is rising and Babylon is about to be swept away. When that happens, these sorrowing exiles need to be ready to make the long journey home. How can this be? Because of who God is. God is the all-powerful creator who brings empires to dust and stoops to rescue God's people. So, the prophet tells them to get ready: God will strengthen them for the journey if they look to God. The great words of verses 29-31 will be true of them and a new chapter of their history will open.

Psalm 147:1-11,20c

The poet takes up the theme of being regathered to God that Second Isaiah has spoken of. God gathers the outcasts and

rebuilds Jerusalem, healing and restoring broken people. So, sing a song of praise because God showers steadfast love – a dependable, eternal, gracious concern – on needy people; on us. Hallelujah!

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

The key to understanding this chapter is to remember that Paul is mid-way through answering a question about food offered to idols (see 8:1). Here Paul is offering the theological and missional reason for the answer he will give from 10:23. The Corinthians based their actions on their rights, on what they know (8:2). Paul bases his on what furthers the mission of God, what will help people of all kinds to see who Jesus is and why they should follow him. Rather than insisting on his rights (v.18), Paul reflects on what will help different people to see the truth of his message and he shapes what he says and how he lives so as not to put any obstacle in the way of them meeting Jesus. Interestingly, he says that by doing this he shares in the blessings of the gospel; in giving in this way, he also receives.

Mark 1:29-39

A key sign of God's reign is that there will be healing and wholeness. Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law and then, when the Sabbath ends, people carry the sick to him (1:32-34). Mark's narrative hurtles along at a break-neck speed and it is good to step back and notice that this section shows us two elements of Jesus' life – the bustle of teaching and healing, and the silence of being alone with God.

Jesus touches the sick a lot (1:31,41; 5:41; 7:33; 8:23). It's a sign of his love, of his desire to get alongside those who suffer,

showing the humility of God. But he is cautious about what such signs say about him. He's come to proclaim God's reign. He hasn't come to heal the sick; this isn't the focus of his mission, and it could become a big distraction (see 1:45). So, he forbids demons – who know who he is – from talking about him, because he doesn't want the crowds getting the wrong end of the stick about who he is. He's not the conquering hero messiah many were expecting. He's a lowly messiah, showing God's rule through serving and offering his life (10:45).

After a busy night with people, early next morning Jesus goes out to the desert to pray. He can only work and speak as he does because of his close, empowering relationship with his Father. Mark tells us this almost as an aside because the thrust of this little section is the dialogue with his disciples. But it's vital to note the place of prayer in Jesus' life. His followers find him and, not for the last time, they continue the testing started by Satan in the desert in 1:12-13. The temptation is to stay and run a healing mission. It's what Peter and co want. But Jesus has to resist and move his team on. That is not the kind of messiah God has called him to be. He must preach the gospel everywhere in Galilee (vv.38,39).

Hymns & songs

Songs in italics are suitable for all ages.

[WEB](#) Song categories, themes and rationale, web links and additional Welsh suggestions.

A love so undeserved
Always true, always kind
 As we are gathered, Jesus is here
Condemnation falls away
 I'm accepted, I'm forgiven
In the light of your presence
I've heard a thousand stories
 I watch the sunrise lighting the sky
 Lord Jesus Christ, you have come to us
 Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy
May I never lose the wonder
My heart is restless; let peace wash
over me
 O Christ, the healer, we have come
Oh, my soul, downcast within me
 Praise, my soul, the king of heaven
Seek ye first the kingdom of God and
his righteousness
 The past is with us still
 Under you under me
 What a friend we have in Jesus
You knew me at the start

CW variation: 2 before Lent: Prov 8:1,22-31;
 Ps 104:26-37; Col 1:15-20; John 1:1-14

Sermon ideas

Ideas for a sermon or interactive talk. See **WEB** for a 'thought for the week' to read out in place of a sermon; and *In touch*, linking the readings to the news.

- Isaiah 40:29-31 helps us to reflect on waiting, resting, hoping and trusting – all contained in the one Hebrew word here, *weqowye* – 'but on those who wait [for the Lord]'. We long for God to act and he will as long as we do two things: Get it off our chest (v.27) – the prayer is not polite activity, it gets down and dirty with creator of the universe and ensures he hears; but once we've prayed, then we get on with it (v.29-31). We don't know what's ahead when we set off, so sometimes we soar on eagles' wings (v.31b), feeling God's life and energy embrace and lift us. But renewal is really about energy to get on with it (v.31d), to walk through our circumstances and not fall or feel abandoned.

- How should we balance activity with quiet? People often feel abandoned, weighed down by life's burdens and they need us to be there for them. How do we ensure that we ourselves are not overwhelmed by life's needs? By taking a leaf out of Jesus' book: he was fully engaged with the needs of people but then he was off and alone with God. He could do the former only because he did the latter. We need to renew and refresh our walk with God in the busy-ness of church activity.

- The context of the Isaiah reading is that the exiles in Babylon felt abandoned by God. 'My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God' (v.27). What stories can we recall from our own childhood or adult life, of feeling abandoned when someone wasn't where you expected them to be? Perhaps some would be willing to share their experiences. Have they ever felt abandoned, disregarded, forgotten when they've been in their sickbed and the world is going on regardless? Simon's mother-in-law may have felt the same, but Jesus goes to see her – unusual behaviour for a guest – takes her hand and restores her to the bustle of life.

- God 'sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers' (Isaiah 40:22). How does this make you feel about God? God may feel distant, but the passage concludes with: 'those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles' (v.31), raising humanity to God and showing how God enters into human lives to give inner strength. 'Have you not known? Have you not heard?' This reminds us of the importance of our own experiences. What evidence have people had in their lives that God 'gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless' (v.29)?

Prayers

More prayers overleaf. **WEB** Welsh translations. Topical intercessions **WEB** each Wednesday.

A prayer of approach

Loving God, ever present, ever faithful,
we come to you on this new day,
among old and new friends,
with our sorrows and our joys,
with our hopes and our failures.
Where we have lost our way, show us a new path.
Where we have lost our sense of your presence, touch our hearts;
and where we have forgotten those in need, nudge our spirits,
that we may serve those around us
with a lightness of touch and a depth of compassion
that reflects your loving concern for all. **Amen.**

A prayer of adoration

God of all, we praise you for your care, commitment and compassion for all life.
Your energy never runs out.
Your well of love never runs dry.
Your grace never goes stale.
Your word is always alive and fresh and lifegiving.
Thank you, God, our strength.
Thank you, Jesus, our Saviour.
Thank you, Holy Spirit, our Comforter. **Amen.**

A prayer of confession

Response after each phrase:

Attune our hearts and increase our love

God of truth, we bring to you those times when we have used
God of compassion and peace,
forgive us when we don't hear the cries of your children:
forgive us when we don't hear the silence of the oppressed:
forgive us when we don't hear the words of challenge:
forgive us when we don't hear our own words of hypocrisy:
That we may serve you with all our hearts and minds
and souls – in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Assurance of forgiveness

Lord of our highs and our lows:
when we are sorry, you forgive us;
when we are weary, you refresh us;
when we are jaded, you encourage us;
when we feel forgotten, you reach out and remind us
of your ever-present and eternal love.
And so we trust you for today, believe in you for tomorrow
and will praise you for all eternity – in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

A prayer of praise

*After each line: **And we praise you.***

Almighty God,
you show your strength by lifting up the weak;
you show your compassion by supporting the helpless;
you show your tenderness by reaching those in darkness;
you show your faithfulness by remembering all your children.
Wherever we are, night or day, in wonder and gratitude. **Amen.**

You are not forgotten by God Isaiah 40:21-31

These two pages offer an outline for worship, with choices at various points. Individual items can be used alone or as part of your own worship design. Bible notes, more prayers, and suggestions for hymns and songs, and sermons/talks, are on the previous two pages.

WEB Resources on the reading to use with under 5s.

Gather

Introduction to worship

Use the activity and prayers to gather the group and introduce the theme.

How's your week been?

You will need: A4 or A5 sheets of paper printed with a soaring eagle, all scrunched up into balls.

- As they arrive, give everyone a scrunched ball, asking them not to open it out (yet). Ask people to recall any moments during the past week when they have felt scrunched up like the ball of paper, or wanted to curl up in a ball and hide. Where did they look for strength and support? What got them through – or is still getting them through – the challenges? If anyone didn't have any scrunched moments, suggest that they think instead of things in the news or other people's lives.
- Now invite everyone to open up and smooth out their paper, revealing the image. Ask if they have had any soaring eagle moments this week, when they felt they could spread their wings and fly. If not, again, has anything in the news or other people's lives given them that feeling? What powered those moments? Explain that today we will be exploring God's presence in our scrunched up and soaring moments.

Call to worship

'How good it is to sing praises to our God;
for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.'
So, let us praise the God who is
great in strength and mighty in power,
and whose love will never let us go.

A gathering prayer

Ever-loving God,
you sent Jesus to bring healing to the sick and the sad,
and to show us your love by seeking out those in need.
Send us, we pray, to be your eyes and feet and hands,
seeing, seeking and loving those in need. **Amen.**

First impressions **WEB**

Questions on the theme

- Why are bees so important to human survival?
- How can we make sure no one feels insignificant and forgotten?
- What helps you to know you are known and loved by God?

