



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Today's reading

Acts of the Apostles 8: 26–40 (“Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch”)

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it.’ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ He replied, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

‘Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.’

The eunuch asked Philip, ‘About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?’ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?’ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea. Amen.

(*NRSV*)

Today's hymns

1 *God is love* (CH123, Hyfrydol)

2 *How shall I sing that majesty* (CH:128)

3 *Dear Lord and Father of mankind* (CH:485)

4 *I, the Lord of sea and sky* (CH:251)

5 *For the healing of the nations* (CH:706)

In the Name of the Father and of

In these days of extraordinary uncertainty, many people find themselves in what we might call economic peril. It's not that they are poor (far from it). Rather, it's that they are, as the saying goes, "overextended". Take Jack and Jill, for example. Until recently, both had been in full time employment, Jack as a freelance photographer and Jill as the owner of a small but successful catering firm, specializing in elite sporting events.

With money in the bank and a solid cash flow coming into the household Jack and Jill could afford to take out a mortgage on a very nice Edinburgh property. They also had three cars, two children and a labradoodle named Percy. Life was good – expensive, but really very good.

Then, with the arrival of the Coronavirus lockdown things started to change. As people became more cautious, firms went under, advertising budgets were slashed and Jack found himself without either clients or adequate government support. Meanwhile, sporting venues were closed down overnight, so Jill's firm lost its clients. Every last one of them. In just three months they realized they could no longer pay their humungous capital city mortgage.

The sad story of Jack and Jill was, needless to say, made up by me, though it really didn't need to be because the anguish of Jack and Jill could be replicated over and over again all across the UK and far beyond. As is so often chillingly said of so many people in similar circumstances: "You are only three pay cheques away from losing your home."

These are hard times indeed for so many. In a similar, yet different, way it's also true for the Church: it is hard to deny that we have fallen on hard times.

What do you think this sermon is going to be about? Will it be concerned with stewardship in the church and the need to keep giving our offerings week by week? No, today we are concerned with the stewardship not of money, but of faith itself.

A few years ago I read this line in a book: "... the Christian faith is always just one generation away from extinction." Let's be clear: this contention has nothing to do Covid-19, and nothing even to do with the plight of the western European church which has been in such dramatic numerical decline over the last 60 years and more. This line about being "just one generation away from extinction" is rather a simple statement of fact in any century and for any denomination. The Church is utterly dependent upon regeneration.

Put simply, if you and I do not live and act as the active, outward-looking, missional Body of Christ which it is always – *always* – called to be, then who will be able to come to faith? To turn the spotlight around so that it shines in our own dazzled, blinking eyes: who will be there to pass on the baton to future generations ... if not us? Who will be there to keep the Good News of Jesus Christ a living reality ... if not *us*?

Let's turn our attention to the Acts of the Apostles, and today's simple little story of the Ethiopian eunuch. This African high official was sitting in his chariot reading from a biblical scroll. What we know from our passage is that he "had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home". Clearly, this man was deeply religious, and most likely part of the African Jewish tradition whose ancient origins are lost in the mists of time.

As he pored over the words of Hebrew scripture there in his chariot, he found himself intrigued by what he was reading. Disturbed perhaps. The scroll in his hands told of someone denied justice, led like a sheep to the slaughter without saying a word, his life taken away from the earth. Who could this figure be, and what might the passage mean?

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

As he mused over the words on the scroll, the Ethiopian found himself joined by a complete stranger: the apostle Philip, who had been sent there by God and who (we are told) “ran up” to what, presumably, was a moving chariot. When Philip had caught up with that grand vehicle, he asked the man if he was able to grasp what Isaiah was saying. The eunuch answered by posing a question that proved deeply relevant to him; a question which may prove deeply relevant to us too: “How can I, unless someone guides me?”

I recently read a story of a man who had been raised on the music of the Beatles. Decades after the band had folded, he found himself listening to one of his favourite Beatles tracks on the radio and couldn't help but join in with the song. Suddenly, out of nowhere, his daughter appeared to ask what the music was. “For a moment,” he recalled, “I was taken aback by her question. How could she not know who is singing? Isn't that something that is passed on in the genes? And then I remember thinking, If she doesn't know about the Beatles, what other things have I mistakenly assumed I would not need to tell her? Obviously, we cannot assume that our children have somehow brought with them, or will pick up somewhere, the most important things we have to share ...”

