



Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

Available in printed form and online at:
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Today's reading

Matthew 25: 31–46 (“The judgement of the nations”)

‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’ Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father (CH4: 153)

Praise God, for he is kind: his mercy lasts for aye (CH4: 92)

I love the sun, it shines on me (CH4: 144)

For the healing of the nations, Lord, we pray with one accord (CH4: 706)

Crown him with many crowns, the lamb upon his throne (CH4: 459)

In the Name of the Father and of

This sermon was preached in a summer service in 2013 when our theme for the season was “lessons from the past for the Church of tomorrow”.

I firmly believe that by listening to the lessons of the past, today’s Church can learn some important lessons: lessons in how to do once again the kind of things that long, long ago, helped to push the Church forward in amazing ways. And with Rodney Stark’s book, *The rise of Christianity*, we find ourselves in the realms of pushing the Church forward.

Let’s go back in time to the year 165AD, and the reign of the Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius. Lost interest already? Please don’t, because this is exciting stuff. Trust me.

A devastating epidemic was sweeping the Empire. We don’t know the cause, though medical historians believe it may have been the arrival of smallpox in a western world ill-equipped to deal with it. Incredibly, over a 15-year period, between a quarter and third of all Roman citizens died in what seemed to be a totally senseless plague upon the apparently all-powerful Empire. Among those who perished was Marcus Aurelius himself, showing that this all-engulfing tidal wave discriminated not at all between ruler and peasant.

Time went by, and things got back to normal ... until almost a century later in the year 251AD another epidemic hit Rome. It was equally devastating, caused (it is believed) by something as simple as measles. As many as 5000 people a day were dying in the city of Rome, with the great city of Alexandria being reduced in population by two thirds.

How did the forward-thinking, sophisticated, resourceful people of Rome respond in each case of plague? With complete incredulity. They couldn’t take it in. Only one group of people (strange people) had some sort of handle on what had taken place across the cities a of the Empire. The Christian community knew full well that this world is a place of uncertainty and of suffering. And yet these Christians held that the world was a place where God was present, calling his people to the enduring power of love.

These followers of Jesus held out as their key community ethic the values of love and charity. The church tirelessly translated this thinking into practical service and community-building. Put simply, these hopeful Christians knew how to approach bad times, and their faith was able to help them cope with even the most dire of life-threatening situations.

The early Christians had already learned important lessons as a caring community, and the application of these lessons made a massive difference to life and death across the Empire.

Why? First of all, the Christians had a very clear sense of divine calling to help those in need. To help us see what the Christians were thinking, Rodney Stark offers us this little exercise:

I suggest reading the following passage from Matthew as if for the very first time, in order to gain insight into the power of this new morality when it was new, not centuries later in more cynical and worldly times:

- *for I was hungry and you gave me food,*
- *I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,*
- *I was a stranger and you welcomed me,*
- *I was naked and you gave me clothing,*

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

- *I was sick and you took care of me,*
- *I was in prison and you visited me.'*
- *... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'*

If you also want to hear a voice from the period in question, then listen to the Christian writer Tertullian who, in the second century said this:

It is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. 'Only look,' they say, 'look how they love one another.'

The Christians did very simple but immensely effective things. They kept their neighbours washed and clean. They provided them with nourishing food and fresh water. They came alongside them in their hour of greatest need. By contrast, at the first sight of plague, those Romans who were able to flee headed for the hills, while the Christians rolled up their sleeves and got on with the dangerous and demanding task of caring.

What happened next? During the course of these two devastating epidemics, many Christians died for their faith, serving others in desperate need, yet the ratio of pagans to Christians changed dramatically, with more and more Romans becoming followers of Jesus. I wonder why. Was it because they were won over to Christianity as a way of faith which is deeply effective? I suspect that is exactly what happened.

What can we learn from those early Christians of Rome who saved and who changed a truly immense number of lives? First and foremost, I believe that we can learn about the power of pastoral care. In a 21st century world of full time ministers, trained doctors and professional social workers, it is easy for us in the church to observe the woes of our world and to say: "Someone else will see to that. Who am I to get involved?" Indeed, there are really good reasons why we should positively leave certain areas of care to the caring professionals with the best facilities available to them. That's an important point to make.

At the same time, we are the people of God: the hands of God, the feet of God, the eyes of God, the ears of God. We (you and I) are the ones whose ministry can bring comfort and wholeness and healing to those in greatest need, because when we go into a difficult situation, God is there before us, and God can use us in ways we can't begin to imagine.

Is our faith effective? Could we do things differently? Could we make a real impact on our families, on our communities, on our nation? Could we? Would we? ... Dare we?

Perhaps we need to get to the position where we are able to say: "I know my faith is effective because it led me to do something big and bold and beautiful. And you know what? That means something to me in the living out of my Christian faith."

If we really want to emulate those early Christians, then we might just have to be ready to show what our faith in Jesus Christ actually means when the chips are down and the stakes are high. That, after all, is what they did. And that has to be one of the most important reasons why the Church of Jesus Christ changed from being the obscure, marginal Jesus Movement, to become the dominant religious force in the western world in a few centuries.

That wouldn't be easy. But whoever told you that being a follower of Jesus would be easy?

Amen.

Praying for others

Just and caring God,
Where there is hunger, we pray for wholeness;
where there is sickness, we pray for healing;
where there is isolation, we pray for community;
and where there is comfort and prosperity, we pray for action.

Help us each to recognise our own unique role in your ministry.
May we answer your call to see you in the faces of all whom we encounter,
and may we truly live as neighbours together.

In the uncertainty and suffering of life,
remind us that you have no hands but our hands,
no feet but our feet,
and no voice but our voices.

Ours is the task of loving.

May we be known by the care we show to one another.
In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

And finally ...

Robin Hill reflects on new ways of joining our Sunday services:

Last week I produced an A4 sheet of instructions on how to come to church. Not so many months ago that sentence would have seemed ridiculous for any minister to have written (even this minister!). But these are strange times in which strange things are happening.

Basically, I put together a six-point guide on how you can use your normal house phone to listen to our live 10.30am Sunday services. It took a few re-writings to get the document just right but once I was sure of my wording, I put the sheet to the test with the kind services of an octogenarian volunteer. We tried the instructions out on the Saturday, and all went smoothly. And so we looked forward to the following day when the emphasis would shift from practice to reality ...

Sure enough, when the time came there was no problem. Our volunteer managed to use the instructions to phone into the "Zoom" service. She placed her landline phone on its "speaker" setting and effortlessly heard every word. Then, a few minutes after the benediction she reported that, "it was just like listening to the Sunday service on the radio". And more than this, the "Zoom" call was set up so that she could hear the act of worship without anyone being able to hear her. She could be there, but was also secure in the knowledge that she could stay in the background, unseen and unheard throughout.

Would you like to try out the six-point guide to coming to church? Both our session clerks have the sheet, and so do most of our district elders, so get in touch and request a copy. Then you too will be able to "Zoom" off to church Sunday by Sunday.