



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

Available in printed form and online at:
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Issue 88

Sunday 21st November 2021

Today's reading

Isaiah 11: 1–9 (“The Peaceful Kingdom”)

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Amen.

(NRSV)

Today's hymns

- 1 *All hail the power of Jesus' Name!* (CH:457; tune: Miles Lane)
- 2 *The King of Love my Shepherd is* (CH:462)
- 3 *Christ is the world's Redeemer* (CH:450)
- 4 *Christ is made the sure foundation* (CH:200)
- 5 *Let all the world in every corner sing* (CH:122)

In the Name of the Father and of

Each year on the last Sunday before Advent, we are asked to bring something very important to mind. At the meeting point of old Church year and new Church year, the Church itself asks ministers to consider preaching a sermon on the theme of “Christ the King”. Not Christ the child in the manger (not even Christ the humble servant) but Christ the King. And the longer I have been in ministry, the more I reckon this to be a particularly good idea.

If we look ahead towards the month of December, we will see all sorts of hints of what is just around the corner: shopping (perhaps mainly online these days), writing cards, planning for family get-togethers (if allowed!). And then, of course, with the 25th of next month, the big celebration begins!:

*Jesus is born: formed in a womb and now a baby, Jesus is born.
Swaddled and small he sleeps in hay.
Setting aside his power and glory,
homeless he enters human story: Christ comes to earth.*

Yes, in little over one month’s time, the child in the manger will take centre stage. It is for that very reason that today we are being urged to pause, for a day which specifically calls us not to the manger, but to the Cross, as we set our minds on the human Jesus. This is the Jesus who grows from a tiny infant into the adult human being who will teach and heal, castigate and condemn, and ultimately rise and reign. This is no baby sleeping quietly and giving us a fine excuse for a Yuletide party. This is Christ the King: God’s own Son who challenges a selfish world with his own radical action and his own unspeakable sacrifice.

And so, on this day we reflect on the Kingship of Christ who, in the word’s of St Paul: “... *did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*” [Philippians 2:5–8]

Who is this Jesus: a baby or a King? Or more personally and pertinently, who for you is this Jesus? Are you happy to keep him as the miracle child, born under the light of a glorious star, loved by Mary, visited by shepherds and wise men? Or are you prepared to travel with this itinerant prophet throughout Galilee as he shows himself to be the rabble-rousing agitator, always on the side of justice for the downtrodden of all the earth?

Maybe you can go even one stage further, standing at the foot of the Cross where life is spent and even the presence of his heavenly Father seems to have become a thing of the past. The late Rev Dr Ian Fraser was one of the Church of Scotland’s most remarkable ministers. In his 100 years on this earth he gave so much, not least in his hymn-writing. He sums up the challenge of Christ’s Kingship – whether as child or as adult – in these words:

*No place had you to lay your head
O Christ whom we call King of Kings;
you came to share the painful lot
of all the homeless, life’s foundlings.
You had no home to call your own
though earth’s your footstool, heaven your home.*

Let’s take this one stage further as we adjust our sights from the King who is coming, turning our eyes to his Kingdom.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

If we are indeed able to see that Christ is born to be King – albeit a King like no other – it follows that we might well raise our thoughts to the Kingdom over which Jesus rules. What would life be like as a citizen living under the reign and the rule of Christ? One way of arriving at an answer to what is undoubtedly a tough question would be to look at the life of Jesus as found across the four gospels. There we find for ourselves clear examples of what Jesus is like. And in looking we see that his character surely models his Kingdom. Take that thought and work with it. Consider for yourself exactly what it is that the Bible shows us from birth to death, from Resurrection to Ascension, of Jesus and his values. What kind of manifesto would he set out for his citizens? What manner of governing would he set in place? Think it through and see where your own thoughts and your own prayers might lead.

Interestingly though, we maybe catch a glimpse of that Kingdom of Christ in what has been called “the fifth gospel”: the book of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah. Writing centuries before the angels heralded a special birth in Bethlehem, Isaiah wrote with passion about a future that would see a “peaceable Kingdom” in which wolves and lambs live side by side, predator and prey no longer, but citizens together. This Kingdom has the cow grazing with the bear, and lions eating straw with oxen. And as for humans, it seems that a point will come when parents will be able to leave their little ones to play with poisonous snakes, the risk of injury or death being a thing of the past.

