



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Today's readings

Acts 4:32-37 ("The Believers Share their Possessions")

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet. Amen. *(NRSV)*

Romans 15:1-7 ("Please Others not Yourself")

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbour for the good purpose of building up the neighbour. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.' For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. Amen. *(NRSV)*

Today's hymns

- 1 *Alleluiah! Jesus is risen* (CH:429)
- 2 *Lord, you have come to the seashore* (CH:532)
- 3 *Be still, for the presence of the Lord* (CH:189)
- 4 *For the beauty of the earth* (CH:181)
- 5 *Forth in the peace of Christ we go* (CH646)

In the Name of the Father and of

What kind of community is the church supposed to embody in its life and work? Are we to be citizens of an alternative and quite different form of society? Alternatively, is the church to be an extended family of sisters and brothers in the faith? Perhaps we might be viewed as a team with players managed by a coach? All these are possible models for how we might operate as a worshipping community.

But *what is the church?* Is it something ancient that is still with us 2000 years after its foundation? Or is it something that has always been new and constantly renewing? These are big questions for us as we find ourselves only just beginning to emerge into a hopefully-soon-to-be-post-pandemic world?

There are more ways of looking at the church than we could ever imagine. We can think of it locally or regionally, nationally or globally, denominationally or ecumenically, with pastors or priests, presbyters or prelates (if you'll forgive that wanton piece of alliteration). Even though we might find it hard to pin down what kind of a body the church should be, still perhaps we can dwell for a brief moment on what kind of body the church should never – *ever!* – allow itself to be: an exclusive club inhabited by paying members.

“Why, of course!”, you say. “We *know* that the church is the Body of Christ, serving as an instrument of God’s grace as it reaches out with the Good News of the Gospel at home and far away. The church is a revolutionary body which has no truck with prestige and no time for privilege. It is the very model of equality and openness and inclusion in so many ways.”

That is certainly how we like to see ourselves: ready to offer a cheery welcome at the door and a friendly smile on the way back out. (And, in the best of times, maybe even a cup of tea or coffee in between.) That’s how it is and that is surely how it truly should be.

Hang on though. Maybe we just need to pull back a little from our rose-tinted view of our own enthusiasm for engaging with others. Could it be that we need to reflect on just how easy it is to fall into the trap of being a closed and comfortable club? We know what it is that we *should* be, but actually when we are among our old, familiar friends it feels so good. We rather like our little church community, and we would rather not have that sense of community disturbed in any way.

There’s a tension here, a bit like the rope in that most noble of sports, tug o’ war. At one end of the rope we have our calling – a proper biblical, Spirit-led calling – to be a missional church that is always outward-looking, always on the move, always seeking out those who are beyond our threshold. Then at the other end of the rope we find something that, if we are being honest, is rather attractive: stability, predictability, structure, tradition – all that is familiar to us as a congregation. It is as though the untamed power of God is drawing us in one direction, while our own desire for safety and security draws us the opposite way. That should not surprise us because our own concern for safety and security is surely part of our human nature. Given a choice between “hail and sleet” on the one hand and “home and hearth” on the other, most of us would choose the latter over the former, I feel sure.

Back in the 6th century, a monk named Gregory wrote this about the state of the church: *We do some things which already belong to the light, but we are not free from the remnants of darkness. It will be fully day for the church when she is no longer darkened by the shadow of sin. It will be fully day for her when she shines with the perfect brilliance of interior light. This dawn is an ongoing process. When the dawn has come, the day will retain nothing belonging to the darkness of night.*

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

Over the course of this summer, Frances and I will be taking as the theme of our addresses “the little big things of church”. By this we mean objects or items which you might find in a church building which say a lot about an important topic. Today we start with something which you might never have spotted on your visits to churches with old-fashioned furnishings. In Scottish church buildings of a certain age, little brass frames populate the ends of pews. All empty these days, the attachments look like they might be waiting for a cheery family photograph to be inserted. But no.