Share the Word

Isaiah 40:21-31

This week's reading is from the first chapter of what is usually called 'Second Isaiah', and arises from the period at the end of the Jewish exile in Babylon (see this week's **Bible Notes**). It offers words of hope, anticipating the people's return to their homeland, and is sometimes called the 'Book of Comfort'. Use information from the **Bible Notes** to set the context for the reading before you begin. This is important in order for people to make sense of the presentation below, and the explorations that follow (including some of this week's sermon ideas).

Accompany the reading with displayed/projected images: verses 21-22 – an image of the earth from space; verses 23-25 – a toppled or fractured statue of a fallen 'ruler', e.g. Stalin or Saddam Hussein; verse 26 – a night sky of stars ('these' in the reading). The plight of the exiled Jews as refugees is one shared by many in today's world; from verse 27 you could show images from a recent incident, e.g. news headlines to accompany verses 27-29, and pictures of refugees, abandoned inflatables, make-shift camps, or similar for verses 28-30. From verses 31 show an image of refugees being welcomed in a new place.

Mark 1:29-39 **WEB** Script to print out

Before the reading, invite people to make an imaginary journey. Ask them to sit upright, with legs uncrossed and hands in their laps, eyes closed, and to concentrate their attention on their breathing, which should be steady and natural. Give a few moments for them to settle into this, then lead them in a guided visualisation in which they are a member of an ambulance crew taking a patient to A&E. They experience a long wait to hand over their patient and witness the crowded situation in A&E. At the end of the visualisation, wait a few moments, then ask everyone, when they feel ready, to open their eyes and come back to the worship space ready to hear the Gospel reading. *Continues on the* **WEB**.



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Explore and respond

A sequence of active worship ideas; individual items can stand alone.
WEB See children's **Activity sheet**, **Colouring sheet** (Welsh versions available) and resources for use with **Under 5s**.

Let me count the ways

W E

Considering the variety of God's love.

You will need: paper and pens.

- Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote a love sonnet that begins, 'How do I love thee? Let me count the ways'. Give everyone a small piece of paper and ask them to list all the different ways and situations in which God might show love for us. Share this with a neighbour and add any extra ideas they have to their own list.

Make a braid

W E S

Recognising the action of God in our everyday lives.

You will need: (for each person) three lengths of thick wool, two of a dark colour and one bright yellow (or gold if available) about 10cm long.

- Remind/show people how to make a three-strand braid (instructions on the **WEB**). Ask them to work in pairs, one holding the end of the other's wool while they braid, then swapping over. The braider should tell the person holding the wool about times they have felt God's presence in their lives. The yellow thread is a reminder of God's presence woven into the fabric of daily life.

I've got you

W E A

Thinking about the variety of needs in our community.

- Ask for suggestions as to which groups or people might feel in 'internal exile' in your community – e.g. it might be refugees, the elderly, those who are homeless, but do not limit it to these examples. And make sure young people are given a voice. Write the suggestion on a flipchart.
- Turn the suggestions into new lines for the song 'He's got the whole world in his hands' and sing your new version. Read St Teresa of Avila's reflection 'Christ has no body but yours' **WEB** and pray for guidance and strength to do God's work.

A simple worship activity

W E S

Recalling that God cares for all of us individually.

- Project an image of the stars at night (perhaps the one you used one in **Share the Word**). Read Isaiah 40 verse 26: 'Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.'
- Invite people to focus on one star while thinking of someone they know who needs God's care, while together, softly singing the chorus of 'Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you'. Invite people to focus on another star and think of someone else in need and repeat the chorus. And, finally, to focus on a third star and think of their own needs, again singing the chorus.

A prayer for all ages together

Creator God, you count all the stars,
 not one of them is missing from your love.
 Thank you that we are all remembered by you,
 And that no one misses out on your loving care.
Amen.

Go with God

Consider together what you have explored, what that means for you and how you will live your faith this week.

- Invite people to think about the week ahead, particularly the challenges and opportunities for service it might bring, and to use their braid with the yellow/gold thread (see *Make a braid*), and/or the lists from *Let me count the ways*, to recall and draw on God's love and strength to see them through. **E A**

A sending out prayer

The Lord builds up his people; (*one hand on the other*)
he gathers the outcasts. (*make a gathering gesture*)
 He heals the broken-hearted, (*hands on heart*)
and binds up their wounds. (*grip biceps*)
 The Lord lifts up the downtrodden; (*raise hands*)
thanks be to God.

Go with God 24/7

E A

Encourage everyone to put their faith into action.

Look for examples of God working in the world and in your own life in the coming week, and give thanks for each time you recognise one. Be ready to be 'God's hands' in everyday situations.

Faith 24/7 **WEB** **Thrive** – a resource to encourage everyday faith in every generation; **Bible study** – based on the week's resources, suitable for a home group.

The importance of witness and telling

Mark 9:2-9

Jesus invites his three closest disciples to go up a mountain with him. The disciples are dazzled by Jesus' altered appearance. In contrast to the voice that spoke to Jesus at his baptism, this time a voice speaks directly to the disciples and tells them to 'listen to him', before they then head back down the mountain.

Today concludes the Epiphany themes of revelation with the transfiguration of Jesus. His appearance with Moses and Elijah places him in a succession of witness and revelation, continued by the disciples who were present, and indeed by us today. We reflect on the challenges of being a disciple and the importance of passing on what we have received.

Bible notes

RCL Year B Transfiguration

2 Kings 2:1-12

This is a masterclass in storytelling. The opening sentence tells us what will happen, but the rest of the narrative bristles with tension as we wait to see how the first sentence will come about. Three times Elijah tells Elisha to stay put. Three times he refuses. Twice the other prophets tell Elisha that today is the day when Elijah will leave them. Three times Elisha says, 'I know'. Everyone knows what is about to happen and yet we strain forward to see how it all ends. Clearly Elijah intended Elisha to be with him; so why did he tell him not to accompany him to the next place? Is this some kind of test to see how ready Elisha is to take on the role Elijah has had? Finally, they arrive at the location of the climax to Elijah's story. And the old prophet offers a final gift. Elisha wants double what his master has. And while they carry on walking and talking – what was the topic of their conversation? – the chariot of God comes and carries Elijah off. This leaves Elisha – who was expecting some such thing to happen – crying out in grief and amazement: grief at the loss of his mentor, amazement at the mode of his departure. And he is left with his grief – but not for long.

Psalm 50:1-6

The psalmist could be recalling the Elijah story as he paints up a storm of a portrait of God's power. His purpose in this is to get our attention: God is speaking. He has come to render judgement and gather his faithful ones to him. It is not only Elijah who is swept into God's presence; so are all those who faithfully follow him.

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

These verses are part of a longer section of 2 Corinthians where Paul contrasts his ministry with that of Moses – hence the reference to veils in verse 3. In particular, Paul is contrasting the light of the gospel with the darkness enfolding those who haven't heard or believed. But the light is seen supremely not in a message but in the face of the one the message concerns, Jesus Christ. Paul takes us back to Genesis 1 where God said 'let there be light' and asserts that the light is shining in the face of Jesus. This is the same point John makes in the opening verses of his Gospel. Paul says we see the glory of God in Jesus' face and we see Jesus' face as we hear the gospel proclaimed.

Mark 9:2-9

Six days after he's taught them about his mission, three of Jesus' disciples are given a glimpse of his past and future glory. The word used to describe the complete change that comes over Jesus is the word from which we get metamorphosis. The words recall Daniel 7:9, indicating that Jesus is glorious indeed, since in Daniel the words used are the 'Ancient One' (a name for God) rather than the Son of Man.

This account of the transfiguration is told entirely from the disciples' perspective: what they saw and how they reacted. They see Jesus and two towering Old Testament figures – Elijah and Moses – talking together. While these two could represent the Law and the Prophets, the sweep of Israel's story so far, it is more likely that they are seen as the 'deathless ones', those who Jewish-inspired hope associated with the coming of God's kingdom. This becomes clear in verses 11-13.

Peter starts rambling because he's scared stiff and doesn't know what to make of it all. One thing's for sure, this is not a time for erecting tents! It is possible he thinks that the suffering has been by-passed and the glory has unexpectedly arrived for good. It is God who clarifies things. In the cloud – a common image of his presence – God's voice restates for the disciples what was said only to Jesus at his baptism (1:10-11). The one they've followed for the past year is so much greater than everyone who's come before him – even the Old Testament giants present on the mountain. He is God's Son. So the disciples should listen to everything he says. God wants them to pay particular attention to what's just been said about how Jesus' messianic mission involves rejection, suffering, death and resurrection.

Hymns & songs

Songs in italics are suitable for all ages. **WEB** Song categories, themes and rationale, web links and additional Welsh suggestions.

All to Jesus I surrender
 Away with our fears! The glad morning
Colours of day dawn into the mind
Can I get a witness
 Come, let us praise the Lord, with joy
Father of life you are my hope
 Give me the wings of faith to rise
 God, whose love is all around us
 Go forth and tell! O church of God, awake
 Go, tell it on the mountain
Humbly I stand, an off'ring
 If we only seek peace
If you plant a seed
 Jesus, on the mountain peak
O magnify the Lord with me, and
Tell me the old, old story
 Transfigured Christ, none comprehends
We are the kingdom
We will dance, we will dance for
your glory
You who ride ancient skies above

Sermon ideas

Ideas for a sermon or interactive talk. See **WEB** for a 'thought for the week' to read out in place of a sermon; and *In touch*, linking the readings to the news.

