



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

Available in printed form and online at:
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Issue 41: Sunday 20th December 2020

Today's readings

While our internet-based act of worship at 9.45am will be our annual Service of Lessons and Carols, at 11am in Gladsmuir we will be looking specifically at these two readings:

Isaiah 60:1–7 (“The ingathering of the dispersed”)

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall be acceptable on my altar, and I will glorify my glorious house. Amen. (NRSV)

Micah 5: 2–5a (“The Ruler from Bethlehem”)

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labour has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Once in royal David's City stood a lowly cattle shed (CH: 315)

Love came down at Christmas, Love all lovely, Love divine (CH: 316)

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

Lord, you were rich beyond all splendour (CH: 318)

Hark! the herald angels sing, 'Glory to the new-born King!' (CH: 301)

In the Name of the Father and of

In 2001 the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann wrote about the visit to King Herod of wise men from the East as they followed a certain star. Here is a short story based on his essay, which was entitled, "Off by nine miles".

"To ... Jerusalem!"

Away plodded the caravan, led by sages, intent on finding a new king in the Holy City.

Some time later ...

King Herod was far from amused: "Why must I be surrounded by idiots and halfwits?"

"But Sire ..."

"Don't you *but Sire* me! I need to know about these visitors from the East. Who are they? Why have they come to Jerusalem? And what has it got to do with me?"

The head of palace intelligence shuffled uneasily: "It seems, Sire, that they have been inspired by Scripture. To be precise, in the book of the prophet Isaiah it is written that travellers bearing gold and frankincense will come from Arabia in search of a new king. And when they come ... well ..."

"Spit it out, man!"

"Well, Sire, it looks like they'll be searching for this new king ..."

"Yeeees ..."

"In ... Jerusalem."

"Curses! What does Isaiah know anyway? Still, we cannot be too careful. Jerusalem is a big place and we can never be sure what might lurk around a dark corner."

"I fear there is more, Sire."

"More???" mouthed the king in disbelief. "Go on then, if you must."

"Our agents have interrogated subjects who claim to have met these travellers only today. They report that the men in question are astrologers who were guided here by the light of a star of great brightness which has brought them across the desert, all the way to Judea."

"Enough!" shouted Herod. "Summon the chief priests and the scribes at once."

And so, later that same day, the religious leaders of Jerusalem gathered before Herod.

"Right," said the king. "Make yourselves useful because there is something I need to know. Where in the Scriptures are we told of the long-awaited Messiah's birthplace? And, if it's not too much trouble, I'd like an address."

The chief priests looked at each other in bewilderment. At last, one dared to speak: "May it please Your Majesty, I fear this most significant of places will not be found in the Holy City. Alas, the 60th chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah is all too easily misread and misunderstood. The text concerns the new-found material wealth of a Jerusalem once laid waste. The coming of the new king will not be about restoring the fortunes of the privileged few. Oh no! Not at all. These visitors have gone for the wrong passage altogether, and are come to Jerusalem in grievous error."

"I am growing impatient now," blustered Herod. "I don't need to know where the new king *isn't* to be born, but where he *is* to be born. Any bright ideas, the rest of you?"

A smart young scribe named Isaac was well versed in the Scriptures. With confident tone he piped up: "May it please Your *Esteemed* Majesty, the book of the prophet Micah is instructional on this point, to wit:

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

‘ “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.” ’

“Bethlehem?” spat Herod. “Bethlehem? Good grief boy! Do you know what you are talking about? Bethlehem is a dump, a complete nonentity. It’s nothing. Nevertheless ...”

“As you say, Sire.”

“Fetch me those interfering star gazers at once. I feel a party coming on, and not a minute too soon.”

Off went the leaders, back to the Temple. And out went horsemen to scour the streets and back alleys for anyone with suspicious amounts of gold or frankincense ... and most likely camels. (The Arabian sort with only one hump.) These men were to be cordially invited to an audience with His Majesty.

Next afternoon, three sages were escorted into the King’s private garden, where Herod was already reclining with a bowl of dates and a large goblet of wine.

