



Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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

Issue 30: Sunday 4th October 2020

Today's reading

Mark 11: 12–26 (“The lesson from the withered fig tree”)

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, ‘May no one ever eat fruit from you again.’ And his disciples heard it.

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, ‘Is it not written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations”?’

But you have made it a den of robbers.’

And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. Then Peter remembered and said to him, ‘Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.’ Jesus answered them, ‘Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, “Be taken up and thrown into the sea”, and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

‘Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.’. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

We plough the fields and scatter the good seed on the land (CH: 229)

Praise God for the harvest of orchard and field (CH: 230)

The earth belongs to God alone and all that it contains (CH: 18)

God, whose hand is all creation (CH: 226)

Come, you thankful people, come (CH: 233)

In the Name of the Father and of

This season of Harvest, as we give thanks to God in hymn and in prayer and in word and in action, I want to tell you a story. As with many good stories, it's a 100% totally true and accurate story ... that never happened. And this is how it goes:

Once upon a time, a long while ago, it was quarter past eleven on a Sunday morning. An arable farmer in Ayrshire was looking out across his parched fields. "Good God," he said under his breath. "Give us rain. Give us rain, Lord, and plenty of it."

Meanwhile, at that very same moment on that very same Sunday morning, a minister in a Glasgow church was telling everyone about the Sunday School picnic. It was just six short days away, and a very special Saturday outing it promised to be. She told the congregation what to expect: there would be all the excitement of gathering at the church gate with high expectations. There would be that moment of oohs and aahs as the first of three big double-decker busses would ease its way around the tight corner, with wee Johnny shouting out: "The front seat up the stair's gonnae be mine, by the way!"

Everyone would pile on in huge anticipation, from babes in arms to old Mrs Murdoch at 92. There would be streamers hanging out the windows, mountains of sweets on hand, and sickbags in stock, just in case. There would be songs and jokes. Then, at last there would be the first sight of the sea with the beach and the waves, and there would be those sandwiches with real sand. Games and races, ice creams and candy floss. Then, everyone fast asleep the whole way home. Everyone except George the bus driver, who could expect a very nice tip.

It would truly be a great, great day for everyone. "So," said the minister, "every night this week, when you crawl into bed, make sure you send up the biggest prayer you possibly can, asking God to send the Clyde coast blue skies and sunshine all day on Saturday."

Two prayers: one for cool, wet rain, the other for a hot, dry day. Just what is God to do?

It's not easy being a farmer, struggling all year round with the land, the regulations, the market fluctuations and ever-changing government rules. It's a life of huge hard work and equally huge uncertainty. The rewards can be tremendous. Or they can be totally non-existent.

That's one very big reason why it is so important for us to pause every year to thank God for the farms, the farmers, and all the other people who put food on our plates every single day. The action of giving thanks to God for farmers is one that helps us – it does us good to reflect on how their investment of wisdom and time and expertise and money ends up in a crop which can be sold on to us, the consumers. Without agriculture in all its many forms, we would have no food. Yet with it we have such security and such variety. Realise that, and surely all we can do is to voice our "thank you" to God and to the farmers for all that we receive.

But what about that farmer in our story? And what about that Glasgow minister? And what about God, stuck in the middle of competing prayers that just don't match up in any way?

On the one hand, God hears the lament of a farmer in Ayrshire who knows that it's make or break time for the seeds which he had planted in hope and expectation; seeds which sprouted and rose so green and so promising, only to be met with relentless sunshine ... and no rain.

On the other hand, the Almighty is met with petitions from Sunday School members asking him in those sleepy bedtime prayers to bless Granny and Grandpa, oh and please, please, please can we have a sunny day for Troon? And whatever you do, don't let Johnny get the front seat again, coz it's not his turn."

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

Now ... at first sight, there seems to be some incompatibility here. If the sun comes out on Saturday, is the minister entitled to observe that God was smiling on the youngsters in answer to their fervent picnic prayers? But if the heavens open, will the farmer, now dancing for joy in his soggy fields, be able to point to timely intervention from on high following his passionate petitioning. The truth is that whatever happens on Saturday, they can't both be right.