Long ago, each little holder contained a tiny card naming the family who were paying rent on the pew space in order to have it for their own exclusive use. On one level, I suppose you can see how this made some kind of sense in Victorian days when huge families and big church attendances often went together. If father and mother rolled up to church at five to eleven of a Sunday morning, they probably wanted to know with glowing certainty that there would be an assigned space not only for themselves but also for young Charles, Reginald, Alexandra, Williamina, Cecilia, Evangeline and Phoebe, not forgetting the infant twins, Adelaide and Stanley. Given the scale of such families, you can see how reserving a pew might have made a semblance of sense away back then.

Sadly though, a congregation's system of pew rent brought some unfortunate consequences which might never have been anticipated when those tiny plates were first screwed into the pew ends:

One: it privatised church-going by linking payment of a small annual fee to the privilege of enjoying a reserved space week by week. Your pew was yours and no-one else's;

Two: it created a hierarchy in which some people had the power effectively to turn away visitors and strangers. ("Can't you see??? This is my pew, not yours!");

Three: it just made everything unbearably cosy and settled and stuffy for those who were "in with the in-crowd", with precisely the same familiar and fossilised seating structure every single Sunday, all year, every year. A congregation might so easily (probably imperceptibly) turn into a club – something the church must never allow itself to become.

In this way, and in so, so many others, the church came to evolve from being a first century revolutionary movement to a 19th century fixed institution ... where it has often remained right down to the present day.

If you want to see what the church can be like as a body which sees beyond itself and its own safety, just look at our reading today. This passage from Acts shows how it was that the earliest Christians saw need and met it in the most direct way, sharing possessions and also reaching out with the love of God. “With great power,” we are told, “the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”

A closing thought: the church in which I was ordained an elder, successfully subverted the role of their little brass pew frames by sliding in a different type of card on which was printed the simple and engaging line which rewrote the social rulebook: "Please feel free to sit anywhere." No more mentality of "my pew", but instead a recognition, in the words of a magnificent hymn, that, "all are welcome, *all* are welcome, *all* are welcome in this place".

Or to put it another way, in the memorable words of one very famous outsider, the apostle Paul, when writing to the Church in Rome:

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.
Amen.

Praying for others

Lord, help us remember those who sit outside the confines of our daily lives.
Remind us that those confines are made by us and not you.

Bless those who could never afford pew rent
because they can't afford to feed themselves or their families.
Help us to work for justice in your world, and until that point is reached
to feed the hungry people, for you.

Bless those who have been excluded from joining any club
because their limbs, minds or behaviour breach our conventional ways.
Help your church remove the blinkers which promote one way of seeing,
so we come to welcome all our brothers and sisters, for you.

Bless those who have no possessions to share
because their homes or homelands have been destroyed and
they have nothing but the clothes on their backs.
Help us to open our hearts to them and care for them, for you.

Bless those who find our conventions absurd, outdated and irrelevant.
Help us to see ourselves through their eyes
so we may step out of the shadow into the light, for you.

We ask these things in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

And finally . . .

Abigail Morrison considers the Faith Impact Forum's focus on migration:

Last week I looked at the Church of Scotland Faith Impact Forum's report to the General Assembly 2021 regarding climate change. This week I want to tell you a little about another area they covered in their report (and much of what I say is taken verbatim from it).

A significant focus of the report was on migration. The Forum pointed out that about 25 million people are displaced by climate disasters every year but have no right to seek asylum in a safe country under the *UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951*. The global Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation for refugees across the globe. Many governments used the opportunity to harden their borders, install restrictive immigration practices and prevent people from making use of their right to seek asylum. Refugee resettlement from areas of conflict to safe countries reached a 20-year low in 2020. It is evident that the UK Government, and much of the Global North, has turned a blind eye towards the suffering of millions of people. The pandemic is no excuse to close the door on refugees but rather an opportunity to demonstrate solidarity.

The General Assembly instructed the Forum to call for the development of safe and legal routes for people desperately seeking sanctuary so that they can travel, live, work and contribute to our society with respect and dignity. It also urged the UK Government to reverse its policies regarding migrants crossing the English Channel, the accommodation of asylum seekers in former army camps or other institutions rather than in the community, and the plans to increase the deportation of asylum seekers to other countries.

The report made some suggestions about how individual churches can very practically make a difference in this area and I am sure Longniddry Church will do this.