



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Issue 61

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Today's readings

Psalm 47 ("God's rule over the nations")

Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy.
For the Lord, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth.
He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet.
He chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom he loves.

God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet.
Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises.
For God is the king of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm.

God is king over the nations; God sits on his holy throne.
The princes of the peoples gather as the people of the God of Abraham.
For the shields of the earth belong to God; he is highly exalted. Amen. (NRSV)

Luke 24: 44–53 ("The Ascension of Jesus")

Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

- 1 *Crown him with many crowns* (CH:459)
- 2 *Great is thy faithfulness* (CH:153)
- 3 *Look, ye saints, the sight is glorious!* (CH:439)
- 4 *Lift up your hearts, believers* (CH:446)
- 5 *All hail the power* (CH:457)

In the Name of the Father and of

Sometimes in life people become so famous that their every public word seems to be kept for posterity. Where once the inquisitive mind would have opened up a dictionary of quotations to bathe in the wisdom of Churchill or Dickens, these days you can search the internet and find all manner of *bons mots* from the high and mighty.

Occasionally even the final utterances of well-known public figures are recorded, so making their way into history for later generations to consider and appreciate. Here is a little selection found on the internet, starting with a very famous and poignant example:

- **“I am just going outside and may be some time.”**: Lawrence “Titus” Oates, British Antarctic explorer;
- **“Mozart! Mozart!”**: Gustav Mahler, Austro-Bohemian composer;
- **“One last drink, please.”**: Jack Daniel, American spirits magnate.

You might expect the gospel writers to do their best to give their readers the famous last words of Jesus. In one sense, of course, we get something of this sort at the Last Supper, where Jesus delivers one final, all-important piece of teaching through actions rather than words. With bread broken and wine poured out – and also in foot-washing – we receive some powerful examples of what it is that we are to do as true followers of Christ. These are definitely not Jesus’ famous last words, but ultimate words and deeds of significance.

Moving on to Calvary, we find seven famous phrases of Jesus which were spoken on the Cross. Of these, the sentence that is often held up as being his “last words” is a statement of faith and confidence at the point of death: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

But for people of faith, that cannot be enough because, given the teaching of the Bible, we believe in the Good News of Resurrection and in Christ’s triumph over death. Yes, his life was lost upon the Cross that Good Friday, but on Easter Day he returned to new life.

For this reason, if we really want to pin down the last words of Jesus, we need to go one step further and see what the Bible can tell us at the point of the Ascension, when he leaves his earthly ministry and returns to his heavenly Father. Across the four gospels it is only Luke who speaks about this in a clear and certain way, and this is what he tells us:

“Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

What we see there, right at the very end of Luke’s gospel, is the *final*, final message to Jesus’ inner circle: a message that looks back and which also looks forward. First, Jesus tells his friends that what he has been through in his ministry is not just a journey from life to death to life. It is the actual fulfilment of the Hebrew Bible. Throughout the pages of Scripture, the path to be taken by the Messiah had been made clear. In the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God’s plan had been worked out to the fullest extent. But there’s more ...

Having looked back, Jesus now turns through 180 degrees to look forward to something new: the Day of Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit which will transform believers into the Church and which will set human history on a totally new path of faith and confidence and courage.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

What a fine set of famous last words from Jesus. At once they point the disciples back to the words of promise from the Old Testament, and then they point the disciples forward – onward! – to a new beginning in a new age beyond Easter, beyond even the Ascension. The message is one of historical continuity from old to new. And the challenge is issued loud and clear to those friends: embrace this opportunity and make it their own.

His work done, Jesus blesses the disciples and returns to his heavenly Father. What comes next? A sense of loss? A feeling of despair? Not at all. This is what Luke tells his readers: “... *they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.*”

Strangely, perhaps, Luke’s gospel ends with the polar opposite of Mark’s conclusion, where those at the empty tomb flee in terror, amazement and fear. Not so here. Instead we find an outpouring of joyful – and remarkably public – worship as the disciples thank the God of their ancestors for the Risen Christ, as they recall promises fulfilled and also look ahead to promises whose fruition still awaits them. This is more than just a passing phase. Into the Temple they go in continual praise and thanksgiving for all they had witnessed together.

