

Light for the **Lectionary**
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 Scripture Union is an international Christian charity working with churches in more than 130 countries, providing resources to bring the good news about Jesus Christ to children, young people and families and to encourage them to develop spiritually through the Bible and prayer.

As well as our network of volunteers, staff and associates who run holidays, church-based events and school Christian groups, we produce a wide range of publications and support those who use our resources through training programmes.

Welcome to *Light for the Lectionary*

Light for the Lectionary is Scripture Union's resource for church leaders who are committed to following the lectionary in their all-age worship service. This issue includes outlines for 15 services, each providing a range of ideas for leading worship and exploring at least one of the set Bible readings in an all-age context. Church leaders told us they wanted more lectionary-based material with the experience and variety that characterise Scripture Union's curriculum resources. We have created a syllabus that blends, as far as is possible, the readings from *Common Worship* and the *Revised Common Lectionary*.

This issue begins in Ordinary Time, leading up to Advent. The four Sundays of Advent have been written as a series, with continuity from one Sunday to the next, concluding with Christmas. The service outlines encourage engagement with a variety of Bible passages from the prophet Isaiah, Psalms 1 and 90, several epistles and the Gospels, mainly Matthew. As I have been editing this issue, I have been struck, not for the first time, by the extraordinary way in which Old Testament, psalm, epistle and Gospel support the same theme. To lead people of all ages to hear God speak in this way is a wonderful privilege.

As *Light for the Lectionary* is developed, we would welcome feedback on how appropriate it is for your needs and also suggestions for how we could make it even better! In particular we would welcome comments on whether you would like some ideas for using the material in children's groups and/or more ideas on integrating these themes into a service of Holy Communion. Do please contact me on row@scriptureunion.org.uk. I look forward to hearing from you!



Ro Willoughby
Editor

What's in *Light for the Lectionary?*

Activities

Bible foundations: a guide to the significance of at least two of the set passages for the day plus some background information.

Bible reading: suggestions for preparing and presenting the reading of the Bible to the congregation.

Bible talk: engaging ways to share the Bible and discover the message for today in a mixed-age congregation.

Bible retelling: ideas for drama, storytelling and other suggestions for presenting the Bible passage without actually reading it.

Prayer activity: creative ideas for praying in response to the message of the Bible.

Prayer of intercession: suggestions for talking with God on behalf of our world in need.

Prayer of confession: suggestions to help recognise our need of God's forgiveness, asking for his cleansing.

Helpful extras: a number of additional features including **Beginning the service, Music and song ideas, Game, Statement of faith, Ending the service.**

Notes and comments: further advice or background information on adapting the material for your purposes.

WRITERS

This issue has been written by: Sarah Bingham, Sera Rumble, Mike Law, Tim Norwood, Gill Hollis, Eric Leese, Hil Sewell, John Grayston.

WEBSITE

The *Light for the Lectionary* pages at www.scriptureunion.org.uk/light provide more information and free downloads to help with each session.

5 OCTOBER *Proper 22*

READINGS: **Isaiah 5:1–7; Matthew 21:33–46**

Psalm 80:7–15; Philippians 3:4b–14

Bible *foundations*

Aim: to recognise the importance of accepting what God wants us to be

Much of Jesus' last week in Jerusalem is taken up with debates with Jewish leaders. The entry into Jerusalem and the cleansing of the temple are the backdrop for all the subsequent action. Both events were a threat to those in power. The parable of Matthew 21:33–46 is part of Jesus' reply to the challenge in verse 23, 'What is your authority?' It is highly charged and clearly pointed. In the Old Testament the vineyard is a symbol of Israel. The picture in Isaiah 5 tells its own story of a God who loves, cares for and protects his people, who obstinately go their own way. Jesus invites the 'chief priests and the elders' (v 23) to see themselves as the successors of those who, centuries earlier, had disobeyed. They see Israel as theirs to rule and to control, assuming that, because they are leaders of God's chosen people, blessing will follow automatically. They are determined to hang on to power at all costs. They fail to see that they hold it on trust and are accountable.

By contrast, Paul gives up everything he might have valued to gain Christ. He will serve Jesus whatever the cost because he knows that what he will gain is far greater. Far from blessing being automatic, it comes only through the pain of identifying with the Crucified.

We face different challenges. For some the lure of worldly power and reputation will prove too great, and the way of Jesus too hard. When we are young this is not much of an issue – although increasingly even young children face pressures to conform to the world's values. We have to make a decision whether we will run things our own way or give the control to God. This is not a once for all decision but one which is to be reviewed and renewed at different stages of life.

