



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Issue 42: Sunday 27th December 2020

Today's readings

*Today's internet service is led by the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, the Right Rev Dr Martin Fair. This issue of **The Sunday Focus** offers an expanded text of Gladsmuir's Christmas Eve address. Merry Christmas!*

1 John 4:7–21 (“God is love”)

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

The first nowell the angel did say (CH:323)

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

It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old (CH:303)

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

Blessing and honour and glory and power (CH:441)

In the Name of the Father and of

Christmas is all about moving: think about those millions and millions of cards that have had to be moved through the Royal Mail to get from house to house. What about presents that have moved from internet retailers into countless homes across the land? And then there are groceries that – even after the festivities are over – will continue to move in the delivery vans of all the major stores.

On this final Sunday of the year, let's pause to give thanks for the logistics which have made 2020 a period when the letters, the parcels and all the essentials got through despite some terrible challenges. These were faced and overcome not just by computers and automated dispatch systems, but by human beings (and very often underpaid ones at that).

Throughout this continuing pandemic, we owe so much to those unseen heroes in mail rooms, warehouses and supermarkets who help to keep our country going, its homes in one piece, despite so many pressures and dangers.

So yes, at a time when it's hard for people even to move down the street to visit a neighbour, still Christmas brings with it the moving of so many items from place to place. And that is kind of appropriate because Christmas – the birth of Christ – was all about moving, and in four ways:

Moving from ...

Most obviously, the Christmas story has Mary and Joseph moving from their home in Nazareth to get to their census in Bethlehem. And then we read elsewhere that Mary, Joseph and Jesus had to move all the way to Egypt. The first move was on the order of Rome. The second move was to protect the Holy Family from Herod. And neither move was one that a young couple would have wished for, going from place to place to place with their little boy, all ending up as refugees in a strange land.

Today, the world has at least 70,000,000 refugees who have been displaced from their homes on account of war, persecution, hunger, poverty, natural disaster, climate change and more. That is roughly the population of the entire United Kingdom with nowhere to call their own: ordinary folk disorientated, rejected and subject to terrible risks of many kinds.

The Christmas story is a reminder to us of the threat posed to the Prince of Peace by a tyrant who would stop at nothing to wipe out those who would threaten his position. Now, 2000 years on, where do we stand in today's power struggles? On the side of refugee babies? Or on the side of powerful elites?

Moving down ...

"Moving from ..." is the first move that we find in the Christmas story, but there is a second one that is implicit in the words of the writers, because in the pages of the Bible we see very clearly that Christmas is about Christ moving down from heaven to come to earth.

As we read from the first letter of John: "*God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world ...*"

In the words of a 16th century Christmas hymn by Martin Luther, translated into old Scots:

*I come from heaven high to tell
the best nowells that e'er befell.
To you these tidings true I bring
and I will of them say and sing.
This day to you is born a Child
of Mary meek and Virgin mild.
That blessed bairn benign and kind,
shall you rejoice baith heart and mind.*

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

Moving out ...

Jesus comes from heaven high all the way to the fabric of our troubled world: the great Son of God moving to our human level and, in time, moving out to individuals and communities whose lives would be changed beyond all expectation.

We know so little about the young Jesus, and we may well be tempted to pose many – unanswerable – questions about his upbringing. In what kind of family unit did he grow up? Was the young Jesus bold and energetic, or quiet and thoughtful? Did Joseph have a role in apprenticing his oldest boy into the family business?

It may be that the first 30 or so years of Jesus' life were lived in quiet poverty, taking on his dad's business while learning more and more about the faith of his ancestors in the local synagogue. There may have been little by way of physical "moving" going on through those three decades, but in time something moved deep within Jesus, as he felt a calling from God that would cause him to move on from a domestic setting to a much wider platform.

Let's go back to our reading from the first letter of John, because within its beautiful discussion of love, we find another aspect of moving:

God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

Jesus moves, so that we might be moved: moved in our thinking and moved in our hearts by the God of love.

And why? So that we might love in turn.

The theologian Marilyn Pagan-Banks describes Jesus as, "God's living, moving, disrupting love-made-flesh". The story of Jesus – from his birth on Christmas Day, right the way through – is the story of love moving close to us in our human living; the story of heaven moving down to our world; the story of divine light moving into our earthly darkness ... and staying there as it illumined a path that would lead back to God.

Here, then, is

- Jesus, who **moves from** heaven, entering our troubled world like a tiny little candle-flame, flickering in the gloom of human sin;
- Jesus, who **moves down** to our human level, shedding the light of God's love brightly everywhere he goes;
- Jesus, who **moves out** on a journey of salvation, as he sends his great light of hope to all those cowering in the shadows of loneliness and oppression ... of misery and exclusion ... of hatred and hurt.

This story of movement is told each December as the reality of Christmas is brought home once again. For some, our annual recollection of the Incarnation serves as a means of strengthening a faith already real and meaningful. For others, it is in a real sense a 21st century "birth of Christ" as a familiar cast plays out a narrative that moves people down away from their old assumptions and off along new avenues of heavenly-earthly possibility.

*Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love divine;
Love was born at Christmas,
star and angels gave the sign.*

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God. AMEN.

Praying for others

God who moves heaven and earth to come to us,
in this season of Christmas we recall the world you love so much:
in all its poverty and all its wealth;
in all its plentiful provision and all its terrible need;
in all the love of tiny children and all the cruelty of wicked rulers.

Come now, O Prince of Peace,
come to us to show us your better way.
Lead us in the way of righteousness which you have set for us.

By your grace, take us on a journey
where we will move from our comfort to
encounter both challenge and hope.

In your great mercy,
shed your light upon this planet and its people:
that all might know you are near and rejoice in your presence.

Grant courage for the journey ahead,
so that we might rise to be your willing servants in a world of need.

In Jesus' Name we pray.
Amen.

And finally . . .

Robin Hill looks forward to a year of uncertainty ... and hopefulness:

What value does our faith have? Surely it offers us two gifts of inestimable worth.

First, our faith helps us to forge a link between past and present. As part of the universal Church of Jesus Christ, spanning all time and space, we regularly reflect on words of Scripture whose origins are lost in the mists. The wisdom of sages helps to guide our feet on to firm ground, while the Spirit of God – there even at the dawn of Creation – is our ever-present Challenger and Comforter. Not for nothing is Isaiah's notion of "the Rock of Ages" identified as God's everlasting strength which has upheld people of faith down through time ... and is there for us today.

And second, our faith helps us to forge a link between present and future. This is crucial to the world of 2020 as it moves so tentatively into 2021. No-one knows what lies ahead in a cold and unusually threatening winter. (Stay safe!) Who would dare to predict how effectively or how fairly the world's vaccine programmes will roll out? Yet even in this troubling time for our battered and bewildered world, we can step out hopefully in the company of God. Our perspective is one which takes in not only the "now" of our material world, but the "always" of a God who cares, as reflected in today's Bible reading:
"*... love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love ...*" (1 John 4:9–10)

This love of God is a love that reaches out *to* us and *through* us. At the turn of another year, please take a moment to pause and reflect on all your prayers, all your engagement, all your action for so many people in so many ways. Well done.

Together, we look forward in faith.