



# Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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**Issue number 10: Sunday 17th May 2020**

## Today's readings

### **Psalm 107: 23–32 (“In praise of God’s goodness”)**

Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the mighty waters;  
they saw the deeds of the Lord, his wondrous works in the deep.

For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea.

They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in  
their calamity;

they reeled and staggered like drunkards, and were at their wits' end.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he brought them out from their distress;  
he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.

Then they were glad because they had quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven.

Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind.

Let them extol him in the congregation of the people, and praise him in the assembly of the  
elders. Amen. (NRSV)

### **Mark 6: 45–52 (“Jesus walks on the water”)**

Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to  
Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the  
mountain to pray.

When evening came, the boat was out on the lake, and he was alone on the land. When he  
saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early  
in the morning, walking on the lake. He intended to pass them by. But when they saw him  
walking on the lake, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him and were  
terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’

Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded,  
for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. Amen. (NRSV)

## Today's hymns

*Amazing grace! how sweet the sound* (CH4: 555)

*He is Lord, he is Lord; he is risen from the dead, and he is Lord* (CH4: 443)

*Let us with a gladsome mind praise the Lord, for he is kind* (CH4: 93)

*Come down, O Love Divine, seek out this soul of mine* (CH4: 489)

*All my hope on God is founded, all my trust he will renew* (CH4: 192)

# *In the Name of the Father and of*

I wonder if, while reading through our passage from Mark chapter 6 you thought you had heard this Bible story really quite recently. Is there something familiar here? The sea journey by night, the storm that whips up the waves, the terrible anxiety of the disciples whose culture had taught them all about those dreaded sea monsters who roamed among the depths. And then there is the intervention of Jesus, calming the waters and bringing peace where only a few moments before there had been turmoil.

If you are a regular church-goer in either Gladsmuir or Longniddry, you will probably be thinking that we're covering old ground here. You might well say: "This clearly a case of *déjà vu*. We've been here before, and not so very long ago."

In response to this I would have to give you a cautious, "yes" and "no". We *have* been on some choppy waters and as recently as three months ago (which seems like a different age in a different world). One Sunday in the middle of February we read about Jesus saving a boat and its passengers from a deadly storm at sea. But that reading from Mark's gospel was a different reading altogether, telling a different story, though in a very similar way.

If there is anything we have learned about Mark these last few months, it is surely this: that he writes his stories sparingly, with a deep commitment to the economy of his message. Mark will not normally use five words where one will do. Yet here we find him choosing to include in chapter 6 of his wee book a sea-faring drama which looks very, very similar to the sea-faring drama found only two chapters earlier. And, for Mark, that is a little strange.

But rather than scratch our heads, let's go in search of an answer to the question, "Why?"

- Why might Mark break his habit and give us two such similar tales?
- Why should he choose (as he seems deliberately to have chosen) to take us back to a theme that was so well covered earlier?
- Why, in particular, does he want us to revisit the scenario of a boat that is saved from inundation; a group of terrified people who are saved from drowning?

Experts call today's reading, the "second sea miracle", and they consider it to be the latter section of a two-part lesson. If we turn to the inevitably named "first sea miracle" of chapter 4, this is what we find: Jesus and the disciples are in a boat out at sea when the weather turns nasty. It looks like things are getting perilous for them, with the real prospect of looming disaster. More than just a battered old boat is at stake here.

In fear for their lives, they shout for Jesus who, despite all the turmoil, is calm, relaxed, fast asleep on board. "Do you not care," they ask, "that we are perishing?" Rising from his slumbers, Jesus steps up to bring the storm under control, so restoring peace and bringing his friends the safety they crave. Then he asks: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

In part one then, Jesus is there with the disciples in their lack of faith, coming to the rescue from within the boat itself. Following on from this story, as we know from recent Sunday services, Jesus trains up his team, showing his friends that as his followers they can expect to face opposition. And after this, he sends them off two by two, to share the Gospel message and to heal the sick, all the while living by faith.

So that's the kind of flow that we find in Mark's gospel: a flow that takes us through incidents, meetings, miracles and healings until now, once again, we find the disciples on some troubled waters once more.

## *the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .*

So what's going on in part two? More of the same it seems, only this time ... *the disciples are on their own*. Jesus is nowhere to be seen as they are straining at the oars in their futile attempts to save their soaking skins. On this occasion there's no reassuring presence of the sleeping Lord just yards away. All seems lost, then suddenly, a figure appears through the gloom with a very simple greeting: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

And suddenly we, the readers, are able to see why Mark has gone to all the bother of giving us a second sea miracle. There was no need to take us back out into a storm, except that this second journey gives us a new insight into fear and faith.

