

# THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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## Today's Bible reading

*Psalm 42:6b-11 ("Longing for God and His Help in Distress")*

I say to God, my rock, 'Why have you forgotten me?  
Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?'  
As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me,  
while they say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'  
Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God. (NRSV)

*John 8:21-30 ("Jesus Foretells His Death")*

Again he said to them, 'I am going away, and you will search for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.' Then the Jews said, 'Is he going to kill himself? Is that what he means by saying, "Where I am going, you cannot come"?' He said to them, 'You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he.' They said to him, 'Who are you?' Jesus said to them, 'Why do I speak to you at all? I have much to say about you and much to condemn; but the one who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.' They did not understand that he was speaking to them about the Father. So Jesus said, 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.' As he was saying these things, many believed in him. Amen. (NRSV)

## Today's hymns

*To God be the glory (CH: 512)*  
*God is love, his the care (CH: 193)*  
*O love that wilt not let me go (CH: 557)*  
*Let us build a house where love can dwell (CH: 198)*  
*Let all the world in every corner sing (CH: 122)*

In the East End of London you will find a sculpture which has become known as "The Champions". It depicts a famous football match - a match which you might just have heard of. This large and impressive bronze statue, commissioned to celebrate the 1966 World Cup final, depicts Geoff Hurst, Martin Peters, Ray Wilson and (of course) the sporting great that was Bobby Moore. Passers-by see the young England captain's figure lifted on his teammates' shoulders in triumph as he clings to the Jules Rimet trophy: that most precious of world footballing prizes.

I wonder if there is a certain something-or-other which lies very deep within the human psyche, linking the feeling of triumphant elation with the action of lifting up. You might argue that elevating a champion is nothing more than a tradition across all sport. In one cricket match, the legendary Don Bradman amassed a monumental 452 runs for New South Wales against Queensland, breaking the world record for runs scored. When he left the field it was with the aid of his teammates who in their sheer joy hoisted him up on their shoulders. By the time of the player's death in 2001, "The Don" was widely held up as the greatest ever Australian, universally admired across all Aussie states and territories ... with, it might perhaps be said, the possible exception of Queensland.

Sir Don's glittering career in the 1920s and '30s seems to suggest that being recognised among the greats and being lifted up have gone together for a long time.

Our Bible reading today takes us back not 100 years but 2000 years. Still, in the gospel of John we most certainly see this same idea coming through loud and clear, though not in a sporting sense. Here's what we heard in that passage:

*When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I am he ...*

Jesus is speaking to the religious leaders on their home ground, the Temple in Jerusalem. Over the course of this conversation, Jesus has already come out with some pretty direct and controversial lines, noting that the all-important Pharisees don't know him and, moreover, that they don't know God. Jesus may well be getting an important point across, but he's certainly not out to make friends and influence people. Just like Bradman, Jesus hits hard, and Jesus scores.

The Pharisees, he claims, are set to die in their sins, unable to go where he himself is going. And then Jesus comes out with a typical John's gospel sort of a line, telling those leaders that they belong to this world, while he belongs with his heavenly Father. (The book of John is forever pointing up to heaven and then back down to earth, with Jesus serving as the divine/human bridge between the two.)

Perhaps it is no great surprise that before long the Pharisees in their exasperation bluntly ask Jesus: "Who are you?" In reply he makes the point that he is the one who declares to those who live below what he has heard from the one who dwells above: God, the heavenly Father.

When those confused men just don't get it, Jesus gets all theological on them, with that weirdly glorious line:

*When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I am he ...*

In lifting up Jesus, they will at last come to understand that this human being is divine - the very Son of God.

But what is it that Jesus is getting at when he speaks of being "lifted up"? The Pharisees might well imagine their very own first century equivalent of Bobby Moore or Don Bradman held aloft on others' shoulders. And yes, we should remember that the Church does indeed speak about "lifting up Jesus" in exaltation. (That thinking is found through many a hymnbook.) But that is only half the story.

Take a look at the setting of this reading. Jesus is speaking about his coming death. In saying those words, "when you have lifted up the Son of Man," he is making a not so veiled reference to those leaders who will plot his execution on a cross raised high. So we come to see that the Jesus of John's gospel is someone whose heavenly exaltation actually comes through earthly death ... even death on a cross lifted up. This kind of theme is one which appears more than once in John. Just a few pages later in John chapter 12 we come to this famous line:

*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.*

Yes, the killing of God's Son on a cross of torture and shame is a most terrible lifting up, yet at one and the same time it is a glorious lifting up, filled and overflowing with hope for all humanity: Jew and gentile; woman and man; young and old; slave and free. We might even say that all can exalt in and through the lifting up of Jesus on Good Friday, knowing that death will be conquered in the early light of Easter.