“Ah,” he chirped, “our honoured guests, all the way from Arabia. Welcome, welcome! Please: there is no need to stand on ceremony, for here you are among friends.”

Places were taken and dates were passed around, with the king’s finest wine poured out most liberally. Introductions and diplomatic niceties duly seen to, the ruler of Judea got to asking about another – very much younger – king.

“And so I believe you come here on a godly quest to seek the much anticipated king of all our hearts. With deepest regret it is my sad duty to inform you that your reliance upon the book of the prophet Isaiah has led you astray. However, you are only off by nine miles.”

“Nine miles!” they whispered in awed unison. Then one of the wise men leant forward and placed a pale and wrinkled hand upon that of the king. “Sire, we implore you: tell to us the true scripture through which we will be guided, even to the newborn One.”

“Most certainly,” replied Herod, as though he knew what he was talking about. “You will find all the advice you need in the book of the prophet Micah, for it is he who directs the eager seeker to the very point of the Messiah’s entry into our world. It is to be a little place named Bethlehem. I suggest you rush there right speedily. Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go ... and pay him homage.”

And so those travellers from the East left the palace of a power-crazed king who was so petrified by the prospect of a new kind of monarch. Herod, as we know only too well, had no intention of worshipping the Messiah, but still he needed to find where that child might be. This man would stop at nothing to eliminate those he saw as pretenders to his crown.

Meanwhile, guided by the faithful star before them, the travellers set out upon their world-changing trek of nine short miles to dusty little Bethlehem and their journey’s end.

‘ “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.” ’ (Micah 5: 2)

“[Micah’s] is the voice of a peasant hope for the future, a voice that is not impressed with high towers and great arenas, banks and urban achievements. It anticipates a different future, as yet unaccomplished, that will organize the peasant land in resistance to imperial threat. Micah anticipates a leader who will bring well-being to his people, not by great political ambition, but by attentiveness to the folks on the ground.” (Walter Brueggemann)

Praying for others

Heavenly Father,
we thank you for the glad tidings of great joy
that were given to us all
through the Saviour's birth so long ago.

We find joy in the reassurance of your presence,
so help us take time in our day to notice and savour
even the smallest happy moment which lifts our spirits,
which leaves us grateful or which eases our minds.

Our happiness does not come from what we have on earth.
It arrived with the gift you gave us that first Christmas.

Lighting the candle of joy reminds us
of the delight the shepherds felt when told of a special birth.
Their joy was the eager anticipation
of wonderful things to come.

Fill our hearts with joy this Advent season
as we reflect on the Good News of Jesus' birth.

In Jesus' name we pray.
Amen.

And finally . . .

Abigail Morrison considers God-given gifts:

A couple of weeks ago the very first dose of the Pfizer-Biontech Covid-19 vaccine was administered in the UK. Since then, over 150,000 people have had their first shot of the vaccine. This includes our very own Frances Cunningham who received her first jab this week, because she is a front-line health worker. You know it's real when you actually know people who are getting the vaccine. I am sure that soon a couple more vaccines will be approved.

Some folk have expressed concern about the speed of the development of the vaccines but I am filled with wonder at the ingenuity involved in developing a vaccine in 10 months rather than 10 years. Admittedly I think the 10-year length applies to vaccines where scientists don't know how to destroy the virus. But with a Corona virus they already knew you had to get at its surface spikes. And, once they had the sequence of the virus' genome – which was available from Chinese scientists in January – the Oxford team designed their vaccine on a computer in 48 hours! The rest of the time was spent growing the vaccines and testing them, and the whole process was shortened by overlapping various phases that would ordinarily be done in sequence.

So, industrial production of the vaccines began before they knew if they worked – Pfizer, Astrazeneca and others took a risk on that. And the regulators started to get data in July to speed up their approval process.

All of this makes me so grateful for all the brains, skill and hard work that have gone into producing these vaccines: skills in genetics, microbiology, clinical trials, documentation of medicines and vaccine production. Humans really can achieve wonderful things when we put our minds to it.