



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Today's readings

Matthew 3: 1–17 (“The Baptism of Jesus”)

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” ’

Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

‘I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.’ Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

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| 1 | <i>Amazing grace!</i> (CH:555) | 2 | <i>Immortal, invisible</i> (CH132) |
| 3 | <i>Take my life, Lord</i> (CH502) | 4 | <i>Father Eternal, Ruler of Creation</i> (CH:261) |
| | 5 | | <i>For your generous providing</i> (CH655) |

In the Name of the Father and of

People who call themselves Christians – those who do their best to learn from the life and teachings of their Risen Lord – sometimes get things wrong in the ways of faith. Take, for example, the manner in which Jesus, the poor, itinerant Son of God from first century Nazareth, gets transformed by the Church into an all-conquering hero, employed down through the centuries to justify one government over another, with all their wars, colonialism and even slavery. Sadly, this is the Christ of Empire.

When it comes to Jesus, we have been raised on a rich diet of greatness and victory and grandeur and authority. And, whether as pilgrims or as tourists, we have wandered round cathedrals and art galleries, looking at stained glass windows and oil paintings which point us to a heroic Jesus that we just accept as being right and proper. And yes, we have been taught, and have even grown to love, those undeniably great hymns of the Church which extol all that is magnificent about the Messiah:

*Blessing and honour and glory and power,
wisdom and riches and strength evermore
give to the Lord who our battle hath won,
whose are the Kingdom, the crown, and the throne.*

“The Kingdom, the crown, and the throne”: words which, in their own way are most certainly biblical, but which have also been expropriated for some very human purposes.

When the Scottish hymn writer Horatius Bonar penned that hymn away back in the 1860s, he was living in an age of Empire, with Queen Victoria ruling over all the red bits on the map ... and there were a great many of them. Even her name, “Victoria”, spoke of military triumph by the British who had come to conquer so many distant peoples. Is it any surprise that a Victorian hymn writer should work within that national identity? Perhaps not.

I really don't know, although I can well imagine the imperial bearing of Victorian society being one which might all too easily have taken root, lasting from generation to generation, with the Church remaining perfectly happy to bask passively in the glory of it all.

Here, then, is what I see as a big problem in all of this inherited grandeur: we have got it into our heads that Jesus is a winner. And we like winners. Truth be told, we actually quite like keeping our own personal winner from Galilee up their on his pedestal, a laurel wreath on his blood-stained brow, a victor's medal around his scarred neck.

It certainly looks like the Church of the past has provided quite some legacy for the Church of the present and, no doubt, of the future. That said, let's pause to reflect on the simple thought that there is nothing new under the sun. It's all very well having folks like me trying to blame Victoria, her politicians, her generals, her merchants ... her hymn writers! ... for a faith that looks towards greatness. If we stop to consider this more closely, opening our Bibles as we do so, I suspect that we would find the seeds of our fascination with greatness in the Gospel story itself, as we consider its very human cast of players.

In our reading today we find a prime example of someone who has what might be termed “Jesus the Great” firmly in his sights. Recall how we read about John the Baptist:

Then Jesus came to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?” [Emphasis added]

John sees his second cousin approaching and knows that he is soon to be in the company of greatness. How could he wash Jesus clean of sin, when Jesus should be washing him?

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness." Then John consented.

For Jesus "to fulfil all righteousness" means that he must act in accordance with God's law or God's will. God wants his only begotten Son to be washed in the waters of the River Jordan, along with those others who come to John for Baptism. It's not that this Jesus is above all the rest. As we will see, it is quite the reverse. It is Jesus' task to become a godly companion of the world. Or, if you prefer, it is Christ's divine calling to be our brother.

Strip away all the veneer of greatness, and the true brotherly love of the human-divine Jesus is at last allowed to shine through. We encounter this, as we have just read, at the point of his Baptism in the River Jordan. But we also encounter it in other places and at other points. All the way through his wonderful ministry to "the least of these", Jesus is getting alongside folk in their need, and changing their lives. He does this in simple, human ways, through his radical teaching, his healing ministry, his table hospitality, his serving – not as a benevolent king – but as a kind friend to so many.

Our reading today comes from the very start of his ministry, though we could easily have gone to near the very end and the foot-washing episode from the gospel according to John:

Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.'

And bang! There you have it: "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."

Once more we find Jesus requiring his friends to see him not in terms of power and glory, but instead as their model of humility and service. And suddenly we see that our faith is all about God's grace, not God's might; about our discipleship, not our share in glory.

I suspect that many of us don't know where to turn to make sense of our world right now. With a fresh start to another year, we all desperately want things to turn around: for all the vaccines to work together to overcome the pandemic; for Brexit to finally (finally!) be sorted; for justice and peace to come to this world's oppressed people; for that brave man, Joe Biden, to be the kind of leader that the United States so very badly needs.

As Christians, we should care about all of this, and more. But we should also care about Jesus: about how we treat Jesus and what we try to make of Jesus. It is far too easy for us to turn the chosen One of God into the kind of figurehead who is there to serve our purposes, just like that majestic, imperial Jesus of the 1860s. These days we find ourselves in the 2020s when we need to focus upon the character and call of the Servant Christ.

The One so patiently knocking at our door is Jesus our brother. And what our brother calls us to is a commitment to work with him in addressing the pains and the fears and the sufferings of those in need. As he showed his humility, so must we live it along with him.

The theologian Mary Luti puts it like this: "... if we immerse ourselves in our neighbors' need, if we bend to wash their feet, it's not for duty's sake. It's because we've lost our bearings, the old ones that always urged us up. Now, we who have been so vastly loved, so sweetly served, have no bearings at all. Except for Christ. Who heads us down." Amen.

Praying for others

Perfect God, who came to earth in Jesus Christ as servant to all,
we pray that we might learn how best to serve others.

Servant God, we pray for our leaders.
Give them humility and help them remember always
that their role is to serve the people they lead.
Guide them so they can serve as best they can.

Loving God, we pray for a world of peace:
a world where we put others before ourselves,
where we accept those who differ from us,
where we can disagree without violence, fear and hatred.

Caring God,
we pray for those who are ill – in body and in mind.
We remember so many who are struggling with this dreadful pandemic.
Heal them we pray.
We ask for your blessing on all those who are helping.
Give them strength to continue their vital work when distressed and fatigued.
Help us to sacrifice our own freedom to ensure we protect others from harm.
In Jesus name we pray.
Amen.

And finally . . .

Abigail Morrison considers Christmas past and a brand new year:

Goodness gracious me – here we are in 2021! I can hardly believe it. As I get older each Christmas and New Year seems to come around even faster than the last.

For most of us Christmas would have been different from our usual celebrations but I hope they were celebrations none-the-less. Mine was. It was a lovely, quiet time with my mother. She missed her grandchildren and other children but, on the other hand, she didn't have to sit through lots of noisy parlour games (like many folk with hearing aids she finds lots of chat and noise quite hard to cope with).

And I got to watch *Call the Midwife* without snorts of derision from my children. Though I do now have a slight challenge in that all my family's presents are still with me in Scotland (and mine from them in England). I suspect by the time I can see them again the warm clothes I planned to give my sister and niece will be less welcome than they would have been in December!! Ah well.

I suspect most of us are very glad to see the back of 2020. 2021 must surely be better. There is certainly promise that it will. But before then we must grit our teeth and plough on through another (the last?) lockdown. It feels like the last gruelling slog up a mountain through deep snow and the wind in your face. But soon we will be at the top, with glorious views of a better future and a downhill slope to get us home.

Have a safe, prosperous and vaccinated 2021.