

## Christ the King Sunday

### Christ the King Sunday – 20 November 2022

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Dr Alison Jack, Professor of Bible and Literature and Principal of New College, School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh, for her thoughts on Christ the King Sunday, and to Prisoners Week Trust for their introduction and prayers for Prisoners Week.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

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## Introduction

Christ the King Sunday marks the end of the liturgical year, before Advent takes over and the cycle begins again with a new Gospel focus. It might be a moment to consider the journey you have been on with the Gospel of Luke this year, especially if both readings from Luke, one from the beginning and one from near the end, are chosen today. Unless you are going to be very counter-lectionary about things, the overarching theme of the service is chosen for you, but each of the readings offers a different perspective on what the idea of Christ as King might look like. I usually find it's these contrasts and differences that I'm tempted to explore and which capture my imagination.

As most of us do when we know we are preaching on a particular Sunday, I'm sure, I try to read all of the biblical passages early in the week before and let them play around in my head before I commit myself to any exegetical direction. I often find that the reading I'm doing for work or pleasure at the same time 'coincidentally' resonates with something in the Bible readings, and I accept many of these connections as gifts from the Spirit. Some, however, have to be rejected as fanciful or unhelpful when held up to the cold light of critical discernment.

A resource I have found useful for reliable and accessible insights into contemporary biblical scholarship is the 'Bible Odyssey' website (<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/>). The material is provided by the Society of Biblical Literature as part of their public outreach. The Society is based in the United States, and this perspective is sometimes obvious to a reader from the UK, but its aim to promote the study of the Bible, in a socially and ethically diverse way, is carefully worked out here. The site can be searched by the categories of People, Places and Passages, and new material is added all the time. I recommend it as a starting point/refresher course for the study of the passages and themes brought to the fore by the lectionary.

On this Christ the King Sunday, for more about general biblical teaching on the 'Kingdom of God' (from a somewhat American rather than UK perspective, some would argue), see <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/places/main-articles/kingdom-of-god-kingdom-of-heaven>

Paul's views on the Kingdom of God are summarised neatly here (but note that our Epistle for the day, Colossians, is generally not thought to have been written by Paul): <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/paul-and-the-kingdom>

## **Jeremiah 23:1-6**

For background information about Jeremiah and an overview of his prophetic ministry, see: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/main-articles/jeremiah>;  
<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/jeremiah-the-prophet>

Jeremiah was clearly different from those who followed the prophetic tradition of the time. He is presented not so much as an advisor to rulers about military matters, but rather as a prophetic guide for the people of God through the difficult period in the run-up to the Babylonian Exile and beyond. He is shown often to be in conflict with others, including other prophets as he warns about the changes which are coming and as he defends his prophetic calling. In particular, in our verses, he points to an unknown 'Branch' of David who will eventually resume the kingly line, although few details about this person are given here. However, the hallmarks of this reign are clear: wisdom, justice and righteousness.

## **Luke 1:68-79**

In its liturgical setting, this passage forms the 'Benedictus'. It's the 'song' Zechariah pronounces with such joy at the naming and circumcision of his son, who will come to be known as John the Baptist. More information about this passage is found here: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/benedictus>

The liturgical title comes from the first two words of this song in Latin, 'Benedictus', which means 'blessed be'. This sense of being blessed is particularly acute in the case of Zechariah: both he and his wife Elizabeth are advanced in years and yet now they cradle their baby son; and Zechariah is also celebrating the return of his voice, which had been taken from him by the angel Gabriel, for doubting this would ever be a possibility (Luke 1:20).

His song has a pointedly constructed quality about it, in its reworking of early prophecies for the current situation. It's also a little out of kilter with the narrative at this point, as much of it is surely referring to Jesus, who has yet to be born, rather than to this baby, John. John will point the way to the mighty Davidic Saviour referred to here (v69), just as Zechariah and Jeremiah have done in their prophetic speech, and just as Luke is doing here, constructing a narrative which anticipates the significance of the arrival of Jesus. This is a huge drumroll for the appearance of Jesus on the world stage, which crosses the boundaries of time and space. Luke's Jesus will amply demonstrate the wisdom, justice and righteousness of Jeremiah's vision of the 'Branch' of David, and will lead the people like a good shepherd in ways of peace and light.

