



Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Today's readings

Mark 13: 28–37 (“The lesson of the fig tree”)

‘From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

‘But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.’ Amen. (NRSV)

Romans 10: 13–17 (“Salvation is for all”)

For, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’ But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’ So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Some hymn choices in the season of Easter for you to enjoy in the quiet of your home:

Our Lord Christ hath risen! The tempter is foiled (CH: 421)

The Saviour died, but rose again triumphant from the grave (CH: 425)

Blest be the everlasting God, the Father of our Lord! (CH: 424)

Fairest Lord Jesus, ruler of all nature (CH: 463)

Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son (CH: 419)

In the Name of the Father and of

Where are we in our year-long journey through Mark's gospel? Well, we started back in January and took in the early chapters of the book, sermon by sermon. Then, with the arrival of Lent, we jumped on to the midway point of the story and travelled with Jesus and his companions down to Jerusalem in time for Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and ... at last ... Easter.

We are still only half way through the month of April, so we will go back to where we left off at Lent and explore other stories, other teachings ... though not today, as you will see.

I think it is fair to say that lots of people had been anticipating a holiday around now – certainly that is true of many ministers. This year, however, circumstances dictated otherwise, so of holidays there are none. But it occurred to me that I might offer the good people of Gladsmuir and Longniddry Parish Churches a bit of a holiday of their own this week: a preaching holiday. And so this Sunday, by way of much needed light relief in a harsh and heavy world, I am going to be looking at Mark's gospel in a totally different kind of way. Let us see this world-changing story considered word by word all the way from chapter 1, verse 1 through to the end.

If you were to wonder just how long Mark's gospel is in the glorious King James Version, the internet has the answer at her fingertips: there are no fewer than 14,949 words. (Let's say that's 15,000 between friends.) In 2004 we read every single word up to the Crucifixion in our joint Good Friday service, when we encouraged folk to come and go through the morning. (We realised this was bound to take much longer than a standard hour of worship!)

It was something of a mammoth task for our four readers to start at the beginning with their Bibles open, reading and reading until they arrived at the powerful passage concerning Christ's death on the Cross. That was a memorable and very moving service.

Now picture yourself as the classical actor Alec McCowen reciting all 15,000 words of Mark: doing so in order and with dramatic inflection, and – amazingly – doing it totally from memory. That is quite some feat.

Today, I want to use the sermon slot to recount the story of how a centuries'-old Greek document became a one-man show performed from the Edinburgh Fringe to the Whitehouse and on to some of the world's smartest venues, captivating audiences wherever it went.

So who was this actor, and what motivated him to undertake this project of – literally – biblical proportions?

Alec McCowen was born in 1925 into a Congregationalist family. Although never a church member himself, it certainly seems that he was a deeply spiritual person who would commune with God in his own contemplations. In his 50s, perhaps because of his upbringing and his own personal experience of the holy, Alec McCowen decided that he would like to tackle a big chunk of the Bible as a monologue to be performed on stage. He homed in on Mark's gospel, getting up early in the morning to learn just three verses. Day by day his actor's memory would add more and more tiny packets of three verses, until at last all 16 chapters of Mark had been safely stored away: a chapter learned each month on average.

The one-man show's premiere came in the city of Newcastle in 1978, though Alec McCowen felt uncertain as to how his production would be go down. He needn't have worried. Audiences and critics alike were captivated. He said one old lady came up to him after a performance to pass on her view that, "it was as good as a play!"

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

Alec McCowen chose to keep Mark's gospel simple. On stage there would just be a rough table and few kitchen chairs. He himself dressed casually for the part of story-teller, and he did his best to keep his own personal feelings out of his performance. And this, of course was absolutely the right thing to do. Mark is a straightforward telling of the Jesus story, direct and to the point. Unlike John's gospel, it is simple. Unlike Matthew, it has surprisingly little teaching. Unlike Luke, it is lacking in sophisticated, poetic flair. Above all, *it is short* (if you can call 15,000 words of memorised text "short".) The fact is that Mark's gospel fitted in with the actor's style, so it proved ideal for his purposes.