What goes for Beatles songs goes also for the Christian faith. You see, our faith is absolutely not something that is passed on in our genes (no matter how much we might wish it to be so). The reality is that if we want the up-and-coming generations to take seriously the notion of a living faith, we must pass that faith on through word and prayer, through example and action. How can they understand, unless someone guides them?

Let's go back to Jerusalem and look at what happened in that chariot. A man was challenged by what was in the Bible. He was intrigued. He wanted to find out more yet he hadn't a clue where to turn. What made the difference for him came in the form of a devoted Christian who was prepared to take time to explain what was going on in that passage about an unnamed person who went meekly to his death. What we are told is that Philip started with the Isaiah passage then went on to proclaim to the Ethiopian the Good News of Christ.

The result was immediate. As soon as the official had been told about this man Jesus, the words of Isaiah made new sense for him and he understood. In that moment, everything came together and faith became real. And it was all thanks to Philip running up to that chariot to ask: “Do you understand what you are reading?”

We have already heard about a Beatles song this morning, but the tune which is going through my head right now is a beautiful one from contemporaries of the Fab Four. The wonderfully named “Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young” (one of whom went to school with one of our members) wrote a beautiful song in 1969. It is entitled, “Teach your children well”. Although they were almost certainly not thinking about the Church of Scotland, the sentiment is one that might be applied to us half a century later. If our church is to flourish, and if our faith is to thrive, we cannot simply assume that someone else is going to do the work. It's up to us. Not strangers. Not hired hands. ... Us.

It's up to us to be the kind of church that makes our neighbours think: “I want what they've got.” It's up to us to show in and through our faith that what we are about is actually making a difference. Above all, it's up to us to live our lives close to God so that we, like Philip before us, can be open to the promptings of God's Holy Spirit. After all, if God were to place you near to a moving chariot, would you be ready to start running?

Amen.

Praying for others

Lord God,
we open our hearts before you in this time of trial and difficulty.

We pray for all the peoples of your world.
We are all caught up in the pandemic; we are all affected:
in our nations, in our communities, in our circle of friends,
in our church family and in our own families.

We ask your blessing on all whose duty it is to cope and care:
nurses and doctors and others who work in our health centres and hospitals,
and many others whose daily lives are fraught and exhausting.

Surely, Lord, we all need the guidance of your Holy Spirit – we all need to feel hope.
And so we ask for your healing power to be poured out on the many who are sick
and for your consoling power to flow to the many who mourn.

Bless our church as we continue to meet in new ways and worship you in humility.
Give us courage and strength to persevere.

May we be as Philip, Lord – may we show forth, in the ways we live our lives
and in the ways we love each other, the light of your truth and the joy of your love.

So, bless us, Lord, and keep us faithful in your service.

In Jesus name we pray.
Amen.

And finally . . .

Abigail Morrison considers staying the course:

There has been much good news about the Covid-19 pandemic recently – more new vaccines being approved or moving into clinical trials, infection rates dropping substantially, hospitalisations and deaths due to the virus at least stabilising and showing signs of decreasing. And, of course, fabulous progress on vaccinations – well over 10 million to date. Most of the vulnerable have been vaccinated – those living or working in care homes, front line medical staff and social care staff. Many more have their appointments to receive a vaccines. Many of you reading this will be one of these people.

At the same time, we are still struggling with lockdown. It seems so much harder second time around. The days are shorter and the weather colder and wetter. Nearly a year of social isolation is taking its toll. And it's very easy to start thinking that, because more folk have been vaccinated and infection rates are falling, it doesn't matter so much if we break the rules. Surely we won't harm anyone vulnerable now – they've all been vaccinated? It can't matter if I pop round to my friend's for a cup of tea and a much needed natter – perhaps with one or two others?

But no, now is the time to stay strong – it's hopefully not for much longer. Yes, millions of us have had the jab. But we aren't fully protected yet (it takes a couple of weeks for that, and, really, two jabs for the best protection). The new variants are much easier to pass on. So, we need to “hang tough”.

Keep on with those Zoom, Facetime and Whatsapp calls to kith and kin. It will only be a few more weeks, with luck, before we can see some of them face to face (even if two metres apart!).