



# Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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## Today's reading

### **Psalm 51: 10–14 (“A prayer for cleansing and pardon”)**

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance. Amen. *(NRSV)*

### **Mark 7: 14–23 (“What makes you unclean?”)**

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, ‘Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.’

When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. He said to them, ‘Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?’ (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, ‘It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.’ Amen. *(NRSV)*

## Today's hymns

Here are five hymns offered to inspire you as you reflect on their words and music:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me* (CH4: 555)

*Our God as a God who makes friends* (CH4: 792)

*Oh, come, and let us to the Lord in songs our voices raise* (CH4: 59)

*Make me a channel of your peace* (CH4: 528)

*Eternal Father, strong to save, whose arm restrains the restless wave* (CH4: 260b)

# *In the Name of the Father and of*

**L**ast week we were thinking together about the religious practice of hand-washing – an empty and counter-productive religious ritual which Jesus warned his listeners against. He was concerned, it seems, for those whose hands could so easily be made visibly spotless while leaving hearts and minds in a concealed, corrupted state.

Jesus, it strikes me, could take an age-old custom and hold it up to the light just in order to show how ragged and tattered it had become. For him, his dirty-handed army of often unreliable followers showed a whole lot more spiritual promise than the hygiene-conscious scribes and Pharisees who clung to their human traditions while ignoring the justice of God.

Today, we arrive at part two of this story, where we hear what happened next. And what did happen next was nothing less than a full-scale attack by Jesus on the religious authorities who had so upset him. Here is what Mark writes:

*Then [Jesus] called the crowd again and said to them, ‘Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.’*

Let me list four key words from this tiny quotation: “crowd”; “listen”; “all”; and “understand”. And bear with me please, as I try to unpack the significance of each one:

**The word “CROWD”:** Mark tells us that Jesus drew together “the crowd” – very ordinary people, most likely poor folk who made up the bulk of first century Jewish life. These were not the wealthy religious leaders. They were not the followers who had travelled with Jesus. They were probably the rank and file peasants and underpaid workers who had next to nothing: the very ones who were perpetually struggling in so many different ways. These were Jesus’ own people, maybe even his family and his friends.

**The word “LISTEN”:** This single word sends a message all of its own. “Come on,” it says, “I need you to pay attention; to stop what you’re doing; to set aside your dealings and your conversations, because what you are about to hear changes everything for you ...”

**The word “ALL”:** Jesus is about to pass on a great truth that is not directed at any one person or family, but is rather intended to be heeded by society as a whole, irrespective of age or ability, background or belief. In this sense, it must have come as a shock to the leaders who thought they knew who were “in” and who were “out” in the realm of faith. They had their rules of the game, and they stuck to them come what may. The problem? Jesus brought with him a different set of rules to govern a decidedly more radical approach to life and faith.

**The word “UNDERSTAND”:** Jesus did not just want his listeners to hear what he had to say. Jesus wanted them to take it in and to realise the full implications of the fresh, new teaching that would imminently be coming their way. And look!: here it comes, in all its brevity and simplicity and mind-altering impact:

*‘ ... there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.’*

Those foods which have been banned by religious rules lack any power to stain or to sully. Don’t be concerned, says Jesus, with what those leaders tell you about attending to ritual by cutting out all that is not kosher.

No. What you need to dwell on day by day is your own list of personal traits and tensions which threaten to diminish – to inhibit – your life and lives of other people around you.

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

One week ago you will no doubt have caught the top headline in the news: the toppling and ditching of Edward Colston's statue in Bristol. Dramatic stuff for a Sunday tea-time, and food for thought as we consider this passage from chapter 7 of Mark's gospel. Colston, after all, lived by the rules as an upstanding member of society and respected public figure. Today, let's compare two lives, setting the experience of Edward Coston (1636-1721) against that of his near contemporary and fellow slave trader, John Newton (1725-1807).

