



Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

Available in printed form and online at:
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Issue number 13: Sunday 7th June 2020

Today's reading

Mark 7: 5–13 (“The tradition of the elders”)

So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, ‘Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?’ He said to them, ‘Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

“This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.”

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.’

Then he said to them, ‘You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, “Honour your father and your mother”; and, “Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.” But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, “Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban” (that is, an offering to God)— then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.’. Amen. (NRSV)

James 1: 22–27 (“Hearing and doing the Word”)

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

For your gift of God the Spirit, with us, in us, always true (CH4: 603)

Come, children, join and sing, alleluia! amen! (CH4: 185)

Behold, the amazing gift of love the Father hath bestowed (CH4: 478)

Spirit of God, unseen as the wind, gentle as is the dove (CH4: 600)

Christ is made the sure foundation, Christ the head and corner-stone (CH4: 200)

In the Name of the Father and of

Some Bible passages should – perhaps – come with a warning, or at least a word of explanation. Today’s passage from Mark chapter 7 has a couple of ideas which we might need to consider carefully. One of these ideas is contained in a single and very unfamiliar word (which we will come to in just a moment). The other idea, however, is much more simple, as revealed in the writings of someone who was a favourite minister of mine.

Leith Fisher was one of the most brilliant and also one of the most down-to-earth people I have ever met. When, exactly 30 years ago, he took on the charge of Wellington Church in Glasgow, he brought with him great wisdom and unforgettable wit. He had that rare gift of being able to light up a pulpit – a particularly impressive pulpit, famed for its succession of top class preachers. And all his preaching was delivered in unmistakable Greenock tones.

In one of his books, Leith urged his readers to consider the need for humility (and of what can happen when you fail to be humble). Here is his self-deprecating tale:

As an angry young divinity student, child of the revolting sixties, I once preached to a sleepy, midsummer seaside congregation. My text was from Mark 7:9 in the full might and majesty of the Authorised Version, ‘Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition’. I am sure I addressed the congregation with impertinence, upbraiding the people for the ‘sins’ of conventionality and complacency and visiting on them my own ecclesiastical prejudices and frustrations. I wasn’t asked back. I hope I now know when to bite my tongue!

What life-changing lesson should you take from such a sorry story? And as a minister, what might I learn that I myself can bring to my Sunday sermons? Together let us grow in this understanding: that sensitive matters of religion are always likely to spark a great big fire. I know it. You know it. And in today’s reading Jesus clearly knew it too.

And so to our second idea, and that difficult word I mentioned a moment ago. Yes, Mark chapter 7 offers us a Jewish term that sits uneasily with us: “Corban”, with a capital “C”. Upper case words are usually important words, and Corban is no exception, yet we probably struggle to grasp what it is all about. So here goes ...

In first century Palestine, Jewish people would sometimes make a vow to consecrate their property and resources to the Temple in Jerusalem, a bit like someone drawing up a charitable legacy today. Sadly, it seems that this legal measure was used in a deeply unethical way by some unscrupulous folk in order to hoard their wealth for their own pleasure while those around them struggled in poverty. (Hardly a good or godly outcome.)

More than this, however, in Corban it seems that folk had the perfect excuse for telling their impoverished parents: “Really sorry mum and dad, but I have now dedicated all I own to the Lord, so I cannot give you even so much as a penny to help you in your hour of need.”

Now this was a shocking thing for a son or daughter to do to their parents, particularly at a time long, long centuries before the arrival of the welfare state. For Jesus, such a gross act of selfishness was the very opposite of true faith in God. It was hypocrisy, loud and clear.

Instead of sticking by the commandment to honour your father and mother, those who turned their vow of Corban into a personal savings generator were able very neatly to evade their social responsibilities and so live a life ever more selfish. To make matters worse, they even got to say they were engaging in this scam *for God*. (No wonder, then, that Jesus was livid.)

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

This story of Mark's is placed within the setting of a question from the religious authorities about why the disciples fail to wash their hands before eating. In reply, Jesus berates the scribes and Pharisees for their double standard in obeying regulations while caring little for God and God's justice. And so we find Jesus, of course, making enemies at quite a rate.

