

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Isaiah 55:1-9 ("An Invitation to Abundant Life")

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.
See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.
See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Jubilate, everybody (CH: 65)
We are marching in the light of God (CH: 516)
You are before me, God, you are behind (CH: 96)
O Lord, our Lord through all the earth (CH: 5)
Now thank we all our God (CH: 182)

Each season of Lent that rolls into view around this time of year brings with it a range of timely opportunities: opportunities to pause and to reflect; opportunities to assess life and to repent of our failings; opportunities to hold back a little as we look forward a lot. And - of course - the season of Lent which begins in three days' time is a precursor to the later and greater season of Easter. Yet Lent *in its own right* is a time of year to be embraced and to be cherished.

Also this week our seven-week Lent study course will be getting under way, and if you would like to find out more please have a word with Abigail, with Frances or with me. Over the course of the next two months or so we will be turning to a slim but rather wonderful Lent devotional book written by the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann. It's entitled *A Way Other Than Our Own* and we will be using it both in our study groups and in our Sunday services, though in rather different ways. And whether or not you sign up for the course, I would really encourage you to part with a £10 note and gain a book which will help you to look at Lent in a whole new way. (I have bought five copies for selling on, so first come first served!)

One of the things I like about Walter Brueggemann is his ability to get to the heart of the matter without using jargon or relying on fancy words. So when he comes to considering the meaning of Lent he turns to today's reading from Isaiah chapter 55 and poses these rather striking questions for us to think about:

What are we doing?;

What are we working for that does not satisfy?; and

Are we spending for that which is not bread?

The Good News which God holds out to a tired, materialistic world are gifts indeed. These gifts are *free* gifts (gifts of God's immeasurable grace) which are meant to do nothing less than sustain true living. How might this work? Well, those who thirst are shown the way to gloriously quenching waters. Meanwhile, those who have no money are actually invited to come ... and buy ... and eat. There will be wine. There will be milk. And all without a price tag because this time it's God's shout, so your money (however much or however little) is no good here - here in a Kingdom which is coming from heaven on high straight down to earth below.

What is this? How can I possibly buy when I'm broke? It simply makes no kind of sense whatsoever, yet Isaiah's rather poetic point is that good living is to be lived out according to the terms which God graciously lays down. Or as Brueggemann neatly puts it, we need to do, "what is in sync with the God of the gospel".

Perhaps this brings us to the very heart of Lent, because in taking six-and-a-half-weeks to work ourselves and pray ourselves and push ourselves through to Easter Day, perhaps that Lenten journey can lead us to God's intention for us: an intention that would guide us away from the material and the trivial, the petty and the inconsequential. Lent, then, holds out to us a way of being which the way of the world scorns and derides. This is a way of being which is strange and alien to the rulers of the world, simply because this is the way of a very different Kingdom.

Isaiah seems to be a fine judge of our all-too-human nature and of the pitfalls which it can present for each one of us. The writer feels compelled to voice the passion which God has for his hapless children, stating:

... my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

Yet this statement of our weaknesses is not intended to cast down the listener or condemn humanity in all its ignorance and shame. Rather God holds out hope to all.

In verses 6 and 7 of our reading, we are brought into the heart of Lent with four key ideas which stand out for Brueggemann: **seek**; **call**; **forgive**; and **return**. It's all about reclaiming and regaining our true identity as people of faith. Back in Isaiah's day, the exiled Hebrew people were ready (and all too ready) to get on side with their Babylonian rulers whose empire was cruel and vain, forsaking God for trivial idols of one sort or another. If Isaiah's people were to compromise their God-given birthright to become just like their eastern taskmasters, they would not only lose their faith but their very identity as the children of Israel.

Are we, I wonder, in a similar situation today, surrounded by a secular world which recognises only that which can be seen or touched or tasted, envying much yet valuing little. And all the while are we actually missing one crucial point: that the one thing in life which is to be valued most highly of all happens to be the very thing which comes to us without any kind of price tag whatsoever: the gracious outpouring of God's love which can be ours if only we will turn away from our selfish ends to embrace that love as heaven fully intends.

