

# THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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## Today's Bible reading

*Psalm 36 ("Human Wickedness and Divine Goodness")*

Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in their hearts;  
there is no fear of God before their eyes.

For they flatter themselves in their own eyes  
that their iniquity cannot be found out and hated.

The words of their mouths are mischief and deceit;  
they have ceased to act wisely and do good.

They plot mischief while on their beds;  
they are set on a way that is not good;  
they do not reject evil.

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens,  
your faithfulness to the clouds.

Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,  
your judgements are like the great deep;  
you save humans and animals alike, O Lord.

How precious is your steadfast love, O God!  
All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.  
They feast on the abundance of your house,  
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.  
For with you is the fountain of life;  
in your light we see light.

O continue your steadfast love to those who know you,  
and your salvation to the upright of heart!  
Do not let the foot of the arrogant tread on me,  
or the hand of the wicked drive me away.  
There the evildoers lie prostrate;  
they are thrust down, unable to rise. Amen. (NRSV)

## Today's hymns

*Spirit of God, unseen as the wind* (CH: 600)

*Give me joy in my heart* (SoP: 223)

*Behold, the amazing gift of love* (CH: 478)

*Lord of all being* (CH: 125)

*Through the love of God our Saviour* (CH: 562)

**A**s the removal van drew up outside next door's empty house, young James ran to the window to see what might be emerging: "A table ... some chairs ... a leather seat (dark brown) ... a washing machine (white) ... a lamp (no, two) ... and bikes (three). Mum, there are three bikes, two for grown-ups and one for a kid. But by the look of it, I'd say they've got a girl."

"Come away from that window," called Mum. "You'll find out soon enough who the new neighbours are. For now just give them space to settle in."

It didn't take long for James to make himself known. His new next door neighbour was indeed a girl. They had a lot in common, as Jessica enjoyed cycling, playing football and climbing trees. Just old enough to go off exploring the neighbourhood together the two new friends headed off on James's custom-made guided tour.

"This," said James, "is the place that you find frog spawn."

"Cool," said Jessica.

"And this," said James, "is the straight stretch of path where you can get your bike up to 15 miles an hour ... well, maybe 12 miles an hour in your case."

"Huh!," scoffed Jessica.

"And this," said James, "is the slope you come thundering down on your sledge, closing your eyes when you hit that big bump."

"Call that a bump? My eyes will be open," said Jessica.

After the tour was over, James knew that there was one thing he still had to do. "Now," he asked with the air of the expert guide, "are there any questions?"

"Just one," replied his attentive audience. "Where do you go to hide?"

"To *what*?" replied a startled James.

"To hide. When you just need to get away for a few minutes and straighten out your head. Everyone needs their place to hide."

Jessica is probably right. In all the many places that are important in our complex and busy lives, everyone should have some sort of place that offers the possibility of retreat, far from the madding crowd. Not so much a place, perhaps, as a setting where peace of mind can be restored and life successfully reset: a favourite comfy seat perhaps; a painter's easel; a piano; a path through the woods; a view of the sunset where you can just be without other people doing anything that might risk disturbance or interruption of a priceless solitude.

Yes, Jessica, is *definitely* right: everyone needs their own place to straighten out their head. And now, early in this new year, that very thought might well be occurring to you. Back in March 2020 we all thought that the Coronavirus pandemic would be met with a vaccine. Yes, we would have to wait (of course we would) and wait both patiently and cautiously, but the wait would certainly be worth it. Now nearly two years on we have witnessed so much incredible progress made by scientists of amazing ability, yet we have to acknowledge that Covid-19 has moved from one new variant to another. And that's unnerving. Actually, it's deeply troubling to our settled way of thinking.

We would like to retreat. In fact, we would very much like *to escape*. So maybe we go for walks by the coast rather than visits to the busy department stores. We watch repeats of "Poirot" and "Marple" instead of turning on the news with all those harsh headlines and upsetting reports. We do our best to find safe spaces though, try as we might, it so often seems to us that no truly safe place can be found.

That is where the writer of Psalm 36 might well come to our aid with some words which we really need to hear at a deeply challenging time such as this:

*Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your judgements are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O LORD. How precious is your steadfast love, O God!*

These are heartening and affirming words. But then the psalmist goes further with this thought-provoking line: *All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.*

What these words of profound hope tell us is this: that God is a God of faithfulness in all times - not least in those times of real distress. God's love is true. God's actions are reliable. God will stand with us and stay with us, even when the news seems so bleak. God yearns for what is best for us, perhaps especially when we cannot begin to unearth for ourselves the kind of plan that might take us to our better, safer place.