In our time, we might well think that this hand-washing issue is no big deal. After all (especially in these dangerous times) we all wash our hands to stay safe and to keep others safe too. We certainly do not see personal hygiene as some time-honoured ritual carried out as a religious duty or spiritual discipline. Still, the reality is that we as church members often do certain things simply because that's the way they have been done since olden times.

Here's one simple example for you: when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we use the old version: "Our Father *which art* in Heaven ...". We probably don't even think about this because it is what we have always done. In many ways it is a lovely prayer to say service by service, as it keeps us in touch with the language of the church we grew up in. But just remember: that wording dates from as far back as the year 1611. And really good modern versions of the Lord's Prayer have been around for a generation and more, in use all across the Church.

Have you ever considered that? Perhaps not, and this is nothing to be ashamed of. I know that I have never even brought the subject up for discussion at either of our kirk sessions.

Customs can be really good things, keeping us aligned with what has gone before, ensuring that we stay true to the teachings handed down to us. But let me go further: a good tradition offers a firm foundation upon which all sorts of fine practices can be built. So tradition: we love you; so much comes from you, and we are grateful.

But, as we said last week on the Day of Pentecost, if we are to take seriously the reality of God's Holy Spirit at work in the Church, this must bring certain very striking consequences for us. God is still speaking, God is still challenging, God is still wanting to inspire us anew. So it would be sad indeed if *God's* action should ever be stifled by *our* old, familiar ways.

Are we to be guided by the bright flame of the Spirit ... or by the dying embers of some of our customs whose use-by dates have long come and long gone? Now, perhaps more than ever, we need to be looking to God, discerning God's will for what our Church is to become.

The scribes and the Pharisees knew inside-out all the regulations that helped make their exclusive religion work smoothly for the benefit of those who were within the faith. A big challenge arrived for them in the form of this man from Galilee, because when Jesus came along with a message of openness and acceptance and inclusion for all, his Good News would change everything. For Jesus it could not be enough to stick to the old standards, especially if those standards served to fence people off, leaving them firmly on the outside.

In June 2020 we need to reflect carefully on what has happened these last few months: how quickly and how adeptly we have re-invented ourselves over a whole range of different areas, whether in worship, pastoral care, faith nurture or community-building. Since March, congregations all around the world have done amazing things. And that firmly includes us.

As we move out in more new directions as followers of Christ, we will learn much from our experience. May we, just like Jesus, look to invite in those people now are standing on the fringes of faith. And may we ask God to be our ever-present guide along the way.

Amen.

Praying for others

Sunday marks the final day of Volunteers Week 2020.

Let us pray:

Everlasting God,

Strengthen and sustain all those who volunteer
in their neighbourhoods in so many different ways;
that with patience and understanding
they may love and encourage those around them:
the young and the old,
those with so much potential, those who fear they may be useless.

At this time of great challenge, we ask you to bless
all who are helping to make life so much better for those people
who are living in trauma, in despair, or in fear of Covid-19.

May your Spirit bring wisdom;
may your Spirit bring guidance;
may your Spirit bring strength,
so that, with you to challenge and to guide,
dedicated volunteers may continue to bring hope as they bring help.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison considers good intentions:

This week has been our first full week with the very first, very slight, easing of lock-down restrictions. And, don't you just know it, now we can meet other households outside, the weather has gone from summer to early spring. Nonetheless I am sure we are all enjoying seeing friends and family again in our gardens or parks, even if we can't yet give them a hug.

But the easing of life's current limitations makes me wonder about all this enforced free time we have had. I strongly suspect many of us made plans about all the wonderful things we would do when we were made to stay at home for weeks on end. Did you plan to learn a language? Urdu? Swahili? Or maybe just polish up your school French? Maybe you planned to write that novel you always felt you had in you: *The Life and Times of a Session Clerk in Longniddry* (I'm sure it would be a bestseller). Perhaps you were going to read *War and Peace* or *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* at long last. Maybe you were going to pick up your easel and paints again and give Monet a run for his money.

When time stretches before us in what seems an endless vista we can be full of good intentions but never quite carry them out – there is always tomorrow. Now, suddenly, there might not be too many more tomorrows free of our usual busyness and daily distractions. So, perhaps we should galvanise ourselves and sharpen our pencils, or dust off the French dictionary or epic novel and get going with our plans, before they become pipe dreams once more. (I sincerely hope we never have another opportunity like this one!)