What is really striking about Jesus' engagement here is the style of his response to the Pharisees. He might have told them to their faces that he was the great Holy One who had been given the power to curse or to cure, to damn or to deliver. He might very well have pointed to his radical teachings or to his life-affirming miracles. He might have said: "Do you not know who I am?" But instead he just points them forward to a cross and to the reality of a blood-stained and all-too-human death.

I wonder what the Pharisees made of their encounter with Jesus that day. How did each one feel as he set out along the road and made his way home from the majesty of the Jerusalem Temple? Perhaps in his own good time one of those pondering Pharisees might have taken a moment quietly to think it all through:

- **there was Jesus**, ready to speak out for God's all-embracing love and justice;
- **there was Jesus**, ready to suffer so that earth and heaven might in some way be drawn closer to one another;
- **there was Jesus**, ready to pick up his cross and walk the way of death itself so that the world might know God's life in all its fulness.

Maybe one wandering, thoughtful Pharisee, mulling over the message he had heard from Jesus in the course of that big Temple confrontation, might have come to a conclusion - to a *conviction* - that *there must be something to it*. *Why* would Jesus make a stand for the grace of God, unless God is truly gracious? *Why* would Jesus risk public ridicule and hatred, unless this was something truly worth risking? *Why on earth* would Jesus pin his teaching - his very life - to the unlikely notion that he was actually the Son of God ... unless he was actually - *actually* - God's Son. *Who we are* is far more convincing than *anything we might say*.

A true story to finish: once there was a pastor who lived in the socially conservative, politically divided States of the southern USA. He was facing revolt from his congregation for standing up in favour of causes which were deeply unpopular in the South. He recalls:

*In one contentious meeting with church officers, I was told that my preaching in support of women's and LGBTQ equality would necessitate deep cuts in our church budget ... beginning with my own salary and benefits. I responded that I understood, but the cuts in my salary and benefits would not alter my convictions or my preaching. In response to that, one deacon stood and said, "If you are willing to sacrifice your own salary and benefits for this, then there must be something to it."*

As this brave and thoughtful pastor concluded: "The crosses we bear are indeed more self-disclosing than the self-assertions we make." Amen.

## Praying for others

God of Grace,  
as we return to worshipping in person in our buildings,  
we pray that all who want to be part of it may find a way to do so.  
For those who have not embraced online services with enthusiasm,  
may all obstacles be overcome for them to be present in person.  
May all those who have felt disconnected from the church  
feel drawn in once more.

We pray for all those who are ill and in need of urgent medical attention,  
for those depending on regular treatment from the NHS and  
for those who need ongoing social care.

May those who work in these fields have the strength they need  
to carry on and may the funding that supports services  
that are creaking be enhanced, so that needs are met.

We pray for peace in our world and  
for leaders everywhere to find alternatives to conflict.

We remember the people of Ukraine at this time of danger for them.  
Please protect them.

We ask these things in Jesus' Name. Amen.

## And finally ...

*Abigail Morrison considers fences and why we have them:*

A few days ago I heard The Andrews Sisters song about fences on the radio. You may know it (and if you don't, it's worth listening to). The first verse is:

*Oh, give me land, lots of land under starry skies above (don't fence me in).*

*Let me ride through the wide open country that I love (don't fence me in).*

*Let me be by myself in the evenin' breeze,*

*And listen to the murmur of the cottonwood trees,*

*Send me off forever but I ask you please don't fence me in.*

It makes me ask: why do we have fences? The song celebrates the freedom that open country brings. Indeed, that freedom to roam – both in body and mind – is a key part of being human. Flights of fancy bring great ideas and radical change. The birth of the Reformation needed open minds, for example. So, should we tear down all the barriers we have erected? I'm not so sure. I think there is an argument that fences can make good neighbours. We all need our own space where we can do things as we like. Without fences there could be a few heated disputes about a neighbour's dog destroying your garden, or your plants taking over your neighbour's veg plot. Some boundaries are helpful. But when they become large and immutable, when they cut us off from everyone so we can no longer hear what they have to say, or see a different way of living, then maybe they do need torn down.

Perhaps the ideal fence is low enough to allow you to see over it to chat to your neighbours and so to form relationships. It has gaps that are easy to pass through so they become porous enough for hedgehogs – or ideas – to cross over.