

# THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

Issue 95

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## Today's Bible reading

*2 Corinthians 4:1-15 ("Treasure in clay jars")*

Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practise cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—'I believed, and so I spoke'—we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. Amen. (NRSV)

## Today's hymns

*Sing for God's glory that colours the dawn of creation (CH172)*

*Sent by the Lord I am (CH250)*

*For everyone born a place at the table (CH685)*

*Jesus shall reign where'er the sun (CH470)*

*God is love, let heaven adore him (CH123)*

**T**he experience of the Christian is one which is lived out with one foot placed in “now” and the other stepping on towards “eternity”. With the eyes of faith looking towards Scripture’s promises we find that our own frailties can never be the entire story. Yes, we might suffer exactly the same aches and pains as anyone else. We might be laid low with illness just like our neighbours. And we will probably find ourselves needing hospital treatment or social care of one sort or another as the years go by. Yet, our human state is in no way a reason for dismay, for we find our hope rooted in God who was and is and always will be the Rock of Ages, spanning all of time ... and beyond.

The message of the Christian faith down across the ages is one of divine love being made visible – made real – in the lives of the faithful. Just as Christ was made Incarnate through his human birth in Bethlehem, so too God works through his Church and its all-too-human members in our own day. And so, generation by generation, the Church of Christ moves ever onward. As self-effacing Presbyterians, we might not warm to the idea of God working with us (who, us???) in the divine mission to change the world. But here is the reality of our calling, as found in the words of Paul to the Church in Corinth:

*“... since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.”*

God’s guiding of our lives makes it possible – indeed, necessary – for us to play our part in God’s work. Imagine what this means both for us and for those around us, whether near or far. In the company of God, our lives can become heavenly beacons of hope in a world which so often seems to find itself mired in shadow. As Christ-followers, it is our role to wait for the Holy Spirit to show us how we should live, where we should go, how we should step out in the light of the Gospel of love.

“Hang on,” you might say. “Hang on just a minute. I have the same limitations and failings as the next person. So how could it possibly be that the God of all time and eternity could use me in big, inspiring, world-changing ways? I’m so insignificant!”

Perhaps that is sounding altogether more like the Presbyterian mindset with which we are so deeply familiar. We are not up to the job. (Or that is how we so often feel.)

Let’s go back to our reading and to its writer, the apostle Paul. He has seen a lot of life and has suffered in many ways throughout his energetic and often dramatic ministry. Opposition and oppression, arrest and punishment, illness and shipwreck – Paul has seen (or will see) it all. He knows better than most that human beings have human limitations, and he acknowledges what it means to live our lives in full view of those very same stark, unavoidable limitations.

He speaks about “treasure in clay pots”, pointing to the fact that the Good News of Christ is carried in the life and in the living of each believer. Like a clay pot, each one of us is anything but durable, and we know that we are all too likely to crumple on impact. Still, into our brittle, fragile beings God places the gift not only of life but of new life in Christ. Surely God could have found a bearer of faith more fit for purpose, more resilient to knocks and bumps. Of course he could! But God chooses us to be the ones who will carry Christ’s love across our neighbourhood and far round the globe. Not them ... but us.

With a lifespan of no more than a few score years at most, each one of us will come and go in next to no time, but while we are here and while we have life within us, we can live that life – as we should live that life – appreciating the treasure that has been lovingly bestowed, more glittering than gold, more sparkling than diamond: God’s gracious presence in us.

Seen in that light, the relationship between God and the Church's members takes on a remarkable new appearance. Not through our feeble abilities, but through the eternal grace of God, great things can happen. As if to keep the real message firmly in mind, Paul himself tells those Christians of Corinth: "... this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us."

If, then, God's Spirit brings new-found strength to our perishable "clay pots", should we not seek to pass on that same strength to others? Should we not encourage resilience-building in those who are weighed down in their own lives, equipping those who are struggling with strength to meet each day?

