



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Issue 58

Sunday 25th April 2021

Today's reading

Psalm 146 ("Praise for God's help")

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!

I will praise the Lord as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.

When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord their God,
who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith for ever;
who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free;
the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
the Lord loves the righteous.
The Lord watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

The Lord will reign for ever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the Lord! Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

- 1 *The day of resurrection!* (CH:413)
- 2 *Christ is alive! :Let Christians sing* (CH:416)
- 3 *This joyful Eastertide* (CH:415)
- 4 *Eternal Father, strong to save* (CH:260)
- 5 *Will your anchor hold* (CH:737)

In the Name of the Father and of

The role of the preacher is a challenging one at the best of times. Sermons, as we all know, require to be well thought-through, though they should also be simple. The preacher needs to use their theological and biblical insights, yet they must never allow themselves to get too clever. A great orator is what's called for: one with the common touch and a grasp of everyday language. And, of course, they need to be prophetic, speaking truth to power, without ever ... ever ... *ever* stepping on other people's politics. So if nothing else is clear from all this, what we can certainly say without fear of contradiction is that ministers have a near-impossible job whenever they step into the pulpit. (Maybe that's why so many preachers say a wee prayer just before they start!) I like to start my sermons each week by pinning my colours to the mast of the Holy Trinity, kicking off my preaching with those words which I learned from Bill Wishart when he was with us a few years back: "In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Why do ministers of *Word* and Sacrament preach, rather than just speak? It is because we are called to deliver our considered reflections on Scripture *in the Name of God*. And that's scary.

It is easy for an after-dinner speaker to stand up in a social setting and do a bit of pontificating on the topic of their choice. They can say what they like because they are totally unaccountable. But the minister or the priest is a different kind of animal, always aware that they need to open the pages of the Bible to search out what is termed "God's Word" for one particular time and one particular place. And as God is still speaking in our own age, that has to be seen as a daunting task. Far from being unaccountable, the preacher is answerable: to God, to Church, and also – in a real sense – to community.

Here in Scotland, if ministers really antagonize other people in their sermons, they might find difficult questions being asked in the kirk session, or charges being brought by Presbytery. In extreme cases, I suppose, they might even be made to appear at the bar of the General Assembly – and that's not the kind of bar you want to be made to appear at.

But move away from calm, douce, polite Scotland and go to Latin America or Central Africa or the Middle East or South Asia, and there you will find priests and pastors whose preaching might place them absolutely and literally in the line of fire. Many have given sermons which voice opposition to drug barons, or tyrannical dictators, or terrorists, or corrupt police. And many have paid for their courageous, prophetic words with their lives.

How blessed we are to live in a democracy. How civilised it is that we are each free to vote as we see fit. And how sad – how *very* sad a thing it is – that some people opt to set a plague on all the houses of the politicians by abstaining from elections. I know of people (young and old) who can't be bothered to vote. I have even chatted with women who, although knowing all about the suffragettes, simply don't find themselves inspired to use the vote for which others died one short century ago. It baffles me, and it saddens me greatly.

Let us be clear: I will never, ever tell you which party to vote for. Rather, my very suggestion is that you should most certainly use your vote thoughtfully, even if that means you simply choose to spoil your ballot paper. Other people, of course, take a stronger view. My brother in Australia knows that if he fails to put his "X" in the box, he can be fined by the state. And the 19th century thinker John Stuart Mill maintained that voting should be public in order that everyone could be made to justify their choice to others. There's no need for that, though there *is* a pressing need for us all to engage with elections.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

And so with my decidedly non-party election broadcast done and dusted, let us turn to our reading: that great clarion call of Psalm 146. Back in October at the very height of campaigning for the US Presidential elections, I read a reflection on this psalm from Talitha Arnold, a minister in the far south west of the USA (a region of some real social division). She described this text as “required reading”, noting that the psalm, “identifies who God is and what God does. In so doing, it defines what it means to be Christian.”

