



Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Issue 23

Sunday 16th August 2020

Today's reading

Psalm 137

*By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.*

*On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'*

*How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.*

*Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, 'Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!'
O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!
Amen. (NRSV)*

Today's hymns

Although our 10.30am service only has two hymns each week, we can all enjoy opening our hymn books throughout the week to enjoy some excellent spiritual songs. Here are a few:

- CH4 65: *Jubilate, everybody, serve the Lord in all your ways*
- CH14: *The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want*
- CH4 541: *Lord, I pray, if today someone wrongs or troubles me*
- CH4 710: *'I have a dream', a man once said, 'where all is perfect peace'*
- CH4 682: *Go in grace and make disciples*

In the Name of the Father and of

This sermon was preached in a summer service in 2016 when our theme for the season was “framing a jazz-shaped faith”.

It is said that blues music helps its listeners to connect with sadness. Crucially, it also connects with hope. The blues brings us to sadness by giving voice to human yearnings. And in a strange way, the blues supports the idea of hope by doggedly and often defiantly supporting, even strengthening the singer who is so cast down in life.

It's quite some music.

We may not sing the blues ourselves, though perhaps each one of us can relate to the blues in our own experiences of disappointment or injustice. The blues is a form of music that openly acknowledges deep, dark pain, so helping to articulate our innermost longings, and sometimes sowing tiny seeds of hope.

The blues is a simple category of music, based on short verses, typically 12 bars in length, using as few as three chords as an accompaniment. We are talking about a very, very basic type of music here, yet within the blues form there is infinite artistic variety, from the slow and mournful to the poignant and heartfelt, to the big and angry. There is room in the blues for all sorts of emotion, and that shouldn't be too surprising considering how the blues came to us.

If we look back in time to the early days of America's southern states, we find a nation divided on racial lines. People of European origin owned the land. They owned the means of production. And in a purely literal sense, they even owned a great many of the people who worked the soil and raised the crops. The obscenity of slavery was the engine of the Southern economy, making the rich very rich while the poor stayed destitute.

Southern churches played their part in keeping this divide in place with teachings which pointed to rewards in the next life in return for the dutiful sufferings in the here and now. But many of the spiritual songs which slave communities knew and loved were inspired by thoughts of liberation. The phrase “crossing over Jordan” could stand for death and heavenly glory, but it could also be a cry for freedom in the present. The land of Egypt came to be seen as the place of bondage, from which freedom would surely come. ... One day.

In all their oppression and in all their pain, African Americans had resilience: an inner strength which came from their faith in God, and which was voiced through their defiant music. Tragically though, as the years went by and the cause of emancipation finally won through, many of these Americans found themselves still rooted in injustice and poverty.

Little had changed for the women and men and children who had been slaves for so long. Now they were free, though often in name only. Their place in American society was a place of humiliation, yet these people would not give up. Many found themselves both believing in God and singing their pain. How true that remains to this day.

The theologian Robert Gelinas, says that in life we need to know what to do with pain. The blues, he maintains, can helpfully set that pain in motion. Singing the blues becomes a way of telling a story, “wrought out of the deep feelings that accompany life in a world that isn't as it should be. To sing the blues is to latch on to a tragedy in such a way that we embrace it for all its worth. ... It requires that we become intimately familiar with our pain and the pain of the world.”

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

Psalm 137 is unique among the 150 psalms in the Bible, in that it looks back in pity and in loss to an actual historical event: the conquering and destruction of Jerusalem in the 6th century BCE by the Babylonians and their Edomite allies. Hand-in-hand with this tragedy went the national calamity of the Hebrew leadership, as they were taken captive and deported for several decades to exile in the land of Babylon.

The writer is very much part of this sad, sad story, and so his song comes from the heart. Singing of what has been, of what is and of what is to come:

- he remembers Zion (Jerusalem) in the **past**;
- he vows not to forget in the **present**; and
- he pleads with God to bring liberation in the **future**.

This displays what we might call “a blues mentality”, which faces up to the terrible loss of the people, but which will not be overcome. The song of the psalmist is not just shouted into a void, wailed into nothingness. It is a frank and unashamed plea to the living God.