- Epiphany is about showing what's real and what's not in the world we live in. This is what Paul explores in 2 Corinthians 4:3-6. And it's about values. Paul doesn't deceive or resort to gimmicks; he appeals to each person's conscience, the part of everyone that knows we're made for something better than the darkness the world seems so often to offer. So, it's about lifting veils (vv.3-4a): the gospel reveals, the world conceals; behind bright lights is (often) the spiritual power of darkness, leading people into the night; our call is, gently and persistently, to urge them to turn their gaze on true light that, at that moment, they cannot see. The true light is in Jesus crucified and raised (vv.4b-5); he reveals what God is like.
- Why was it that Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus in the transfiguration? Were they there to represent the Law and the Prophets? Or were they the 'deathless ones' who pointed to the resurrection to come? What does all this tell us about how God is revealed to the world in this season of Epiphany? How do we take this story and land it in our lives today, and the lives of those around us, indeed of the whole world that needs to hear the good news that God has come?
- Facing a long trek with many obstacles is a common adventure movie plot line. (You could invite people to suggest examples and explore in outline.) Can we think of any that involve going up mountains, or following a leader without knowing where they're going? (*The Hobbit/Lord of the Rings* films tick many boxes!) So, Peter, James and John go on this trip; what do you think the other nine might have felt? And the three 'chosen ones'? Perhaps we should remember that, whatever their experiences, all 12 were in fact chosen! In 2 Kings, Elijah seems to be trying to protect Elisha, offering escape routes from the demands of their vocation. What are the challenges of discipleship today? How far are we willing to go on the adventure?
- The three disciples who went up the mountain with Jesus were not told never to speak of what they had seen, but only to keep silent until after the resurrection. Presumably they must have spoken then for the story to have found its way into the Christian tradition and the written Gospels. Being witnesses, and passing on experiences at the right moment are vital. Has someone else's testimony been important in your faith journey? You could invite people to share a personal story of theirs – how did the right words at the right time help them?

Prayers

More prayers overleaf. **WEB** Welsh translations. Topical intercessions **WEB** each Wednesday.

A prayer of approach

God of all ages, in expectation we come together to hear the stories of your people long ago, and to be inspired by them. In humility, we come to hear the words of your prophets, to be challenged by them. In confidence, we come to learn how to grow into our own story, and to share it. In joy, we come to appreciate the stories of those around us, and affirm them. In unity, we come celebrate your love for each of us and for our world. **Amen.**

A prayer of adoration

Inspirational God,
from little acts of faith, you bring huge transformation;
from little acts of trust, you bring huge opportunities;
from little seeds, you bring huge growth;
from little steps, you bring huge progress;
from little showings of love, you draw us into your huge heart,
and hold us as one – for you are our all, forever. **Amen.**

A prayer of confession

Response after each phrase: Forgive us we pray.

God of truth,
when we won't go far enough in speaking out for justice...
When we won't go far enough out of our comfort zone...
When we won't go far enough in taking responsibility for our behaviour...
When we won't go far enough in meeting the needs of those around us...
Forgive us and help us to change, to grow, and to appreciate fully all that you have done for us – in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Assurance of forgiveness

Living God, your forgiveness enables and empowers us to change, to move on and to be made whole. Thank you for your patience, your grace, and your presence with us each step of our life's journey – and beyond. **Amen.**

A prayer of thanksgiving

God of our setting out and of our arriving,
we rejoice that, wherever we go, you go with us.
When we journey together, you bless us with fellowship.
When we journey alone, you bless us with courage.
When we journey in the footsteps of others, you bless us with gratitude.
When we journey to new places, you bless us with faith.
And when we make our last journey, you bless us with the knowledge that we are safe within your eternal love – thank you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

The importance of witness and telling Mark 9:2-9

These two pages offer an outline for worship, with choices at various points. Individual items can be used alone or as part of your own worship design. Bible notes, more prayers, and suggestions for hymns and songs, and sermons/talks, are on the previous two pages.

WEB Resources on the reading to use with under 5s.

Gather

Introduction to worship

Use the activity and prayers to gather the group and introduce the theme.

High points

- Invite people to share the high points of: their week; then of their year so far; and, finally, of their lives. Ask them how often they share such moments with others. Ask them to discuss with their neighbour(s) why they might share special memories. And have they had an experience they were asked or instructed not to share? How did that feel? Were you ever released from the restraint; and, if so, how did that feel?
- Did anyone share, or at least bring to mind, anything to do with their lives as Christians? What moments in their journey of faith would they class as 'high points'. Have they ever shared them with anyone? Today we are going to explore a story of a 'high point' in the discipleship journeys of Peter, James and John – a literal 'mountaintop moment'.

Call to worship

We come together to share in the story of faith, to share our own stories and to add new chapters to the story of the Church.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

A gathering prayer

Here we are again, Lord.
There are many temptations to be elsewhere,
but, as you live and as we ourselves live,
we will not leave you.
It's a lifelong journey: as long as life lasts, we're on it.
And while we're on it we should make the most of it.
Help us to make the most of this time together
with each other and with you today. **Amen.**



Michelle Barnett, www.behance.net/michellebarnett2

Share the Word

2 Kings 2:1-12 WEB Script to print out

Mark 9:2-9

Remind people that Jesus chose just three of the 12 disciples to go up the mountain with him to witness the transfiguration. Ask: How might the other nine have felt about this? The following sketch is a response to that question. After the sketch conclude: 'Thankfully for us, we don't have to wait – because the full story is here. (*hold up a Bible and read the passage*)

You will need: Peter, James and John, and a group of up to nine other; three have speaking parts.

Disciple 1: I just wonder what's so special about those three?

Disciple 2: I know; what about the rest of us?

Disciple 3: If anyone ever wrote about Jesus and his disciples, you'd think there were only three of them, not 12.

Disciple 1: They might know our names, but not much else.

Disciple 2: I bet they wouldn't even get them right!

Disciple 3: Hey, look – here they come now. There's Peter.

(*Peter appears, followed by James and John*)

Disciple 1: He looks shattered. (*to Peter*) Are you okay mate?

Peter: I'm fine.

Disciple 2: You don't look it.

Disciple 3: You look as if you've seen a ghost!

James: Kind of!

Peter: Shush!

James: What?

John: We're not supposed to say!

James: Sorry, I forgot.

Disciple 1: What?

John: Jesus told us not to say anything about what went on up there.

Disciple 2: That's great – we don't get to go up, and now we don't even get to hear what happened!

Disciple 3: Come on Peter. You look really shaken up. What happened?

James: Peter made a fool of himself, that's what.

John: Oh come on, James – to be fair, he was terrified.

Peter: We all were.

James: I wasn't.

John: You were!

First impressions WEB

Questions on the theme

- What stands out for you in the story of Elisha and Elijah?
- When have you caught a glimpse of the glory of God?
- How do this week's transfiguration stories challenge or encourage you?

Disciple 1: But why?

Disciple 2: Was it *scary* scary, or *good* scary?

Peter: Good scary, I think.

Disciple 3: And that's all you're saying!

Peter: You'll have to wait.

Explore and respond

A sequence of active worship ideas; individual items can stand alone.

WEB See children's **Activity sheet**, **Colouring sheet** (Welsh versions available) and resources for use with **Under 5s**.

Make a heart chain

E S A

Reflecting on ourselves as part of a chain of succession.

You will need: A5 paper, scissors, pencils.

- Across today's readings we can trace a succession, a passing on of something special. We can symbolise this by creating a chain of hearts. With the paper portrait, fold bottom to top, then each half to the middle, to make a four-section concertina. On the top layer draw a heart, filling the space but running off both long edges. Cut this out, cutting through all four layers but not along the edges!
- At the top of each linked heart write 'heart', 'links', 'to', 'heart' – one word per heart. In the middle of the first heart write (or draw) 'Moses'; on the second 'Elijah' with 'Elisha' beneath and an arrow connecting them; on the third 'Jesus' with 'the disciples' underneath and a connecting arrow; and on the fourth 'Gospels' with 'me' below and a question mark below 'me' with connecting arrows. The question mark represents another person whose heart might be added to the chain. Decorate the hearts as you wish, and think about whose heart you would want to link into this chain of succession.

Stand and be counted

W E A

Explore the challenges of being a witness.

- Today is also Racial Justice Sunday. Share examples of different kinds of racial injustice (see *God and racial justice*, **WEB**), e.g. from the CBTI website **WEB**. Ask people to suggest how each could be countered.
- Listen to a setting of 'Swing low sweet chariot' (there are many available), inspired by today's Old Testament reading and used by oppressed people to encourage them with hope. As you listen, consider how far you could and would go in being a witness for Christian values and standing up for justice.

How much do you want

W E

Consider the strength of our desire to serve.

