



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Issue 32: Sunday 18th October 2020

Our services today are led by members of the Gladsmuir and Longniddry Worship Team. While Robin is on holiday this week, emergency cover is kindly being provided by the Rev Bill Wishart (07900 367023).

Today's readings

Psalm 127 (“A song of ascents”)

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain.

Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.

It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved.

Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward.

Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth.

Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them.

He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate. Amen. (NRSV)

Mark 12: 41–44 (“The widow’s offering”)

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.’ Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Saviour's blood (CH: 396)

God is love, his the care, tending each everywhere (CH: 193)

For the beauty of the earth, for the beauty of the skies (CH: 181)

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

Be thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart (CH: 465)

In the Name of the Father and of

Our story this morning is very short, made up of a mere four verses. It doesn't even announce itself as very significant, starting with the words, "Jesus sat down". It sounds at the start like he is just taking a rest. And why on earth not just take a bit of time to do some people watching, when you are as busy as Jesus was. Yet it soon becomes clear that he is not being idle. He is observing very carefully everything that is going on and he finds significance in what he sees. What we discover when we look more closely at this story – and especially when we try to find its application for us today – is that it is probably one of the most misunderstood – and indeed misused – passages in all of Scripture.

This is often held to be a wonderful example of sacrificial giving – the focus is entirely on the widow, on her great act of faith in giving her very last coins away. If we are tempted to jump straight to the implications for us in this passage and decide that Jesus wants us all to imitate her actions, we should ask the obvious question: "Did Jesus ever tell anyone to give away all that they had?" And, of course, the answer to that question is, "Yes, he did". Just a little earlier in Mark's gospel we read about the rich man who came to Jesus to ask what more he should do to inherit eternal life, having kept all the commandments. He was crestfallen when Jesus said: "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor ... then come and follow me." Sadly, the man had too much to lose and walked away. However, when we think of another rich man – Zacchaeus – we find that when he offered to give away half his fortune and repay those he had defrauded, Jesus doesn't say, "Oh come on Zak, why not give the other half away too?" No, he says: "Today, salvation has come to this house!" Jesus did warn about the snare of great wealth many times in his teachings and, clearly, he knew that the rich man was so invested in his possessions that nothing but parting with them would offer him the freedom to follow Jesus. Zacchaeus did not need to be told anything – he had suddenly turned from being tight-fisted and greedy to being open-handed and generous. But this widow – the idea that she is being held up as an example to follow – that is quite hard to fathom.

If we want to get to the main point that Jesus is making here, we need to zoom out, take our attention away from the widow and look at the other characters in the story. The other givers are being quite showy about it, enjoying the attention of onlookers. If we zoom a bit further out and look at the immediate context of the story – what comes just before it, for instance – we see that Jesus is being quite scathing about the religious leaders of the day; he describes how the teachers of the law love to be at the centre of everything, enjoying the prestige of their esteemed position. He even says that they devour widows' houses – what an extraordinary claim. Whatever that specifically refers to – maybe some loophole in the law, they managed to find – it is definitely a reference to the exploitation of widows. Then if we zoom a bit further out still, we come to the clearing of the Temple, where Jesus is very defiant about the buying and selling going on there, the exploitation of poor people by that religious institution. Then, of course, much of what fills the pages between Jesus' clearing of the Temple and our story this morning, are repeated attempts by the religious leaders to discredit Jesus. They try to trap him with difficult questions; to no avail, but it is clear they want rid of him.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

One final bit of context before we look at application: it is really interesting to see what comes immediately after our story of the widow's offering. It is short, but very significant, so here it is: *"As he was leaving the temple, one of the disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!" "Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."*

Of course, that happened to the Temple in Jerusalem when the Romans destroyed it just a few decades later. Jesus has been pointing out, since he arrived in Jerusalem, that the religious institutions of the time were corrupt, not fit for purpose, run by crooks, charlatans and hypocrites and now he is saying – "it is all going to come to an end!"

