



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Today's readings

Matthew 25: 31–46 (“The Judgment of the Nations”)

‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’ Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

- 1 *Guide me, O thou great Jehovah* (CH:167)
- 2 *There is a Redeemer* (CH:559)
- 3 *Make me a channel of your peace* (CH:528)
- 4 *Take my life, Lord, let it be* (CH:502)
- 5 *To God be the glory, great things he has done!* (CH:512)

In the Name of the Father and of

Bishop David Sheppard may be best remembered today for one considerable achievement: being the only ordained minister ever to have played test cricket for England. Yet his gifts went far beyond hurling a ball or wielding a bat for his team. David Sheppard was someone who cared passionately about social justice; an ecumenist who fervently wanted to build bridges between communities; a person of faith who was a humane and gifted communicator who would talk sense and speak wisdom every time he sat in front of a microphone or stood in front of a camera.

As an author, one of his books made a big impression when it was published back in 1982. *Bias to the Poor* came out just at the point when the social consensus was beginning to break down in the UK, with free market economics offering a road to riches for willing entrepreneurs while the welfare state started to feel the pinch. If you were in work, your standard of living might well rise: foreign holidays, a smart new microwave, money in the bank. If you were unemployed, as so, so many were in the first half of the 1980s, life was hard. And in inner cities areas in our nation – the Liverpools, the Swanses, the Glasgows – poverty could be so deeply ingrained across multiple generations of struggling families. And that, indeed, can still be the case some 40 years on.

What was Sheppard's book about? Here is what the back cover told readers back in 1982: *The burden of unemployment and disadvantage falls unequally on our divided society. It hits the urban poor most sharply, who are robbed of the freedom of choice God intends for all human beings. The Gospel is about changing people from within, and also about actively shaping events and circumstances to set people free. David Sheppard draws from thirty years experience of urban life to issue a hard-hitting challenge: the attitudes, beliefs and priorities of the whole Church should reflect God's bias to the poor.*

God's "bias to the poor" – this obviously raises a question worth asking: just what does the word "poverty" imply? The Joseph Rowantree Foundation offers this handy description: *Poverty means not being able to heat your home, pay your rent, or buy the essentials for your children. It means waking up every day facing insecurity, uncertainty, and impossible decisions about money. It means facing marginalisation – and even discrimination – because of your financial circumstances. The constant stress it causes can overwhelm people, affecting them emotionally and depriving them of the chance to play a full part in society.*

If David Sheppard was right in suggesting that God has a bias – a leaning towards, if you will, or a special fondness for – those who are at the foot of society's ladder, then those who are specially vulnerable should certainly number among God's special ones. And if we want to get a sense of who it is that might make up this loose grouping, we need only look at our Bible reading from today. Matthew chapter 25 hits us between the eyes with a list of those who are to be seen as top priorities for justice and practical help: the hungry, the thirsty, strangers, the naked, the sick and those who are imprisoned. Looking elsewhere in the gospels, we can easily find Jesus looking out for the very young too. In short, in a world in which some are strong, Jesus shows there is a pressing need to act up for those whose vulnerabilities or disabilities mean that life cannot be lived in all its fulness.

Just like Jesus before him, David Sheppard speaks of God's passion for all to live together in his Kingdom. This may be difficult and it will certainly be costly, but it is fundamentally the right thing for the Church to do, as we live out our purpose as the Body of Christ.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

On this Safeguarding Sunday as we think about protecting those who are vulnerable, we must recall that one of the great tragedies of our present age is our sad realisation that all is not well in this whole vast field. The powerful can so easily take advantage of the weak, abusing those who have every right to live a life that is free of bullying and persecution. And whether we are talking about physical abuse in children's homes, sexual abuse in boarding schools or mental abuse in care facilities, the awful truths which have emerged in recent decades have shocked our nation and the wider world. Though it may be hard for people to understand how or why terrible abuse happens, at least now we all know that it does happen, and happens in many places, taking many forms. That is why the regulatory frameworks of safeguarding are so vitally important.