- In pairs, share what things you enjoy so much you could put them into the sentence, 'I could never have enough of...'
- Elisha asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit to help him with his work as a messenger for God. What would you ask for? (Remember that Elisha was told what he'd asked for was difficult! Choose realistically.) Form a line across the worship space with zero at one end, a single portion in the middle and double at the other end, according to what you would ask for. Invite people to share with their neighbours on either side the reasons for their choice.

A simple worship activity

E S

An act of penitence for falling short in discipleship.

You will need: palm cross, candle or lighter, fireproof dish.

- As a corporate act of contrition for not going as far as we might in witnessing to the gospel, the worship leader burns a palm cross – if you have never done this before, helpful hint: it generally works better if the cross is dried in an oven first. Sing together a suitable well-known Lenten hymn such as 'When I survey the wondrous Cross' – you could point out the reference in the first verse to the 'Prince of glory', and link this to the transfiguration.
- The ash could then be used on Ash Wednesday, if this is your custom.

A prayer for all ages together

Father, we want to be your witnesses. (*reach out, hands open*)
Give us the right words (*touch your lips*)
and the portion of courage we need. (*hands on heart*)

Amen.

Go with God

Consider together what you have explored, what that means for you and how you will live your faith this week.

- A voice from a cloud told the three disciples to listen to Jesus. What has Jesus said to you through today's worship? Has it been a challenge or an encouragement to you? Invite people to reflect on these questions while listening to the Taizé chant, 'Nada te turbe'. Display the lyrics in Spanish and English translations. **S**

A sending out prayer

Join hands in a single long chain; the first person holds a cross, the last has their hand on the door.

We go out into the world in peace
as links in the chain of faith;
may we be brave witnesses,
sharing through word and deed
the revelations we have received.

Amen.

Go with God 24/7

W A

Encourage everyone to put their faith into action.

There is more to racism and racial injustice than acts of abuse and violence. In the coming week, find out about the varieties of racism and how you can support racial equality campaigns.

Faith 24/7 **WEB** **Thrive** – a resource to encourage everyday faith in every generation; **Bible study** – based on the week's resources, suitable for a home group.

God's good news of a covenant

Genesis 9:8-17

After the flood, God tells Noah that a covenant is to be made with all living creatures, that there will never be another event like the flood, in which God destroys everything and begins again. The rainbow is a sign and a reminder of this covenant.

We explore the rainbow, a sign of God's promise never to stop loving our whole planet and everything in and on it – no matter what. Jesus' baptism shows Jesus tuned into God's steadfast love, able to hear God's voice, respond to God's Spirit. We are invited to relish God's love, to start afresh in our appointed role helping God to love and care for the planet.

Bible notes

RCL Year B Lent 1

Genesis 9:8-17

The stories in the early chapters of Genesis set out the ancient Israelite understanding of the relationship between God and creation: God is the source of all creation; creation is good; creation is ordered; humankind is made in God's image and tasked with caring for God's creation; living in a way that is out of step with God has disastrous results.

Many ancient cultures have flood stories that, in one way or another, are the judgement of the gods on the wayward human population. In this version, Noah is the one bit of light in an otherwise dark world. The widespread destruction caused by the flood enables a reset, a fresh start for creation, led by the one family that had remained in step with God. The months spent in the ark, while quickly read, were no brief moment and would have been a character-forming time!

On release from the ark, Noah's first response is to make an offering to God, perhaps out of gratitude, perhaps as an act of dedication. God makes several promises that give future security to humankind. These promises are sealed with the covenant set out in today's reading: a contract, a formal agreement between two parties, in this case between God and humankind – present and future. While such a contract would normally have responsibilities on either side, this covenant has no conditions attached. God's love for God's creation is such that, having enabled this fresh start, humankind will never again experience

such a judgement. Never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth and all humankind. The rainbow is a memory-trigger: when we see it, we see a thing of beauty, a reminder of God's faithfulness, a promise of a future.

Psalm 25:1-10

This psalm of petition could easily have been prayed by Noah, in the face of all the turmoil going on around him. The psalmist knows that God can be trusted and asks for God's intervention. In an uncertain world God's love is steadfast, reliable. In a world where we can easily be overwhelmed by the consequences of government decisions, of misused power, of lack of responsibility for ourselves and others, God's love remains.

1 Peter 3:18-22

Peter writes to the mostly Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians in Turkey who are experiencing some persecution. Aiming to encourage them to keep going, to not question their suffering but to focus on living as the people of God, Peter packs a lot of theology into these verses. Jesus also suffered, to bring us to God. How? Well, when Jesus died, it enabled him to preach to those throughout history who had not kept step with God, such as those who were wiped out at the time of the flood. Just as Noah and his family were saved from that judgement by their obedience to God in building the ark, so we are saved through baptism because this, too, demonstrates a turning to God; and because Jesus' resurrection makes possible a fresh start. Therefore, the suffering being experienced is an opportunity rather than a threat. It is an opportunity to choose how to respond,

to keep focused, to live as God's people, God's holy people. As with today's other readings, this is an opportunity to reset, to remember God's faithfulness and love.

Mark 1:9-15

As always, we begin Lent with Jesus' baptism, affirmation, period of temptation in the wilderness, restoration, and the beginning of his ministry. Mark assumes that his readers will know who Jesus is and so the only scene-setting is the proclamation of John the Baptist, in the preceding verses, of the coming of one who is 'more powerful' and who will baptize 'with the Holy Spirit'.

With the people of God looking for a new rescuer who would lead them to freedom as did Moses in days of old, Mark portrays Jesus as representing Israel. Having gone through the waters of baptism (like the Israelites of old going through the Red Sea) and through the time of testing in the desert (like the Israelites of old wandering in the wilderness as they learnt to be the people of God), now is the time for something new: the kingdom of God has come near. This is the good news! Turn around ('repent'), make a fresh start, because God is doing something new! As always, we begin Lent with the opportunity to refocus, to reset, to renew our relationships with God and each other.

Hymns & songs

Songs in italics are suitable for all ages. **WEB** Song categories, themes and rationale, web links and additional Welsh suggestions.

Come, living God, when least expected
Come with me, come wander, come
welcome the world
Crashing waters at creation
From the waiting comes the sign
God has chosen me
Hail to the Lord's anointed
Have you heard the good news
I bind unto myself today
Jesus in the desert
Jesus you have called us
Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us
Lord, when you came to Jordan
My song is love unknown
No wonder that we sing
O love, how deep, how broad, how high!
Out of the flowing river
Spirit who broods
There'll be times of trial
We walk his way

Sermon ideas

Ideas for a sermon or interactive talk. See [WEB](#) for a 'thought for the week' to read out in place of a sermon; and *In touch*, linking the readings to the news.

- Beth was only young, 19, but life had been hard. She'd had to make her own way in the world, to rely on herself. Learning to trust God had been challenging. Learning to obey went against the grain. But now she had come to be baptized. As the minister lowered Beth under the water everything seemed to be in slow motion. The water closed above her head and she felt as if she went down, way down, deep into the river... then she was rushing up, as if from miles away, leaving her past behind her, reaching up towards the sunlight, God's light.
- Rainbows are caused by light travelling through water droplets. The light bends and bounces through the droplet, separating out into its different wavelengths, each a different colour, producing a rainbow of colours ordered according to the wavelength. But we don't need to understand how a rainbow works in order to appreciate its beauty, just as we don't need to understand how or why God provides us with fresh starts in order to be grateful and make use of them. And, again without needing to know how, we can see that the light interacting with the droplets transforms them. Perhaps our fresh starts, too, come when we are transformed by the Light of the World.
- 'The focus of the story is not the flood but the change in God which makes possible a new beginning for creation.' (W Brueggemann). The story marks human awareness of a permanent change of heart in God. God now promises an unfailing, steadfast love towards us and the whole of creation without conditions. For thousands of years people have sung psalms rejoicing in this love, even amid heartfelt laments about challenging human behaviour. God chooses to be infinitely patient with limited human ability to help God care for creation. God compensates for the unequal partnership, but never stops inviting us to be agencies of God's presence on earth. We say 'yes' and we look to Jesus.
- The rainbow is a symbol representing diversity and inter-connectedness. God tells Noah to bring into the ark all the opposites: the wild and the domestic (Genesis 7:2-15) and locks them together inside. 'It is "holding" things unreconciled that teaches us – leaving them partly unresolved. Sometimes we claw ourselves to death. But gathering contraries is the school of love. It happens, in honest community and committed relationships [covenant relationships]. In forgiveness [a fresh start] you experience three graces: God's unmerited goodness, the deeper goodness of the one you have forgiven, your own gratuitous goodness.' (R. Rohr, *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality*)

Prayers

More prayers overleaf. [WEB](#) Welsh translations. Topical intercessions [WEB](#) each Wednesday.

A prayer of approach

Eternal God,
your love draws us in and your promises fill us with hope;
your covenant secures our future and undergirds our faith;
your grace enriches and colours our relationships and our lives.
And so, on this new day, we join our voices to sing your praises.
We open our hearts to hear your word
and celebrate all that you have done for us and for all creation.
In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

A prayer of adoration

God of truth,
we praise you for your covenant with us and all creation and
for all the colours of your blessings:
for the reds and yellows of your unconditional and costly love;
for the pinks and greens of your creativity and compassion;
for the oranges and purples of your grace and understanding;
and for the blue of your faithfulness.
In wonder and joy we praise you. **Amen.**

A prayer of confession

Response after each phrase:

Forgive us and help us to make a fresh start.

