



Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

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Today's reading

Mark 9: 14–29 (“The healing of a boy with an evil spirit”)

When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, ‘What are you arguing about with them?’ Someone from the crowd answered him, ‘Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.’ He answered them, ‘You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.’ And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, ‘How long has this been happening to him?’ And he said, ‘From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.’ Jesus said to him, ‘If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.’ Immediately the father of the child cried out, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’ When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, ‘You spirit that keep this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!’ After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, ‘He is dead.’ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’ He said to them, ‘This kind can come out only through prayer.’ Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Blest be the everlasting God, the Father of our Lord! (CH4: 424)

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation (CH: 124)

The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want (CH: 14)

Let's sing to the Lord, yes, sing God a new song (CH: 126)

O Jesus, I have promised to serve you to the end (CH4: 644)

In the Name of the Father and of

How easy it is – how very easy – to open up your Bible and read a passage as though it has been put there to be understood in isolation. In the case of our reading today, we might very well start at the beginning, read to the end and conclude that it is *just* another example of a healing miracle: ill boy; disciples try and fail; Jesus succeeds.

There is perhaps something in the way the modern mind works that tempts us to think the power of Scripture simply *exists*, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, as though we could stick a pin in our Bibles and find meaning no matter where that pin might land.

That is not the best way to read our Bibles because context will always be vitally important if we are to grasp for ourselves the message that lies behind the black ink on the white paper.

In the case of Mark 9:14–29, we would do well to ask ourselves some pretty basic questions:

- Why is Mark telling us this story of Jesus and the boy? (Is it *just* another healing?);
- Why is Mark placing this story at this particular point in his gospel?; and
- Why would this story and this placement of it be important to Mark’s original readers?

Let’s start with the reason behind Mark including the miracle in his short little book about Jesus. What is clear is that the chapters leading up to the arrival of Jesus and his followers in Jerusalem are all to do with two related things: the suffering that Jesus will encounter in the Holy City in the days through to Good Friday; and also the actions of his closest friends, his far-from-reliable inner circle. When the chips are down, what are these 12 men good for? This healing gives us some answers.

The scene is set within a gathering in which a father is telling Jesus that he had brought his son for healing. The disciples had tried to perform a miracle but their actions had been totally ineffective. The boy was not healed. In response, Jesus gives this sharp rebuke:

‘You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.’ And they brought the boy to him.

Who is this “generation” of whom Jesus is speaking? He may mean all the folk of that age: the people as a whole. But it certainly seems apparent that Jesus is referring to those failing disciples who, despite their privileged position, simply could not heal the boy. Jesus had lived with them. He had guided them. He had answered their questions and suffered their self-indulgent arguments. And through it all, it seems, they had learned so very little.

Yes, this story certainly points the reader to the failure of Jesus’ friends to be effective followers, much to his great regret and his deep frustration. (This then is not “just” another healing story.)

So how about Mark’s placing of this healing in chapter 9? It looks very much as though the gospel writer was sending a pointer to his readers that they should be looking back to the Hebrew Bible which his Jewish readers would have known so very well. Let me explain.

Immediately before this healing Mark had presented all the drama of The Transfiguration, when Jesus went up a mountain and experienced divine revelation. The first century reader would have immediately identified this huge event as a reflection of Moses going up the mountain for his own divine revelation, as told in the book of Exodus. And what happened when Moses came back down? He found the people faithless, looking to a life far removed from the way of the God of Israel. And so, again with Mark, the new meets with the old.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

Now let's jump forward a few decades. We find that something very interesting has sprung up in the post-Easter world. It is called "the Church" and it's made up of people of faith drawn from many backgrounds. Some might view themselves as Jewish Christians, having made the leap of faith from the ancient Hebrew traditions to something which – while looking similar in many ways – is undeniably different. Others within the Church might have come from pagan origins, worshipping many and varied gods in the style of the Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans. What keeps this grouping called "Church" together is a common belief that in Jesus, they have come to know God's chosen one ... the Risen Christ.

