



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

Available in printed form and online at:
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Issue 49a: Sunday 21st February 2021

Today's readings

Psalm 51 ("A psalm of David")

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgement.

Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased.

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt-offerings and whole burnt-offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

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| 1 | <i>Be thou my Vision</i> (CH:465) | 2 | <i>Make me a channel of your peace</i> (CH:528) |
| 3 | <i>Just as I am</i> (CH:553) | 4 | <i>Let's sing to the Lord</i> (CH:126) |
| 5 | <i>O Lord my God! when I in awesome wonder</i> (CH:154) | | |

In the Name of the Father and of

It may seem strange to move from the month of February *back* to the month of December. And it may seem very strange indeed to start the season of Lent with a verse of a much-loved Christmas carol by Christina Rossetti. But I imagine that stranger things have happened, so here goes:

*What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would do my part, —
yet what I can I give him, give my heart.*

That's all very poetic and all very lovely. It is fine to speak of bringing our heart to God. But ... what if we harbour an unmistakable fear deep inside us that our heart is simply not fit as a gift for our Maker? What then?

We find ourselves at the start of another season of Lent, and what a year it has been since Lent 2020 when we started out leading almost normal lives and ended up in that dreadful state of lockdown. Over the last 11 months so many people have fallen ill, millions have lost a loved one, and the actual death toll from Covid-19 is so considerable – and so fast-changing – that it would be unwise of me even to try to quote a figure. By the time you were to take in that terrible number, the total would have risen.

And so we find today that hearts are broken and in very large numbers. But if we step back from this pandemic to recall what life was like *before* the virus, what do we find: a picture of uniform prosperity and happiness? No, if we look at our world and the people who inhabit it, we find that at any time and in any place broken hearts are everywhere.

I am not for one moment trying to play down the suffering, the sorrow, the grieving encountered through lockdown. And, looking ahead, I am certain that hospitals and medical practices will have to deal with so much trauma once we arrive at “new normal”, whenever that might be. All sorts of mental health issues are being stored up right now and will need to be dealt with in time to come, not least among our young people who have been through so, so much in terms of unparalleled educational stresses and social setbacks.

Yet it is only fair to say that human suffering has always been with us. Throughout all of history people of every nation have known the crushing weight of failure and of wrong. Each person has always had to shoulder the tough responsibility of taking in the impact of their own faults as well as those of their neighbours. And that can be so very hard to bear.

In our reading from the Book of Psalms today we skipped over the heading that comes after the title: “Psalm 51”. Had we looked at it we would have read these striking words: “A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.”

You can guess at the details of what happened. Suffice it to say that in the Second Book of Samuel we find King David about to become the father of a child whose mother is a married woman named Bathsheba. More than this, it is a time of war and King David has deliberately sent Bathsheba's husband, Uriah the Hittite, into the fury of battle. There – so very conveniently – Uriah is killed. Afterwards, David and Bathsheba marry in suspicious circumstances. And then it all falls apart, as Nathan the prophet bravely challenges the King on his conduct, both deeply sinful and decidedly corrupt in more ways than one.

For the king, there is no place to hide. He is found out, and the truth of his character is brought home to him in the very starkest of terms. He turns to God in heartfelt contrition:

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

These words of deepest contrition are not reported in Second Samuel. Rather, we find them in the Psalms: a book which has such strong ties to the contrite king himself.

Heartfelt contrition: it's hardly a term you hear in everyday life, except perhaps when Fleet Street gets to report a David-like piece of wrongdoing involving this or that Cabinet minister who has been found out. We may not use the term, yet the ability of a person to be contrite is a significant attribute that really can help to turn lives around.

In the season of Lent, as we prepare ourselves for the journey to Easter, it is absolutely right to say that contrition – being genuinely sorry, and yearning to deal with our shortcomings – is something worth grasping in our own personal experience.

I wonder how you look at sad and troubled King David. Do you see someone who wants to change? Or do you wonder what really lies inside his heart? Look at the man. He thought he could have it all. He sent an innocent husband to near certain death then had the temerity to wed the dead man's wife. He's as culpable as if he had plunged a sword into Uriah himself.

