



Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Issue number 1: Sunday 22nd March 2020

Today's reading

Mark 10: 17-31 ("The Rich Man")

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother."' He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'

Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.' Amen.

Today's hymns

Read them or maybe even sing them in the privacy of your own home – the choice is yours!

At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow (CH4: 458)

Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness (CH4: 641)

Look upon us, blessed Lord, take our wandering thoughts and guide us (CH4: 601)

Brother, sister, let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you (CH4: 694)

Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven, to earth come down (CH4: 519)

In the Name of the Father and of

It goes without saying that these are difficult times. One short week ago I had no idea that my sermon for Sunday 22nd March would be delivered not through a microphone, but through a publication printed on paper and published on the web. The idea of *The Sunday Focus* was one which had yet to be had by me or anyone else. Yet here we are.

As the Covid-19 pandemic really takes hold, we are all seeing things change around us. People seem to be comparing our current period of crisis with wartime experiences, and it's easy to understand why. Yet our present struggle is against not an army or a navy or an air force, but rather a tiny, invisible and very scary attacker of quite another sort.

At times like this, everything changes in front of us, with illness for many and death for some, panic buying, scare-mongering, school closures and countless other truly major issues. Each problem seems to compound the problem before it. And arguably only of the worst things? Nobody can say how long it will last. All we can do is focus on the messages given out by our wonderful National Health Service: keep vigilant, wash your hands frequently, avoid being near other people, and use tissues then throw them away, again washing your hands. Simple rules which, if followed, will help to win our country precious days and weeks in the battle with a hard-hitting virus.

In all of this we are looking eye-to-eye with massive anxiety, forcing each one of us to examine what really matters at a time like this. Cancelled holidays may be annoying, yet they pale into insignificance when set beside cancelled exams. A lack of your favourite ice-cream is little more than a passing inconvenience, but being unable to get to a supermarket to restock on toilet roll? Far more serious.

In our current "Year of Mark", we are looking Sunday by Sunday at the gospel of Jesus Christ as told by the earliest of the four evangelists. Mark is very concise, providing his readers with a sparse and economical telling of the Jesus story. While Matthew and Luke took Mark's words and added to them in a whole range of ways, Mark himself seems content to home in on what really, really matters, like a news editor who drops this or that story to pull in a tight focus on to the key issues as he sees them. What this says to me is that if Mark chose to write it down, it must be very important to him ... and also to us.

And so to today's reading from Mark chapter 10. Jesus was heading off on his travels once more, only to be stopped by a bloke in a hurry. The man ran up to him (rarely a good sign in my experience) and knelt down before him. Already we can see a mix of urgency and deep respect. Obviously, the stranger is keen to catch Jesus before he leaves the neighbourhood; keen also to afford him the kind of deference an autograph hunter might show to an Oscar-winning film star. Jesus would need to have been forgiven had he thought: "Hello ... what's up here?"

This stranger gives a lot away in his first two words: "Good Teacher". Back in those days the idea of goodness was tied in with that of holy perfection which is – of course – of God. Could it be that this man, now down on his knees, is recognising something unique and heavenly in the teacher who had passed through his community? Perhaps. What is certainly clear is that Jesus is not about to be easily sweet-talked by his would-be friend who asks how he can inherit eternal life. Choosing not to address that point just yet, Jesus takes him back to the original greeting: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone."

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

It may be that we find Jesus taking a little wind from this over-keen questioner's sails. He might just as easily have said: "Calm down. Let's not get ahead of ourselves here."

And so to the very heart of today's reading: Jesus has been asked a big question to do with inheriting eternal life. He now answers it by reeling off a selection of the Ten Commandments found in Exodus chapter 20: utterly vital instructions on how to live a good life in the community of Moses – instructions on avoiding killing, adultery, theft, lying and fraud, followed up by another on honouring parents. "You know the commandments," says Jesus. (After all, everyone did.)

