



Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

Available in printed form and online at:
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Issue 24

Sunday 23rd August 2020

Today's readings

Psalm 19:7-11 ("The Law of the Lord")

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring for ever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. AMEN. (NRSV)

Matthew 7:1-12 ("Judging others")

'Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbour, "Let me take the speck out of your eye", while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye.

'Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.

'Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Let's sing to the Lord (CH4:126)

All people that on earth do dwell (CH4: 63)

Lord, you have come to the seashore (CH4: 532)

Make way, make way (CH4: 279)

God is working his purpose out (CH4: 235)

In the Name of the Father and of

This sermon was preached in a summer service in 2017 when our theme for the season was "God at the movies".

In today's reading from Matthew's gospel we read: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get."

These cold, hard words of Jesus are found in the New Testament, but up until that point in biblical history scholars tell us that there had been absolutely no message quite like this message in the entire sweep of Scripture. From Genesis through to Malachi, there is nothing in the Old Testament that equals the uncompromising message of Jesus contained in these two sentences on judging and being judged.

It is true that Jewish tradition placed great emphasis on fairness, toleration and mercy, but it is easy to see that the teaching of Jesus laid out here goes far beyond any of these. It seems that Jesus is telling his listeners that every single believer has a real obligation to observe themselves closely in their dealings with others, so that they do not rise to the temptation to judge others or to condemn them.

We can see this amplified in what Jesus goes on to ask his audience:

"Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbour, "Let me take the speck out of your eye", while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye."

The fact is that everyone has their faults. Everyone. So if you lay into your neighbours over what you see as their dodgy conduct, you clearly haven't first paused to consider what needs turned around in *your* life. If you had only stopped to think about your own shortcomings, then surely you would have been drawn to behave in a more restrained way in relation to those around you.

In short, we can't have it both ways. What we do unto others, we might very well expect to have done to us: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged."

That all sounds terribly negative, so let's turn it right around to look at things from a different angle. If we choose the mercy-filled way of Jesus over the judgement-filled way of the world, our lives will be enhanced and made better. As Jesus himself said in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."

In total then, it seems that whatever we give (good or bad) we can expect to find returning to us. So, perhaps being merciful in our personal living is always, always, always going to be the better path to take – both for the good of other people and the good of ourselves. Mercy isn't just a tool to be picked out of the box when it suits us. Mercy is a central part of the people we are called to be.

I recently read a commentary on Matthew's gospel and I was really impressed by what was said there about this passage of Jesus' teaching about justice and mercy. The writers tell us that there are times when decisions based on community discipline are called for in life, "... but they must be made by those aware of their own failures ..."

That's vital, because everybody fails. And we must keep that fact humbly in our minds when we might be tempted to judge others by a standard that might well be less than equitable.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

Perhaps the greatest film to look at fair standards in life is Sidney Lumet's magnificent 1957 courtroom drama, "12 Angry Men", which is set almost entirely in a hot and humid jury room in the height of a sweltering summer. It is a movie that takes the lid off the human condition to look deep inside at the many and varied ways in which people can so easily allow themselves to judge others with a terrible lack of fairness.

At the start of the jury's deliberations, 11 jurors vote for a guilty verdict, with one (Juror number 8) coming out for "not guilty". What's striking here is that his argument is not that the boy is innocent (and that is really crucial to the plot) but that there is *reasonable doubt* over the alleged crime, making any conviction an unsafe verdict. All the others disagree.

Some are convinced by the evidence that had been offered at trial. Others are governed by their instinct or their intuition. Some see the teenaged accused as coming from a background that makes acts of violence simply inevitable. And for one or two of these jurors, they just want to find the quickest way of getting out of that pressure cooker of a room. Only one sees problems with the prosecution's case, and little by little, he voices his doubt to the other 11. They can't believe their ears, but they grant him one single hour in which to change every one of their minds to a unanimous verdict of not guilty. One hour to save a boy from death row.

As the minutes tick by, sure enough, more and more of the jury come to see what they supposed to be the hard and fast truth of a murder to be little more than unsafe conjecture. 11 to 1. . . . 10 to 2. . . . 9 to 3 it goes, as more and more of the jurors turn away from their misconceptions, and so come to change their vote.

Eventually, two thirds of the jurors move over to "not guilty", on the basis of Juror Number 8's reasoned argument, but the last three are much more determined to stick to their position. Why? Because when it comes to judging others, irrational prejudice is the hardest nut to crack. That's where Juror 8 steps in with this wise observation:

It's always difficult to keep personal prejudice out of a thing like this. Wherever you run into it, prejudice always obscures the truth. I don't really know what the truth is; I don't suppose anybody will ever really know. Nine of us now seem to feel that the defendant is innocent. We're just gambling on probabilities; we may be wrong. We may be trying to let a guilty man go free, I don't know. Nobody really can. But we have a reasonable doubt, and that's something that's very valuable in our system: no jury can declare a man guilty unless it's sure.

At the very end of this famous film, the three remaining jurors finally become convinced by Juror 8, and their case against the boy (such as it is) crumbles away. He is found not guilty unanimously, not because anyone can be confident of his innocence, but because not one of them can be sure of his guilt. The teenager walks free; justice is both done and seen to be done.

Every single human being has within them a dangerous capacity to hear what they would want to hear, to forget what they would prefer to forget, to jump to conclusions which might very well lie far from the truth. That, I would suspect, is why Jesus is so keen to stress that judgment is so serious a matter, which must never be entered into lightly. And perhaps that's also why Jesus promotes mercy in his thinking. If we listen to his words we might learn to overcome prejudice in dealing with others who may have their flaws – just as we have ours.

Thank God for those who can assess the world with open minds and consciences free of prejudice and hostility Thank God for Juror number 8 and other brave people just like him. Amen.

Praying for others

God of all the earth,

The beauty and majesty of your Creation sings to our souls:
in seaside walk and forest wandering;
on mountainside and shaded glen;
by highland river and massive canyon.

And as we look up to the skies we find, as with the Psalmist:
“The heavens are telling the glory of God.”

As people of faith who know your loving mercy,
we pray that you would make your Church a leader
in the battle for our planet’s future.

At times we turn away from the horrors of environmental disaster.
Fix our eyes on the challenges needing faced,
and give us the vision and the determination to change our world for the better.

Forgive us, Lord. Guide us. Inspire us.

All this we ask in Jesus’ Name. AMEN.

And finally ...

Robin Hill offers a paragraph recently shared by a minister friend in Midlothian. If this can apply to another congregation nearby, might it be adapted by us here in Gladsmuir linked with Longniddry? Read on:

One of the things that Covid has robbed us of is the opportunity to share together, so we want to do all we can to help create strong connections with one another, aware that at the heart of church life we are called to share with and support one another.

Often we have relied on people meeting together in the church building in groups and with that opportunity largely taken away from us we need to look to other ways to connect with one another. We all have a part in this.

- Could you invite someone else from the church over for a meal—or arrange to go out with them for a coffee?
- Could you go out for a walk with two or three others from the church—or with another family from the church?
- If you have a young family, could you get together with a couple of other families from the church for an activity with some kind of Christian focus?
- Could you help host a small study group, or just invite some church friends round for afternoon tea and a chat?

For the first 300 years, the church met in people’s homes not in dedicated buildings and we have a sense that this may need to be what we develop as we move towards autumn and into winter. We need to keep in touch to support and encourage one another.

Interesting ideas there from our Midlothian friends for us to consider. Now let’s see what might emerge for us as we think and pray about ways of being the church of tomorrow.