Bible reading

Isaiah 5:1–7 should be read in the middle of the **Bible talk** with one person reading verses 1–4 and a second person reading verses 5–7 a little later.

The Gospel reading from Matthew 21:33–46 lends itself to readers taking the following parts: a narrator, servants, Jesus and the chief priests/leaders.

Bible talk

With: a gardener who comes into church with boots, a spade and a wheelbarrow, a branch (that could be a mini-vine/tree), grapes (real, artificial or pictures of them) that can be attached to the branch

God often uses the image of a gardener to describe himself – not for nothing were Adam and Eve found in the Garden of Eden. They were part of the garden God created and had a role in it. All through the Scriptures, God uses the image of vines and vineyards to talk about his people.

God had given Israel a job to do, and warned them what would happen if they failed. *(At this point, a gardener wearing boots, carrying a spade and even pushing a wheelbarrow comes into church. In the barrow is a large branch. He is asked to introduce himself as a gardener who has come to dig out some land to create a fruitful vineyard for growing grapes. He digs imaginary land, plants the branch, looks pleased with himself and then goes away.)*

The leader explains that you all have to wait for the tree to take root and grow fruit. It is October, which in the northern hemisphere is really too late for grapes to be growing. Ask people to imagine that you have waited for several years to pass. The vine has now grown

strong and fruitful. The leader attaches pictures of some grapes (or artificial or real grapes) to the branch. *(The gardener comes back and is very pleased to see the branch. He/she takes one of the pictures/grapes off the branch and looks pleased. He/she takes a bite (real or imaginary) and screws up his/her face. These are not sweet-tasting grapes.)*

At this point read Isaiah 5:1–4. The image of the vineyard was used by the prophet Isaiah to warn Israel of what God would do. God had 'planted' Israel into the Promised Land. He had guided and guarded them. He had hedged them around with his protection. Isaiah says he expected 'sweet grapes' (CEV) as the harvest. Sadly the harvest was 'bitter'. After years of investment into Israel, the harvest God was reaping did not reflect who he was, or his nature. Later the verses tell us that God had hoped for honesty and justice, but dishonesty and cries for mercy were all he found (CEV). The Israelites had treated people dishonestly, both the poor and needy, strangers, and their neighbours.

So, God planned to deal with Israel. He had chosen them from all the nations. They were small and insignificant, but were offered the role of a lifetime – to represent God and his ways to the whole world. The picture they offered was distorted and inaccurate. By disciplining them, God hoped they would turn back to him and become and do what he had intended them to be and do.

(The gardener reappears and tears down the branch, does some imaginary digging and wheels the branch out of the church in disgust!) Isaiah had the hard job of telling Israel that judgement was coming – and he did it through this story. Read Isaiah 5:5–7. God's people would be uprooted, attacked and eventually taken into exile to live hundreds of miles away in Babylon.

By the time of Jesus, the religious authorities were still not being the people that God wanted them to be. Jesus told them what God his Father was like and how he wants all people to live. But the authorities hated Jesus and what he said because he threatened their authority and made them feel uncomfortable.

When Jesus told a story about a vineyard and a landowner, people listening would know that Jesus was talking about God's people and God himself as the landowner. Refer back to the reading from Matthew 21:33–46. Ask if the congregation can remember the following points in the story:

- ◆ Where did the owner of the vineyard go?
- ◆ Who did he send the first time and what happened?
- ◆ Who did he send the second time and what happened?
- ◆ Who did he send the third time and what happened?
- ◆ What did the chief priests and leaders say the landowner would then do?

The crowd were really involved in this story of the violent servants/tenants. They suggested harsh judgements when the day of reckoning came. They could see how unjust it all was and how shameful was the servants' behaviour when they killed the son.

The chief priests and Pharisees certainly made the connection between themselves and the servants. They didn't like it – and immediately started plotting Jesus' death. It was just like God's people all those hundreds of years ago, in the time of Isaiah.

In the same way, God invites us to welcome Jesus and all that he says about God and how God wants us to live. We can reject him and, in effect, produce sour, bad grapes, or we can welcome him, accepting how God wants us to live. Are we 'sweet' as God intends, after all his time, energy and attention has been lavished on us? Or, like Israel, are we bitter? When we look at our own lives, what have we done that makes us feel proud? Is it fruit that makes God proud too? What things is God challenging us about?

In Philippians 3, the apostle Paul lists a whole load of things that he had been proud about, in human terms. This includes his privileged birth and upbringing, and the skills and talents he had. However, he goes on to say that all these things are rubbish compared to knowing Jesus as his friend and saviour. Our cleverness cannot get us into

heaven. Our creativity does not give us friendship with God. Our money cannot buy us security with God. Only knowing and loving God, through Jesus, can give us all those things.

