



# Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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[www.longniddrychurch.org.uk](http://www.longniddrychurch.org.uk)

**Issue 29:      Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

## Today's reading

### Mark 10: 17–31 (“The rich man”)

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother.”’ He said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.’ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’

Peter began to say to him, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’ Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.’ Amen. (NRSV)

## Today's hymns

*Oh, the life of the world is a joy and a treasure* (CH:141)

*When I'm feeling sad, I can call out to him* (CH: 569)

*I waited patiently for God, for God to hear my prayer* (CH: 31)

*My song is love unknown, my Saviour's love to me* (CH: 399)

*Through the love of God, our saviour, all will be well* (CH: 562)

# *In the Name of the Father and of*

**D**iscipleship is demanding. That simple little sentence might wash over you as though it means nothing. Perhaps those three words come as no great surprise based on your own Christian journey through life. Or maybe you are shocked to the core of your being by what I have just said: discipleship is demanding.

It should be noted that this message is a centrally important one within our faith, so we should recognise the inevitability of Jesus placing high demands upon our living. Similarly, the gospel writer Mark is bound to put that message in his wee book about following Jesus. The role of the follower of Jesus is not simply to accept the gift of God's grace offered so freely to us. The role of the follower is also to step out on a new kind of road: a path along which we may well find some disturbing truths.

In our reading today – and what a tough reading it is – we find a person of wealth coming to Jesus to ask about the entry requirements for eternal life. Here is some of what Jesus tells him: *You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.*

Jesus directs his words to the rich man. But does he also speak to *us*?

This message of Jesus is anything but comfortable for those who are well off in a world of need. So many times the gospels make a point of telling us that Jesus' way involves a journey with little space for unnecessary clutter or encumbrance. Let's list three of the key passages:

- Mark 10:23: *How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!;*
- Matthew 6:24: *You cannot serve God and wealth;*
- Luke 6: 24: *But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.*

Does this strike you as strange, after my two most recent sermons? Whether you chose to read them in *The Sunday Focus* or you heard them over Zoom, either way, you may well recall me saying – two weeks in a row, mark you – that Jesus calls us to be like little children. If we want to enter the Kingdom, we must make ourselves like the wee ones. That is what I said, because that is what *Jesus* said, and when he said it, it might have sounded kind of easy and reassuring.

Now, however, it's all getting a bit too personal. We don't like it when the bank manager or the solicitor starts talking about how much cash we have sloshing about. And we certainly don't like it when Jesus does the same. So let's try to get to the heart of this rather big issue by asking two really important questions: first, who is Jesus speaking *to*?; and second, who is Jesus speaking *about*?

Let's start with his audience. As we have said many times before, the typical person in the first century world was poor – poor as with the poverty of present day Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Liberia. We could name so many more sovereign states in 2020 whose citizens live with the normality of grinding poverty. And that's the place where Jesus lived. So the people who were listening to him were not in any way challenged by his words, as *we* are challenged. If anything, they might very well have been *comforted* by what Jesus had to say about the wealthy.

So were there no rich people back then? Yes there were, though not that many of them. These few are the ones *about* whom Jesus was speaking: the ruling elite at the very top of the tree. Perhaps we are talking about two people in every hundred. These were the ones who controlled half to two-thirds of the goods produced by the peasants of the day. Therefore, the level of wealth disparity between the top and the bottom of society was clearly enormous.

## *the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .*

Being rich should not, of course, be seen as equating with being overtly corrupt or wicked on a personal level. The real issue lay beneath the surface of lace and silk and fountains and peacocks. The real issue was to be identified in the unholy alliance between the rich and the ruling powers, with those few rich folk gaining so much from the Emperor and an economic system that kept them nicely well off, while so many more were mired in the throes of poverty.

Did Jesus have an alternative model? He did. And it was known as the Kingdom of God. Unlike the Kingdom of Caesar where the rich would be trapped in their indifference to the huddled masses, the Kingdom of God would identify suffering and would act upon it in a spirit of justice.