Let's contrast the two accounts. First time round, the danger is overcome from *within* the boat because the person who can fix things, Jesus, is right there. But what if you're on your own? What if you feel isolated and petrified and convinced that you are going down? That's where the second story comes in. At the very moment when the disciples feel their human strength just isn't going to be enough – at that so solitary point when each one would have felt lost – that's the moment Jesus reveals the reality, the closeness, of God's presence.

Over these last few months we have noted on a few occasions that Mark's was the first gospel to have been written. This means that we can examine the later gospels (particularly Matthew and Luke) to see what fresh insights they build into the narrative by adding new material on to Mark's foundations. What's fascinating in relation to this little story is how Matthew changes it. He gives us the addition of another character. He tells us of Peter, who steps out on the sea with great faith intent on meeting Jesus, sadly to find his own strength failing him. He starts to sink and needs Jesus to reach out and pull him back up.

New Testament scholar Marcus Borg helpfully explains this, to let us see what is going on: *For a while, Peter walks on water, but as he "became frightened," he began to sink. After rescuing him, Jesus addressed him as "you of little faith." The connection is clear: fear, lack of courage, and "little faith" go together. With little faith, you become frightened and sink.*

So this lesson – this second lesson from the cruel sea – is offered first by Mark and then expanded by Matthew to give us that account of Peter's rescue in the face of his own failure. And here's one big lesson from today's reading: if you, a follower of Christ, want to learn what the opposite of faith is, don't be fooled. The opposite of faith is not doubt, as you might well suppose. The opposite of faith is *fear*: and fear is what Jesus overcomes.

How very timely. Right now you might be fearful of the most basic things of life, still not permissible under lockdown: travelling far to go on holiday, or making a trip to the cinema. You are justified in being scared because you have no built-in defence to guard you from a potentially deadly virus. And that may very well make you feel your life is "all at sea".

More than this, as a follower of Jesus you have precisely no extra ability to beat infection should it come your way. But whether you stay fit and well or whether you don't, as a Christian your trust lies in something and in someone far greater than this material world with all its threats and perils. The Early Church came to know that great truth, and they were transformed from fear and fragility to courage and care – even in the face of violent death.

The true lesson in all of this is a lesson well worth taking on board any sinking ship: "faith and courage go together." In the wonderful words of Marcus Borg:

*Faith enables us to overcome the stormy sea. Without faith, we sink. Faith is trusting in the buoyancy of God. Amen.*

# Praying for others

Gentle God, you are our pilot upon the seas of life.

In these days of huge uncertainty, we see storms all around.  
We long for calm and peace, yet we know that dangers remain.

In times of crisis, when we feel lost and vulnerable,  
come to us and show us that with you by our sides, we need not fear.

We pray for those people who are finding the current situation so very difficult:  
overstretched and under-resourced NHS staff and care workers;  
parents unable to teach, and teachers frustrated at schools lying empty;  
shop workers who have to serve customers in the most testing of situations;  
council employees putting themselves in the line of danger every working day.

Be with all those who are navigating their way across choppy seas in their work.  
Grant courage and faith to all who feel the storm so close.

Let each one hear those words of Christ: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

In Jesus’ Name we pray. Amen.

## And finally ...

*Robin Hill reflects on an annual fixture of the Church of Scotland, re-imagined for 2020:*  
This weekend is bound to be a poignant one for our Church. Under normal circumstances Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> May would have been “Assembly Sunday”, when the Right Rev Dr Martin Fair, newly installed Moderator of the General Assembly, would be expected to preach at St Giles before going on to pronounce the benediction at the annual Gaelic service at Greyfriars Kirk. This year, of course, these long-standing traditions – along with the General Assembly as a whole – have had to be put on ice. Along with so much in national and domestic life, concern for public health is being placed first, and quite right too.

One Assembly Sunday tradition will, however, be going ahead, albeit in a new form. The annual “Heart & Soul” event scheduled for the afternoon has been relocated from Princes Street Gardens to a computer screen near you. Simply visit the Church’s website ([churchofscotland.org.uk](http://churchofscotland.org.uk)) at 2pm on the day to enjoy a varied programme of events.

One highlight will be journalist Hugh Pym, an elder at St Columba’s Church of Scotland in London, interviewing Professor Jason Leitch, the National Clinical Director of the Scottish Government. The BBC’s health editor will also be speaking with our own Viv Dickenson, chief officer of CrossReach, the Church’s social care council, which runs 70 services for people of all ages across Scotland, including care homes.

One last surprise, again from our own charge: Alastair Clarke’s magnificent lockdown music video of the Heart & Soul Swing Band will be receiving its world premiere. (The song, recorded across a dozen different houses, will ensure that the band’s 100% attendance record at the event will remain intact!) As a work of film-making prowess, it is not to be missed.

Heart & Soul 2020: a grand day out in the comfort of your own home.