



Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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

Issue 28: Sunday 20th September 2020

Today's readings

Psalm 26 ("Plea for justice and declaration of righteousness")

Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering.

Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and mind.

For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to you.

I do not sit with the worthless, nor do I consort with hypocrites;

I hate the company of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked.

I wash my hands in innocence, and go around your altar, O Lord, singing aloud a song of thanksgiving, and telling all your wondrous deeds.

O Lord, I love the house in which you dwell, and the place where your glory abides.

Do not sweep me away with sinners, nor my life with the bloodthirsty, those in whose hands are evil devices, and whose right hands are full of bribes.

But as for me, I walk in my integrity; redeem me, and be gracious to me.

My foot stands on level ground; in the great congregation I will bless the Lord. Amen. *(NRSV)*

Mark 10: 13–16 ("Jesus blesses little children")

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. Amen. *(NRSV)*

Today's hymns

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father (CH4: 153)

I, the Lord of sea and sky, I have heard my people's cry (CH4: 251))

God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year (CH4: 235)

Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness (CH4: 201)

May the mind of Christ my Saviour live in me from day to day (CH4: 536)

In the Name of the Father and of

When we look at the personality of Jesus we find a great many attributes: some of them inspiring and others a little more challenging. On the one hand is his charismatic personality: Jesus of Nazareth was clearly a person filled with God's Holy Spirit, able to attract people of so many different backgrounds by his words, his actions, his rare skill at communicating with those around him.

On the other hand, this same Jesus could be direct and at times profoundly confrontational with those he opposed. At a time when it was a dangerous thing to be an outspoken peasant under the domination of the Roman Empire, this peasant spoke out with a radical message that could bring hope to many and fear to others. So was Jesus a scary person to be around? For the most part, I don't think so. And as evidence for this conclusion I would point you to today's tiny little reading from Mark's gospel which shows Jesus in an unmistakably positive light.

Last week, you may recall, we were considering the challenge presented by Jesus when he passed on a great lesson in humility to adults who looked down on the young. We read: *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.'* (Mark 9:37)

This week we move from chapter 9 to chapter 10, and we find Jesus still among the children. On this occasion they have been brought along by eager family members, keen to have their tiny tots blessed by the great Rabbi. Had they heard about the welcome he had given to one young child not so long ago? Had they wondered if their own toddler might be treated in the same way? We simply cannot say, yet it seems at least possible – maybe even likely – that word had spread far and wide: “You know what he did? He picked up a bairn and told the people they had to welcome wee ones like he did. I've never heard the likes!”

Yet when the families rolled up (perhaps expecting a welcome) what they found was a wall of disapproving looks from Jesus' disciples who took a dim view of their advances. Once more we see the people closest to Jesus showing that they had learned so little. Meanwhile the outsiders flooded in, ready to encounter this great teacher and his revolutionary lessons – ready to usher their little ones right into the Kingdom of God.

Leith Fisher's way of describing this scene is just right. Here's what he says: *What does it mean to receive the Kingdom as a child? The gifts children bring are vulnerability, openness, dependence. Again Jesus strips away our adult notions of power, status and knowledge. Nothing in our hands we bring, yet with hands open, we will receive. "He took the children in his arms, placed his hands upon each of them, and blessed them." The same generous, warm, enfolding embrace he offers freely to those who are not too proud and self-encumbered to receive it.*

What uniquely special “X-Factor” did Jesus possess that made him so attractive to other people? Once again, we are speculating here, but I really don't think it could have been anything big and showy, like power or celebrity, status or oratory. No. To me, none of that could ever speak of the Jesus we know and understand. So what could it have been?

At that point in human history when so many people were downtrodden, bled of hope and unable to see a way out of cruel Roman rule, my gut instinct would be to say that Jesus modelled in his message and in his living a very different way to that of the powerful elite. Yes, we know that he could be forceful in taking on the religious hypocrites, castigating the great and the good for the part they played in keeping the people at bay. But ... when it came to Jesus and the people themselves – those ordinary folk trying their best to love God, to raise their families and to do the best they could – I think there can be little doubt: Jesus was kind, and that kindness really set him apart as someone to be trusted.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

Kindness is a greatly underrated virtue, now as then. In the world of today, people are expected to be self-serving, self-starting, self-controlled and self-motivated in the world of business and commerce. If you want to get ahead, you need gallons of self-confidence and buckets of self-absorption. It's all about the power of me over you, over them, over the rest.