What then of the Kingdom of God today? If we count ourselves fortunate or blessed in this life, our duty is surely to stand back from our own situation to assess where we are in relation to the majority of our 7.8 billion fellow human beings worldwide. If we have clean water (which we do) we are already far better off than many in Zambia or in Bangladesh. If we have roads and pavements and street lights (which we do) we are better off than many in Mexico or the Philippines. If we have freedoms of religion and of expression (which we do) we are better off than many in Saudi Arabia and North Korea. If we have a National Health Service and a well-run system of civil policing (which, thank God, we do) we are better off than Russia or the United States. And all of that is before we even glance at our bank balances.

It all comes down to self-examination, and that is what was lacking in the man who came to Jesus. He was concerned with keeping to the religious laws which he saw as a way of finding favour with God. He was quick to tell Jesus that he had done the things he was required to do and that he had avoided the things that were banned by the legal codes of the Hebrew faith. He was good, and he knew it. Imagine then how he would have felt on hearing these words:

*'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'* When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Jesus' message? Turn back to God; divest yourself of all the stuff that holds you back – sell it; take the cash and put it to good use among those who really need it. Then come, follow me.

Putting God first is probably the biggest single step that any one of us has to take on the journey of faith. We may be inhibited from taking that step either by our addiction to stuff (whatever stuff that might be) or our perceived need of security or comfort or peace of mind. There might be something else that stops us setting off with Jesus. Again, that's where rigorous self-examination comes in. Step back. Take a look in the mirror. Take stock of what you see.

At the end of the day, probably just like you, I really don't know what on earth to do with this tough reading. And I also don't know what to do with the quotation with which I will end my sermon. So here are the words of biblical scholar Canon John Fenton, offered without comment, for you to mull over in your own time. They certainly give us lots to think about:

*"Jesus looked at him and loved him." It is the only instance [in Mark's gospel] of Jesus loving somebody. He loves the person who can't do it. This is ... what is so good about Mark. He saw that his readers would never be able to accept his book, and he was right. ... We see the impossibility of the demand, "Destroy your life! That's the only way to preserve it." And we know we can't do it, but the man who couldn't do it was the one that Jesus loved. Away success! Welcome failure. That is the good news.*

Amen.

# Praying for others

God who loves us despite our limitations,  
we look at the rich man who wanted so much but who owned so much,  
and we see ourselves encumbered by riches of many kinds.

We know that we live a life of privilege in a country that has real wealth.  
Help us to appreciate all that we have, sharing it for the common good.

We look at our newspapers and TVs, only to find poverty and suffering staring back.  
Help us to see your Kingdom at work in the midst of turmoil.

Challenge each one of us to lay down the things which hinder our true discipleship  
so that we might go with Jesus on a journey back to bountiful.

May your Church, whether locally, nationally or globally,  
be a beacon of hope and a fount of living insight, drawing others to Christ's way of truth.

And when we fail (as surely we will) save us by your grace,  
strengthening us once more.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

## And finally ...

*Frances Cunningham considers two happy re-openings that have been a long time coming for the people of Gladsmuir linked with Longniddry:*

Exciting news! The day we've all been waiting for is upon us, Sunday 27th September! This is an important day for us with the re-starting of services in our churches, first in Longniddry then, next week, Gladsmuir. (Thankfully the change to Covid-19 restrictions has not affected this – so far at least).

Elders will be at the door to invite you to use hand sanitiser and show you to the designated seats. There are still some places available for Sunday's Longniddry service so please feel free to contact Norah. We will be delighted to welcome you back, complete with face covering.

Gladsmuir will hold services on the first and third Sundays of each month, and Longniddry will hold services on the second and fourth Sundays. These services will all be at 11am.

From this Sunday, 27th September, our Zoom services will move to a 9.45am start.

As there are fewer seats, we have implemented a system to allow you to book a place at a service and this seems to be working well. There are two dedicated booking lines:

Gladsmuir services: 07443 858983; Longniddry services: 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 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.

We look forward to seeing some of you in person this Sunday at 11am in Longniddry.