As a young man, Colston built up a lucrative business trading between Spain, Portugal, Italy and parts of Africa. In 1680, he became a member of the Royal African Company, which had held the monopoly in England on trading along the west coast of Africa in gold, silver, ivory and slaves. He also made part of his income as a money-lender. In total, he accumulated wealth amounting to an estimated £70,000 – an unimaginable fortune by 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century standards. Colston was a Christian who chose to use his riches to support and endow schools, almshouses, hospitals and churches in Bristol, London and elsewhere.

He was, then, a philanthropist, though he had his limits. It appears he carefully ordered his giving so as to deny benefits to people who did not share his religious and political views.

Around the time of Colston's death a boy named John Newton was born. He too played his part in the slave trade of his day. He too became a Christian who saw no incompatibility between singing God's praise on Sunday and spending the rest of the week buying and selling human beings as property: human property to be used and abused at will. Newton, was first mate and later captain of various slave ships, working in an Atlantic triangle spanning the British Isles, Guinea and the West Indies.

Even after settling back into life on English soil, Newton continued to invest his money in the slave trade. Unlike Colston, however, John Newton eventually came to see the terrible error of his ways. In his sixties he wrote an abolitionist pamphlet which he sent to every Member of Parliament. In it he apologised for what he called, "a confession, which ... comes too late ... It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders."

John Newton turned his hand to writing, giving the world one of its greatest hymns, *Amazing grace*, whose lyrics point believers to what really matters in life: not wealth or privilege, or even generosity, but the realisation that each one of us is a flawed creature in need of God's help. As he wrote: "'tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."

Colston's vandalised statue may well end up in a museum as a lesson to future generations. If it does, I will be satisfied that right has (at long last) been done in the city of Bristol. But Newton's memorial in song will, I would hope, outlive any statue or, indeed, museum.

Jesus was surely correct: we don't need to be right in our rituals or religion to be right with God. We need to be *made* right in our attitudes and our motivations, in our living faith and our human relationships to be right with God. And that will make all the difference to our journey of faith as we let the living God be our guide and our rule.

Evil intentions, as Jesus told that crowd, 'come from within, and they defile a person'. It was this message which made people stop and think both about what they believed and how they lived out their beliefs. It is this same message which needs to be heard and embodied now.

Amen.

# Praying for others

God of all love,  
We come to you once again to draw on your amazing grace  
which you have promised to all your children.  
We pray that you would guard our hearts in these difficult days,  
so that our lives might shine with your living presence.

The length and breadth and depth of your grace are beyond our understanding,  
yet it is enough for us to place our trust in your presence and in your power.

In our weakness, may we know your strength.  
In our sadness, may we find your joy.  
In our pain, may we feel your healing touch.

And through these hard times, may that same amazing grace bring  
your perfect peace resting deep within our souls.

We ask at this time that where it is most needed  
you would bring peace alongside justice in our world.

Inspire true justice across the nations, we pray, so that all might know  
they have a name, and a place, and a voice in this, our troubled world.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

## And finally ...

*Abigail Morrison considers mindfulness:*

There are many aspects of life in recent weeks that have been hard to bear – no hugs from grandchildren, no chatty coffees in your local café, no visits to town (or even another village). But all this enforced time away from our usual busyness may have helped us finally find time to focus on, and enjoy, things that we overlooked in our old lives.

Sales of jigsaws have rocketed in the past few months. There is something ineffably calming and mind-stilling about rummaging around in a box looking for a piece of funny-shaped cardboard which shows the left eye of that man in your picture that you have so nearly finished. And when you put that final piece in place – what contentment, what pride! Most jigsaw puzzlers leave their completed masterpieces in place for many days.

Gardening too has taken off big-style recently. Many more of us are learning the joy of sowing a few seeds, nurturing them and then the excitement of seeing them germinate. And it is so satisfying to plant out dozens of flowers that came from those few wee seeds.

These lock-down activities are so calming because they absorb your whole mind in something simple. And they give you time to really look closely at things. It's often only doing a jigsaw of a famous painting that you really see all the wonderful detail in the work of art. Only by looking closely at your plants to check their health can you see the beauty of their leaves and flowers close up. And whilst you contemplate these things your mind clears of worry and empties of the myriad clutter that usually frazzles your brain.

Peace for a moment, and it's wonderful.