## [Psalm 46](#)

This is the alternative ‘conversation partner’ with the reading from Jeremiah in the lectionary.

The key verse in this Psalm of Praise as it relates to the reading from Jeremiah is surely verse 10: “I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.” God is portrayed here as being above all earthly rulers with their limited kingdoms: all people and all lands come under God’s reign. Not as a result of conquest or treaty, but simply as a matter of fact based on God’s utter pre-eminence and creative power.

What we have in this psalm is an image of a God whose care, judgement and protection extends beyond anything a human monarch might aspire to. Even when appearances suggest the contrary, God is presented as completely in control: hearers are commanded to behold God’s works in the past, more powerful than the natural disasters of earthquakes and tidal waves. Just as God brought about creation, so God has the power to reverse this with just a word (v6). Assaulted by the exalted, even violent, imagery, the hearer’s expected response is one of still acceptance: “Be still and know” (v10). No other response is appropriate. But while some of these exalted themes will be picked up by the writer of the hymn in Colossians, not least in the universalism of the vision, there will be fine contrasts made between this set of images and the creative power of Christ the King.

For more about the strong thread of universalism in the Hebrew Bible, this article offers plenty of information:

<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/passages/related-articles/universalism-in-the-prophets>

## [Colossians 1:11-20](#)

For current historical thinking about the status of the city of Colossae,

<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/places/main-articles/colossae> is a good introduction.

Obviously an important centre of trade and civic authority under Roman rule, the city’s position was dominated by the proximity of Mount Cadmus, standing nearly 8,300 feet above sea level. The people of this city knew about the contrasts between light and dark, heights and depths, visible and invisible power of which our passage speaks.

The universal message of Psalm 46 is clearly echoed in the repetition of the phrase “all things”: nothing is beyond Christ’s creative role, and “all things” are both below Him and find their integrity within Him. Crucially, because in Christ “all” of the fullness of God is to be found, “all things” are reconciled to God through Christ. Much deep theological thought

has been applied to the grand claims made here about the nature of Christ's involvement in the creation and redemption of the cosmos (which goes far beyond the personal redemption of individuals). What we might note particularly is that the passage begins with the hope that this vision of Christ's creative power might enable the patient, even thankful, endurance of those who hear its message: a pastoral expansion of the command to "be still and know" found in today's psalm. And that "reconciliation" and "peace" are the outcomes of this creative work of Christ, focused not on the usual demonstration of earthly power, but on His death on the cross (v20).

### **[Luke 23:33-43](#)**

The main Gospel reading for this Sunday takes up this paradoxical teaching about Christ and His demonstration of monarchical power.

Joel Green's article in Bible Odyssey lays out some of the themes particular to Luke's version of the crucifixion:

<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/passages/main-articles/jesus-crucifixion-in-lukes-gospel>

As Green points out, in Luke's Gospel particularly, Jesus is portrayed as falling foul of both Jewish and Roman authorities (Luke 23:1-5). He is accused of being both a false prophet and a stirrer of civil unrest. Jesus' death is also, in Luke's Gospel particularly, presented as part of God's purpose for salvation (Luke 18:31-33). Only in this Gospel does Jesus forgive those who crucify Him (v34) and only here does He extend the promise of a place in paradise to the 'good' thief, who seems to recognise there is something different about Jesus as they hang together on their crosses (v41). The thief senses that this man has power to make things different for him after their deaths: "Remember me when you have come into your kingdom" (v43). Jesus' response validates this intuition and the nature of His authority, which is in such stark contrast to the authorities which have brought them both to this place of execution. In Jesus' kingdom, salvation is offered to all who seek it. The cross is the throne of the Christ who challenges all that earthly authority represents, and which the resurrection vindicates.