And, of course, in all that painstaking learning and all those nights of performing, Alec McCowen came close to the figure of Jesus. To immerse yourself so completely in a gospel, and then to act it out around the globe: that must surely put you in touch with the mind of Mark – and perhaps even with the mind of Christ.

Here's what the actor himself said about the man whose story he would tell to audiences the world over:

"I like a Jesus to whom I can relate, one who needs sleep and gets hungry. For instance, the episode in which he curses the barren fig tree is usually interpreted in a symbolic way. Well, I find it preferable if he just walks to the tree, and there are no figs on it, and he gets annoyed, as I would. I like to think of a man who combines wonderful teaching with the everyday struggle of living."

Bringing his unique insights into the thinking of Mark's Christ, Alec McCowen gave audiences more than just a reading. Writing in the *New York Times* in 1990, the journalist Benedict Nightingale said this of his approach:

"... the critics have often commented on the humor he has found in the Gospel. For him, as perhaps for Mark himself, Jesus is more man than God, and capable among other things of frustration, impatience, anger, pain, exhaustion, sarcasm and good humor. It is his simultaneous plainness and complexity that Mr. McCowen hopes above all to show."

When Alec McCowen died in 2017 at the age of 91, Michael Billington wrote this assessment in his *Guardian* obituary of the one-man show which by then had become something of a classic:

"I saw its first performance at the Riverside Studios, Hammersmith, and was bowled over by it: I wrote at the time that 'McCowen related the familiar story with all the precision, irony, intelligence and faintly controlled anger that characterises all his work' and that it was a superb piece of acting."

In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul makes the point that, "faith comes by hearing". For us, if we take in a passage of Scripture through our ears as well as through our eyes, the Bible can come to life as never before. For countless theatre goers, as well as people of faith, Alec McCowen made that uniquely possible.

Would you like to see this impressive piece of acting for yourself? The good news is that, if you have internet access, you can. Just go to the YouTube website, key in "Alec McCowen Mark", and up will come a string of short clips. Watch these in turn and you will have his show, right there on screen: a performance that did its best to live out the sentiment of Mark, a Bible writer who gave us these words of Jesus:

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but *my words will not pass away.*" Amen.

Praying for others

A prayer offered by a member of Gladsmuir Parish Church:

Loving God,

In these scary times, we remember the doctors, nurses, scientists and carers who work selflessly, dedicating their skill to help those who are suffering so much.

Lord, give them strength and courage, and keep them safe.

We pray for the political and religious leaders who are taking decisions and actions which affect us all, and shape our future.

Lord, give them wisdom and fortitude, and support them in their work.

We recall before you all those bringing food from field to our shop and home: the farmers; the delivery staff; the shop workers.

Lord, let them know how much they are valued by us all.

And for all those providing essential services at this time: emptying our bins; policing our streets; giving us updates via the media.

Lord, let them know they are appreciated.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison considers teamwork:

In recent weeks I have pondered on the wonders of technology and how they help us in times like these. But this week I have been thinking about purely human attributes. I have been struck by some tremendous examples of team work and collaboration that the Covid-19 outbreak has given rise to. The most obvious one was the building of the Nightingale Hospital in London. It took just nine days. I remember seeing stories of the rapidly built new hospitals in China and thinking you could only do that where you can command your citizens to do whatever you like. You couldn't do that here, I thought. How wrong I was.

The leader of the Nightingale Hospital project was a Colonel from the British Army with extensive experience of setting up and running field hospitals. Architects and engineers from firms plus NHS staff were involved in planning the hospital. In total, around 200 military personnel worked from 7am-10pm every day to complete the job. Their engineers and logisticians supported police, firefighters, volunteers and hundreds of civilian contractors with electrical, plumbing and carpentry tasks, such as building beds and laying vinyl floors.

Another example in the news is the collaboration between University College London engineers who worked with clinicians at University College London Hospital and Mercedes Formula One to build a device which delivers oxygen to the lungs without needing a ventilator. Several other Formula One team engineers and other firms are working together to achieve a similar aim.

I find it inspiring to see how people come together, using their skills and expertise in novel situations and all for the greater good. In the midst of all the bad news it's life-affirming to hear these stories of people working selflessly to help others in their hours of need.