So often the Psalms draw us in to the natural world and the majesty of Creation. And that is precisely what we find in Psalm 36. The writer presents us with a "word picture" of what God is all about - a divine faithfulness which spans the universe. From the glorious heavens above to the dramatic earth below, via sky and sea, mountain and woodland, God is there. More, God is "in relationship". The Maker, the Saviour, the Sustainer: the source of our life; the ground of our being.

Surely a picture - a vision - such as this has the potential to change everything. If all that "is" finds itself located within God's creative and upholding love, then it follows that we live in a universe that is soaked in divine grace, no matter what. The faithful God, says the psalmist, is steadfast, meaning that all people may indeed take refuge in the shadow of his caring, outspread, in-gathering wings.

This brings us back pretty much to where we started, with young Jessica's assertion that everyone needs a place to which they can escape. Sadly, escape is so easily confused with escapism, whether in terms of thrill-seeking or sorrow-drowning. In our 21st century culture of gross materialism, we too readily try to *spend* our troubles away as though we might find safe space through food and drink, sport and entertainment, adventure and adrenaline, or - in the ironic words of Ian Dury - "sex and drugs and rock and roll".

Others might try another escape route, wishing that they could flee the world's onslaughts by relying upon their own self-image and all the many material accoutrements that go with our so carefully crafted personal facades. Yet no castle of the mind, no palace of possessions (however expertly constructed) could ever give us the ultimate freedom we crave. As imperfect beings, we need so much more than we could ever conjure up in our own limited capacities and fleeting technologies.

How, then, *are* we to plan our escape? Where are we to find the kind of refuge that will truly bring us peace? We are to escape to God, whose righteousness is in the heavens and whose love is here with us. This is God, whose desire is that we should relate to him all our days, in all our ways. God is faithful, standing *by* us and *for* us and *with* us, even as the storms of life are raging all around.

If - indeed, *when* - you need to find your place of refuge, turn to God. As people of faith it is our hope and our prayer that in God's presence we will come to a place of safety and security. There we will find our retreat from all that life and death might throw at us. And so we place our trust in the God of faithfulness.

*Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.*  
Amen.

## Praying for others

Lord,  
we pray for those in our community who do not know your love  
and have no comprehension of their own worth:  
those for whom personal trauma, addiction or poverty  
create a spiral of despair and hopelessness.  
Help us to bring your message of love and hope.

In those countries and communities where voices are suppressed and  
the needs of the marginalised ignored, we pray that your justice will prevail.  
In particular, we pray for the people of Kazakhstan, Afghanistan and Yemen.

We bring before you the people of New York,  
tragically impacted by the devastating fire;  
the families who have lost loved ones including  
those hundreds of miles away in The Gambia.

We also remember those known to us  
who are suffering through illness, distress or bereavement.  
May all take refuge and comfort in the shadow of your wings and  
may they find healing and wholeness in body, mind and spirit.  
Lord in your mercy and grace, hear our prayers. Amen.

## And finally ...

*Abigail Morison considers New Year tidying:*

New Year often brings a new broom and a desire to clear out and tidy up. I think a winter clean is much more likely than a spring one. In spring the days are longer and the weather better - who wants to be indoors cleaning? But in winter, what else is there to do? It's an ideal time to take stock (there's a reason we have New Year's resolutions and not mid-summer ones).

If you remember, I said a couple of months ago I might do a series of *And Finally* sections on ideas about fences. This was prompted by my neighbour repairing the fence we share. There is a connection between fences and winter-cleaning. The repairs that were carried out were as a result of checking the fence over and noticing it needed strengthening. It meant the fence was in good nick before Storm Arwen blew over. Though it was effort to repair the fence, it was much less work than replacing the whole thing had it blown down in a strong wind.

A good clear out, tidy up and check of things pays dividends. Your car gets an MOT to make sure it's roadworthy and to avoid expensive repairs later. Your optician and dentist regularly check your vision and teeth to spot early warnings of trouble ahead and to take evasive action (get new specs, get a tooth filled). I think winter is a good time to take stock of our behaviours too. Are there some undesirable ones I need to curtail? Some good ones I need to exhibit more?

The new year is a good time to cast an eye over ourselves and mend things before the fabric of lives tears irrevocably.