God of all,
when we abuse your covenant with us and are complacent:
when we trash your creation ruthlessly and selfishly:
when we reject your call to live well and generously:
when we take your love for granted:
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Assurance of forgiveness

Faithful God, you raise us up from the ashes of sin and repentance
to the joy of forgiveness and acceptance; you flood our hearts with
your love, your grace and your beauty; you give us the opportunity
to make a fresh start and to seek out that which is lifegiving and
creative and fulfilling; you journey with us through the storms and
the failures and equip us to stand firm and to flourish. Thank you.
Amen.

A prayer of praise

Response after each phrase: We praise you.

Living God, with the crescent moon and the rising sun:
with the singing birds and the roaring waves:
with your creatures in the forests and the creatures in the fields:
with our friends and family around our tables and our brothers and
sisters around our world:
for your promises, your love and your faithfulness:
Amen.

God's good news of a covenant Genesis 9:8-17

These two pages offer an outline for worship, with choices at various points. Individual items can be used alone or as part of your own worship design. Bible notes, more prayers, and suggestions for hymns and songs, and sermons/talks, are on the previous two pages.

WEB Resources on the reading to use with under 5s.

Gather

Introduction to worship

Use the activity and prayers to gather the group and introduce the theme.

Remembering a rainbow

- Display a photograph or video of a rainbow. Or watch a video that shows you simple ways you could make a rainbow yourself **WEB**. Ask people to 'remember' a time they saw a rainbow. Where were they? What feelings did it stir? Did they tell anyone (how many of us say 'Look, a rainbow!')?
- A rainbow is, of course, formed by the interaction of sunlight and water droplets. But over many generations, humans have invested it with symbolic meaning. In the Bible it is the sign and a reminder of God's promise – a symbol of the colourful life of the whole planet, sustained in being by God's covenant, always inter-connecting. It is often taken for granted. Invite people to think, just for a few moments, about the richness and interconnectedness of life on planet earth. Today, we explore the good news of God's promise,

Call to worship

Rainbows delight and surprise us.
Our breath pausing, we stand under the beauty
of the creator's promise of unfailing love.
Colours of joy beaming onto us,
recalling us to remember, to turn,
to believe the good news.

A gathering prayer

God of beautiful rainbows,
mirroring the myriad colours of your marvellous creation,
we are drawn together in the dance of your unfailing love.
Thank you for attracting us with your beauty and goodness.
Inspire us to treasure each day as a fresh start,
in our shared life in you. **Amen.**

Share the Word

Genesis 9:8-17

Create a visual representation of a rainbow. For example, drape seven appropriately coloured cloths over a table or communion rail. Or display a photo of a rainbow. Explain that a covenant is a solemn and binding promise of love. A religious marriage is an example. Each person pledges themselves to the other: for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness, in health, to love, to cherish, until parted by death. Ask everyone, during the reading, to notice who God pledges to provide life for, and for how long. And what conditions God places on this provision of shared life. After the reading, invite people to respond to the task you set. Then sit quietly and sing or listen to the hymn 'God in his love for us lent us this planet'.

If children are present, you could precede the above with a recap of the story so far using the visual aid of a toy ark (or a cardboard box, cut and decorated accordingly). Share out a range of Duplo™ people and animals. Give a brief summary of the back story: 'After God created the world, God was dismayed with how bad the quarrelling and fighting got, and decided to start again. God asked Noah to build a huge boat – the ark – and to take two of everything on board, because there was going to be a great flood.' Ask the young people to bring the different people and animals and put them in the ark. 'Then God sent the rain.' Get people to stamp their feet to imitate the rain. Ask people to imagine what it would have been like for lions and goats, cats and mice, etc., to be all together in an enclosed space for 40 days and nights (nearly six weeks). 'In the part of the story we are listening to today, the rain has stopped and it is time for everyone to come out and start a new life.'

Mark 1:9-15 WEB [Script to print out](#)

WEB This week we offer **Somewhere, over the mountains of Arabat...** drama.

First impressions WEB

Questions on the theme

- This valley flowers every three to ten years and only after a flood – what thoughts does that stir in you?
- Why is the rainbow after 'The Flood' a sign of God's covenant?
- What does God's promise mean to you?



Explore and respond

A sequence of active worship ideas; individual items can stand alone.

WEB See children's **Activity sheet**, **Colouring sheet** (Welsh versions available) and resources for use with **Under 5s**.

Feel the love

W E S

A way to express God's universal and unconditional love.

You will need: A5 paper, scissors, pencils.

- In advance, prepare a large rainbow painted on wallpaper, with one or more red card hearts attached near its centre.
- Display the rainbow. Ask everyone to line up in pairs. Give every pair a number: one, two or three. Ones are people. Twos are tame animals. Threes are wild creatures. Explain that, after the flood: God promised to love everyone – all people alive then and their children's children, and so on for ever; God promised to love all living things – tame and wild, across all the earth, then and for ever into the future; and God promised this love, no matter what – in good times and bad times.
- Take the heart(s) from the rainbow and pass it/(them) to someone, saying 'I am [*your name, or a country/people that a person might be from, or the name of an animal – as appropriate*]. God loves me; and God loves you. Pass it on.' That person should then do the same, until everyone has received it. The last person returns the heart to the rainbow. Remind everyone that the rainbow is a sign/reminder that God's love will be there for every generation to come.

A prayer for all ages together

Loving God,
hearing about your love for us makes us feel safe.
You don't ask impossible things of us.
When we mess up, you give us a fresh start.
Thank you.
We see signs of your love all around:
in friends, in the things we have, in rainbows.
May your love flow through us
to the whole of your beautiful creation. **Amen.**

Gift of life collage

W E S A

Reflect on how God's love makes us flourish.

You will need: large sheets of paper, a selection of art and craft materials.

- Work in small groups to make a collage. At its centre, make/draw a rainbow and a heart. Around this make/draw things that give you life, make you feel loved, or help you to flourish.
- When the collages are finished, invite the groups to show their work and say a few words about what is represented in their collage. Draw what has been shared together in the form of a thanksgiving prayer.

Operation Noah

W A

Explore a Christian response to climate/planet issues.

- Using phones and tablets, and working in groups, ask people to find out about the charity called Operation Noah. If there is a group that doesn't have access to the technology, ask them to discuss what they know (e.g. from the Bible) about how Christians might or should respond to climate or other world issues.

A small part

W E S A

A poem to help us reflect on our personal response.

- Reread this week's Bible reading, and then these words – an extract from a poem by Gideon Heugh:

Do not be afraid –
to complete the repair of the world
is not why you were made.
You were created to play
only your small part; whatever is within your hands;
whatever is the now of your heart.

(Gideon Heugh, *Tearfund Lent devotional 2023*, day 19 **WEB**)

- What can we learn about how God relates to us and how we can relate to God? What is the now of your heart?

Go with God

Consider together what you have explored, what that means for you and how you will live your faith this week.

- Invite people to summarise and share their discoveries from today's worship. Then ask everyone to pause, take two deep breaths. Say: Hear again the good news is that God loves you and the whole of creation for ever and ever. Your ability to mess up is not a problem for God.
- Encourage everyone to name, silently, the new start God is calling them to today. **W S**

A sending out prayer

God of new beginnings,
your undying, tender love is truly amazing.
You sustain the whole universe with what is needed for life.
You trust us humans to care for that life.
We often fail,
but your love reaches out a hand to pick us up,
to help us start again.
Thank you. **Amen.**

Go with God 24/7

S A

Encourage everyone to put their faith into action.

Pause three times each day this week to enjoy the comfort that God's forever-love gives you. Each day do at least one small thing with love to tend your bit of creation (ideally a different thing each day).

Faith 24/7 **WEB** **Thrive** – a resource to encourage everyday faith in every generation; **Bible study** – based on the week's resources, suitable for a home group.

Trusting God when we don't understand

Genesis 17:1-7,15-16

God makes a covenant with Abram, in which Abram and his wife Sarai (both in their nineties), will become the ancestors of many nations and peoples, including their leaders, and an example of great faith. They are renamed Abraham and Sarah and promised the birth of a son – this is a great blessing because they had not previously been able to have children.

This week we explore different ways to change our automatic or instinctive way of seeing things. We explore how we need other people to help us see things differently, to help us appreciate that our way of seeing things may not be God's way. And we explore how to trust God, even when we are worried that God is wrecking our plans.

Bible notes

RCL Year B Lent 2

Genesis 17:1-7,15-16

The story of Abram-who-becomes-Abraham provides us with the origins of the people of God, the people of whom we, many centuries later, are a part. In Genesis 12, God calls Abram to leave his home, family and country to set out for a land 'that I will show you', with the promise of being made a great nation. Over the ensuing chapters Abram travels and adventures at God's direction, and the promise is clarified: Abram, who is both elderly and currently childless, will have descendants as numerous as the stars. Today's reading from chapter 17 concentrates the promise into a covenant, a formal agreement between God and Abram, with responsibilities on either side. Abram is to follow God – this is his side of the covenant. In response, God will give Abram many descendants. Unlike the covenant made with Noah (see last week), this covenant entails both relationship and choice.

