



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

Available in printed form and online at:
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Issue 87

Sunday 14th November 2021

Today's readings

Judges 6: 36-40 ("The Sign of the Fleece")

Then Gideon said to God, 'In order to see whether you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said, I am going to lay a fleece of wool on the threshing-floor; if there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said.' And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. Then Gideon said to God, 'Do not let your anger burn against me, let me speak one more time; let me, please, make trial with the fleece just once more; let it be dry only on the fleece, and on all the ground let there be dew.' And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew. Amen. (NRSV)

Matthew 5:38-48 ("Love for Enemies")

'You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

- 1 *Lord, bless and pity us* (CH:45)
- 2 *For all the saints* (CH:740)
- 3 *What shall we pray* (CH:712)
- 4 *Judge eternal, throned in splendour* (CH:264)
- 5 *Praise God from whom all blessings flow* (CH:807)

In the Name of the Father and of

Some 30 years ago I worked in the academic field of terrorism. I shared an office with two friends: my Sri Lankan friend who studied sub-State violence in Asia, and my American friend who studied West German terrorist movements. I, meanwhile, spanned all regions with my research into criminal air law: hijackings, aviation sabotage, airport attacks. Together, our little room was like a mini United Nations, with lots of work going on at all hours of the day and night. And lots of chats over yet more tea and coffee.

In the world of terrorism studies there were two schools of thought which brought two very different approaches to the subject. On the one hand were those academics who were known as “fire fighters” – always on the media, speaking out against evil. But as well as the fire fighters there were also folk like me: “students of combustion”. People committed to our field, we were fascinated by how – and especially by why – terrorists did what they did. The student of combustion would more likely to spend their time in the library than the TV studio. And that was very much the thinking of the Sri Lankan, the American and the Brit.

Equally, in politics and the military, the big leaders might be grouped into “hawks” and “doves” depending on their approach to the wrongs of this world. A hawk might go in for the kill, little worried by the possible outcomes: ready to send in the troops, determined to win any war that might need waging. The dove, meanwhile, might favour restraint, open dialogue, the consideration of measured sanctions – perhaps even being open to some form of negotiation. Needless to say, hawks and doves just don’t see eye to eye.

The famous American General Colin Powell, who died only last month, is said to have called himself, “a reluctant warrior”: probably neither hawk nor dove. He had seen active service on the front line in Vietnam, an experience which would be bound to make a person think very deeply. In General Powell’s case he came to grasp the terrible implications of combat and the brutal consequences of sending young men and women into battle.

On hearing the news of Colin Powell’s death last month, President Joe Biden said this: *Having fought in wars, [Powell] understood better than anyone that military might alone was not enough to maintain our peace and prosperity.*

Powell was a warrior. And yes, he was a reluctant warrior, more keen to build than destroy.

So too with Gideon, that thoughtful Old Testament figure. He sensed that the possibility of warfare was close but instead of heading off to sharpen his sword and rally the troops, Commander Gideon chose to pause and consider carefully what steps to take. He turned to prayer, seeking external signs of what God wanted. I confess that I am uneasy about laying out a fleece on the ground and asking God to bring down the kind of dewdrops that would determine whether or not mortal combat should take place. But I will grant this much to Gideon: he was uncertain in his own mind, so rather than blustering onward no matter the outcome, he resorted to a period of contemplation, becoming mindful of God’s presence while being open to God’s guidance. Warfare, after all, is never, ever, to be taken lightly.

In this regard, I think we can learn from Gideon, whether we are a king, a president, a four star general or just an ordinary, confused human being. Big decisions are best taken after reflection, not before. Weigh the rights against the wrongs. Assess the possible consequences of forceful action. Wrestle and wrestle and wrestle some more until – you hope – you can arrive at a course of action that is morally acceptable, practically achievable and measured in terms of what is genuinely appropriate. And yes, I give heartfelt thanks that I am indeed an ordinary, confused human being, and not a responsible Prime Minister.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

Above all, if we are to follow the late and in some ways great General Powell in his thinking about being a “reluctant warrior”, we need to give a lot of consideration to those people who find themselves in uniform and sent off to fight: often little more than girls and boys with lives unfolding before them. And here it helps if we allow ourselves to travel back some 80 years or so to the terrible days of the Second World War. Around the world, 20 million armed services personnel of all nations were killed from 1939-45. More than this, however, in the same period 55 million civilians died on account of the war: deliberate genocide, indiscriminate attacks, mass-bombings, disease or starvation.