You might look at these words of Isaiah as artistic – the kind of poetry intended to fuel the imagination with images of calm and well-being. Then again, you might regard Isaiah as the type of prophet who wants his listeners to know exactly what the future will bring (a kind of society which turns human standards right around and even promises a new kind of nature, free from killing and death). Whichever way you go, it seems that Isaiah is a visionary who looks at current suffering and sees God’s hand in charge of all that is. Yes, things are bad, but God’s hand is there. Right now, everything appears to be out of control, but God’s hand will not let us go. God’s hand will prevail, bringing all Creation to its fullest reconciliation.

Isaiah is waiting, as Hebrew prophets so often wait, for the coming of the Messiah when all will change. We are told that when the King appears: “... with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.”

God’s chosen one is all about leading the vulnerable to the safety they so badly need, whether in first century Palestine or in so many troubled places and in so, so many troubled lives today.

One more question: where do we stand in this equation of righteousness? The answer, it strikes me, is both clear and utterly staggering. Not only does God call the Messiah out of heaven to enter into life on earth; God calls each one of us to be disciples, followers of the child born to be King. Living in Christ’s company, we are to listen for the King’s commands of heartfelt Love. We are to go in his Name and work out all that there is to do on this suffering planet of ours. And once, by God’s grace, we have finally grasped what is to be done, we are to play our part in the doing of Christ’s righteousness.

Anthony Robinson puts our challenge of living out our faith in these simple words:

“Today hold in your heart Isaiah’s vision of God’s Messiah, Jesus, and Isaiah’s powerful vision for all leaders: protection of the vulnerable, making the world safer for the least powerful, taming the lions so that the lambs have a chance to live.”

Amen.

Praying for others

Lord,
we ask that you imbue your people with
your Spirit of wisdom and understanding.
Help us to put on your belt of justice,
your girdle of faith and to see the world as you see it.
We pray for justice for those who are poor in our midst.
Let them never be forgotten or ignored.
Give those of us with resources the strength to speak truth to power for their aid.
Give us courage to stand up for what is right.
Give us the will to give up a little of what we have for their benefit.
God our Father, drench all those in power with your Spirit
that they may remember who is the true King.
We ask that they exercise their power to defend the humble with fairness,
to protect the vulnerable and to see your will be done.
Help us not to rush to judgement based on
what we see and hear and based on our prejudices.
Quieten us to listen for your word.
Let us all judge as we would be judged by you.
We ask this in the name of Christ the King.
Amen.

And finally . . .

Abigail Morrison considers fences: two heads are better than one:

Recently my neighbour was round in connection with strengthening the fence that runs between our properties. Many of you will know him – Graham Dalton. Graham and his wife Katherine often read the Sunday Focus. Graham needed to access my garden to do this work and my gardener, Cliff, helped. As a way of thanking me (though, really, none was needed) Graham sent me a few ideas for “*And finally ...*” thoughts. I had said to him I can always do with help in this area (everyone else please take note – you won’t step on my toes if you suggest ideas for this section of *The Sunday Focus* or even write one yourself). So, I am doing the first in what may be a periodic series of “*And finally ...*” sections on fences.

When Graham reinforced the fence (it was wobbly and in danger of blowing over in a strong westerly wind) he needed help. He needed me to give him access to my garden and to agree to have supports for the fence on my side of it. He needed an extra pair of hands (in this case Cliff’s, in the past my husband’s). And he benefited from someone else’s expertise and equipment – both Cliff and Douglas had ideas and tools Graham did not have. On both occasions they worked together to strengthen the fence.

And, of course, now Graham and I are working together – virtually in this case. I too have benefited from Graham’s thoughts for this “*And finally ...*”. He emailed me some ideas and I have pondered at least one of them and then fleshed it out to the required 300 or so words.

As is so often the case, both my and Graham’s experience remind us that two heads are better than one.