



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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

Issue 40: Sunday 13th December 2020

Today's readings

Malachi 4 ("The Great Day of the Lord")

See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts.

Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.

Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse. Amen. (NRSV)

1 Thessalonians 5:16–24 ("Final exhortations and greetings")

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

O little town of Bethlehem how still we see thee lie (CH: 304)

The Virgin Mary had a baby boy (CH: 300)

In the bleak midwinter frosty wind made moan (CH: 305)

Child in the manger, infant of Mary (CH: 314)

While humble shepherds watched their flocks on Bethlehem's plains by night (CH: 296)

In the Name of the Father and of

The Church of Scotland minister and academic, the Rev Dr Ian Bradley, is someone whose knowledge of hymns is remarkable. When it comes to the subject of hymns for Advent and Christmas, he is the go-to expert. And because he is the author of *The Daily Telegraph Book of Carols* his wisdom in this field is there for all to see.

If you turn to page 134 of his book, you will find his discussion of a hymn that is not much sung these days. It goes like this:

*Hark, how all the welkin rings, "Glory to the King of kings;
peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconcil'd!"*

Beginning to sound familiar? Read on:

*Joyful, all ye nations, rise, join the triumph of the skies;
universal nature say, "Christ the Lord is born to-day!"*

"Hang on a minute," I hear you cry. "That's just 'Hark! The herald angels sing' without the chorus – you can't fool me, matey!"

And you're right. Charles Wesley wrote the original for a collection published back in 1739, but he didn't just make the words up. Rather, he turned to his Bible and found all sorts of sources upon which to draw: According to Dr Bradley, there is a whole lot of material from the gospels of Luke and Matthew (of course) but also Genesis chapter 4, Isaiah chapter 9, Haggai chapter 2 and Philippians chapter 2. Why not grab a Bible and go on a hunt for them?

But that's not all, because there is a very particular verse quoted by Charles Wesley from Malachi chapter 4, verse 2, our text for today:

But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.

Perhaps it's just me, but for as long as I can remember singing "Hark! the herald angels sing", I have wondered why "Sun" was spelled with a "U" and not an "O". Here is the answer: it all goes back to 500 years before the birth of Christ and the words of the prophet Malachi.

What we are encountering here is a prediction and a celebration of something – indeed, someone – who is to come. Half a millennium after the prophet spoke, Righteousness with a capital "R" would enter into time and space in the form of a person. With the arrival of Jesus, God would be not only "with us" but also "one of us".

No longer would the divine seem like a far distant country, because Jesus' birth is the moment in human history at which we see for ourselves what God is truly like.

Babies, of course, are greatly adored. Revered by doting grandparents, cherished by exhausted parents, spoiled by aunties and uncles and shown off by big brothers and sisters, a new arrival is a truly fabulous reason for celebration. It is as though the tiny bundle of joy, home from the maternity ward, becomes a shining beacon for all to see. What is contained in that bundle? Hope and love; promise and perfection; noise and a whole lot of sleeplessness for Mum and Dad.

When we think about a new arrival, however, do we ever pause to reflect on the word, "righteousness"? Almost certainly not. And why should we? Righteousness, after all, is one of those words we rarely if ever use in everyday life.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

So when ministers and theologians speak of being “righteous”, what is meant by the term? Put simply, to be righteous in the spiritual sense is to act in accordance with divine law, being free from sin or guilt.

Immediately, we can see a problem in relation to babies, toddlers, children, teenagers and, yes, adults too. The sad fact is that no matter how adorable, how angelic, how heavenly a newborn baby might appear, their growth upwards towards maturity will result in cracks to their fragile patina of perfection. “Don’t touch!”; “Give it back!”; “Off to sleep!”; “Share nicely!”; “Move away from Jane!”; “Put those scissors down!” We have all been there, either as a child or as a parent . . . or as both.

What child is perfect? And I dare you – I just dare you – to say, “Jesus, of course!” That’s exactly the kind of line ministers hear all the time because people assume they should think of Jesus as God. (It’s only right after all.) But if our Advent journey towards the Incarnation at Christmas is to challenge us on anything, surely it should challenge us to think of Jesus not just as God but also – crucially – as human.