That seems a reasonable assessment, doesn't it? What kind of person could be so profoundly wicked as to do such a thing? Yet what about us and all our sins piling up at our own doors? We might not be in the same league as David, but unless we are perfect, we are surely worthy of blame in the eyes of God. (And here's the thing: we're none of us perfect.)

It is fair to say that there are several religions which focus on virtue and blame, with each human soul weighed in the balance. Under this model of personal ethics, you had better clock up a good deal more virtue than blame on the divine scales of justice, or else!

But interestingly, true Christianity does not join in playing the blame game.

What Jesus teaches is that God's grace is big enough for our failure. Yes, if we do wrong in this world, we can fully expect arrest, prosecution and, if convicted, punishment (and quite right too). But God's grace moves on an entirely different plain to that of our human criminal justice. God's grace is there to catch us when we fall and when we fail. This means that if we, for our part, can live our lives *confident* that we are already safe in the glow of grace, then we are truly blessed: never ashamed to admit our faults to God, never reluctant to be contrite of heart. And always – always – ready, willing and enabled to move forward.

The Jesus who travelled to Jerusalem to stand up to sin (the Jesus, indeed, whose life was given up on a Cross for the stance which he chose to take) points us to God's grace in no small way. That journey would see him suffer so many agonies, as his heart became broken again and again, his blood ending up shed upon the Cross. Our lives stand in marked contrast to the life of Christ. And it is only the grace of God that is our salvation.

As followers of the Risen Christ we should keep our eyes focused on what theologian Mark Heim once described as "the vast accomplished grace around us". In the grace of God we find mercy ... forgiveness ... love great enough to take our brokenness and transform it.

While we need to recognise our sins, the miraculous power of God's grace means that no wound can ever be beyond God's healing; no failing beyond God's power to save.

Amen.

Praying for others

Today we pray for two individuals in the YMCA who were both detained last week: Ronnie Lyan, General Secretary of the YMCA in Hakha, Myanmar who chaired the Union Electoral Commission for the recent elections, and Evgeniya Pochevko, a vibrant young leader in the YMCA in Belarus.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, as we embark on our Lenten journey, we remember those people in the world who have been denied basic human rights and choices.

We pray for those for whom fasting is a daily reality due to lack of food or clean water.

We pray for those devastated by the impact of climate change: those who have lost their homes and their livelihoods.

We pray for children who are denied the chance of education through poverty, child labor or gender injustice.

We pray for those who have been detained or illegally imprisoned simply because they hope for a better future and stand up for democracy and freedom.

To all who suffer, Lord, in body, mind or spirit, grant your comfort and peace.

Lord of mercy and justice, as we journey through Lent, embolden us so to be your voice speaking out against injustice and poverty.

In Jesus name we pray, Amen

And finally . . .

Robin Hill considers the strange renumbering of this week's issue:

Did you spot it? If not, take a look at page 1 and you will see that this is issue 49a of *The Sunday Focus*. Yet how is it possible to have a "49a", when "50" would have done just as well? The answer, I trust you will agree, is simple.

Last year all the UK went into lockdown on 23rd March. The day before, we launched the first edition of the worship supplement you hold in your hand, with the firm intention of offering everyone a text-based alternative to going to church, as we knew the doors of our buildings would be locked for a while. A long, long while, as it turned out.

On 5th April, Palm Sunday, we boldly set forth with our first internet service via Zoom, going out live from a spare bedroom (a.k.a. "Studio B, Broadcasting Manse"). Did we close the *Focus*? We did not, as already it was clear that this weekly point of contact was proving invaluable, whether in electronic form or printed out for those without computer access.

Fast forward five days to Good Friday, when our web-based service was carried on YouTube. But what about those members not on the internet? A special edition of *The Sunday Focus* would do the trick, numbered as issue 4, even though Good Friday wasn't a Sunday at all. It could do no harm as – surely! – we'd be back to normal sometime soon . . .

Now almost a year on, I reckon the time has come to get our numbering straightened out and back to where it belongs. With this issue being 49a, next week we'll mark the 50th proper *Sunday Focus* with its right number. True, it's not much to celebrate . . . at least not when compared with the happy day we get back to our buildings once and for all.

Soon . . . soon . . . soon . . .