

# THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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## Today's Bible reading

*2 Samuel 18:24-33 ("David hears of Absalom's death")*

Now David was sitting between the two gates. The sentinel went up to the roof of the gate by the wall, and when he looked up, he saw a man running alone. The sentinel shouted and told the king. The king said, 'If he is alone, there are tidings in his mouth.' He kept coming, and drew near. Then the sentinel saw another man running; and the sentinel called to the gatekeeper and said, 'See, another man running alone!' The king said, 'He also is bringing tidings.' The sentinel said, 'I think the running of the first one is like the running of Ahimaaz son of Zadok.' The king said, 'He is a good man, and comes with good tidings.'

Then Ahimaaz cried out to the king, 'All is well!' He prostrated himself before the king with his face to the ground, and said, 'Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delivered up the men who raised their hand against my lord the king.' The king said, 'Is it well with the young man Absalom?' Ahimaaz answered, 'When Joab sent your servant, I saw a great tumult, but I do not know what it was.' The king said, 'Turn aside, and stand here.' So he turned aside, and stood still.

Then the Cushite came; and the Cushite said, 'Good tidings for my lord the king! For the Lord has vindicated you this day, delivering you from the power of all who rose up against you.' The king said to the Cushite, 'Is it well with the young man Absalom?' The Cushite answered, 'May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man.'

The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, 'O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!' Amen. (NRSV)

## Today's hymns

*Praise my Soul, the King of Heaven* (CH160)

*I am the church, you are the church* (CH204)

*The Church's one foundation* (CH739)

*In Christ there is no east or west* (CH624)

*Christ is made the sure foundation* (CH200)

*A sermon about funerals might seem a little daunting, but hopefully readers will find this a positive contribution, as we think through the place of mourning in our modern society.*

The family had gathered as best they could, spilling out from the tiny front room. The younger adults were sitting on the stairs in the hall, silently staring at their smartphones. Meanwhile, the older generation of Alan, Joyce and John gathered round the fire, ready for “the chat”.

“Now, we all know,” said Alan in his authoritative, head of the household voice, “that Daniel really wasn’t one for fuss and bother. Don’t get me wrong, it’s sad that we’ve lost our dear brother, but he’d want us to keep calm and carry on.”

“Quite right Alan,” said Joyce, who always took the practical line. “Danny said as much to me many a time. No fuss and bother, so let’s keep his funeral simple.”

“A celebration,” said John, the sensitive one of the three. “There were so many good things about our wee brother, so we can just keep the whole thing positive, eh?”

“Maybe this time we should go for a humanist funeral,” suggested Joyce.

“Well, maybe ... and maybe not,” said John, without any conviction either way. “I really don’t want to think about it. It’s all too much.”

Just then a voice piped up from the hall. “See funerals? You don’t need them these days. I’ve just googled “cremation only” and straight up you get half a dozen companies that just do the basics and nothing more. Instead of a service with a coffin and flowers and limos and stuff, we’d just hire the community hall and throw a big party. It’s a fraction of the cost, and we’d have a right good knees-up.”

“Cremation only,” nodded Alan. “Now that’s a great idea.”

People are affected by the loss of a loved one in a wide variety of ways. No two bereavements are the same, and we can easily see why with factors like human character, human temperament, human relationships all varying from one person to the next. Isn’t it interesting that right the way down through human history, the notion of grieving has been taken with tremendous seriousness? Until now, it seems. Biblical experts reckon that the Second Book of Samuel would most probably have been written somewhere between the 6th and 8th centuries before Christ. That, of course, is a very long time ago, yet that ancient text shows us clearly that the tragic loss of a loved one could be met with utter heartbreak and open lamentation. Our Bible story today is sad. We read of Absalom, the third son of King David, said to be the most handsome man in all the land. Absalom had murdered his half-brother and been exiled to a distant land. Returning after three years, he raised a rebel army and turned against his father. At the Battle of Ephraim’s Wood Absalom lost his life, even though the King’s forces had been instructed not to harm him.

On hearing the news of his beloved boy’s violent death, King David was distraught, his words coming down to us from across the centuries:

*‘O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!’*

One 20th century commentator has a poignant way of describing what this father went through in the loss of his dearly beloved boy. Writing of David, that great, imperfect king, the scholar notes, “the extravagance of his grief”.

The *extravagance* of David’s grief: in it we find a sudden, shocking and entirely justifiable outpouring of a king’s desolation. And I feel certain that there will be

some of us today who know *precisely* what this means, because they themselves have been on *precisely* the same numbed and troubled journey of mourning.

