

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

Issue 94

Sunday 2nd January 2022

Today's Bible readings

Isaiah 6:1-8 ("A Vision of God in the Temple")

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.'

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!'

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!' Amen. (NRSV)

Matthew 2:7-12 ("The Visit of the Wise Men")

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Angels from the realms of glory (CH324)

As with gladness (CH326)

Father eternal (CH261)

In the bleak midwinter (CH305)

Look forward in faith (CH)*

When I was six years old I moved from primary 1 to Primary 2. This was a big move for two quite different reasons. First of all, you got to be in a classroom that was up two very dark and dingy flights of stairs right beside the school gym. And secondly, there were badges. Two very exciting, enamel led badges which everyone longed to be entrusted with, each one for a week.

Mrs Weston recruited two of her six-year-olds every seven days to have special responsibilities ... and that is where the badges came in. Everyone proudly took their turn, so the weight of obligation was spread evenly. As I recall, over the course of the academic year everyone would step up to become "the captain" (dark blue enamel badge with the word "CAPTAIN" in big letters) or "the star" (dark red enamel badge with five pointy bits, as though straight from the Soviet Union).

I have to confess that after more than 50 years I have long forgotten the role that was played by the captain – even though I do remember holding that position for my week's worth of infant glory. That said, I can tell you exactly what was expected of the star. If Mrs Weston had, say, a form to go to the school office or a pile of books to go to the school store cupboard, or just a message to go to her colleague in the classroom three along, she would call upon her star of the week, sending them out to convey just whatever needed to be conveyed to its rightful destination, saying the right thing to the right person in the right way. The responsibility was immense but the reward for success was great: that glow of six-year-old pride in knowing that you had fulfilled a role that would help keep your school running smoothly. You had played that role to your very best, and you had not been found wanting.

On this Sunday of the year we reflect on the Wise Men from the East and their precious gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. These, as any primary 2 captain worth their salt could no doubt tell you, were presents for a baby king born in Bethlehem. The objects were precious, but also prophetic: gold for royalty, incense for a priest of God. And myrrh? Well, myrrh was a bit more problematic, signalling a death – the preparation of a lifeless body. And so, these Wise Men were more than just delivery drivers seated on their DHL camels. They were messengers from far away, bringing signs of a story that would gradually unfold some three decades later. The baby would grow into an adult by whose life and whose death a king of all the earth, a priest of the most high, would come to be recognised.

It must have taken commitment on the part of the Wise Men to haul their precious cargo all the way from Asia. To quote T.S. Eliot, they would have endured "a cold coming", with risks posed by weather and wild animals, bandits and so much more. But these Wise Men were divinely inspired to go on their quest. They had a star, not pinned to the smallest of blazers, but set away up high in the sky, encouraging them onward all the way to Bethlehem. That star must have been their guide – and more than their guide. Shining brightly, it would have served as a constant reminder of God's great commission to get that gold and frankincense and myrrh all the way to Mary and Joseph's house.

And the baby's parents? What would they have made of the visitors? At this time of year I love to reflect on the imagined words of Mary from the song, "Bethlehem Down":

*When He is King we will give Him the King's gifts,
Myrrh for its sweetness, and gold for a crown,
Beautiful robes", said the young girl to Joseph,
Fair with her first-born on Bethlehem Down.*

The Wise Men, of course, were not alone in going on a quest. Across the Bible we see many instances of people receiving God's commission and heading out in faith and confidence, determined to do their best to live out their God-given vocation. In the Old Testament there is Abraham, called away from his pastures to start a mighty journey of faith that would span the generations from BC to AD and right down to the present day. In the New Testament there is Saul on the road to Damascus, turned in a moment from persecutor of the Church to its first and greatest missionary.

But today let us reflect on the person of Isaiah, because I think Isaiah might have slotted in well to Mrs Weston's class in Hillhead Primary School. In the sixth chapter of his massive book we read of Isaiah's vision in the Temple of Jerusalem:

I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew.

From within this terrifying scene, Isaiah cries out in anguish, convinced that he is unworthy to be standing in the presence of God. But the Lord of hosts is forgiving. In his vision, an angel comes with a live coal and touches it upon the mouth of Isaiah saying: "... your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."

With these words of mercy ringing in his ears, Isaiah finds himself transformed with a new confidence. How do we know this? Very simply, God's voice is heard by Isaiah, a voice with a message and a calling: 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?'

And with boldness and conviction Isaiah responds, 'Here am I; send me!'

Here am I; send me – a response which is keen, not reluctant. A statement of faith which speaks of a firm rootedness in the Living God.

Nobody can know what 2022 has in store for the world, with a pandemic that stubbornly refuses to blow over and a climate crisis that simply will not go away. Closer to home we know that the Church of Scotland must face up to its own enormous challenges – challenges which have been around for decades though never adequately addressed. And even closer to home, you may be looking at serious difficulties in terms of your health, your job, your relationships, your future.

At times such as these it is so easy for each of us to be like the prophet Isaiah, crying: "Woe is me! I am lost." But here, on the very first Sunday of a new calendar year, perhaps we need to think a little about our new year's resolutions. You might have decided to cut down on chocolate, or to get more exercise each day. Maybe you feel in your heart of hearts that you should eat less red meat or drink less red wine. It could be that you are deciding to do more for your neighbours in the street or your family half way around the world.

Whatever resolutions you opt for, I would encourage you to think about that word, "resolution". It comes, of course, from the same root as the word, "resolve", which means "firm determination". And resolve is precisely what Isaiah gained in the course of his vision in the Temple. No more woe; no more aimlessness. In their place a fresh, new, mind-shaking, life-changing resolve to serve God come what may, speaking out and acting up to bring good news of God's justice for all to a world which was weighed down with terrible burdens.

'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And Isaiah said, 'Here am I; send me!' Amen.

Praying for others

God of the journey,
on this day we recall the visit of
those exotic travellers from the east with their gifts of
gold and frankincense and myrrh.

Make us travel beyond our comfort zones as we seek the baby,
not in a manger filled with hay
but in a world filled with broken hearts and troubled souls.
Into every situation of need, make us your willing travellers.

As we bring ourselves, so may we bring
your divine gifts of true peace and real hope.

Bless all who need the nearness of your presence now, we pray,
and teach your Church in all the earth
to be instruments of your grace
in so many ways for so many people,
so that we may bring your Light
of justice and of hope into the places of shadow.

This we ask in the name of Christ your Son. Amen.



“Adoration of the Magi” (c.1475)
Circle of Hieronymus Bosch
Metropolitan Museum of New York,
USA
(public domain)