The Christmas stories of Luke and Matthew form the vast bulk of what scholars pompously describe as “the infancy narratives”. But these stories don’t stop with the flight to Egypt. Instead they go on to one final tale of the young Jesus really upsetting his Mum and Dad. We find it at the end of Luke chapter 2, where an exasperated Mary turns to her eldest son who has just gone AWOL in the Temple for three days, greeting him with these words: *‘Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.’*

Had any one of us approached her at that moment to tell her that her wee boy was, in fact, perfect in every way, I think she might very well have used a few choice sentences to make us aware in no uncertain terms that we don’t understand the ways of 12-year-olds.

The story of the young Jesus hiding out in the Temple is in our Bibles to show us just how devout and studious he was, even at an early age: the very model of faithfulness to serve as a blueprint for youngsters down the ages. But looking behind the words on the page, I think we can see that Luke is telling us something more than this. To me at least, it looks very much as though we are being shown a picture of Jesus who is like any other pre-teens kid: going his own way, pushing the boundaries, and ultimately getting caught.

Roughly 20 years later, this very same Jesus was back in that very same Temple, overturning the tables of the money-changers. It seems very much as though he simply didn’t care what other people thought of him. In the very heart of religious order, he was showing just what little respect he had for authority. In that singular act of civil disobedience he was making a public stand while simultaneously getting ready to pay the price – and what a high price that would turn out to be.

How could this Nazarene nobody with nothing to his name (he who broke the rules in such graphic and shocking ways) be viewed as “righteous”? In the eyes of the religious elite he was a trouble-maker and a rebel, and they knew just exactly what to do with the likes of him.

Yet to God, the heavenly Father of Jesus, maybe higher requirements and divine laws applied all along. In his life, Jesus went about his mission looking far beyond the standards of this world, to frame a reputation as the “Sun” (or “Son”) of true Righteousness. Amen.

Praying for others

Precious Lord,
you sent your gift of pure Love
to us that first Christmas,
the greatest gift of all.

The Love that came down to earth
and walked among us,
is the One who loves us more than we can know,
and more than we deserve.

God of love,
teach us to care as you care,
and take away our selfishness,
granting us the vision to see your love
in this world, despite our human failure.

With grateful hearts, we give thanks
for a love that has no end:
your love that knows no bounds.

In Jesus' name we pray.
Amen.

And finally . . .

Robin Hill considers the importance of festive fun at a time of continuing restrictions:

It seems almost sacrilegious to write an “And finally ...” on the subject of festivity in the days leading up to Christmas 2020. Human suffering has occupied our minds and our prayers since March, with so many families knowing at first hand the destructive power of Covid-19. We look forward to new vaccines becoming effective, though that very welcome outcome is still several months away. Meanwhile, we do our best to keep calm and carry on.

But shouldn't we be doing more than just battling through, resigned to a Christmas of dull loneliness? After all, December would normally see all manner of festivities in Gladsmuir, Macmerry and Longniddry. It may be hard to be jovial at a time of crisis such as this, yet it is in no way a sin to celebrate Jesus' birth, whether in word or song (or even laughter).

We can't meet in large numbers as yet – roll on that glorious day! – but, as we know, it is possible for many in this “e-connected” generation to come together over the internet. And that is exactly what is planned for the evening of Monday 21st December when at 7.30pm our YouTube Christmas Special, ***Deck the Virtual Halls***, will go live.

Featuring the talents of Frances Cunningham, Charlie McGillivray-Davidson, Alec Shuttleworth, Bill and Erica Wishart and me, we will be celebrating Jesus' birth through music, laughter, Bible-reading and story. Our very special guests, all the way from Cookeville, Tennessee, will be our old friends The Ballinger Family Band (Kris, Dale and Ethan) who have sent us some glorious Christmas music to raise our spirits at the darkest time of the year. And that's no bad thing.

If you have internet access we warmly invite you to visit www.longniddrychurch.org.uk at 7.30pm, on Monday 21st, click on the link, and smile.