God then expands on this covenant: Abram's descendants will include nations and kings, and they will be given land (v.8). As a sign of this covenant Abram and his household and descendants must be circumcised (v.9-14) – a common practice, given a new significance. For future generations, performing circumcision at eight days old makes clear that the child has done nothing to earn their place in the covenant, it is all down to God. This is grace.

The changing of names, from Abram ('exalted ancestor') to Abraham ('father of a multitude'), and from Sarai ('quarrelsome') to

Sarah ('princess'), is a demonstration of trust. Names, back then, said something about their owners. These name changes are not because of what God has done; they are in anticipation of it. We may not know how God's promises will be kept, but there is a call to choose to believe them nonetheless.

Psalm 22:23-31

The early verses of this psalm are words of lament, telling of the psalmist's suffering. The verses set for today, however, express trust in God's faithfulness and gratitude for God's response to the earlier lamenting. They encourage praise of God, by all nations, and by future generations. As with today's other readings, their perspective is one of choosing to believe that God will respond, no matter how difficult it might be to see how this is possible.

Romans 4:13-25

Paul writes to the Church in Rome where there are tensions between the Christians who are of Jewish heritage and those who are not. He tries to help them work through their perspectives on what it means to be the people of God, how they can be a single people despite their diverse backgrounds, how the overarching story of the people of God culminates in Jesus, and the place of the law (the myriad of teachings found in the Old Testament) in their new life as Christians. In today's reading Paul focuses on the choice of Abraham to believe God's promise by living as if it had already been fulfilled. This was not written into the law – it predated the law. Abraham believed what God had told him, hoped that it would come to fruition, trusted God, and this is what is described

as 'righteousness'. This is what it means to live in step with God: to choose to see things God's way, to trust God even when we don't understand what God is doing, or how things could work out.

Mark 8:31-38

Mark writes against a backdrop of much persecution: both the killing of many Christians at the hands of the Romans, and also the Jewish revolt against Rome. Writing to help the Church understand and make sense of this context, and of the reality of a crucified Messiah, he presents a Messiah who suffers and whose disciples are called to do the same. There is a stark contrast in these verses between expectation and reality. Just as the people of the day were not looking for a leader who would suffer and die, so they were also not looking for a message that entailed sacrifice, losing oneself. The change of perspective this requires demands a great deal of trust, a choice to believe when the evidence seems to point to the contrary. In the context of so much loss it is difficult to hear the message of resurrection. It is hard to choose to take up one's cross without a guarantee of the life that follows. Does our post-resurrection position in time make this any easier?

Hymns & songs

Songs in italics are suitable for all ages.
WEB Song categories, themes and rationale, web links and additional Welsh suggestions.

*All I am, I lay it down
 A new commandment I give unto you
 At the name of Jesus
 Christ triumphant, ever reigning
 How deep the Father's love for us
 I danced in the morning when the world
 was begun
 I'm not ashamed to win my Lord
 I'm saying yes to you
 Let worship be the fuel for mission's flame
 Lord Christ, we praise your sacrifice
 Meekness and majesty
 Now let us from this table rise
 Oh your grace so free washes over me
 O that rugged cross my salvation
 Praise to the holiest in the height
 Saviour I come, quiet my soul
 So beautiful, no name is higher
 Take up thy cross, the Saviour said
 Though I can't see what's before me
 When I survey the wondrous cross*

Sermon ideas

Ideas for a sermon or interactive talk. See **WEB** for a 'thought for the week' to read out in place of a sermon; and *In touch*, linking the readings to the news.

- An ancient Indian parable tells the story of a group of blind men encountering, for the first time, an elephant. Each is touching a different part of the elephant and decides what it looks like from what they are experiencing (the leg is like a tree trunk, the tail is like a rope, etc.). We come at things from a particular perspective, while God's perspective is not only big enough to encompass all our perceptions, but goes beyond them. What might be God's perspective on Abram's current standpoint, or that of Peter, or the situation in which we are currently living?
- The playground saying 'sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me' is obviously incorrect: words can hurt. They can also empower, undermine, inspire...and more. Often we believe what we hear about ourselves, and we live up (or 'down') to what we hear. Changing Abram's name changed his identity. What does God say about our identity?
- In the film *Dead Poet's Society*, the actor and comedian Robin Williams plays the inspirational (and real) English teacher, John Keating, who uses unorthodox teaching methods in a boy's boarding school. He gets the students to stand on their desks to demonstrate a way to look at things differently. He gets them to rip out prescriptive introductions in poetry books to discover their own ways to appreciate. The strict headmaster ends up getting rid of Keating. The creativity of the boys is repressed. The film ends with the boys defiantly standing on their desks to honour their departing teacher. How does Jesus teach us to look at life differently and from God's perspective? How can we find a different place to stand to see things differently?
- In his book *Falling Upward*, Richard Rohr illuminates one of life's profound mysteries. Somehow our failing can be the foundation for our ongoing spiritual growth. In the first half of life, those who have fallen, failed or 'gone down', seem to be the only ones who understand 'up'. The heartbreaks, disappointments and loves of the first half of life can be stepping stones to the spiritual joys that the second half has in store for us. The stories of Abram, Sarai – and Peter – perhaps illustrate this.

Prayers

More prayers overleaf. **WEB** Welsh translations. Topical intercessions **WEB** each Wednesday.

A prayer of approach

Faithful God, as we continue our journey of Lent, we come together as your family, your church, your people, to worship and to learn from you.

None of us are too young or too old to follow you.

All of us can be surprised by new opportunities, new challenges, new ways to serve you.

We are known by name and cherished as your children, whatever our age, whatever our circumstances, for you call and love us all. **Amen.**

A prayer of adoration

Eternal God, how wonderful and vast are your horizons.

Thank you, creator God, for making us in your image.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for calling us to be your disciples.

Thank you, Holy Spirit, for empowering us to fulfil our calling.

Thank you, Holy Trinity, for the expanse of your love and the depth of your faithfulness. **Amen.**

A prayer of confession

Response after each phrase:

Forgive us and help us to change our perspective.

God of our days and nights, we are sorry for those moments when we see obstacles and you see stepping stones:

We are sorry when we just see the years behind us, and you see the years ahead:

We are sorry for the times we put limits on what we feel is possible, and lose sight of the fact that you are the God of the impossible:

We are sorry when we shrink the world to our size and lose sight of the vastness of your compassion:

In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

Assurance of forgiveness

Living God, from upside down to the right way up:

you change our lives and our perspectives.

From being burdened by guilt to being freed by your grace:

you change our lives and our perspectives.

From the fear of death to the embracing of each moment:

you change our lives and our perspectives. Amen.

A prayer of praise and thanksgiving

Incredible God, we thank you and praise you for trusting in us even when we find it hard to trust in you. **Amen.**

We thank you and praise you for offering us more than we could ever imagine. **Amen.**

We thank you and praise you for making the impossible possible. **Amen.**

We thank you and praise you for all the blessings of youth and of age. **Amen.**

We thank you and praise you for everything – in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Trusting God when we don't understand Genesis 17:1-7,15-16

These two pages offer an outline for worship, with choices at various points. Individual items can be used alone or as part of your own worship design. Bible notes, more prayers, and suggestions for hymns and songs, and sermons/talks, are on the previous two pages.

WEB Resources on the reading to use with under 5s.

Gather

Introduction to worship

Use the activity and prayers to gather the group and introduce the theme.

Jumping to conclusions

- Invite everyone to listen to a short story, and to imagine the scene. Pause for 10 seconds after each sentence as indicated. 'Sally is on her way to school. *(pause)* She is worried about the maths lesson. *(pause)* She is not sure she can control the class again today. *(pause)* It is not part of a caretaker's role.' (Adapted from M Williams, *Mindfulness*) Ask people how their perspective and assumptions changed after each sentence. Go through the story again, asking 'What was in your mind at this point?' after each sentence.
- Ask people if something like this has ever happened to them in real life. How easy it is to make assumptions based on knowing only part of the story – even about ourselves! What if God wants us to do something but we don't understand why – that can be hard. Maybe we need to change our perspective.

Call to worship

We imagine God's plan for us –
our ideas of what a happy future looks like,
for us, for our family, for our community, for the world.
It will bring success, and joy, glory and praise.
But will it? Often things turn upside down, we lose control,
there are unexpected consequences.
God invites us to learn to trust without clear seeing;
only later do we recognise God's goodness to us.

A gathering prayer

Mysterious God,
you love and hold the universe in being.
You treasure each of us as a work of art,
a sign of your presence.
When we haven't a clue what you are doing,
help us to trust you, knowing
that you see the whole picture.
Amen.

First impressions **WEB**

Questions on the theme

- What do you think this is?
- How do we respond to seeing things we don't quite understand?
- How can we trust God, when we do not fully understand God's ways?

Find out what the image is at the foot of the next page.