It has even been said that the US Presidential Election of 2016 came at a point in time when America's image of itself matched up well with the policies and the rhetoric of a man like Trump: a business-tycoon-turned-TV-celebrity who knew all about looking after number one and was ready to share his vision with his adoring audience, if only they would turn out and cast their ballots for the cause of "making America great again".

Now though, only a few weeks away from the 2020 polls, something strange may be emerging. The theologian Diana Butler Bass this week noted that among some of the President's overtly religious voter base, support for Trump may very well be waning. Here's what she said:

... academic researchers found an 11-point swing among white evangelicals and Catholics who backed Trump in 2016 toward Vice President Biden. What was the greatest predictor of those who changed their preference? Kindness. The Trump defectors said ... Biden is kinder.

Who knows how America will vote on Tuesday 3rd November? So much water has to pass under the bridge before the polling booths open for business. Yet the point about kindness will not quietly go away. After four inglorious years of Trump's barking bravado and unseemly coarseness, years throughout which Presidential policy has been sent forth through social media to the waiting Twitterati, it may well be that the United States is now drained of energy and is ready for someone whose approach may be to build bridges of kindness, not walls of hatred.

In all of this, however, please resist the temptation to equate kindness with niceness. That would be a big mistake. The problem with the church is we're just too nice. The trait of Presbyterian niceness is something which makes us appear both shallow in the face of truly big issues, and ultimately ineffective in demonstrating to others that our faith actually works in changing things. In this regard, niceness is a bit like kindness with the stuffing knocked out of it.

But imagine for a moment what might happen if we took that Presbyterian quality of niceness and converted it back, raising it up once more to the level of kindness – genuine, properly invested, sleeves-rolled-up kindness. What would that look like? It might well look like the kind of problem-solving that gets things done, confidently, effectively. Niceness only ever needs to be on the surface. Kindness gets right under the skin and makes a difference to others.

Is that what those families knew when they went to see Jesus with their little ones? Did they understand that this man was different because of a special, luminous kindness in which they could place their trust? That's what they expected. And that is precisely what they found.

Two quotations to end, the first from Thursday's "Thought for the Day" from Tom Gordon: *If we all did what comes naturally and offered an act of kindness in simplicity and love, what a difference we could make. We might even find ourselves spreading holiness to the people around us who need it the most.*

And this golden line from the writer to the Colossian church:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. (Colossians 3:12, emphasis added)

Start doing that right now, Christians of America. Then ... get out and vote. Amen.

Praying for others

God of all kindness,
in your Son, Jesus Christ, we see someone
whose life was lived in Love.
Welcoming outcasts, blessing children,
healing those who were sick,
he showed the way of care and concern
to so many people he encountered in his ministry.

May the kindness of Jesus be our guide for living,
as together we seek to be a church which shows love:
both our love for the neighbours around us,
and your love for all.

Help us, we pray, to learn from the example of Christ,
and show us how, in the power of the Holy Spirit,
we may go from day to day and place to place
bringing welcome and blessing and healing.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison re-considers a booking in for church services:

I make no apology for the fact that this week's "And Finally ..." section bears a remarkable similarity to last week's one! The information passed on is so important it bears repeating.

Our two churches will restart services in their sanctuaries from next Sunday (the 27th) in Longniddry. Gladsmuir will hold services on the first and third Sundays of each month (with their first service being 4th October) and Longniddry will hold services on the second and fourth Sundays of every month. These services will all be **in an open building at 11am**. From next Sunday, the 27th September, our **Zoom** services will move to a **9.45am** start.

Whilst it is lovely to be able to return to our church buildings, it won't be like it used to be. Returning means coming to a place of worship with many fewer seats than we are used to. This means we are implementing what we hope is a fair and simple way to book a place at a service.

Each of our two congregations has a dedicated booking line: Gladsmuir: 07443 858983; Longniddry: 07718 612546.

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.

As I said last week, this is unknown territory for us all, so do please bear with us as we bed down our new booking scheme. As the weeks go by, we may need to change the way we do things – only time will tell!