### **Sermon ideas**

Weighty theological themes of Christology, atonement and incarnation jostle for attention in the readings for this week. Notions of power and authority and the meaning of the much bandied-about phrase 'kingdom of God' are all up for grabs by the attentive preacher. I wonder how many of you, though, when you read the passage in Luke about the crucifixion

of Christ, heard Tom Leonard's poem 'The Good Thief' in your head, as I did? It can be found here: <https://www.tomleonard.co.uk/online-poetry-and-prose.html> (and on YouTube [https://youtu.be/5-qpWM\\_4WA](https://youtu.be/5-qpWM_4WA))

The poem expresses something profound in all of our readings: the recognition which is open to all that Christ may be 'king' but He is also 'wanny us'. Leonard's thief expresses that recognition while also acknowledging the cost ('gonny miss thi GEMM Jimmy') and holding on to the hope this enables ('good jobe they've gote the lights'). The language of the poem roots the theology in the everyday and ordinary, pointedly that which is not usually regarded as appropriate for theological discussion or insight. Whether or not you feel you can use the poem or refer to it, there is something about it which gets to the heart of the message of Christ the King Sunday and might be important to communicate in your worship.

I've also been struck by the phrase in the reading from Colossians that Christ is "the image of the invisible God". I would be tempted to consider ways in which the visible and the invisible are related in our own world. If we stick with the theme of monarchy which the lectionary points us to, could we say that our own royal family embodies or makes visible an understanding of monarchy (which might be subtly different for each of us)? It could be a helpful exercise to consider the similarities and differences between monarchy in our own time, with the particular nature of its 'power', and monarchy in the time of Jesus, which would provoke a very different set of responses, depending on the religious and economic status of the hearer. How do these multiple visible images reflect on our understanding of the ruling power of God as they are presented in the life and work of Jesus in our readings?

The poet and priest Malcolm Guite also plays with this idea of divine embodiment in his understanding of the role of the poetic imagination, which might offer some inspiration for this Sunday. For Guite, the poetic imagination shares something of the creative impulse of God. As we read in John's Gospel, God creates through the Word, speaking the world and us into being. And that Word is made flesh in Christ: He is the embodiment of all that God is, just as a poem is the 'bodying forth' of the poetic imagination's understanding of heaven and earth. Guite has recently laid out his theological perspective in a very accessible book in the 'My Theology' series by Darton, Longman and Todd (2021): *The Word within the Words*. For anyone who would like to explore the relationship between theology and poetry, particularly as it relates to an understanding of the incarnation in scripture, liturgy and sacrament, I highly recommend it. If you find the following quotation from Guite's book intriguing, then it could be for you:

“My vocation as a poet attunes me particularly to the mysteries and beauties of language: the magic of words, the cadences and music of speech, but most of all, kindling and glimmering through all the words we use, the mystery of meaning itself and the wonderful vehicle of metaphor whereby one thing can be transfigured by the meaning of another” (p 12).

Taking a different approach, the work of the American professor of homiletics Sally Brown reminds us that our preaching should not remain in the world of the theoretical, but offer our hearers inspiration to act with creative courage in their everyday worlds. The title of one of her recent books, *Sunday's Sermon for Monday's World: Preaching to Shape Daring Witness* (2020, Eerdmans), sums this up. For Brown, seeking out the promise-grounded hope in a biblical passage and then offering ways to discern where this is already underway in the lives of a congregation, is the task of the preacher. This work of creative engagement with the active and on-going promises of God might be related to the Jeremiah passage and/or to either of the passages of Luke. For Brown, it's then important to offer concrete examples related to situations within the community of the congregation, of ways in which these promises might be responded to with improvisational and inventive courage. The hearer should step out of church with a new or renewed understanding of how they might live as someone who follows this God of mercy and justice in the situations they face in the week to come. Taking this approach, particularly on the last Sunday of the liturgical year, with Advent about to begin, might be particularly appropriate as you consider the preaching opportunities you face.

## Prayers

I often find the writing of prayers for public worship a devotional and creative experience, if I leave myself time to enjoy and appreciate the process. That's not always the case, but I do find that if I have lived with the readings for the week and allowed them to weave through my thinking, praying and reading for a few days, my written prayers flow with some energy that builds in a creative way. Echoing the language and cadence of the Bible readings I hope offers some people with an ear for that sort of thing a deeper experience of the texts around which the service is formed. But it's not essential and I'd always choose clarity and directness of expression over theological language which might jar or exclude.

### Gathering prayer / Call to worship

In the Psalms we hear the word of God:

Be still and know that I am God...

We are reminded:



The Lord of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge...

In the still moment, in the presence of God,  
we wait and listen for the Word of God for us today.