As the Old Testament scholar, James L. Mays so succinctly writes: “Faithfulness will remember in pain and prayer.” And if we are to live according to a true faith, we need to do just as he says: to “remember in pain *and* prayer”.

In some ways that is already what we are about in church. Consider what happens when we share bread and wine at Communion. This defining act of our church is in no way a joyful celebration of Easter; it is a grounded and sombre remembrance of Christ’s suffering and death. That is what Jesus himself calls on his disciples to take on board, again and again – body broken; blood poured out. Remember ... remember ... remember. So we have indeed remembered for nearly 2000 years. And so we will continue to remember in years – in centuries – to come, following Christ’s command.

And, of course, our remembrance is not simply a looking *back* in time. It is also a reaching out *in our own time*, as we all take the ministry of Christ beyond the walls of our church, with the powerful message, the personal care and the social action which our faith demands. This is Christ’s mission to bring justice to those whom Jesus calls “the least of these”. Our faith is a faith that both acknowledges the blues and *lives* the blues, precisely where people are burdened by pain and sorrow.

We close with the words of Robert Gelinas:

“Jesus’ message won’t let us forget the least of these — the blues people. The gospel must connect with the poor and the poor in spirit, the miserable and the marginalized, in order for it to be the gospel. When Jesus spoke of the gospel, he did so in terms of a kingdom for blues people (and beyond). ... if our gospel doesn’t have the blues in it and if it’s not applicable to blues people, then it’s not the gospel. The gospel we live must be for blues people. A jazz-shaped faith is familiar with life on the bottom. It is comfortable with the poor and the poor in spirit, the marginalized and the miserable — for they are Jesus.”

Amen.

*If you would like to find out more about blues, jazz and spirituality for the church of tomorrow, Robert Gelinas has written an excellent book on this topic: **Finding the Groove: composing a jazz-shaped faith.***

Praying for others

A prayer for the start of a challenging year in education, as children and young people return to playground, classroom, lecture hall, workshop, studio and laboratory:

God of power and love,

In this world of such uncertainty, we turn to you asking for peace:

Grant peace to our playgroups, nurseries, schools, colleges and universities,
as pupils, students and staff work hard to make education real once more.

Open young minds to the glories of wisdom and of learning,
helping each and all to be safe and well in all they do.

Bless those whose calling is to teach:

those special people whose purpose is to guide, encourage, befriend and inspire.

May each one know that their vocation changes the lives of others for good,
making this world a better place for all.

Yes Lord: bring peace we pray,
so that all our places of learning might ring with joy
and glow with the light of your great love.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

And finally ...

Jim Jamieson considers the joy of a summer holiday ... inside your own head:

“Maxwell’s demon” and “Schrodinger’s cat” – you may have heard of them. They are examples of thought experiments – conjectural or imaginary experiments which are conducted in the mind rather than on the laboratory bench. There is even a special word for a thought experiment. It is *Gedankenexperiment*, one of the few words imported directly into the English language in modern times from German.

This brings me round to what in normal times would be considered the summer holiday season. You may not be having a real holiday this summer. It is a pleasure which, understandably, should be forgone. Nevertheless you may, like me, be taking a thought holiday. I find that in my mind I can travel to places far away and take delight in the experiences I meet with.

Here is one such thought holiday I return to every now and then. In my mind I see it as a morning’s outing on a warm summer’s day. A ploy hatched at the holiday’s beginning, biding one’s time for the ideal weather. It is taken from The Scottish Mountaineering Club’s Guide to *The Islands of Scotland* (1952 edition – I don’t think they’d get away with it today!):

Holy Island is the finest view-point in the south of Arran, although only 1,030 ft. in height. It is situated in Lamlash Bay, about half-a-mile from Kingscross Point. The ascent in twenty minutes, stimulated by a swim across the narrow channel, affords a pleasant morning’s recreation.

I do not know if there is a special word in English for a thought holiday. Never mind – we can still enjoy holiday experiences in the mind.