It is into this setting that Mark is writing his book around the year 70AD. The purpose of the work is to put into the hands of these followers of Jesus something they had never held before: a book which could show them not only who Jesus *had been*, but also who Christ *is*. So, when Mark's gospel shows Jesus speaking about his departure – ... *how much longer must I be among you?* – this is something that has real relevance to them. How is the young Church to operate without a human presence in the form of Jesus of Nazareth? Mark's answer is both stark and striking: the Church is to live and the Church is to work *by faith*.

We should bear in mind that this faith is not grounded in Christ's *absence* from the world, but is rather grounded *in his Risen presence*. Christ is not a notion, but a reality to be grasped by divine revelation worked out in human faithfulness. Instead of wishing that Jesus was still with them, the early Church's task was to live out the continuing "with-ness" of Christ, made real through the working of God's Holy Spirit across the Church.

In the dialogue between the father of the boy and the capable healer, Jesus, Mark gives his readers a lesson in what this faithfulness must involve:

'... if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.' Jesus said to him, *'If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.'* Immediately the father of the child cried out, *'I believe; help my unbelief!'*

What does it mean to have faith? Simply to turn to Christ with a little belief, seeking only that the little be built up into ever greater trust. The early Church could not physically see the Jesus who had once been with them in full human form, yet in the power of their growing faith they would continue Christ's ministry in a world so badly in need of healing.

The boy's father gloriously proclaimed his faith in two simple words: "I believe ...". He then went on to place his trust in the Jesus whose faith was so much greater than his own. Only three more words were needed: "Help my unbelief."

In these five words (the two, then the three) Mark gives the early Church a beautiful way of remembering what true, sincere Christianity is all about: first recognising the power of God in Christ, then confessing our need for divine assistance as we live out our faith.

Mountaintop experiences like The Transfiguration are a privilege to be welcomed and treasured, but Mark's telling of this healing story takes us back down from the "specialness" of that dramatic spiritual moment to engage instead with the "ordinariness" of practical ministry by the people, where Christ's power is truly to be seen. And *that's* a real privilege.

Amen.

Praying for others

*Here is a beautiful children's prayer
kindly offered by the Church of England:*

God of love and hope,
you made the world and care for all creation,
but the world feels strange right now.

The news is full of stories about Coronavirus.
Some people are worried that they might get ill.
Others are anxious for their family and friends.
Be with them and help them to find peace.

We pray for the doctors and nurses and scientists,
and all who are working to discover the right medicines
to help those who are ill.

Thank you that even in these anxious times, you are with us.

Help us to put our trust in you and keep us safe.
In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison considers worship in a Covid world:

As you may remember, our churches are now open for prayer and contemplation on Tuesdays (Gladsmuir opening at 10.30am and Longniddry at 2pm, each for one hour).

I'm glad to say that we can now also hold physical services. Each church will be open for worship every second Sunday from the end of this month, starting with Longniddry on Sunday 27th September. On the first and third Sundays of the month there will be a live service at Gladsmuir at 11am. Longniddry will hold live services in its sanctuary at 11am on the second and fourth Sundays. And for the few months that have five Sundays in them there will be a special service – details to follow!

In these difficult times necessary restrictions will be in place, to ensure that we all do our best. These will cover such aspects as booking places (there will be more next week on the detail of this), physical distancing, wearing face masks and hand-sanitising.

In addition to the happy return of services in Gladsmuir and Longniddry, both our weekly publication, *The Sunday Focus*, and our joint internet services will continue long into the future as a central part of church life.

With the resumption of services in late September, our Zoom-based service will move from its current 10.30am slot to 9.45am, enabling Robin to lead that from the manse before heading to one of the church buildings for 11am. In case you are wondering, the 11am service will have much the same content as the earlier Zoom one!

The Sunday Focus is of interest to those who lack access to – or inclination towards – high technology. Any neighbour, relative or friend who might appreciate it can request a copy.