



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Issue 37

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Today's reading

Mark 15: 21–41 (“The Crucifixion of Jesus”)

They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, ‘The King of the Jews.’ And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, ‘Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!’ In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, ‘He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.’ Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, ‘Listen, he is calling for Elijah.’ And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, ‘Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.’ Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, ‘Truly this man was God’s Son!’

There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

The Servant King (CH: 374)

When I receive the peace of Christ (CH: 566)

The King of Love my Shepherd is (CH: 462) *When I survey the wondrous cross* (CH: 392)

Rejoice, the Lord is King (CH: 449)

In the Name of the Father and of

My name is Cyrus, and I am an officer of the Roman Army. So many times I've been here. So many times. I often joke that I make my living from death, and it's true.

Of course, it's never easy overseeing an execution, what with all the hammers and nails, but I just say to the boys on duty: "This is the way you build an empire."

And so I play my small part for Caesar: a tiny worker in an ever-expanding anthill of civilisation. A time-served soldier in yet another ignorant outpost so far from home.

What's this job of mine all about? You take a common rebel and you show him who's boss. That's it. And the thing is, they'll never come back to settle the score – probably no bad thing when you come to think about it.

Wood and nails, that's all it takes. And a strong right arm.

There are more efficient ways to kill, and more peaceful ways to die, but that's not the point. This way – the Roman way – sets a clear example to anyone else who might have ideas of their own.

And every time, the message is raised up for all to see.

This time was different though. This time the nails made their mark ... on me.

When we started our "Year of Mark" back in January, little did we know what kind of a year this would be, with a terrible virus causing mass disruption to health, to families, to churches. All the way through this year we have had to adapt simply to keep the most basic of our activities on the go. There have been losses and sorrows, yet for us in church, we have also had the constant guidance of the gospel writer Mark, right there beside us every step of the way as he shows us the meaning of Jesus.

On week one of our year I provided everyone in Gladsmuir and Longniddry's congregations with their very own personal copy of Mark's gospel. I wonder what you have done with yours. Did you scribble on it? Did you underline and circle and highlight? Or did you place it at your bedside and quietly forget about it? (Don't worry. No-one's checking!)

One of the things you might have done is to consider the little sheet I also gave you which listed some characteristics of Mark's gospel. There were 10 of them in total, ranging as follows: Mark's gospel is sparse and brief; its language is unrefined; it has urgency; its writer is a story-teller; it stresses deeds not words; it focuses on the Cross; it ends abruptly; it keeps an air of secrecy; its Jesus is very human; and, lastly, it criticises the male disciples.

I hope that you can recognise in that list of features something of the gospel that we have been navigating our way through since January. If so, that's great. But if not, don't worry too much because many of these 10 characteristics find voice in the story of the Crucifixion which we are considering on this Christ the King Sunday.

This Feast of Christ the King sounds like it should have its origins in the early Church, yet it only came into being in 1925 as a deliberate attempt by the Church to counter the dual tides of secularism and nationalism that were sweeping the world. On this Sunday each year, immediately before Advent, we are drawn back to the Kingship of Christ, and reminded that the baby to be born in the manger is the same Christ who will die on a cross.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

So what are we to make of Jesus on this day which holds him up as our King? Are we to explore his character in going to his death with such courage? Are we to reflect yet again on those ignorant male disciples who fled on Thursday and are nowhere to be seen on Friday? Perhaps we could pause to consider the gospel of Mark's true disciples – those apparently fearless women who stayed close by through all the travelling, and who on Good Friday are seen remaining near to the cross and near to their friend in solidarity and devotion.

Today I want to take us in another direction as we think about the soldiers on duty at Golgotha that day. Ordinary men who would rather have been home than stuck in a far outpost of empire. These men had the terrible job of killing the condemned prisoners whose time had come. It was nasty, messy work, but at least it was not without its perks: “... *they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.*”

Day in, day out, Roman soldiers routinely found that it took a long time for crucifixion to be effective. Perhaps the hours were wiled away in gambling, as the meagre possessions of a prisoner were snatched away with the roll of a couple of dice. There was unlikely to be anything of real value, but you might just find something that would take your eye.