Not so long ago the Church of Scotland operated what was called "The Child Protection Service", designed to keep children and young people safe within our congregations. In more recent times, this has been renamed, and rightly so. Our "Safeguarding Service" bears its new name in recognition that we have a duty to ensure a safe Church for all – not only for those in the lower age brackets. Office bearers, ministers and certain volunteers are required to be "PVG-ed" and trained up in the ways of safeguarding, with local committees looking after this important area of responsibility. More than this, every kirk session meeting in every charge across our Church is required to have safeguarding openly on the agenda as a permanent, recurring feature of our meetings. It's just that important.

In the past, people would ask why we need safeguarding. Is it not a "terrible imposition" upon an elder or minister, as though their office and their character and their reputation are not enough? No. When faced with a society in which vulnerable people suffer at the hands of wicked (often very clever) people, office or character or reputation can never be enough. Congregations need to work hard to make sure they are doing their best to meet the criteria which will mark out a safe church in which all can worship secure from risk of harm.

Let's return to our reading. In among all that talk of sheep, goats and eternal fire, we have to bear in mind something else that Jesus is telling us: when we offer help or support to the most vulnerable in our midst, there Christ is encountered. We are called to see in each person the presence of Christ himself.

In this passage Jesus is praising those who give food, water and clothing for the just wellbeing of others less able to have access to these necessities. As I've implied already, we need to move beyond any fixed list of needs, using our imaginations to realise that there is a principle at work here. Our responsibilities extend far beyond the six examples cited by Jesus. As such, when we seek to help, support, encourage, teach and nurture any who are vulnerable in any way, our first goal has to be to do no harm. From that solid foundation we can then build upwards, doing good ... and more good ... and yet more good.

You might ask what a congregation is to do when it finds in its community, for example, an ex-offender with a history of violence or abuse. Are we to say: "Sorry, but you are not good enough to come to church?" Absolutely not. Bear in mind that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Ours is a faith of grace and forgiveness, redemption and transformation. It is right that we should seek to strike a balance between maintaining the safety of others and offering a supervised community of welcome for those who have been released from prison. In the Church of Scotland, this is rightly and carefully done.

Safeguarding matters. It is there to be honoured. More, it is there to be celebrated. Amen.

Praying for others

Lord God,
We live in a world which is not perfect,
but one which you created and saw was 'very good',
and so we humbly ask you to hear all our prayers
for those who are vulnerable in any way:
grant to each and to all safety and true community, we pray.

Gentle God,
grant us a vision of your world as your love would have it:
a world where the weak are protected,
and none go hungry or poor;
a world where the riches of creation are shared,
and everyone can enjoy them;
a world where different races and cultures live
in harmony and mutual respect;
a world where peace is built with justice,
and justice is guided by love.
Give us the inspiration and courage to build it,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

And finally . . .

Beth Elliott considers Safeguarding:

Congregations are encouraged by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland to mark Safeguarding Sunday this Sunday and Longniddry and Gladsmuir are only too happy to do this. It is an opportunity for the Church to raise awareness of the work done by Safeguarding to create safe places for all.

Safeguarding is so important as it is integral to the Christian message to care for the vulnerable. It is vital we consider aspects of safeguarding in all our work.

Each congregation appoints a Safeguarding Coordinator and, if possible, a Safeguarding panel. After eight years as Coordinator, I am now joined by Moyra Wilson as Joint Safeguarding Coordinator. I'm sure we're all grateful to Moyra for taking on this role. We have had a Safeguarding Panel as long as it has been required. Our panel is Sheila Jamieson, Blythe Peart and Mary Barron and we are grateful for their work and commitment. We are also ably supported by our session clerk and minister.

The Safeguarding Panel has implemented the Protection of Vulnerable Groups Scheme for Longniddry Parish Church. This is a scheme set up by the Scottish Government and managed on their behalf by Disclosure Scotland. It checks volunteers who help in church and protects children and adults at risk.

As recommended by the Church of Scotland the minister and Kirk Session attend Safeguarding training courses every few years. Safeguarding is a standing item at every Kirk Session meeting.

In this way everyone is working to ensure a safe Church.