As good Presbyterians, we might think that public and vocal demonstrations of grief are not to be encouraged. That kind of behaviour appears somehow unseemly or improper in our sophisticated living (so much more detached than that of the ancient world). Yes, it is true that we see footage on the evening news of Palestinians or Israelis or Syrians or Afghans loudly wailing as yet another victim of violence is laid to rest. But that's *there*, not *here*. Not here in douce East Lothian where everyone stays so neatly buttoned up against the storms of our emotions.

I would like to suggest that we could and that we *should* learn a lesson from King David in his heartfelt approach to loss. In short, we need to acknowledge the power of lamentation to help us come to terms with who it is we have lost and how it is we are feeling in that moment. We may express ourselves in a different way to that of David, yet we should be ready to see bereavement as a path which is essential, both to us as individuals and to us as families, communities, society as a whole.

For that reason I maintain that we should guard against viewing a funeral service simply as a celebration of a life now gone. It needs to be more, reflecting an acknowledgment of the death and the loss and the sadness and the sorrow of all those who come together, whether in church or parlour or crematorium.

More than 20 years ago our family had the astonishing privilege of spending an entire summer with the good people of the Scots International Church, Rotterdam. Although it had been established many hundreds of years ago by and for Scottish merchants and sailors based in the Netherlands, by the late 20th century the congregation had become quite the United Nations. Scots International Church had people from all around the globe, with many families from sub-Saharan Africa.

On our first Sunday in town I was invited to a gathering which took place to mark the end of a socially recognised period of mourning for a man who had died. This West African custom values *bereavement as a process* which needs to be taken seriously and slowly. In countries like Cameroon this practice honours the memory of one who has died while respecting the grief of those who are gradually coming to grips with their loss. Then after the period is over, everyone comes round to the family home for an open house with food and drink and casual chatting, where fond reminiscence is to be found, right at the centre of things.

Sometimes in life it can be a whole lot better ... *gradually* ... to turn a dial than ... *suddenly* ... to flick a switch. Sadly, I fear that any emerging trend away from funerals and towards the "cremation only" approach might be damaging for some families. We as the church have so much that we can offer to families in need. To visit, to pray, to spend time listening and writing and liaising back and forth - it all helps a family with the grieving process. Then to gather at Gladsmuir or Longniddry, at Seafield or Mortonhall, at Warriston or simply by a graveside, is a gift in itself, as together we entrust the person who has died to God's merciful keeping. And, in realising a loved one's absence, it is a powerful thing to enter into the presence of God who is our hope and our strength:

*God be in my head, and in my understanding;  
God be in mine eyes, and in my looking;  
God be in my mouth, and in my speaking;  
God be in my heart, and in my thinking;  
God be at mine end, and at my departing. Amen.*

## Praying for others

God of all,  
we ask your blessing on those who mourn,  
whether in the first agony of loss or the ache of later years.

Bless those who rage at a life cut short, a future unlived, who feel cheated.

Let them know you can absorb all their fury and  
that you will never blame or desert them. Grant them peace.

Bless those who grieve a life lived in misery –  
a life lived in constant pain, hunger, fear or despair.

Help us remember those lives too. Guide us to be your hands and feet in the world  
and to work to end suffering so that no-one need mourn such a loss in future.

Bless those who cannot mourn, who may feel appalled, shocked or betrayed by the  
one lost or who may have been harmed by them. Dissolve their guilt, heal their  
wounds, refresh their lives. Help them to forgive and to live free again.

Bless us as we seek to support those who are bereaved. Give us words of love,  
remove our embarrassment and desire to make it better. Help us to just let their grief  
be, to hold it in our hands, to accept it as a blessing of a life well loved.

We ask these blessings in Jesus' name.

Amen.

## And finally ...

*Robin Hill considers the tentative possibility of a "new normal":*

We have asked, most of us, when life might get back to how it had been prior to March 2020. Indeed, you may be asking this even now ... and who could blame you? The Covid-19 pandemic has seen suffering and sacrifice for so many, with well over 150,000 British lives lost and many millions of deaths on the global scale. This has been the biggest social and economic crisis since 1945.

Is it, I wonder, realistic to speak about going *back*? After wholesale turmoil of the kind only a pandemic or a war could bring, it may make more sense to consider instead what currently unseen ways of living might emerge from the shadows. In some senses, the "old" has left the stage, with the as-yet-unknowable "new" waiting in the wings ready to enter. In due course we will witness change for ourselves, whether in terms of home life, work life, school life, and so on.

This is where the church, both nationally and locally, needs to be ready to respond. We have a great opportunity to leave behind much that had been forced into disuse nearly two years ago. Similarly, we can now dare to imagine ways of being and doing our Christian faith that might never have occurred to us in those pre-pandemic days. So pray now for God's guidance as we look to a future that may very well be both deeply challenging and freshly engaging.