What did these soldiers make of Jesus' possessions? Perhaps they were enthralled by what the gospel writer John called the seamless tunic which Jesus had been wearing. This was a proper piece of designer clothing: an expensive garment which wouldn't normally be hauled off the back of a rebel or a bandit at the place of the skull. Casting lots for it, perhaps they came to see that they had something of real value placed right in front of them.

How ironic! There they were, present at a world-changing moment of global history which would be immortalised in Scripture, painted by great artists, sung of by choirs. Good Friday would help change the lives of countless millions over not hundreds but thousands of years. And while the soldiers' focus was on some grubby second hand clothes, the real focus of Good Friday was slowly giving up his life just feet away.

It is said that when the Gestapo came for the Frank family in Amsterdam they were ready to pocket anything of value found in the apartment. They may well have found gold or silver, but – thank God – they failed to recognise the diary of Anne Frank that would later be revealed as a true gem. So too that day by the Cross of Christ: see the tunic; miss the gem.

How easy it is for us in the church to have the wrong focus. While the joy of discipleship is offered to us by God, we come to church quibbling about what “he” said at the door or what “she” did to make us so annoyed. Never mind the tunic. The tunic doesn't matter. Look to the cross and the person hanging there. That's what matters. That's *who* matters in our faith.

But someone was looking on in the *right* direction that day at Golgotha. Someone had his eyes trained on Jesus and couldn't keep a big, bold, persistent thought out of his marvelling mind. Enthralled by the way in which Jesus had given up his life on that cross, the officer in charge that day made his statement of faith: “Truly this man was God's Son!”

And so here at the end of Mark's gospel we find that the person who proclaims Christ crucified is not someone with inside knowledge or privileged position. Mark is showing us someone from beyond the community of “us” who comes to true faith, while all the time those 11 so-called friends are cowering in the shadows, too scared to dare show their faces in public. All very strange. All very, very Mark, the gospel writer for those on the edge.

Amen.

Praying for others

God who knows the cruelty and callousness of this world,
we stand at the foot of the Cross looking up at our crucified King.

There we see heavenly grace in human form:
the gift of God rejected and scorned.

Though Good Friday's horrors seem so long ago,
so far distant from our world of today,
we know that our human nature remains the same across the generations:
our desire to control others, often to the point of suffering,
sometimes to the point of death.

In the world of 2020 we can see so many signs of callousness and apathy:
the sinful allure of wealth while so many are unable to pay their bills;
our ability to walk on by in the face of injustices, great or small;
the realisation that we so often fail to take heed of your call to us.

Bless this world in all its pain.
Lift our eyes first to Christ on the Cross,
and then to the scandal of this world gone wrong.

In all the hurt, make us healers, we pray.
In all our complacency, challenge us to make the difference.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

And finally . . .

Abigail Morrison considers help in hard times:

A couple of weeks ago this "And Finally ..." section was written by Emma Brown, East Lothian Council's Connected Communities Manager for Preston, Seton and Gosford. She mentioned that she was working with others to help prepare and deliver bags of food, presents, winter essentials and even cooked meals to those facing hardship or who are socially isolated. The plan is to deliver these goodies to people in need in the week prior to Christmas and on New Year's Eve. Emma said she'd let us know how we could assist with this endeavour, and now she has.

There are two ways we can help. The first is to donate the luxury items to be added to the food bags. The Council is working with Fareshare and the Foodbank to source basic food items but it would be great if we could donate some extra treats. The sorts of things they would be grateful if we could give are: boxes of biscuits or chocolates; sponge cakes; crisps; and Christmas crackers.

They would be delighted to receive donations of any of these things at Longniddry Community Centre. The Centre is open Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday mornings from 9.15am until 12.15pm. Or you can drop gifts of food off at Longniddry Church when we are open for prayer (Tuesday afternoons 2pm until 3pm) or after one of our fortnightly services.

The second way we may be able to help is with delivering food parcels locally between December 20th and 24th and on the 31st. If you think you can assist with this, please contact me and I'll pass on details to Emma.