



# Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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## Today's readings

### **James 2:11-17 (“Faith without works is dead”)**

For the one who said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’, also said, ‘You shall not murder.’ Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgement will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgement. What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. Amen. *(NRSV)*

### **Mark 7: 31-37 (“Jesus cures a deaf man”)**

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, ‘*Ephphatha*’, that is, ‘Be opened.’ And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.’ Amen. *(NRSV)*

## Today's hymns

Some favourite hymns for you to contemplate on Sunday, and through the week to come:

*And can it be, that I should gain an interest in the Saviour's blood?* (CH4: 544)

*When I needed a neighbour, were you there, were you there?* (CH4: 544)

*Just as a father shows his love to all his children dear* (CH4: 69)

*Angel voices ever singing round your throne of light* (CH4: 498)

*Rejoice! the Lord is King, your Lord and King adore* (CH4: 449)

# *In the Name of the Father and of*

People can have a tendency to shy away from excessive closeness, and not just in these troubling times of enforced distancing. In all of life there are those awkward occasions when someone impinges just a little too much on another's personal space.

And I suspect that each one of us could think of times when we choose to keep our distance rather than risk getting close. Maybe we fear another person's difference. Or do we convince ourselves that we "really shouldn't intrude"? It may simply be that we are apathetic, so like those characters from the Good Samaritan, we are content to walk on by on the other side.

Jesus, of course, told that parable, and he told it at least in part to show what it takes to be a neighbour. Really good neighbours don't walk past the stranger in need. They move in close. They become involved. They get *relational*. And that can be a challenge to our comfort.

Of all the stories of intimacy in the Bible, the story we read today has to be one of the most staggeringly, off-puttingly relational of all. You might argue that it actually comes into the category of "scarily intimate". Here we find Jesus meeting a man who could neither speak nor hear, and we, the readers, are offered a big lesson in care and compassion, right up close.

Jesus takes the deaf man off to a quiet place, away from all the other people who are pressing in on them; Jesus puts his fingers right into the ears of the man; Jesus spits and touches the tongue of the man. (In all of this, Jesus doesn't hold back in his personal engagement with this individual in need.) Then, the writer Mark goes on to say that with a great sigh Jesus looks to heaven and asks for the man's ears to be opened. At once he hears and he speaks.

What does this story mean for us? For us who have no superhuman powers and for whom touching the insides of other people's ears and mouths would be a very big step too far?

At the most simple of levels, this story suggests that Jesus was ready, willing and able to *get involved*. It follows that if we are to become increasingly like Jesus – more Christ-like in our living – then we need to learn our lesson, and *get involved* in similar ways.

Let us, however, be realistic here: the Jesus we encounter in the pages of Scripture is a Spirit-filled healer who could bring wholeness to people in all their brokenness. He is in a different league to us. (That much is certain.)

True, we might not have the same gifts as the Son of God, but let us never forget that we can still look at our own God-given abilities – looking also at our untapped potential – to see how we might use what we might have (yes, what *little* we might have) to bring wholeness to people in the midst of their brokenness. From asking, "What could *I* do?", we might move forward in our reckoning to a whole new emphasis: "What *could* I do?"

If we believe that God wants to equip us to rise to life's challenges, then that belief itself might spur us on to examine within ourselves how we might open up our inner being to new possibility: the possibility of being healing influences in our community: not as paid specialists; not as well-qualified professionals; but you and me, getting alongside other folk as – friend-to-friend (or friend-to-*stranger*) – we show God's love in action.

Jesus, as we know, was not one for taking things easy. So often we read in the gospels painfully clear examples of Jesus being in huge public demand, teaching great heavenly truths, encouraging disciples, feeding multitudes, and more, and more, and more. In several instances we find Jesus dropping everything at a moment's notice to help or to heal. That is what we might expect of him but – surely! – it must have been utterly exhausting.

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

Jesus was on a hectic mission to show what kind of a kingdom the Kingdom of God truly is. And so we see sick people restored to health, because that's the kind of thing God's Kingdom smiles at: fresh starts for those who might have reckoned there could be no hope.

That poor man in our story is excluded from so much of ordinary life by his two-fold limitation: an inability to hear and an inability to speak. For Jesus, however, this is an issue to be tackled head-on, a problem to be set right. He comes to show through word and action that *all* have value, that *all* are able to find new life, new worth in God's redeeming love.

