



Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Issue 18

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Today's reading

Psalm 55 ("Complaint about a friend's treachery")

Give ear to my prayer, O God; do not hide yourself from my supplication.

Attend to me, and answer me; I am troubled in my complaint.

I am distraught by the noise of the enemy, because of the clamour of the wicked.

For they bring trouble upon me, and in anger they cherish enmity against me.

My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me.

Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me.

And I say, 'O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest;

truly, I would flee far away; I would lodge in the wilderness;

I would hurry to find a shelter for myself from the raging wind and tempest.'

Confuse, O Lord, confound their speech; for I see violence and strife in the city.

Day and night they go around it on its walls, and iniquity and trouble are within it;

ruin is in its midst; oppression and fraud do not depart from its market-place.

It is not enemies who taunt me—I could bear that;

it is not adversaries who deal insolently with me—I could hide from them.

But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend,

with whom I kept pleasant company; we walked in the house of God with the throng.

Let death come upon them; let them go down alive to Sheol;

for evil is in their homes and in their hearts.

But I call upon God, and the Lord will save me.

Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan,

and he will hear my voice. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

CH570: *When the storms of life are raging*

CH694: *Brother, sister, let me serve you*

CH288: *Creator of the stars of night*

CH457: *All hail the power of Jesus' Name*

CH475: *Christ is coming! let creation from her groans and travail cease*

In the Name of the Father and of

This sermon was preached in a summer service in 2008 when our theme for the season was “songs of power and passion”.

Today we find much food for thought in the Book of Psalms. In our reading, we hear a power and a passion being articulated by a writer who obviously wants to bring before God the hurt which so many of us feel in life.

The book of Psalms, of course, is rightly famed for its “no holds barred” approach to honesty before God. No matter what the emotion (joy, sorrow, love, hatred, contentment, fear) you can be fairly sure that the book of Psalms will have something to say about it. Psalms such as Psalm 55 are simple in their approach, yet profound in their content, making us realise that there is pretty much nothing we can say to God which has not been said before.

Perhaps that is why the psalms are sung to this day, whether in the robed majesty of a high Anglican choir, or the dark-suited sobriety of Gaelic psalmody. Yes, the psalms have survived in all sorts of forms and manifestations, drawing us back to the enormous truth that people of faith have always turned to God in good times and in bad. And that is, at least in part, what makes them songs of power and passion.

Down the years, other writers have borrowed the psalms and other books of the Bible for their own inspiration. In particular, the slave communities who penned African-American spirituals would go back to the books of the Old Testament for song material. They would look to stories of subjugation, and find signs of hope. They found that where there was wrong-doing, God used his servants the prophets to speak out and make a stand for justice.

The Bible message leapt out from the printed page and into American popular culture. And when it did so, it is fascinating to see the sort of music which accompanied these songs of power and passion. This was music of the people: folk music.

Did you know that folk music the world over tends to bypass the seven note major scale of western art music (*doh, re, mi, fa, sol, lah, ti*)? Instead, folk music, whether in Scotland or Ireland, China or Korea, West Africa or West Virginia, tends to manifest itself in a five-note scale (often *doh, re, mi, sol, lah*). Really? If in doubt, check it out: *Auld lang syne* (five note scale). *Ye banks and braes* (five note scale). *Skye boat song* (five note scale). *Amazing grace* (five note scale). *Oh Suzannah* (five note scale). I could go on, but you get the message.

If you were sitting at a piano, with each of these tunes you would only need to use the black notes because no white note is ever required for the melody. The scale used has five notes, so it's called “pentatonic”. It's simple. It's sparse. It's amazing. And it's very, very powerful.

So then, think of some of the most famous African American spirituals, and it's a fair bet that they will be pentatonic. Not all of them are, by any means, but a surprising number of spirituals work with only those five black notes: *Mary had a baby*; *Nobody knows the trouble I've seen*; *Steal away*; *Swing low, sweet chariot*; *This little light of mine*; *Were you there when they crucified my Lord*. Keep searching and you will find many others too.