What carnage. What appalling suffering and loss of life, all brought about by war. Indeed, to set it in context, the 75 million people who died because of the Second World War represented a full three percent of the world’s total population, gone, and largely forgotten.

Facts such as these should be enough to make each one of us into a “reluctant warrior”. For some, there is no option but to renounce violence in favour of all-out pacifism. Yet, others have a quite different story to tell. I have mentioned in church before how much I have gained from the calm and quiet wisdom of the (sadly also) late, great Jonathan Sacks. As Chief Rabbi, Dr Sacks was a regular contributor to BBC Radio 4’s “Thought for the Day”, and whenever I heard his voice first thing in the morning I would stop and listen and wait for something big to enter into my consciousness. Today, as together we mark this season of Remembrance, I want to read a passage from one of his thoughts on the Holocaust. It is offered for you to consider for yourself:

I, as a Jew, cannot forget what the Holocaust meant for our people. One third of all the Jews alive in 1939 had been murdered by 1945, among them a million and a half children. Whole communities, from the joyous pietists of Eastern Europe to the urbane Jews of Vienna, Prague and Berlin, from as far north as the Baltic and as south as Greece, had been shot, gassed, burned and buried in unmarked graves. Today every Jew knows that but for the courage of those who fought evil we would not be here.

Is war the very worst thing in human experience? Tragically, I suspect it is not. War is bad in so many ways, yet perhaps we need to keep in mind the obscenities of oppression and injustice which wicked tyrants will always seek to impose upon their own people, or upon those of other nations. Now more than 75 years after the war, we need to remember the Syrias, the Afghanistans, the Ethiopias – those places where today human beings are living in terrible fear. Recalling injustices of the past and the present does not guarantee a brighter future, but moments such as Remembrance Sunday give us a valuable opportunity to pause in a dignified silence and make the space to recall – yes! – the service and sacrifice, but also the maiming and killing. We will not find easy answers today, but at least – like Gideon – we can turn to God to seek his wisdom when ours has run as dry as an arid desert.

Let us determine that, for our future, we will form relationships that could mean so much. For without the solidarity which community makes possible, we are all of us impoverished.

We close with some more much-needed wisdom from a remarkable hero, Jonathan Sacks: *In today’s unstable world we have to build bridges of friendship across faiths and ethnicities so strong that they can withstand even the worst hurricane of hate. That’s what people are trying to do all the time in Britain, and we must never stop. Friendship creates hope, hope defeats fear, and we can handle any future so long as we do it together, made stronger not weaker by our differences. Amen.*

Praying for others

God of grace,
at this time of Remembrance we come to you
in gratitude for life and for freedom.

Bless those who serve in our armed forces at this time.
We are mindful of the anxiety, the fear and the many costs
which they and their families incur day by day.
Give courage to each and to all, we pray.

Bless those who suffer or are suffering still from war.
May your love reach out to the wounded,
the disabled, the distressed,
and those whose faith has been shaken
by what they have seen and endured.

Bless all who work for peace among the nations,
who strive in dialogue for understanding, mutual respect and charity.
In all they do, may humanity's shared needs
be satisfied among brothers and sisters the world over.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

And finally . . .

Abigail Morrison considers oomph:

Recently I was emailing a member of the congregation who has been a bit under the weather. They said their oomph was taking some time to return. It got me thinking about "oomph".

What is it? Why is it important? Oomph is that quality of having energy and enthusiasm for life. I guess the French would call it *joie de vivre*. Another English term is *get-up-and-go*. Though it can't be measured or seen or heard or held in your hands, we all know when we have lost some of our oomph. We feel lethargic and tired. We can't motivate ourselves to do anything. We can feel a bit low.

Oomph is a lovely word. I feel it should always be written with a capital O and an exclamation mark after it, but that's just me. Our relationship with it can be a bit like traversing the word itself. When our energies, our health and our outlook are good we can scale the O from bottom to top in no time. We gaze across the world from the peak of the O and feel just grand.

But then something changes and suddenly we slide right back down the other side to the bottom again. Up we climb, a somewhat smaller o this time, but still we slide back down. Then we climb, slither and slide across the m, scale the dizzy heights of the tall leg of the h before descending to the bottom again. But then! Oh, then we scale to the top of the exclamation mark! Once more we can see our way ahead and feel we can manage whatever the future holds.

Oomph. Its has its ups and downs but, in the end, we will get it back again.