



Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

Available in printed form and online at:
www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

Issue 27: Sunday 13th September 2020

Today's readings

Psalm 1 (“The two ways”)

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. Amen. (*NRSV*)

Mark 9: 33–37 (“Who is the greatest?”)

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’ Amen. (*NRSV*)

Today's hymns

Read them or maybe even sing them in the privacy of your own home – the choice is yours!

Morning has broken like the first morning (CH4: 212)

We are marching in the light of God (CH4: 516)

Lord, teach me all your ways (CH4: 21)

Lord of creation, to you be all praise! (CH4: 500)

Jesus shall reign where 'er the sun does its successive journeys run (CH4: 470)

In the Name of the Father and of

You might remember this from the first half of our Year of Mark sermons: the writer of the shortest gospel telling his readers about Jesus and his friends being on “the way”. The way? Which way might that be? And on the way to *what* exactly?

I recently read a book with this arresting line: “Jesus offers his followers not greatness or privilege, but death and resurrection.” The way of Christ is not always going to be easy or predictable, but it promises to take us from old to new; from death to life.

So what is it about “the way” of Jesus that we should take note of? First, we need to realise that in travelling south from Galilee towards the seeming triumph of Palm Sunday, Jesus and his friends are stepping out on “the way” to the city of Jerusalem. One foot in front of the other, they are going on the way that will lead to their destination: the epicentre of the Jewish faith.

But that’s not all, because in undertaking that journey, Jesus is also on “the way” to the climax of his ministry (and, as it happens) the climax of Mark’s gospel. This is the way to suffering. More than this, it is the way to Jesus’ own death and Resurrection ... and he knows it.

“The way”, then, is certainly a physical journey. (Of course it is.) Yet for Jesus and his chronicler, Mark, it is also a journey into deep meaning, as again and again Jesus tries to teach his 12 wayward disciples “the way” to true discipleship.

And so we come to reflect on today’s passage. By Mark chapter 9, it feels like we know these disciples well, so it’s no great surprise to learn that they have been up to their old tricks again, getting ideas far above their station. As Mark says: “... *on the way* they had argued with one another about who was the greatest”.

The disciples’ way would seem to be the way of greatness and personal success. Based on what we have learned so far about Peter and James and John and all the rest, does this surprise us? No, it does not. These men are, it seems, as self-centred as they are ignorant of the ways of their Master and Saviour. With the multiple horrors of Jerusalem and Holy Week mounting up over the horizon, these 12 failing followers need some sort of lesson in right living that might make an impact upon their feckless behaviour ... if not now then, at the very least, later.

Thankfully, Jesus has the very thing for them all. And that thing is the *paradox*: a statement that may appear contradictory or ridiculous but which might just point to a valuable truth. As it turns out, a paradox is a handy device in a situation like the one Jesus is facing. At its best a paradox is tool to make people stop and think for, and maybe even to discover something life-changing. What a paradox does is to express an idea which makes no sense at face value, because it just doesn’t hold up to conventional scrutiny. Yet, in thinking through the implications of the paradox, perhaps some vital truth might emerge, dawning in time upon the mind of the listener. So listen to this paradox, gradually thought through in a person’s mind:

‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’

OK, so I want to be first. Then I know I have to push my way through to the front, elbowing others back as aggressively as I can. It’s all about keeping on keeping on, until at last I raise my arms and throw my head back in glory as I cross the line and take the victor’s crown. That’s how winners win. That’s how the first get to be first. And that’s how I’m going to do it.

‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’

Wait a minute. If I want to be first, I can’t afford to be second or third or fourth, far less *last*. And an important person like a winner is going to be servant of no-one.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'

Last of all? What? The wooden spoon? The lowest place of least honour? How can that be victory? How can that get me to where I want to be? And, in any case, what would it mean to be servant of all? Would I need to lower myself to the level of a woman? Or, to the level of a servant? (Or, even worse still, a slave?)

'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'

"Must"? Really? This is quite something. It's enough to make me consider my priorities: all the things I hold most dear. It's enough to make me question my values as I hold them up against the values of this man from Galilee. Here is someone worth listening to, worth learning from, worth following. So paradoxically, nonsensically, ridiculously, maybe there might be something in what he says.