Jesus is the founder of our faith, and he gives each one of us a blueprint for communal living. If we take that blueprint and we set that blueprint out on a great big table, and if we turn our minds to studying that blueprint, then what we come to see is that we are called to build and build, straight and true, learning as we go, and doing as Jesus does.

And what is it that Jesus does? He sticks his fingers in grubby, dusty, dysfunctional ears. He puts his hands right inside the mouths of strangers and – calling upon God's power – he changes lives. That sounds alarmingly intimate; *far* too close for our comfort.

In parts of our worldwide Church that message of intimate engagement has been understood and acted upon. We see it in CrossReach. We see it in the YMCA. We see it in the Grassmarket Community Project. All these are agencies we have close connections with.

Internationally, look at the Salvation Army, focusing as they do on practical, Christ-centred action to tackle the most pressing of human need, rolling up their sleeves and just getting on with it. Just as Jesus does. And if that is not true faith, I simply don't know what is.

Sadly, of course, other parts of the Church down through the years seem to have had different priorities, tying themselves up with prestige, craving position and stability and security. Glance through European and American history, and study the murky patterns of church life that worked so hard and so effectively to gain influence with the rich in all their glory while the nameless, faceless poor people stayed nameless and faceless . . . and poor.

Today in our own experience, we need to examine closely our own personal attitudes and our own church priorities. Are we too safe in our assumptions, too regular in our routines, as we sing our hymns, give our offerings, bow our heads in prayer one day in seven. Are we measuring up to the Jesus blueprint? Or, to get more than a little gritty for a moment, dare we ask ourselves: where are *we* sticking *our* fingers? What are *we* doing with *our* spit?

The American preacher Howard Thurman saw complacency as a challenge to the integrity of faith: a threat to true incarnational living. Here are his thoughts on the subject:

*“Too often the price exacted by society for security and respectability is that the Christian movement in its formal expression must be on the side of the strong against the weak. This is a matter of tremendous significance, for it reveals to what extent a religion that was born of a people acquainted with persecution and suffering has become the cornerstone of a civilization and of nations whose very position in modern life too often has been secured by a ruthless use of power applied to defenseless peoples.”*

Only last week I came across a simple little prayer by the theologian Vicky Kemper – a prayer that struck me as one we all need to make to God if we are to avoid being numbed by complacency and, instead, find ourselves sparked into life-changing action. It goes like this:

*Lead us not into numbness, O Lord, but deliver us from denial. Amen.*

# Praying for others

Challenging God, inspirer of our souls,

Your Son ventured out into a world of need, a world of cruelty,  
to reveal your Kingdom and to offer wholeness in body, mind and soul.

With Christ as our blueprint for living, help us to walk in his footprints:  
where oppression is rife and unfairness is real,  
lead us in the ways of justice for those downtrodden in life;  
where fear and anxiety dominate individuals or communities,  
make us your willing servants, working for peace amid the turmoil.

We pray for all those who are finding it hard to cope at this troubling time:  
families divided, whether by miles or by walls;  
business owners and employees who know such terrible uncertainty this summer;  
all who work so hard, so selflessly, for healing and wholeness across our NHS.

God, be near to all, that all might know your love dwelling deep within them.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

## And finally ...

*Abigail Morrison considers freedoms and restrictions:*

On Thursday we heard that we are now entering Phase 2 of Scotland's easing of lock-down restrictions. We can now enjoy more freedoms – or will shortly be able to enjoy them. We can meet up, outside, with more than one other household – up to three households can meet outside together, up to a maximum of eight people.

Though we are encouraged to stay within five miles of home for everything else, this does not apply to visiting friends and family. If you are meeting in a friend or relation's garden you no longer need to cross your legs and hope for a speedy journey home – you can use their loo. (Who would have thought, a few months ago, you'd think using a friend's toilet was a special privilege?)

For anyone living alone you can now join up with one other household to form a joint one. That means going inside and being able to give them a hug. Oh joy! Hopefully such joys will be extended to those who don't live alone soon.

But whilst we enjoy these new freedoms, let's take time to remember those who can't enjoy them. Those who are shielding, whilst they can now go outside to exercise and can meet one other household (in groups of no more than eight outdoors), are still living under a greater range of limitations compared with the rest of the population.

Remember those who couldn't enjoy this luxury even before lock-down, for whom the easing of restrictions may seem a hollow joke. Those who are ill, confined to home, with no family or friends near. Those for whom lock-down is, has been for a long time, and will remain, real life.