### **Confession / Repentance**

Living God,  
in the stillness of Your presence we know ourselves in new ways.  
We see more clearly where we have chosen the way of the world  
rather than the way of Christ.  
We have compromised when we should have stood firm,  
and judged others by standards to which we rarely hold ourselves.  
We have been quick to anger and slow to love.  
We have not lived as people who know the kingdom of God is among them.

Loving God,  
You have given us confidence to turn back to You as forgiven people,  
through the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Your Son Jesus.  
Like prodigal children we are ready to begin again  
and like the loving parent in the story Jesus told,  
You are watching for us to return, ready to take us into Your arms.  
In the stillness of Your presence may we know ourselves in new ways,  
as loved and accepted and forgiven.

### **Thanksgiving / Gratitude**

For Jesus Christ, the image of the invisible God,  
we give You thanks, dear Lord.  
In Him we know You in Your fullness,  
as loving and compassionate,  
as creator of all,  
as reconciler of things which are far apart, broken and ruptured.  
Thank You for His message of hope,  
His steadfast living out of all You stand for,  
His Spirit, which draws us into new communities of compassion and healing.

We thank You for human companionship, which builds up and restores the soul.  
We thank You for people around us who show us the way of the kingdom of God.  
For those whose work is to provide us with what we need,

who care for us when we are sick  
and delight us in so many ways by being just who they are.  
And for the random kindness of strangers  
which turns the ordinary into a moment of joy and meaning.

We thank You for the blessing of our environment,  
and of sustenance for mind, body and soul.  
For colour and beauty in nature,  
and things we see and hear and feel  
which bring us pleasure,  
make us stop for a moment,  
want to share and enjoy –  
thank You, dear Lord.

### **Prayer for others / Intercession**

On this Christ the King Sunday we remember that Christ's kingship does not shy away from the agony of the cross, the vulnerability of the incarnation, the risk and betrayal of human relationships in times of danger and threat. In our prayers for others, we are committing those we pray for into the hands of One who knows the frailties and troubles of human life.

And so we pray with compassion for those who hurt and fear and cry today  
because they have been let down by systems or circumstances or the ones they love.  
We remember those whose lives are most affected by climate change,  
who face hunger, thirst, fire or flood in the heart of their homes.  
Grant wisdom and conviction to those who hold the power to make a difference,  
on global, national and individual levels.

We pray with love for those who are lonely or in pain,  
and for those who care for family and friends in times of need.  
We acknowledge the stress of being a carer  
and the sometimes conflicting feelings of those who are cared for.  
Bring comfort and encouragement, dear Lord, to situations of conflict,  
and rest for those who bear the heaviest burdens.

We pray with faith for those we love the most,  
and for those who have no-one to name them before You.  
May Your presence surround and bless them today and always.  
May they know they are loved and known and seen by You.  
For those who grieve the loss of one they loved,

we pray especially that You will encourage them with strong memories and a confidence in Your loving purpose, which holds all souls in life.

May we all take comfort from Your words,  
“Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

We give You thanks for the witness of those who knew and followed You as their Lord and King,

and showed us what it meant to be a Christian.

May they know of our grateful love for them, now and always.

### **Blessing / Closing prayer**

Creator God, Christ the King, Living Spirit,  
go before us to give light to those who sit in darkness  
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

And may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
surround you and keep you,  
now and ever more.

## **Resources for Prisoners Week 20-26 November 2022**

### **A Story of Pain to ‘Grace’**

For many people, 2022 has been a story of pain: Covid-19, the war in Ukraine, the cost of living and environmental crises, etc.

Imprisonment – the pain of separation, the anguish of loved-ones, the trauma of victims – hurts too.

*My story hurts: Why am I here (again)? Whom have I hurt? How can I stop this? How can I get well? Can I be trusted again? Do my family still love me? I am sorry. I want to write a different, better, story!*

When we reflect on all that has happened, on our painful stories, we can also see glimmers of grace – moments when we glimpse the heavenly kingdom, the hand of God at work in our lives and those we know and love. These glimpses weave into our life’s story, our own Story of Grace.