This is very much on the mind of the Church of Scotland HIV Programme as it works with partner denominations all around the world. One of the biggest challenges in this whole field has been identified as the need to equip young people with the health education that they simply must have if they are to understand how the HIV virus works and if they are to overcome the dangers which it can pose. Tragically, many young people contract HIV because they cannot grasp the risks that may be surrounding them in their everyday living. But money from Church of Scotland members is making a difference all round the world:

**Caribbean:** The "Campaign for Life Project" in Cuba is working to build a space where people living with HIV will feel welcomed. Workshops on HIV topics will be on offer, along with a variety of health-related resources.

**Middle East:** A project in Egypt is aimed at awareness-raising on Hepatitis C and HIV. Organisers plan to reach out to the community to educate people in the reality of blood-transmitted diseases and to change negative attitudes and stigma within the community.

**Africa:** Nine denominations spread across all ten provinces of Zambia are working ecumenically as they plan to empower women and children through capacity development, sustainable care, support and prevention. In addition, educational opportunities will be made available through the scheme.

**Asia:** The Church of Christ in Thailand operates an emergency shelter providing holistic care for those who are temporarily homeless or who need to be near medical services. It also provides respite care, and training for income-generation projects.

We are only clay pots, but within us is a power that is not our own. Through God working in and through his Church, Good News is sent out in the most practical of ways for the building up of those who are downtrodden. The Church of Scotland HIV Programme can point to so many examples of lives being turned around by the committed Christian care of partner projects which gain so much by our support, whether through prayer or donation. This work builds resilience and offers bright hope to so many people.

On this Souper Sunday, don't just spare a thought for those whose lives have been dragged down by the ill health, the private isolation and the public stigma which HIV so often brings. Play your part in bringing new hope and fresh opportunities of faith and life to so many people around the world. As Paul wrote to Christians in the midst of challenge:

*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. Amen.*

## Praying for others

God of life ... and death ... and life restored,  
in a world where HIV has caused such suffering and heartache,  
may your Church raise up hope for those whose lives are in such turmoil:  
for those who are ill, may effective treatments be available and affordable;  
for those who are stigmatised in their communities, may your peace be known;  
for those whose family members have died, may love and care be on hand.

On this day when we recall the fight against this virus,  
we give thanks for the decades of front line research  
bringing such unimagined progress towards limiting suffering.

Bless the scientists, the medical staff and the policy makers  
whose working lives help others live positively in so many ways.

And lastly, we bring before you the partner projects of  
the Church of Scotland HIV Programme,  
working all around the world and right here in Scotland.

Thank you for their dedication and for your love  
lived out in their deep and inspiring Christian commitment.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

## And finally ...

*Robin Hill considers HIV in a world of Covid-19:*

People sometimes ask me, "Why HIV?" In a world where there is so much ill health from so many different sources, it may seem strange that the Church of Scotland continues to focus its attention on a medical emergency which has largely slipped from both the headlines of the media and the consciousness of the public.

It is quite true that since the early 1980s the battles against HIV and AIDS have been long and arduous. Many of us recall the days when a positive diagnosis implied little less than a death sentence. Yet this is a bad news story which now carries with it much good news, as medical science has won many stunning victories across the last four decades. Today, a young person in Edinburgh, San Francisco or Tokyo found to be HIV+ can be treated easily and cheaply with antiretroviral medications which will "put a lid" on the virus so helping them lead a full life past retiral age - unimaginable not so long ago. In addition, research findings relating to HIV were of great use when in 2020 the world had to reset its focus with the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the Church of Scotland HIV Programme, without those 40 years of hard work on HIV, coming to terms with the emerging coronavirus threat would have been so much more taxing. Knowledge is power.

So back to that question, "Why HIV?". And also, "Why now?" The truth is that while governments and other funders are rightly investing large amounts of money in dealing with Covid-19, there is less in the global pot for funding HIV work. More worrying is the realisation that people in the world's least privileged countries still lack the HIV infrastructure found in all the richest nations, including our own.

HIV has not gone away, and neither should our Church's excellent work on it.