



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

Available in printed form and online at:
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Issue 74

Sunday 15th August 2021

Today's reading

1 John 1:1-10 ("The Word of Life")

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

- 1 *Crown him with many crowns, the Lamb upon his throne* (CH:459)
- 2 *It's a world of sunshine, a world of rain* (CH:245)
- 3 *Just as I am, without one plea* (CH:553)
- 4 *Let's sing to the Lord, yes, sing God a new song* (CH:126)
- 5 *Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim* (CH:130)

In the Name of the Father and of

This week's reading is all about light in our darkness – a standard theme for the wintry month of December, though perhaps not so much for the month of August.

In the run-up to the pandemic Christmas of 2020 there was not an awful lot of light around. After a fairly quiet summer when Covid-19 seemed to go into something of a decline, the virus was once more on the rise. By December, any dreams of having in-person church services or school Nativity plays were sent packing with the news that pandemic restrictions would remain in place. (Indeed, they even ended up being tightened.)

And so we needed a lift – a source of light in our darkness, and in Longniddry Church one little lift came from something that was rather unusual: our inflatable Nativity. This bizarrely wonderful creation was placed in all its internally lit nylon glory in front of a large and very public window where, in the fading light of school home time, a little touch of colourful jollity could be seen and enjoyed by children, parents and passers-by alike.

Now more than half a year on, I can report that I have given some considerable thought to this inflatable Nativity, and I can further report that I have come up with a name for this kind of church decoration. If you were to ask me, I would tell you that this is what we might call an “object of soft outreach” which can equip a congregation to make a mark on its neighbourhood simply by “being there”.

At a time of national anxiety, with people feeling troubled, I reckon a four-foot high Nativity was able to shed its light on the passing public. People saw it and smiled. And let's recall that in an age when fewer and fewer people grow into adulthood having been “raised in the church”, the Christian notion of God's light is no longer something that is in-built – if, indeed, it ever truly was.

When I were a lad, some half a century ago, a school Christmas involved Jesus, Mary and Joseph. These days it is just as likely to revolve around Rudolph, Frosty, and elves. You might even find a penguin, if you're lucky. This makes me think in a Scrooge-like way that our children's present-day festivities are pretty far removed from what they used to be and, arguably, from what they should be. (*Bah! Humbug!*)

But let's also recall that society has changed in that half century. Back in 1971 as an innocent seven-year-old I would readily have told you that no, I didn't go to a Catholic school; I went to a *Protestant* school, even though “Protestant schools” actually didn't exist. In the 21st century the correct term for most of our schools across Scotland is “non-denominational”, being rightly identified as both secular and multicultural.

Here's the important point: if the church finds itself hot under the collar at the younger generation knowing nothing about Mary-and-Joseph-having-a-baby-in-Bethlehem-with-angels-in-the-sky-and-wise-men-from-the-east-arriving-with-gifts, then the agent of change needs to be – *not* our schools – but *us*. It should always, *always* be the job of the Church to spread the Good News of Jesus, and most definitely not be the job of the State.

Despite the, at best, ambiguous relationship which wider society has to organised religion, we must never forget that Christmas offers our church something of an open door to let the light flood into the darkness. Whether in story, or in image, whether in ritual or in music (or, for that matter, in inflatable Nativity) the days of Advent still hold out an opportunity for a message of personal hope – a message to be set aglow. No other time of year can capture and captivate people of all ages in anything like the same way.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

OK. At this half way point in my sermon, I am going to pause to reflect on something which might very well be crossing your mind as we speak. Is it possible that, right at this moment, you are thinking to yourself: “Why on earth is he going on about Christmas in August? Doesn’t he know the flowers are blooming, the birds are singing sweetly in the trees and everything is spilling over with summer?” That, I would say in response, is the point.

If Christmas is one of the very few times of year when people’s need for celebration matches up so firmly and so helpfully with the Church’s most important festival of light, should we not be investing a whole lot more serious preparation time in thinking Christmas through and in making Christmas work? With little more than three months to go until Advent rolls around (it’s true!) *now* is the time for churches to plan out how they can bring the light of Christ’s birth into local homes and communities. And yes, everyone loves a Christmas tree, but can’t we do more in our grounds . . . and in our outreach activities? Shouldn’t we be better at engaging our neighbourhood with the Good News of Jesus?