And so we see the end of “Luke Part I”, and we gear ourselves up for what we might correctly call “Luke Part II” as found in this writer’s second volume, the Acts of the Apostles. The followers of Jesus are turning a corner in their faith. Once failed and failing, now they start to understand what Jesus has been about and what he will carry on meaning once they have been “clothed with power from on high”. At this time of transition, they are caught up in a genuine expectation of something that will change them for ever, though that will only be unveiled through God’s action in and through Pentecost.

A thought to close: one of the big things which we have all missed throughout lockdown and beyond has been singing – *public* singing. And the reason we have missed it so much is because praising God with heart and soul *and* voice is so important to people of faith. We see that so clearly at both the beginning and the end of the gospel of Luke.

At the start of the story, as the news of an amazing pregnancy emerges, Mary sings her hymn to God, and Zechariah joins with his praise. Then at his birth, the message of the angels heralds a fresh start for the world:

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!”

Later, when the baby is being presented at the Temple, Simeon and Anna are there to thank God with wonder and with passion, rejoicing at this momentous, world-changing birth. If that is how the gospel of Luke *begins*, how good it is to find that it *ends* in a similar way with the disciples joining in the song, fearful no longer but praising the Risen Lord in whom they have placed their trust.

This last year and more has been a time when singing has had to be a solitary exercise. Despite that, Charlie’s virtual choir has been great, offering a lead which so many of us appreciate. It is so good that we can add our own voices to the praise of God from so many far flung places, north, south, east and west.

And we will sing together once more, accompanied by musicians on organ, piano and so many other instruments, making a joyful noise to the Lord again and again. Maybe not this month or next, but that day *will* come, with hymns and praise and high thanksgiving.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

Praying for others

God of heaven and earth,
your beauty spans the universe
from star-lit skies to the grandest of canyons.

While awe and wonder are all around us,
we also know that suffering and anxiety are never far away,
and so we turn to you with our prayers for others
in so many different parts of the world:
the many communities in India now so vulnerable to coronavirus;
the people of St Vincent rebuilding their lives after a terrible volcanic eruption;
the thousands of people in this country
whose lives have been so badly affected by unemployment;
those who look to the lifting of lockdown with worry rather than with joy.

In this world of such great uncertainty,
come close, we pray.
Guide the nations and their peoples by your heavenly wisdom,
so that wrongs may be righted, in justice and in peace.

Speak to us your gentle words of eternal life,
not only in heaven, but here on earth.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

And finally . . .

Robin Hill reflects on getting out and about ... or not:

The danger of writing a column such as this a little in advance of publication (and here I'm talking about Tuesday 4th May) is that it is very hard to predict what is around the corner. Here's an example of what I mean.

In these changing times of Covid-19, forward planning is proving quite tricky. After months of wedding postponements, I am now finding happy couples excitedly telling me that "the big day is on after all!". My reply is always enthusiastic, if tinged with a degree of cautious realism. Yesterday I texted this note on the subject to two exciting wedding planners: "*Great news! Regulations can, of course, change for good or bad, but now we have a plan! Let's meet soon, Robin*"

"Caution" is the watchword here. Another might be "considerateness", as not everyone will share the same enthusiastic reaction to coming back to outside life after so many months in and around the home. That is why I want to make a simple point as clearly as possible. Whether you intend to rush out to restaurants or theatres the moment they are allowed to open their doors, or whether you prefer to hold back for the time being, please know that our churches will continue to operate on a "two-level basis" as standard, with internet-based services and meetings being offered both "in person, in building", *and* on the internet via computer, tablet, smartphone and landline. The choice remains yours.

Things may be changing but, as far as is possible, your current church options will remain!