Prayer *activity*

With: a large sheet of paper with a bare 'vine' outline, glue sticks, green or mauve grape-shaped pieces of paper, pens, pencils or felt-tip pens

Different people could be asked in advance to lead each of these sections. Ensure everyone has some 'grapes' and something to write with. Remind everyone that God is bothered about the world and wants to bring blessing to all of creation.

- ◆ Think of situations that are 'bitter' – conflicts, illness, bereavements, unfair trade or politics. Write or draw something to symbolise those situations and stick the grape onto the vine to ask God to bring his healing, help or comfort.
- ◆ Think of people whose lives are 'sweet', maybe in the way they are, or because of something they have done for others. Write their name or draw something that reminds you of them, and stick the grape on the vine to thank God for them and all the good things he has done through them.
- ◆ Think about aspects of people's own lives where they are conscious that all is not as it should be. Write or draw something that they would like to change and stick the grape on the vine to show they are ready to welcome God to change them.

Prayers *of confession*

With: bunches of real seedless grapes, enough for everyone to have at least one

Pass around bunches of grapes and ask everyone to take one but not eat it! Ask people to think about things they have done, thought or said that were wrong and that they are sorry about. Ask them to think about things they could have done, thought or said that might have improved a situation or attitude.

When everyone has a grape or grapes and has had time to think, ask them to eat the grape(s) to show they want God to forgive them and help them to live as God's people. Ask everyone to join in this prayer which is available as a download from www.scriptureunion.org.uk/light **web ref 5.10.08_1**.

Loving Father,
We know you have good plans for us.
We know that we often think, say or do the wrong thing.
We are really sorry, and want to be more like you.
We know you can help us to change.
Help us to know better what you want
And help us to be brave or strong enough to do it.
Amen.

Helpful *extras*

Beginning the service

With: some healthy looking fruit and some fruit that has gone off

Show the two different fruit. Talk about why the fruit may be bad – it may have been around too long or it may have been infected while still on the tree. If you have a gardener in the congregation, ask him or her to explain why fruit gets infected on a tree. It may not be too late in the year in the northern hemisphere to bring in some windfall apples or a branch of a healthy apple tree.

Explain that in this service you will be looking at the vineyard that is talked about in the Bible which refers to God's special people. This vineyard did not produce all that God had hoped for – quite the reverse!

Music and song ideas

In the sung worship time, focus on the invitation we have to be a friend of God and to reflect him to others. For example: 'All I once held dear'; 'And can it be'; 'Be thou my vision'; 'Draw me close to you'; 'Give thanks to the Lord (our God and King)'; 'Hear these praises from a grateful heart'; 'Jesus be the centre'; 'There must be more than this'; 'In Christ alone'.

Statement of faith

This can be downloaded from www.scriptureunion.org.uk/light **web ref 5.10.08_2.**

Lord God, you are loving and merciful.

Your people have rejected you.

But in Christ, you have made it possible for all people to belong to you.

You show us how to live.

You equip us to serve you.

We want to live as your people in this world.

Amen.

Ending the service

Summarise the teaching that God wanted Israel to be sweet-tasting fruit, pleasing to him and to reach out to serve others. They failed and so were judged. Remind the congregation that God will judge us, like Israel, if we fail to welcome and respond to his invitation. However, we do not need to fear judgement, because God calls and equips us to be the people he wishes, if only we ask him.

One person could lead, or the congregation could bless each other using words like this:

Bless us, Lord, with your presence.
Bless us, Lord, with your equipping.
Bless us, Lord, with your wisdom.
Bless us, Lord, with your grace.
Lord we ask this, so we can bless others in your name.
Amen.

Notes *and comments*

You may wish to explore the reaction of Israel to God's judgement. This is reflected in part by Psalm 80. The psalmist reflects the words of Isaiah 5 in his description of Israel as a vineyard – though he does not address the question of *why* harm had come to Israel. The psalmist keeps reminding God of the covenant he has with Israel, whilst referring to the fact that Israel was the party that broke the covenant!

You may also wish to explore the impact of Jesus' story on his Jewish listeners. Did they suddenly gain a new understanding of the implications behind their nation's time in exile and of restoration when they linked the story of the servants/tenants with the story from Isaiah about God's judgement?

This service outline could be adapted for a late harvest festival service since it includes material on gardeners and a harvest that did not produce all God had hoped for. Make sure that there is opportunity to thank God for harvest produce which is the result of good farming and careful gardening, which could not be how one might describe God's people, Israel, as landowners or keepers of a vineyard.