Our planning team should bring to the table a wide range of different dreams of what might be done in church and community in the month of December – including, needless to say, inflatable Nativities. The truth is that we can and we *should* be thinking big. That is why a sermon on Christmas planning *has* to come at this stage in the year, when there is still time to think through what we can do to show our neighbours “the reason for the season”.

What about the high-tech side of things? We will need to base our planning for Christmas on a hybrid approach in which “in-building” engagement is matched with an online presence, because we still don’t know what lies around the corner in terms of Covid-19. For those who know about social media, now is the time to think big thoughts. And for those who love to engage in the traditional, pastoral, hands-on level, now is the time to work out exactly how we will be reaching out in care and in support, in love and in joy, to those in our community who might well find this coming December bleak and dark and horrible.

Last year, Lothian Presbytery held a Christmas planning night which several of our church elders went to. Sadly, it was probably a little too late in the year to have been of use to us in 2020, but the ideas have been noted down and (I hope!) kept. Those notes can now be discussion starters for 2021. And maybe you too will have ideas on reaching out with the message of the real Christmas. If so, then let Abigail or Frances or me have your thoughts and together we’ll see if we can make December a truly meaningful time.

Just to close, the Quaker writer Thomas Kelly wrote this: “Over the margins of life comes a whisper, a faint call, a premonition of richer living which we know we are passing by.” That’s a striking line which tells us something about the ease with which we can be overwhelmed by the ordinariness of modern living, as we fail to see the spiritual realities which lie “over the margins”. Do we dare to listen for “the whisper”? Are we prepared to hear a “call”? Might we gain a sense of that “premonition” which we fear might be passing us by? Perhaps if we make time and space *now* to look forward in faith, that richer living can be made real, not just for our neighbours, but also for us.

Look to the future . . . look to the Light which the darkness cannot comprehend.

Let us pray:

God of time and eternity, help us to watch our clocks, to set our schedules and to plan for the coming of the Light of the world right here in our neighbourhood. Amen.

Praying for others

Nurturing God of all the ages,
At this time of change and transition
we bring to you our nation's children and young people.
From tiny babies and toddlers born into pandemic
to teenagers and students doing their best in such trying circumstances,
we ask your blessing upon each one.

As nurseries, schools, colleges and universities prepare to restart
we remember before you all the staff whose task it will be
to re-open buildings, offering a safe environment for learning and development.
In the midst of such great challenge in the life of our nation,
may teachers, support staff, administrators and volunteers
know that the work they do is vital in so many ways.

In our prayers this day we especially remember those school leavers
who are uncertain about what their future might hold.
May your grace and your guidance be felt
in the very heart of their uncertainty and fear,
enabling good decisions to be taken and bright futures to be opened up.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

And finally . . .

Abigail Morrison considers names:

What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. So said Shakespeare and how right he was. Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me. So said children in the playgrounds of my youth. I'm not so sure we were right.

Earlier this year the World Health Organisation formalised the names of the Covid-19 virus variants. Previously they were known by the country in which they were first identified. So we had the Kent, South African, Brazilian and Indian variants. Now they are known as the alpha, beta, gamma and delta variants. But why change the names? Unfortunately, it sometimes seemed that some blame was attached to the geographical terms. There could be a hint that, really, Kent and Brazil should have worked harder not to produce a variant – that they were careless to have done so. Of course, variations of the Covid-19 virus are just a fact of life and arise all over the world. Renaming new versions of the virus with neutral letters of the Greek alphabet takes away the unpleasant connotations the old names held. And we can tackle the virus better if we spend less time and energy blaming some region or another for its appearance.

It is not uncommon for names to change in other facets of life. The names we, perhaps unthinkingly, gave immigrant groups to the UK became terms of abuse. The recipients of such names found them deeply offensive. It is not “political correctness” that means these terms have become beyond the pale to use. It is because names come freighted with meaning and can be used as weapons. Names really can hurt as much as sticks and stones. We should choose what we call things with care.