*I am hopeful. I am free. I belong. I am loved.*

Our Prisoners Week theme this year invites us to listen to grace-filled stories of those affected by imprisonment in Scotland, of their families and of the victims of crime. This year we are celebrating these Stories of Grace, which can be read, with accompanying videos on the Prisoners Week website here: [www.prisonersweek.org.uk](http://www.prisonersweek.org.uk)

On the website you will also find lots more information about Prisoners Week 2022, including resources for worship, the Prisoners Week prayer-sheet, a Calendar of Events, etc.

### **The Prisoners Week Prayer**

*Video version available:* [Prayer – Prisoners Week Scotland](#)

Lord, You offer freedom to all people.  
We pray for those who are held in prison.  
Break the bonds of fear and isolation that exist.  
Support with Your love:  
prisoners, their families and friends, prison staff,  
chaplains and all who care.  
Heal those who have been wounded by the activities of others,  
especially the victims of crime.  
Help us to forgive one another.  
To act justly. To love mercy.  
And walk humbly together with Christ.  
In His strength and in His Spirit.  
Now and every day, Amen.

### **Prayers of intercession and thanksgiving**

Loving God, we want to thank You for Your gracious love, no matter who we are.  
Thank You that You hear us when we cry to You.  
We pray for all those who feel stuck in a place they don't want to be –  
in a place of imprisonment, or of unforgiveness,  
or of despair or of isolation, or of injustice.  
Come, Lord Jesus, and by Your grace,  
grab outstretched hands and set each of us on solid ground.

We pray for all who have been harmed.  
For **victims** of violence and crime, of abuse and neglect,  
of prejudice and marginalisation.  
We pray especially for those who feel that their voice is not heard  
or justice has not been done.

May justice be restored through grace-filled conversation,  
forgiveness and understanding.

Let those who have harmed, see what pain they have caused –  
and may those harmed, find the grace to forgive.

We pray for all who **support** people on release and beyond –  
for organisations and faith communities who journey with people  
as they seek to resettle into the community.  
And for the families of people in prison and all who support them.  
Pray that we as a Church in Scotland would be communities of grace,  
where people feel welcomed, whoever they are.

Loving God, You sent Your son Jesus to live among us  
and to show us Your infinite grace.

We thank You for all those who make themselves present in Your name in our prisons.  
For the chaplains who provide pastoral, spiritual and religious care,  
for the volunteers who regularly go in to support chaplains  
as they journey with those on remand,  
on short-term and on long-term sentences  
and all those who visit or write letters.

Faithful God, we give thanks today for all who have experienced Your transforming grace  
in and out of prison.

Our hearts are filled with joy when we read the stories of lives transformed,  
of brokenness healed,  
of lives restored.

We could not survive without Your grace.

God of justice,  
we pray for all those involved in our justice system –  
for the police,  
for those in the courts who decide the punishment,  
for all prison staff who care for those sent to prison,  
for the press who report on cases  
and for the attitude of the public towards to some of the most vulnerable in our society.  
Help us all to see things through Your eyes  
ministering each day to bring Your kingdom here on earth.  
In Your name we pray, Amen

A prayer sheet with daily prayers for this week, based on the above, and further resources are available on the Prisoners Week Scotland website <https://www.prisonersweek.org.uk/>

## Musical suggestions

Our [online music resource](#) is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

Classic hymns for this Sunday are found in the 'Christ Risen: Reign and Priesthood' section of CH4, including the popular "Rejoice! the Lord is King" (449) and "At the Name of Jesus" (458).

- CH4 453 – "Christ, of God unseen the image" – Leith Fisher's hymn is a reworking of the Colossians passage, and might effectively be incorporated into worship even if this is not one of the readings you choose to include

Two hymns in this section in particular speak to the paradoxical nature of Christ's kingship which might be a theme you choose to follow:

- CH4 463 – "Fairest Lord Jesus" and
- CH4 464 – "Though hope desert my heart" – Both offer a welcome contrast to the more assertive 'Christ the King' hymns. I've read the latter of these two within the context of a sermon and a prayer, rather than sung it, and found it effective in its direct and powerful simplicity.

## Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.
- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord's Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of 'holy chaos'.
- While singing in our congregations is still restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?  
Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/  
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different "Spiritual Styles"?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?  
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?  
Did it function well as a whole?  
How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?  
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?

Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/  
community?

How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?

How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?

- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

## Useful links

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found [here](#)

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and  
download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

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