What are we to do? The good professor put it this way: we are, "to come back to an original identity, an elemental discipline, a primal faith". Put another way, we are to repent, turning around in our tracks and heading back to God and God's ways.

That, perhaps, is the principal reason for walking the way of Lent each year, not so that by giving up our Merlot we can lose a few pounds off our waistline or gain a few pounds in our purses, but so that we can head back to God, secure in the confidence that we are moving ever closer to new life in Christ. Lent, then, can be a time for us to take stock of who we are ... and then to do something about it.

We have heard already today of the way in which Christian Aid helps some of the world's poorest farmers not only grow viable and nourishing crops, but also to market their produce effectively and so earn a fair price for what they produce. If we can use our jars of grace to support Christian Aid in its life-changing work, then we will be making a difference through our living and through the outworking of our faith. Having such a focus throughout the weeks to come not only helps us to make a stand for trade justice, it actually serves in a small yet significant way to reorientate ourselves in the direction of God. I would go so far as to suggest that if we work for this cause, we will be working for something which does satisfy as God intends for us. Turn from "overheated consumerism" and "limitless acquisitiveness", finding a new purpose in sharing what you have so that others can live better lives free from the grasp of poverty.

Since 2004, Gladsmuir and Longniddry through congregations, schools and the wider community have raised many, many tens of thousands of pounds through our Lenten Jar of Grace appeals, helping families with essentials as basic as mosquito nets in Kenya and as high-tech as Chromebook computers in East Lothian. We will never know what impact our giving has had (and will continue to have in years to come) but we hope and trust that our giving has been harnessed by Christian Aid and other bodies to serve God in remarkable ways. And for that we can all be thankful. So give what you can, not what you can't, and together we will help our friends in Christian Aid to be there for many, many families who have so little.

Lent is truly a time, "to consider again our easy, conventional compromises and see again about discipline, obedience and glad identity [for] God's face of pardon and mercy is turned exactly to the ones who re-engage an identity of faith." Amen.

Praying for others

God of justice,
you wish peace for all the Earth,
and so we turn to you this day
with our prayers for a world in danger.

We bring before you the nation of Ukraine and its people,
living under the shadow of brutality and conflict at this time of great tension.

In the midst of all the uncertainty of these days,
bless all the millions of ordinary people, both in Ukraine and Russia,
who simply want peace for themselves, their families and their neighbours.
Be with politicians and diplomats in their efforts to bring an end to aggression
in this sensitive and contested part of Eastern Europe,
and look with favour upon the faithful work of peacemakers in the region.

Guide your church in Ukraine,
that Christians may see beyond historical division
to recognise the call of the Prince of Peace,
even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison considers pruning:

Late February and early March is the time to prune roses. Pruning is an art I only really got acquainted with when I moved to Longniddry and took over a garden with some established plants. I love roses. They are plants that need quite a bit of looking after but they reward you with such beautiful blooms they are worth it.

One of the most counter-intuitive things about roses is pruning. Just as the plants are beginning to put out the first, tentative signs of new growth – lovely pale pink buds bursting into wee pink and green shoots – you have to cut them back. It seems so harsh. But if you leave a rose well alone and don't get to it with your secateurs it will grow tall and spindly with lots of thin branches. This means the energy of the plant has to go to support a lot of growth, and this results in fewer and poorer quality flowers.

You you get better flowering if you prune hard. You cut out any dead and diseased wood and then cut back each branch really quite significantly. I think it's not really possible to prune a rose too hard. The few branches left produce lots of new growth and lots of flowers later in the year.

I think our lives could often do I with a good prune, including church life. We too can often have too much going on and our energies are spread too thinly across too many things. Even though all those things have some life in them we would probably achieve more by doing less but better.

So, where is the dead, diseased and weak wood in our lives? Can we be bold enough to cut it right back to a few strong shoots? If we do we may find we bear a much better crop of flowers as a result.