Our reading today perhaps offers us some kind of an answer to a very big question here: what is prayer all about? Is it there to offer young children a way of bending God's divine ear so they can enjoy a day in the sun? Or is prayer there for – dare I say it? – those really much more important times, as when a farmer is assailed by fears and anxieties over the very viability of a precarious livelihood. Into both these situations, Jesus says: **“So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”**

In reality, neither the minister nor the farmer is justified in thinking “their” weather is a gift of God just for them. Why? Simply because prayer doesn't work that way.

So what is prayer really all about? Let's go back to our Bible passage from Mark in order first to discover what is not being said by Jesus. The fact is that it is so incredibly easy to misread – or to mishear – what is in this text. To put it bluntly, Jesus is not saying: “... whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that *you will receive* it, and it will be yours.”

Just take a moment to compare what we might think Jesus is saying with his actual words (in bold, above) and you will immediately spot the difference. Surprised? I was too.

What does it mean for people of faith to believe we *have received* that for which we are praying? As with so many areas of life, perhaps the psalmist can help us here. In the Psalms we find scores of instances of cries being sent to God, whether in overflowing joy or deepest despair. Yet in those cries, the message is one of faith: not so very often, “God, *give me* strength,” as, “God *is my* strength”. And there is a difference.

Perhaps we are dealing here with the distinction – the very significant distinction – to be drawn between belief and trust. To assert that we believe in God is to keep everything on the nice-and-simple rational level of the head. We have considered all the options and, actually God, we can conclude that we do indeed believe in you. (Now, here's our wish list, thank you very much. Saturday will do just fine, if you can manage it.)

What would it mean for us to move away from the head and to move closer to the heart? It would mean coming into God's presence not with a pile of wants, but rather with a deep trust based on the relationship we have with our creator and sustainer. It would mean confidence in God's goodness, come what may. Confidence in the divine love that is God's very nature.

The American writer, William C. Green, encourages us to view our petitions to God as acts of praise to the one who has equipped us, and in whom we can trust. Let's close with his words: *... prayer recalls us to who we are in the first place. It's an awakening, or reawakening, to what's still ours. Often enough I've felt like some bottomless pit that no amount of encouragement or reassurance could fill. At those times I'd always pray for strength I lacked. I've now taken to praying another way. “God, make me aware of the strength you've given me.” That's proven a good way to respect God, and others. When I quit looking elsewhere for what I already have, I find it!*

Amen.

Praying for others

*At this season of harvest
a prayer for a world in need of change,
kindly offered by Christian Aid:*

God, who embraces us all,
stretch our spirits to embrace each other,
together, in our standing up,
in our speaking out,
in our prayerful living-out of the changes we call for.

Where human beings are being stigmatised,
marginalised or oppressed,
stretch our spirits to embrace
your bias for the poor.

Christ, stretch our spirits to take our place in your body.

Spirit, stretch our will to grasp your vision.

The season for change is now.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison thinks about shoeboxes:

After the excitement of returning to Church last week for Sunday services, another thing returns this week. We are still planning to collect shoeboxes full of goodies for Blythswood to send to people in need across Eastern Europe. We need to have our boxes all packed up and sent away by the end of October.

Due to coronavirus restrictions the process will be a little different this year. Firstly, you need a checklist for each shoebox. This tells you what you can put in it and includes a label to place on the outside of your festively-wrapped box. You can pick up a leaflet from church – pop by between 2 and 3pm on a Tuesday when we are open for prayer, or pick up one at the service on the 11th. But even easier – if you are online – is to download the checklist:

<https://blythswood.org/shoeboxappeal-registration>

Scroll down to the bottom of the page and click “Download Checklist” at the left. Another tab will open with the checklist and you can print or download it from there.

If you can't download a checklist or pick one up from church you can get one from Jim Couper 07796 080321 (call or text him to let him know, and he will deliver one).

Filled shoeboxes won't be left in the church this year. Once you've got a full shoebox, with your checklist taped to the top as required, you can take it to Jim at 38 Douglas Road, Longniddry (if no one is in, leave it round the back under the wooden table by the door, in a poly bag in case it rains). If you can't take it Jim will collect it from you.

Filled shoeboxes must be returned to Jim by the end of October. A pandemic is not going to stop us helping others in need!