Share the Word

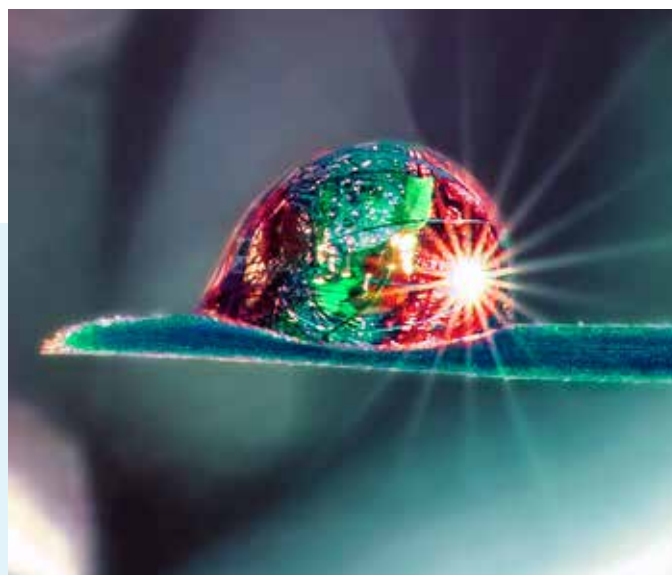
Genesis 17:1-7,15-16

The comedy and strangeness of the stories lend themselves to a dramatic presentation with a narrator and three actors. Abram is elderly, bent over perhaps, hobbling along with a stick. Sarai is elderly too, a little less than Abram, bent over a cooking pot. God could be dressed in a dazzling costume, or could be unseen, a voice speaking through a PA system. The text is the bible passage. The narrator and God can 'ham up' their lines a bit – think gentle pantomime style.

God (or the narrator if God is just a voice) presents Abram with his new name written on a card at verse 5, and Sarai with her new name at verse 15. After the reading ends, Abraham and Sarah should improvise a conversation responding to God's message. It should be light-hearted humour about the impossibility of what is promised. When they stop, ask everyone to pause for a moment and think about something – seemingly impossible – that they would really like to happen in their life, or that of someone close to them.

Mark 8:31-38

Jesus refers to himself as the 'Son of Man', meaning son of Adam, or, in modern language, a human. Peter has just declared Jesus to be the Messiah, the long-looked-for God-anointed spiritual leader whose purpose is to restore Israel's fortunes. Draw a line on a flipchart to make two columns; label one 'Us' and the other 'God'. In the 'Us' column, write – from the point of view of Jesus' disciples and us – ideas about a glorious Messiah figure/person who can spiritually inspire us. In short, what would that person be like? Then read the Gospel passage. Now, in the 'God' column, write – from God's perspective – what the Messiah will be like, and what is asked of us.



Explore and respond

A sequence of active worship ideas; individual items can stand alone.

WEB See children's **Activity sheet**, **Colouring sheet** (Welsh versions available) and resources for use with **Under 5s**.

A funny thing happened

WE

Role play the Old Testament reading.

- Read the Genesis reading again. You could also supply copies of the Bibles note on this reading or read them out, to give background information and context.
- Ask people to work in pairs, imagining one of them to be Abram/ Abraham and the other Sarai/Sarah. Role play a conversation when Abram comes back from meeting God and exploring what has changed and what the changes might mean for them as a couple and, soon to be, family.

Three prayers for trusting God

ES

Try all three or choose the most apt.

A prayer for all ages together

In the small things we trust you, God. (*cup hands*)
 In the big things we trust you. (*hands wide apart*)
 In the confusing things we trust you. (*hands over eyes*)
 Together we trust you. (*reach towards each other*)
 You hold the whole universe (*big circle*)
 in the being of your love. (*hands over heart*) **Amen.**

Why and how prayer

- For those who are able, try responding to God as Abram did: kneel or lie prostrate with your hands open at your side to express not understanding.
- Invite people to think of something confusing that makes them want to ask God 'Why?', and silently to say their question to God. Then invite them to think of something difficult that they believe God is asking of them, and silently to ask God 'How?'

Welcoming Prayer

- Invite everyone to trust God in all their experiences by a simple act of contemplation. Leave a good amount of time after each sentence for people to reflect silently.
 - First, bring to mind something you find mildly difficult.
 - What are you are experiencing in your body at this moment? What sensations?
 - Silently say 'Welcome' to what you are experiencing, and say 'Yes' to God's Spirit in you.
 - Make a conscious effort to let go of trying to change anything, saying silently: 'I let go of my desire to be safe, liked, or in control. I accept [this difficulty]. I trust you, God.'

Aimless walking

SA

An experiment in seeing things from a different perspective.

- For many people, our usual and automatic way of doing things involves lot of rushing around, a lot of purposeful walking. Take a moment to do things differently. Walk slowly and aimlessly for about 10 to 15 minutes, inside or outside as appropriate. Stop, look, turn round, use all your senses, be aware of what is around

you, look closely at things. Make a mental note about things you see or become aware of that you hadn't before, how your perspective has changed – simply by aimless walking. How do you trust God from this changed perspective? What might you do to change your perspective to be more like God's?

Go with God

Consider together what you have explored, what that means for you and how you will live your faith this week.

- Invite people to share their discoveries from today's exploration of Abraham and Sarah's story. Has anything changed in the way they see their own experience of life? Have they had questions raised/answered about where God is in some of their experiences? How difficult do they find it to trust that God has their back, whatever happens? What might help them to trust more?

WS

A sending out prayer

Loving God,
 Thank you for the wonderful times,
 when our hearts are singing.
 Thank you also,
 that you are with us in the difficult times,
 when we are confused and don't understand.
 Help us to feel your presence – at all times.
 Help us to hear your guidance and learn to trust you,
 knowing that good times will come again.
Amen.

Go with God 24/7

SA

Encourage everyone to put their faith into action.

Change the way you do some routine or difficult tasks this week. Slow down and pay attention while you do them. Remind yourself who you are doing them for. Ask God to transform your way of seeing them.

Faith 24/7 **WEB** **Thrive** – a resource to encourage everyday faith in every generation; **Bible study** – based on the week's resources, suitable for a home group.

Bread & Wine

A treasure for you to explore



Sharing the gift of Holy Communion with families on a council estate.

Revd Canon Jack Noble (Fr Jack) is Rector of St Giles without Cripplegate, in the City of London. The parish is home to significant cultural venues (Barbican, Guildhall School of Music and Drama), some of the world's leading financial institutions, and many historic buildings – including St Giles' itself, one of the few medieval buildings to survive the Great Fire of London. In stark contrast, the parish is also home to a large council-owned estate. Around half the families on the estate are 'Old Cockney', born and bred in or near the City's Square Mile. The other half have migrated from many areas across the world. 'At the primary school, we find it's a wonderful, harmonious mix of children – all learning from each other, and it's a delight to see,' says Fr Jack. 'We do also have children whose families have not been in work for several generations. That brings its own challenges and opportunities.' Fr Jack is taking one such opportunity with the parish school, St Luke's CoFE School, Old Street. From autumn 2023, Fr Jack will preside at a monthly all-age Eucharist in the school hall.

Here Fr Jack explains why he is starting this service – and why Holy Communion is an essential part of it.

Meeting families where (and when) they are

Families from the estate simply don't visit the area where the church is located. They don't see that space as 'belonging to them'. So, we are going where they are. We'll be meeting in a typical 1960s school hall – complete with climbing bars up one side and a weak projector. To help us prepare the space we'll bring in a table, a decent altar cloth and candles. We'll meet at 4pm on the second Sunday of the month. This timing is important, as it works around family life. In some places around the country, a Sunday morning may not suit because children are busy with musical or sporting commitments. That isn't the case with children in our community, but 4pm is still best because families don't tend to be out and about on Sunday mornings. Meeting at 4pm also gives us the opportunity to share food together afterwards – enough to suffice as the evening meal. With many children receiving free school meals, this is an important way in which we can serve local families.

Children as elders

Years 5 and 6 in the primary school will be the elders. We're 'just the priests'. My prayer is that we'll start out with a handful of enthusiastic children and from there we will grow into a vibrant community – a proper, local estate church.

Why is Holy Communion so important to your time together?

Eucharist is the heart of the Church: it's where people, Scripture and God come together. Participating in Holy Communion helps people go beyond a nominal Christianity – it becomes *experiential*. I wouldn't say that families in the community are completely unchurched, but they can be tempted into thinking that they've 'ticked the box' by being baptized as an infant and attending a church school.

What we want them to discover through Holy Communion is that there is so much more. By becoming communicants, by further engagements through adolescence, they have the chance to meet with God; to become lifelong followers of Jesus. Even if they seem to fall away later, a space has been opened for God to work in their lives.

How will Holy Communion at the school differ from the one you hold in the church building?

We're going to start quite simply: with two hymns and a said service. It will be smooth, punchy (around 45 minutes long) but not abbreviated. We'll still have what we would have in the church building: in our case, that's vestments, candles, a procession and a talk. I was previously chaplain at a large secondary school, and I found that there is still space for dignified, reverential, traditional worship that is not only worthy of God, but also worthy of those who are coming to meet with God in Communion. I find that traditional worship can hold chaos beautifully.

How has your time as chaplain at a secondary school influenced your plans for all-age Communion?

I'm confident that Holy Communion has a real gift to give people, and I could see that at the secondary school.