On hearing that this man had kept these great commandments all his adult life, Jesus delivers quite a radically different one: "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Alas ... the man was rich and he loved his wealth. While it was one thing for him to rack up win after win after win in the list of Old Testament commandments, he found it a challenge too great to live selflessly and positively for God and for others.

How hard it will be. How hard, says Jesus, for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! But wait a minute. If we are to make sense of Jesus' words here, we had better make sure we know what he is saying. Perhaps by "the kingdom of God" Jesus means heaven – eternal life in the sense that his questioner intended. But for Mark and for Jesus both, the notion of "the kingdom" is one which resonates not just with a hint of the hereafter, but also with the unmistakable chime of the here and now: God's kingdom, coming close in Jesus Christ; God's kingdom near at hand for those whose sincerity of faith and commitment to action would offer entry to a new kind of God-given community.

For us, right now, the challenge is to look to God's kingdom values here in East Lothian, across our nation and around a world troubled in more ways than one. Make no mistake: we need God, but never forget the astonishing truth that God needs – actually needs – the citizens of his kingdom if great things are to happen. Each needs the other. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu so brilliantly put it: "God without you won't, you without God can't."

This story of a sad encounter ends on something of a high note. After the rich, devout man has slunk off in wealth that is ultimately matched by disappointment, Jesus falls into conversation with his friends. They seem deeply perplexed at their own prospects of salvation. And as we know from their antics through Mark's gospel so far, it seems unlikely that they understand the challenge facing them – even yet. Still, Jesus is swift to offer them a glimpse of hopefulness which glows with the Grace of a loving God.

Truly, if it were down to us we would fail and fail again, just as we have failed so often and in so many different ways in time gone by. But, says Jesus, this isn't really about our frantic mental struggles over camels and the eyes of needles. All that stuff is far beyond us.

The truth we need to hear today (and to understand through to the very core of our beings) is that it's just not about us at all.

"For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." Amen.

Praying for others

Gracious God, for you all things are possible.

At this time of huge uncertainty, we bring to you in prayer:
those who are dear to us, whether our family, friends, neighbours or colleagues.
These are people whose lives are being turned upside down
whether through illness or fear.

We pray for *[names here]* at this troubling time.

We remember before you the doctors, nurses and other front-line staff
so courageously taking on duties which place them in the line of danger.

And we recall the scientists and policy-makers
working so hard to find new ways of addressing a new problem.

Be with retail workers, delivery drivers, pharmacy staff, and all who care for others,
for whom this time is a challenge beyond our imagining.

Grant to each faith, and strength, and determination to do what is right
for those they love so much.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

And finally ...

Each issue, one of our session clerks offers a reflection. This week it comes from Abigail:

Robin mentioned that some are comparing the Covid-19 crisis to wartime. My father-in-law was a young man during the Second World War and he often talked about that time almost with nostalgia. There was a sense that people came together and didn't worry about trivialities. Many people at that time thought the war brought out the best in folk. In that respect Longniddry's response to this virus has been the same. It is beyond wonderful to see how many have contacted our church to offer help to those who are self-isolating. And I have heard absolutely no complaints about the privations that we will all be facing over the coming months – just acceptance that it has to be. I hope we all remain so sanguine over that period.

There has been quite a lot of activity in the church community over the last few days. Now that we can no longer hold Sunday (or any other day of the week) services, quite a few thinking caps have gone on to come up with new ways of helping us worship God and carry out his work. There are downsides and risks to social media and the internet but, my goodness me, how utterly invaluable they are proving to be in today's world.

We are putting *The Sunday Focus* on our website so everyone with internet access can read it, Sunday by Sunday. We can e-mail and message elders and others to let them know new information really quickly. We can conference call and video call.

One of the key things that God gave humans is our brains. How very useful they are proving to be, with all our inventions and inventiveness. I am sure he will be calling on us to use them in creative ways over the coming weeks.