A psalm that defines *what it means to be Christian*? Now that’s a strange thing to say, by any measure. Let’s recall that the Book of Psalms presents 150 songs of praise, of lament, of glory, of defiance, and of much more besides, but it does so from the standpoint of writers who were penning those songs somewhere between the ninth and fifth centuries before Christ. How, then, can something lodged in the heart of the Old Testament give us guidance on following someone who only came to be born hundreds of years later? That’s a reasonable question to ask, though the answer is clear: if Jesus Christ is God with a human face, from everlasting to everlasting, then the values of God illuminated by wise and sensitive writers from ages past are the very values of Christ himself. That’s precisely why Psalm 146 can justifiably be seen as a definition of principled, lived-out Christian values of the 1st century . . . *and* the 21st. God’s wisdom spans all time.

In this psalm, we are met with a choice relating to our true allegiance. Who are you to go with – asks the psalmist – the princes of the earth, those “mortals, in whom there is no help”? Or with the God *who made the earth*? This God comes close to the people, “keeping faith for ever”, while those princes die and return to the earth. It is God who is ever-present, and it is God who is committed and gracious and passionate: passionate about God’s Kingdom which embodies justice with equity and heavenly mercy. God, it is, who:

*... executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.
The Lord sets the prisoners free;
the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
the Lord loves the righteous.
The Lord watches over the strangers;
God upholds the orphan and the widow.*

Through this statement of faith, the psalmist tells the reader that God cares – and cares especially for those at the bottom of the pile. And so, all those hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, we find his – God’s! – thinking coming through loud and clear. And who is to say that the boy Jesus did not sit in synagogue or in Temple hearing Psalm 146 being read aloud from the scroll? Might he have had let those godly sentiments dwell within his mind, shaping his young life, framing his uncompromising message and courageous action?

Yes, I can indeed agree with the idea that Psalm 146 helps to define what it means to be Christian. Its passion for justice rolls down through the centuries from generation to generation, just like a moral and ethical DNA for the soul.

Politicians of every single shade of red or yellow or green or blue will always have a tough time balancing all the elements of their manifesto, but if they are sincere in wanting to change the state of this land and this world, then let them turn to Psalm 146.

Exactly the same goes for us: read and learn. And then vote. Amen.

Praying for others

God of love and compassion,
we praise you.

You are our hope and our help in times of trouble –
lasting and complete.

When we call, you sit with us in silent compassion, and we feel your love
comforting, healing, filling us with strength anew.

Jesus affirmed your concern for the poor and afflicted,
his ways just, true, loving, kind, courageous and selfless to the last.

May the power of your Holy Spirit strengthen and inspire us
to be instruments of hope and help to others in our generation.
May we bring glimpses of your heavenly light and eternal joy
to the storms of life here on earth.

Through Jesus Christ, your Son,
who shows us the way.

Amen.

And finally . . .

Robin Hill considers an interesting few weeks of meetings:

The months of April and May are busy in the Church of Scotland, with preparations for the General Assembly in full flow. Four weeks from now elders and ministers from all over Scotland and beyond will be gathering virtually (I almost typed “in Edinburgh”, but no!) to consider pressing issues concerning the future of our denomination. It promises to be fascinating, given the massive challenges of the past year and the potential which undoubtedly exists to reconsider what it means to be Presbyterian in the 21st century.

Prior to that, the Presbytery of Lothian will be meeting this week – again, via Zoom. This middle tier of Church government tends to be a whole lot less exciting than the General Assembly, with lots of regional issues facing presbyters. Right now, however, big plans are afoot to restructure ourselves, with 44 presbyteries being reduced to roughly a dozen. In the past our very own Presbytery of Lothian had been spoken of as part of a new Borders Presbytery spanning all of the south between the Irish and North Seas. Then a Presbytery of the Lothians was mooted covering Edinburgh and its neighbouring districts. We’ll see!

At local level, our kirk sessions are well aware of the prospect of “hub ministry” replacing the parish model. As an when this comes about, a small team of full time ministers will cover a much bigger patch, calling on trained elders and members to act as worship and pastoral teams – a very, very different model to what we have long known, though one for which we have been preparing for quite some time.

After the terrible struggles of 2020 and the tentative developments of 2021, the world of the future is bound to look different. In all of this, our church (and our Church) will, I feel sure, remain faithful to God, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit for the journey which lies ahead. And so we turn from the past to face the dawning of a promising tomorrow.