So, given the context of this passage, is it not possible that Jesus is not mainly commending the faith and generosity of the widow, but trying to focus his hearers on the inattention of the others in this situation to her plight? The question might then not be, "Why and how did she make such an amazing sacrifice!" but, "Why on earth was she expected to give, rather than receive? Where was the help and support she so badly needed? Why was no-one looking out for her?"

At this point we need to uncover a bit of background on the legal and economic conditions for widows at the time. One fact brings it home immediately – a widow had no inheritance rights from her husband's property. When he died, the oldest son acquired the property. If her son took the fifth commandment seriously, then she would be well looked after, but presumably not all sons did that. If there was no son, she might have to return to her father's house, or resort to begging. A widow's existence in first century Palestine was often a very precarious thing. And this had been the case from early on in Israel's history, so when we go back to the giving of the law, we find several particular references to looking after widows, (often grouped together with orphans and strangers). For instance, there was the expectation that anyone who owned fields, vines, olive trees – anything that produced a crop – were supposed not to gather it all in, but leave some for these people, the most vulnerable. The practice of gleaning – the right for poor people to gather what was left of the harvest for themselves – came out of this. The frequent references to the plight of widows, orphans and strangers in the Old Testament – both in the Torah, where the Israelites were encouraged to make provision for them and in the Prophets, where they are accused of forgetting about them – these are all to flag up that the most vulnerable people in society need special care.

So, the application of this passage is not to do what many church leaders have done – some American TV evangelists come to mind – and encourage poor people to give sacrificially, while they themselves live in comparative luxury. No, this story is about compassion, about the need to notice those who are most vulnerable around us and to act. Going to the supermarket and putting provisions in the foodbank trolley is just like leaving part of your field for others to harvest. Filling a shoebox with gifts for the Blythwood Christmas Appeal would also fit the bill. Paying our taxes willingly, without moaning, when we are able to pay more than others, knowing that we are contributing to the common good; campaigning for the rights of the marginalised. Sadly, the list could go on and on, since the pandemic has clearly made our society even more unequal than it was before, and that is something all of us can do something, even a small thing, to change. Amen.

Praying for others

God of Love,

Your heartbeat is in every living creature, every living thing.
Teach us to dance to the beat of your heart.

We consider your great gift to us – keep us humble, thankful, sincere,
not arrogant in our giving.

Infuse us with your loving kindness,
the desire to share freely with those who are
hungry, homeless, ill, abused, helpless, lonely.

Alert us to others' needs –
make us watchful, respectful, understanding of circumstances.
Prompt us to faithful, committed, continued action.

Misfortune can befall anyone and through no fault of their own.
Remind us of your great grace and compassion,
inspiring us to change the wrongs of our world as we strive
to overcome both injustice and apathy.

Reveal to us the freedom of parting with that which we don't need,
in the sure hope of your promise of a richer, fuller life to come.

Teach us to dance to the beat of your heart.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

And finally . . .

Beth Elliott considers counting our blessings:

For many of us this year of 2020 has been difficult. Those of us who are retired can count our blessings that we don't have unemployment concerns. Most of us, fortunately, keep well and we are so lucky to have countryside and the beach to enjoy nearby, instead of living in a city flat.

It makes us realise what's important and what we're missing in life. It's not easy without theatre and music. It's not possible to plan ahead about much, and it makes us realise how much we appreciate anticipation of planned events. We miss our holidays and travel as well as not being able to see our families – even more difficult when they live in restricted areas.

We appreciate our pets, too, and spend time caring for them. There's a lot to be said for good dog walks as well as time in the garden. They give us some solace when we miss hugs with family and friends.

It can be hard to know which day it is without our usual system and routine in our lives. That's why we appreciate *The Sunday Focus* each weekend. On a daily basis we enjoy Tom Gordon's *Thought for the Day* and perhaps a prayer from the *Prayer Diary* as well as a *Wee Thought* from Robin or Frances each Wednesday. These become very important and I'm sure you will join me in thanking those who take the time to put them together.

Let's hope we remember what we've learnt during this strange time and continue to value the important things in life. Let's keep counting our blessings.