Yes, it's a great big paradox alright. And as if to back up what he is trying to get across, Jesus finds a nearby child and uses that little kid as a visual aid, reinforcing his point. I know I've said this many times before, but it bears repetition: 21st century people typically love children and give them a place of very special importance. Go back only a hundred years and it was a little different. Go back a thousand years and it was quite different. Make the journey all the way back to the time of Jesus of Nazareth and we find that the world was a *very* different place.

The biblical scholar John Pilch wrote about the poor social standing of children in centuries gone by, stating that one of the Church's great saints, Thomas Aquinas, had some eyebrow-raising advice for families. In the event of a raging fire, Aquinas insisted that a husband was obliged to save his father first, then his mother, next his wife, and last of all his young child. I will leave it to each person here to draw up their own order of priority!

So what does Jesus do? He takes a child in his arms and offers a teaching that is both totally unexpected and utterly radical in that place and time. Just listen to his words and, as you do so, try to put yourself into that group of castigated disciples as they hear a lesson in humility: '*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*'

Reaching out in welcome to the lowest of the low. It makes no sense: perhaps it is another dimension of that same paradox. A tiny child has no significance, no influence, no place, so why should adults offer any kind of a welcome? What purpose would that welcome have? What could be gained from it? These considerations are the sort that have "me, myself, I" right at the heart of them. But Jesus knows that such selfish thinking can never be part of his way.

I recently came across a list of people who were looked down upon in the ancient world. It makes disturbing reading: those who are aged, disabled, unwell or illiterate. Then there were the ritually unclean, including peasants, shepherds, widows, slaves, the unemployed, aliens, immigrants, prisoners and homeless people. As we reflect on that list of society's hopeless losers, are we not stopped in our tracks by the realisation that Jesus isn't just speaking to 12 disciples 20 centuries ago. He is speaking to us in our day and age.

And are we listening to Jesus now any more than they were back then?

Amen.

Praying for others

God whose values shame our own,

When we consider Jesus taking a child in his arms,
we are reassured by his humanity.

Help us to see past the beauty of this scene to take in its true meaning:
that in a world of prestige and standing
our Christian calling is to be servants of those who need a friend.

Help us to recognise for ourselves our need of change:
change in our attitudes, and change in our actions.

Drag us from our easy comfort, and lead us on a journey of service
in which we find our faith come alive.

May we look into the eyes of the other and see you staring back.

May we resolve to accept the mind of Christ
and to adopt the values of Heaven in all our living,
for then we will know beyond all doubt and uncertainty
what devotion to your Son means for us, his flawed and failing disciples.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison considers a booking line for church services in a Covid world:

Last week I talked about the exciting news that Longniddry and Gladsmuir churches will restart services in their sanctuaries from the end of this month. To remind you, Longniddry will hold live services at 11am on the second and fourth Sundays of every month (with the first service being on Sunday 27th September) and Gladsmuir on the first and third Sundays (with their first service being 4th October). From the 27th September our Zoom services will move to a 9.45am start.

Whilst it is lovely to be able to return to church it won't be like it used to be, for the time being at least. Returning to our buildings means coming to a place of worship with many fewer seats than we are used to. This means that we need to find the fairest, simplest way of ensuring everyone has an opportunity to book their place.

Each of our two congregations has a dedicated booking line for its services: Gladsmuir: 07443 858983; Longniddry: 07718 612546. You can book for any service in either place.

If you would like to check on places for the following Sunday's service, ring that church's number. In each case, the line will be open from 4pm to 6pm from Monday to Saturday.

The friendly person on the other end of the line (it's Peter Strachan for Gladsmuir and Norah Coutts for Longniddry) will check for places. If space is available, they will register you, confirming the place, date and time of the service.

This is unknown territory for all concerned, so do please bear with us as we try our hardest to set up a booking scheme which will be easy to use and fair to all. As the weeks go by, we may need to change the way we do things – only time will tell!