Including everyone The secondary school is a church school where I worked with a community of all faiths and none. When I was there, around 500 children were regular communicants in their local churches, but that left around 700 other pupils. Those pupils were still fully included, even though they didn't physically take Communion. I would say 'Jesus is here. You are here with Jesus. This is an amazing time to be in the room with

Jesus.’ During the time when Communion was administered, I would encourage those pupils to engage in ‘spiritual Communion’ – to talk to Jesus in their hearts. It was a joy to see them: eyes closed, brows furrowed, focused on these conversations in their hearts.

Being accessible At the secondary school, I tried to ‘show my working’ – explaining what was happening as I went along. All the way through the service I’d remind pupils that God was in the room. For example, during the reading I’d say: ‘We’re listening to the Bible now. What do you notice? What is God saying to you?’

Inviting – and responding to – questions I’d always invite questions at the end: I find that children often bring huge questions and doubts. It’s so important to take those seriously. If I didn’t have time to respond straightaway, I’d make sure to arrange a time to follow up.

Final thoughts?

This experience has influenced plans for the all-age Eucharist, but I am sure that God has many new lessons for us to learn together. For now, we will invite people and see what happens. Come along – there’s a treasure here for you to explore.

This article is the result of conversation between Tracy Somorjay, Roots Marketing Officer, and Fr Jack, August 2023.



What is Bread & Wine?

Each set of Roots **Bread & Wine** resources – two per issue – fits either a season covered by that issue (e.g. Lent, Easter) or an overarching theme in the issue (e.g. parables). Each set offers words, prayers and texts that, together with the usual weekly content, provide themed resources for intergenerational or all-age Communion worship. It includes:

A gathering prayer – a themed prayer suitable for the beginning of an all-age Communion service.

An invitation to penitence – a seasonal or thematic sentence or two to help people prepare themselves for an act of penitence.

A kyrie confession – a simple form of confession with three brief phrases, each leading to a response: ‘Lord/Christ, have mercy’.*

An all-age prayer of confession and An assurance of forgiveness – seasonal or thematic prayers suitable for an all-age Communion context.**

Gospel acclamation – a brief sentence or phrase used in some tradition to introduce the Gospel reading.

Introduction to the Peace – an introduction and call to share the Peace.

Short Preface for a (Eucharistic) Thanksgiving prayer – suitable for use in the first part of a Communion Thanksgiving prayer, or anywhere where they might be appropriate.

A post-Communion prayer – a themed prayer for the end of an all-age Communion service.

Prayers of blessing – two prayers, one short and simple, and the other more formal but still suitable for an all-age context.

* designed to be Church of England compliant; see [WEB](#) for more details.

** Church of England and other Anglican provinces allow only authorised words to be used.

Can I use Bread & Wine?

In the context of Holy Communion, practices and rules governing them across the denominations are quite different. Roots **Bread & Wine** provides options to meet those needs which conform to the various rules – see [WEB](#) for more details. Here is a very brief summary:

The Methodist Church – provides examples and guidance for Communion services that ‘are not intended to curb creative freedom’, including traditional, informal and extempore observance.

The URC – offers examples that ‘reflect the ethos of our Church’ that are not prescribed; the examples illustrate a wide range of styles and approaches to Communion.

Church of Scotland/Presbyterian/Baptist – there is no compulsion to follow the published examples, which include classic patterns, Celtic traditions and resources for use in all-age contexts.

Anglican Churches – while in general worship texts needs to be authorised, variations and alternatives are permitted, sometimes by rubrics and notes, but also by use of the discretion specified in Canon Law for a minister to make certain types of variation.

Roots Bread & Wine Epiphany

Gather

A gathering prayer

God of transformation,
Jesus changed our world,
turning water into wine,
shining light in dark places,
and turning people to follow you.
Change us on our journey of faith;
turn us around so that we can show and tell the world about
Jesus. **Amen.**

An invitation to penitence

The magi travelled to a simple manger searching for God. They found a baby who was a prophet, priest and king. Too often, we lose sight of Jesus and search for him in the wrong places. We are sorry and ask that God will forgive us.

A kyrie confession

Lord, you have searched us and know us, but we forget that you know us better than we know ourselves, and long for us to be all that you have imagined for us.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, there is nowhere we can go where you are not present, yet we are distracted by the world around us and lose sight of you.

Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Lord, you have created all life, but we forget that that we are made to live in communities who love one another.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

An all-age prayer of confession

When the world seems dark, and we despair that conflict will never cease: forgive our lack of hope.

When we see people experiencing natural disaster through climate change: forgive our apathy.

When we hear and see the news and feel powerless in a world where money rules: forgive our greed.

When we exclude others because they are different from us: forgive our lack of empathy.

An assurance of forgiveness

Father, even before we speak a word, you know us through and through. Your love is always there to forgive, encourage and prompt us. Such knowledge is awesome, beyond anything we can hope to understand. We thank you that we are wonderfully made in your own image, and in the image of your son, Jesus. **Amen.**

Share the Word

Gospel acclamation

The skies opened, the Holy Spirit came on Jesus like a dove, and a voice from heaven said, 'You are my Son. I love you and I delight in you.'

Sacrament

Introduction to the Peace

We are called to be humble and faithful servants of God and of his Son, Jesus Christ. Through the power of the Holy Spirit with us, let us do everything we can to bring peace, healing and love to the world around us.

Short Preface for a Thanksgiving prayer

We give you thanks and praise, because you have included us as children in the kingdom of God, baptized in water, fed by bread and wine, forgiven and blessed, and part of the community of faith in this place.

Go with God

A post-Communion prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you have not left us but are with us now, by your Holy Spirit, and that you have promised to return to take us to be with you. Thank you for sending to us your messengers, and for giving us one another, so that we can take strength from those around us as we continue to wait for you.

Prayers of blessing

God the Father, whose Son Jesus is our companion and friend, whose Spirit helps us to be more like Jesus, be with you and bless you, today and always. **Amen.**

Thanks be to God for his Son, Jesus, who is our friend and companion on our journey of faith.

Thanks be to Jesus: prophet, priest and king, who knew the power of the Holy Spirit and sent the Spirit to be with us.

Thanks be to the Spirit, the presence of God, who helps us to grow more like Jesus and changes us so that our lives help others to see and hear God too.

And the blessing...

Roots Bread & Wine Lent

Gather

A gathering prayer

Father God, on this Lenten journey with Jesus, from the waters of baptism, through the discipline of the wilderness, to the cruelty and pain of the cross, take our lives and lead us with courage, hope and faithfulness until we can stand with Jesus against all that is wrong in our lives and in our world. **Amen.**

An invitation to penitence

The Lord hears us and sees us. The Lord knows when we think something, say something, or do something which hurts others and hurts ourselves. The Lord hears and sees all that is wrong in our world. Let us bring our own failings and the sins of our world into God's presence, and ask for forgiveness.

A Kyrie confession

The ways of God are straight,
and God knows the secrets of our hearts,
yet we still think things that are unworthy of a child of God.
Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

The judgement of God is honest, and God is holy,
but we still say things that hurt others,
whether we mean to or not.

Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

The laws of God are wise,
and the commands of the Lord are clear,
yet we still do things that spoil our relationship with God.
Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

An all-age prayer of confession

We hope for glory but see people broken by poverty.
We hope for peace but see conflict.
We hope for love but see abuse.
We hope for faith but see confusion.
We hope for truth but see lies.
We hope for God's justice in our world,
because we know that this is what God longs for.
We ask you, God of peace and love, faith, truth and justice,
to restore us and our world so that we can see your creation
made new. **Amen.**

An assurance of forgiveness

The Lord knows our hearts, hears our words and sees our deeds. When we confess, the Lord is quick to forgive us. Know that you are heard and seen, and be reassured of God's love for you. Because of God's love and Jesus' gift of himself for us, we are forgiven.

Share the Word

Gospel acclamation

The Spirit took Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days. Wild animals were his companions. Jesus was tested, but angels cared for him.

Sacrament

Introduction to the Peace

Jesus said that to be his followers, we must deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. Let us show our love for God and for one another by following in his way.

Short Preface for a Thanksgiving prayer

Thanks be for Jesus, our companion on the way. When we are scared, the Spirit helps us to be brave; when we are angry, the Spirit gives us peace; when we are hurt, the Spirit heals us; when we walk away, the Spirit calls us back into communion with God.

Go with God

A post-Communion prayer

Thank you, Father, for feeding us with the words and signs of your love. May the good of the food we have received give us strength to carry the things that make us weary and discouraged, and to bring the pain and sadness of our world into your presence. **Amen.**

Prayers of blessing

May God who never leaves us, who takes us and makes us more like Jesus, who brings order to our lives, fill us with love and blessing. **Amen.**

God of creation,
remind us each day of your promise that you never leave us or forget us.

God of restoration,
take our lives and mould us until we see and hear and act like Jesus.

God who journeys with us,
order our lives and bring us to rely in every way on your faithful love.

And the blessing...

Racial Justice Sunday

11 Feb 2024



In our latest edition of *Discovering God*, Ruth Akinradewo suggests ways for you to explore Racial Justice with all ages.

WEB rootsforchurches.com/racialjustice

These resources complement the Racial Justice Sunday materials produced by our ecumenical partner, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland: ctbi.org.uk



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