



Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Issue 25 **Sunday 30th August 2020**

Today's reading

John 3: 11–21 (“Nicodemus visits Jesus”)

What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.” The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

‘Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.’. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Although we cannot sing in church at present, still we can enjoy these hymns at home over the days to come:

Longing for light (Christ be our light!) (CH: 543)

Sing of the Lord's goodness, Fatehr of all wisdom (CH: 157)

How can I ever thank the Lord for all his gifts to me? (CH: 76)

May the mind of Christ my Saviour (CH: 536)

Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son live in me from day to day (CH: 419)

In the Name of the Father and of

Stewardship is a very important theme in the life of the church, whether locally or nationally. Why should this be? Simply because the church's stewardship efforts are all about taking the resources we have as individuals and using these resources in a way that is well considered and effective in the life of the church.

With stewardship, it is vital to think ahead. In that sense it can be a bit like planning for Christmas. Imagine a conversation between a purely imaginary married couple ...

Nearly September ... the Christmas ads will be on the telly before we know it.

Away! The schools are only just back.

No, we'll need to get planning. What present will we get for Uncle Joe?

Socks.

Socks?

We always get socks for Uncle Joe.

Does he wear socks?

What do you mean, "Does he wear socks???" No, he wanders down the high street in his bare feet.

No need to get sarcastic.

Sorry.

And what about Auntie Gladys?

I'm fairly sure I've never seen Auntie Gladys in socks.

No! What about a present for Auntie Gladys?

How should I know? Buy her a skateboard. Or a pet crocodile. Anything to keep her occupied.

Anything to keep her out of your hair, more like.

What hair???

In late August it may be a little scary to realise we find ourselves pretty well half way between Easter and Christmas. Even at this early stage, planning your Christmas spending can be tricky. But today let's think about Christmas gifts from a different angle as we consider God's gift of his Son on that very first Christmas. For God, this wasn't anything like giving socks or soap or skateboards. This gift was the single biggest thing that God could give. Bigger than silver, bigger than gold, bigger than rubies or emeralds or diamonds.

Why? Because God's gift of Jesus was God's gift *of God*, coming straight from heaven to a people in desperate need of divine wisdom and holy guidance. There could be no greater gift than the gift of God to a cruel and undeserving world: this world of ours which would come to reject the "God gift" and return it to the Maker spoiled ... broken on a Cross.

The theologian Kenneth Samuel puts it very thoughtfully when he says this:

Heaven's treasury was absolutely depleted when God gave God's Only Begotten as a ransom for many. When God gave us Jesus, God didn't just give us the best that God has; God gave us all that God has and all that God is.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

In our reading from John's gospel today we hear all about this momentous act of giving: God's incredible generosity, going so far beyond the gift of mere objects. Because, in the world-famous words of John chapter 3, verse 16:

... God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

"God gave." That much we know, but do we grasp the fullest extent of that divine giving? Do we appreciate what the donation of God's Son really meant for first century Palestine? For the world down through the ages? For us today?

Why would God make this special, divine-human gift to a world in such need? According to Jesus, it all comes down to love: that *unique* Love which really only begins to make sense if we give it a great big capital "L" at the start of it. God knew well that his gift to humanity had to be the sort of present that would be seen to be an expression of *ultimate* Love. It couldn't just be the gift of a messenger with a delivery bag. No mere messenger – and no message, however powerful – could be good enough to meet the challenge.

Neither could the gift of God be something to make the world feel good about itself, like a giant box of heavenly chocolate. Eat it and it's gone. What point could there be in that?

No. God's gift to the world had to be something – *someone* – whose Love exactly matched that great, capital-L Love of God. This would be a Love which would be given and given in so many ways: given to such a variety of folk (so often undeserving and unable to understand); given and given until it was given out, exhausted and emptied.

This Love, in the words of John Coltrane, was, "A Love Supreme."

And that, of course is where the Cross comes in ... though admittedly not at Christmas.

Perhaps we can come to see that the Christmas story actually sets the scene for the Easter story. Both Christmas and Easter are tied in with the Incarnation, through which God takes human form and dwells among us.

Dwells – and dies.

I like to describe this as, "God ... made flesh ... made meat." That's a shocking line. Of course it is. But it is in no way a line that is intended to offend. Rather, it is a stark statement of theological truth that the ultimate gift of God ends up being spurned and slaughtered. Still, this rejection is more than matched by that Easter Love (with a capital "L").

The wonder of our faith is that nothing – not even rejection, not even *death* – can remove us from God's dying and undying love in Christ. What a gift: given; rejected; then given so gloriously and so ultimately at the dawn of Easter.

Let me end by returning to the words of Kenneth Samuel, because after all we have heard today about God's breath-taking gift to an ungrateful world, it is right to finish on a note of challenge: a challenge to you and a challenge to me:

As we consider what we should tangibly give to support the work of God through our church, we should seek to be more aware of the tangible gifts of love that we have received. The God who provides for us is the God who provides through us. The magnitude of what God calls us to give should reflect our gratitude for the magnitude of what God has given us.

Amen.

Praying for others

God who gives all for our sakes,

Your generosity knows no bounds.

You give the gift of your Creation in all its glory,
sustaining it across the millennia and sustaining us in your great goodness.

You give the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord,
who points us to your Kingdom of justice and of joy,
so that we might follow in his way of service and of self-giving.

You give us the gift of your Holy Spirit,
uniting all the Church in one, as we seek to do your will.

Yes Lord: your generosity is boundless.
Help us, we pray, to receive your kindness
not merely with gratitude, but with determination to see
your will done on earth as it is in heaven.

Make us generous in all good ways.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison considers a new ways of worship:

Last Tuesday I was in Longniddry Church sanctuary for worship for the first time in more than five months. It was for an hour of private prayer and contemplation.

This was both strange and familiar. Strange because all of us enjoying the worship were wearing face masks. Strange because we found the pews festooned with flags (very fetching, tasteful flags I have to say) to show us where to sit. Strange because worship in the church is usually full of speaking and singing.

But familiar too. The lovely, calming building was still the same. Folk sitting well apart was familiar – funny how we do that when there aren't many people in the building. Familiar too were the faces behind the masks.

It was good to be back.

One of the things that was strange was meeting for a time when the Church is open just to let you sit and think or pray. But it was a very good strange. It was lovely to enjoy a period of peace, prayer and contemplation away from the busyness of every-day life. The church building lends itself to that (unsurprisingly I suppose).

The covid pandemic has encouraged us to try a new form of worship, one I hope we will continue long after the pandemic is a distant memory.

On Tuesdays Gladsmuir Church is open for prayer and contemplation from 10.30am, with Longniddry Church open from 2pm, in each case for an hour. You are welcome in either building and can come and go anytime during that period. If you feel the need of a few minutes' peace in a familiar and beautiful setting, please come along.