



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Issue 70

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Today's reading

1 Corinthians 12:12-32 ("One body with many members")

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

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| 1 | <i>The Head that once</i> (CH:438) | 2 | <i>Now through the grace of God</i> (CH:637) |
| 3 | <i>Jesus Christ is waiting</i> (CH:360) | 4 | <i>Lord of all being, throned afar</i> (CH:125) |
| | 5 | | <i>Guide me, O thou great Jehovah</i> (CH:167) |

In the Name of the Father and of

As we are all well aware, both of our churches have worked very hard to keep people safe through the Covid-19 pandemic, using a bewildering range of skills covering everything from information technology to handcrafts. As soon as the March 2020 lockdown was announced these people made themselves very busy indeed, thinking about the needs of our neighbours and also the workings of our congregations in a crisis which had never been experienced in our lifetime. Combining all these abilities in a period of national crisis has seen some very positive outcomes. Here is just one of many.

In the early days of lockdown, any kind of gathering in our beautiful buildings was quite simply impossible. We all managed our Sundays through “Zoom”-based acts of worship and *The Sunday Focus*. Not only did these new additions work well, they are now firmly part of our weekly patterns – and will, I feel certain, be here to stay.

A big problem emerged in the autumn of 2020 when we were finally allowed to open up once more, under justifiably tight restrictions. With two-metre physical distancing between worshippers, things were going to look (and feel) rather different to our old familiar ways. So how were we going to make this strange form of church-going work without it looking like one enormous bureaucratic nightmare? I’m sure you can imagine the dangers entailed in trying to get the positioning of worshippers right: “No! You can’t sit there ... No, not there either. ... There! Yes! There! ... NO, not that seat! The next seat along!” None of this would be a good way of working and we were keen to avoid any such aggravation.

Gladsmuir opted for A4 sheets with green arrows and red crosses, which work very efficiently. At Longniddry, however, two church elders stepped up with a different idea. Allocated seats would be highlighted with beautiful little flags each one made by hand in a variety of happy colours, all of which blended in beautifully with the sanctuary’s calming surroundings. The tiny flagpoles were specially engineered to slot into the pre-existing Communion cup holders on our chairs, making the whole thing not only professional but actually attractive. In all, the new additions looked very much at home and would come to serve a vital purpose in showing – nay, *inviting!* – worshippers to their seats.

In those two elders we knew we had gifts of woodwork and needlework – the very skills that are required to make tiny flags on tiny flagpoles. And that simple truth actually speaks to us of something far more significant. Every person has their own God-given traits and characteristics and gifts. Each one of us is different, yet each can bring whatever they have and put it to good use in the service of God.

This was something which Paul recognised and passed on to the people of the church in Corinth. The way he did this was to compare the church to a human body. Each has many different parts and each part has its own role to play. I am sure that anyone who has been to church for many years will have heard these words read on several occasions:

If the foot were to say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

And yes, you are quite right: it’s all a little reminiscent of that old schoolboy howler from many decades ago:

“My dog has no nose.” ... “How does it smell?” ... “Terrible!”

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

But there is a serious point to Paul's words, and a profoundly radical point too. What our modern eyes miss in this ancient reading is an important truth: people of the first century world were well acquainted with equivalences between the human body and human society. Now, the standard way of making this link was by telling people that parts of the body that were positioned at the top were superior, while those parts that were found further down were inferior. It therefore followed that if you were someone from the lower strata of society (akin to a knee or a toe nail) you would know your place and would stay there. You certainly wouldn't think you could ever be on the same plain as the much more important eyes or ears which were – *and always had to be* – away up top (and far, far superior to you). They were “up”. You were “down”. And that's just how things were rigorously structured.

That's how people compared the body to society up until Paul sent out his famous letter. But when the church opened the seal on that letter they found Paul's view of the body to be very, very different from the traditional line. Instead of looking at superior body parts lauding it over inferior body parts, Paul looked at the body of the church from the point of view of *everyone working together* for the glory of God.

This is all to do with diversity and with interdependence. Let's look at diversity first of all: just as each body part has a different and vital role to play in the complete human being, so too each Christian has his or her own vital role to play in the life of the church. This isn't a hierarchical thing, however. No: the eyes, the ears, the leg, the ankle all do different things. So too, each individual will bring their own personal gifts to the church. And that's special.

Now let's move on to interdependence:

It's all very well to say that we are big fans of all these different gifts, skills, characteristics and so on, but the truth of this goes far, far deeper. Paul tells the Corinthian church that *all the church members need each other*. A big toe might not be able to think, but it can flex and tilt and bend in amazing ways that would be simply impossible for a brain to do. A tooth might not be able to climb up a tree, but it can bite into an apple in a way that even the most dexterous of hands or feet would fail to achieve. Put in very simple terms, if you want to make a flag, you'd better have *both* a wood worker *and* a needle worker ready and willing and able to do their stuff when called upon. And, thank God, that is just exactly what Longniddry had.

Many, many thanks to everyone who is bringing their own very particular gifts to the human needs which have emerged throughout this pandemic. Some people have brought care and concern. Other people have brought organization and administration. Others have brought technical ability or creative flair. Recently I heard of a minister in East Lothian who had a bit of spare time on his hands and happened to have the skills needed to set up a school tutoring system covering the S4, 5 and 6 years across our county's high schools. So he just went ahead and started it up. It is free to use, and it is massively helping those young people who are struggling academically. Over this last year, incredible things have been done with skills which have come to the fore when they were needed most.

I hope you can agree ... all this good news is well worth flagging up.

Let us pray:

God of so many gifts, help us all to be aware of the skills you have given each one, and show us how through imagination and application we can play our own parts together in the diverse and interdependent Body of Christ. Amen.

Praying for others

A prayer from our Worship Team:

Gracious God,
we offer you our co-operation in the healing of the world,
our small part in your great enterprise to restore
all that is good, just, free and at peace.

Though we eagerly desire to play our part
as members of the body of Christ,
we need your help.

Teach us your great power of unity within diversity:
to put an end to the ethnic, social and economic distinctions
which mark our world's present struggles;
to celebrate, encourage and give thanks for the gifts of others;
to seek whatever strengthens community,
at home, in our churches, here and abroad;

to be who we are called to be,
never comparing ourselves to anyone other than ourselves,
building each other up to be all we can be in your Kingdom here on earth.

Through the love of Jesus Christ your Son. Amen.

And finally . . .

Abigail Morrison considers an important topic: "the Five Marks of Mission":

Several reports and speakers at the General Assembly this year referenced the Five Marks of Mission. The Church has a declared aim of practising them. It occurred to me that I might not be the only one who seems to have missed these and am not familiar with them! So I share them with you today. The Five Marks are:

- i) to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom;***
- ii) to teach, baptise and nurture new believers;***
- iii) to respond to human need by loving service;***
- iv) to seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation; and***
- v) to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.***

The "Marks" link in with two reports that came to the General Assembly this year. One was on the Presbyterian form of government and one on the Westminster Confession of Faith (this latter one was part of the Theological Form report). The first report concluded that no form of church government is perfect and Presbyterianism is as good as any (I paraphrase!). But it challenges congregations, amongst others, to think about what they are for and how they go about living the Five Marks. The second report similarly challenges us to consider what a good confession of faith might be like in today's world. All elders and ministers subscribe to the Westminster Confession. But at 33 chapters and over 12,000 words I'm not sure how many of us have actually read it!