I believe that one of the gifts which 19th century spirituals give to the Church is the gift of power. The words are direct, personal and visual. The tunes are simple and memorable. As a result, when you sing a spiritual, you sing something that is natural and straight from the soul. It's no surprise, indeed, that by the 1870s, American hymns derived from the spiritual tradition were being described as “soul music”, a term that remains in use to this day.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

Let's not forget that our Church of Scotland hymn book contains some spirituals, set, of course, to pentatonic melodies. One classic of its kind was penned by Charles A. Tindley, one of the "founding fathers of American Gospel music." Born in 1851 in Maryland, he was the son of slaves, and he grew up without formal schooling. However, shortly after the American Civil War, at the age of 17 he taught himself to read and write.

He was a driven young man, working as a janitor while attending night school, and earning a divinity degree through a correspondence course. In 1902, he became pastor of the Calvary Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the church where he had earlier been the janitor. At the time of Tindley's death in 1933, his church had 12,500 members. He wrote at least one very significant song, "I'll Overcome Some Day", which was the basis for the American civil rights anthem "We Shall Overcome," which was popularised in the 1960s.

But the Tindley hymn of power and passion which really stands out is one which perhaps takes us back once more to our Bible reading of this morning: *When the storms of life are raging, stand by me* (see over).

The words of that hymn remind us that our journeying can be hard, but they also reassure us that God can be called on to stand by us in the storms of life.

Another person who knew all about those storms was the writer of a hymn which is filled with so much power and so much passion that it has even been described as the "national anthem of Christianity". Living from 1726 to 1792, Edward Perronet was an assistant to John and Charles Wesley as they took their Methodist message across England. This was no easy task, for a number of reasons. Firstly, the English revival of the 18th century brought with it a fair amount of conflict and turmoil. At the time of their travels, persecution of Methodists was common. John Wesley once noted in his diary that Edward himself "was thrown down and rolled in mud and mire" at Bolton.

And it wasn't just physical trauma that young Edward had to contend with either. Though he was considered a capable preacher, he was (understandably) uneasy about preaching in front of the great orator, John Wesley, even though Wesley kept on encouraging him to stand up and speak in public. No matter how much Wesley suggested and prodded and cajoled, Perronet just wasn't having it. In the end, Wesley had had enough, so he simply announced one day that Brother Perronet would speak. Edward climbed straight into the pulpit, declaring he would deliver the greatest sermon ever preached, and he then read the Sermon on the Mount straight from Matthew's gospel, after which, he immediately sat down again!

What then of the "National Anthem of Christianity"? If you are looking for a hymn of power and passion, you could not do much better than *All hail the power of Jesus' Name* (see over).

The Church of the present day seems determined to modernise, with all sorts of innovations being advanced for "improving" worship. Many new developments are to be welcomed as part of our on-rolling tradition, but when it comes to music we should pause before rising to the temptation to clear out the old in favour of the new. Whether in the psalms of ancient days or the spirituals of 200 years ago, God is still glorified to this day. And that is surely worth celebrating Sunday by Sunday!

Amen.

Praying for others

Ever-present God,
in good times and in bad,
we turn to you.

You are with us in our joys and in our pain.

When we have no words,
you hear the silent callings of our hearts.

The road can be uncertain and the journey rough,
but you, O Lord, stand by us through it all.

Your love meets us where we are.

In turning to you,
we follow in the footsteps of generations before us,
and join with others the length and breadth of your world.

Be with all who are hurting, we pray.

In sickness, in sorrow,
in the absence of a loved one,
may your comfort be known,
and may each of us feel your loving presence
surrounding us this day.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison considers not throwing out the baby with the bathwater:

As lock down eases we are slowly returning to something that resembles our old lives a bit more. Of course, it's not the same as our old lives. We never used to wear face coverings when we shopped or got on a bus. We never swabbed our hands down with sanitiser every time we touched a door handle (well, I didn't). We would have considered it positively rude to sit on the other side of the room from our friends and family whereas now it's the opposite.

As we move into this new way of living it's easy to throw off the habits we have acquired during our months of confinement. Some of those habits could do with being abandoned but some of the things we learnt to do were good and should be maintained. I have realised over the last couple of weeks that, because I have been able to see my friends face to face, we seem to have stopped chatting on video calls. But I see them in person only every couple of weeks or less whereas we chatted on the phone twice a week. When we met earlier this week we agreed to start those phone calls again.

This will be one of the challenges we all face – what was good about lock down (because some things were good) and how do we keep them going?

We are already thinking about this as a church community. We have risen to the challenge of not having services in church every Sunday and there have been some benefits of this. We need to identify which of the new should be kept when we can also return to some of the old.