

# THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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## Today's Bible reading

*1 Corinthians 1: 18-31 ("Christ the Power and Wisdom of God")*

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,

and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.' Amen. (NRSV)

## Today's hymns

*Seek ye first the Kingdom of God (CH: 641)*

*All things bright and beautiful (CH: 137)*

*Holy, holy, holy (CH: 111)*

*O Love, how deep, how broad, how high (CH: 354)*

*You shall go out with joy (CH: 804)*

**I**t is often noted that the emblem of the Christian faith is, in truth, a symbol not of victory but of defeat. Was it not, after all, a Roman cross and Roman nails which together ended the life of the Church's great founder and true head, a poor labourer named Jesus of Nazareth? In a brief lifespan of some 30 or so years, this unique figure in human history did enough and said enough and rubbed-people-up-the-wrong-way enough to make it all but inevitable that he would end his days a loser, first condemned then brutally executed amid the turmoil of a Jerusalem Passover season.

Having gathered around him a band of idealistic followers, Jesus was unceremoniously put to death, showing to all the world the sheer folly of his outlandish views. This man had, if you recall, claimed that he was bringing Good News to the poor. He had held out to inquisitive crowds a great many upside-down values delivered through some famously vivid story-telling - the many parables which left his listeners wondering what it was really all about. He had even asserted that for God the word "first" might really imply "last", while "last" could be read as "first". Hardly a clear case to be advancing. For many of Jesus' perplexed listeners, the whole misadventure must just have been a great big tangle of confusion and contradiction.

And yet only a couple of days after this peasant's execution other - altogether different - stories would emerge: stories which spoke of life being rekindled. The life of Jesus, yes; but also the lives of those who had walked beside him. These followers would go on to speak of a weird presence going with them along their own journeyings of life: some godly presence which was felt in their hearts and known in their minds - maybe even tasted in bread broken and in wine poured out.

And then there was the cross itself. For Christians the ultimate symbol of personal defeat had been raised up as a clear and present sign of hope for all the world. The one who had been slain would, it appeared, enjoy the last word.

Risen presence, real and true? Death overcome by life? What kind of foolishness is this? Actually, it reflects the very foolishness which we find spoken of by the apostle Paul as he contrasts the views of the powerful and the arrogant in his own day with the views of those early believers who had cast their unlikely lot with a dead and dismissed Judaeon.

Walter Brueggemann, whose devotions for Lent we are using in both church and study groups these next few weeks, maintains that "the cross is a contradiction to the world". He holds to the idea that in the Cross of Jesus we find a firm and forthright exposing of the ways of a world whose priorities are so often terribly misplaced. Here, after all, is a materialistic world of selfishness, in which the truth of God's very nature is sidelined, or ignored, or denied altogether. Yet the world's confidence in its own ways can never quite overcome the strange power which is to be identified in the central claims of the Christian faith.

Some 300 years after Rome killed Jesus on a device of unspeakable cruelty and torture, the Roman Emperor Constantine became a high-profile convert to Christianity. In time, the Empire took heed, and in the end Rome's soldiers even went into battle with the cross of Christ emblazoned upon their shields. And so started centuries of unnatural cohabitation in which Church and State would court each other's affections in a decidedly dodgy relationship. Proud kings and self-obsessed emperors might have gained something from these cosy connections; what is beyond doubt is that the Church - the Church of Jesus Christ, let us remember -

undoubtedly gathered to itself a much-prized seat at some pretty dubious tables. While influence was gained, integrity was jeopardised, and at times lost altogether.

Quite clearly, Constantine's way was not "The Way" of Jesus. As we journey through the season of Lent, the never-less-than-challenging image of the Cross must stay close to our thinking. With every passing week of this long (and in many ways arduous) season, Holy Week draws us nearer. And, with it, we spy the prospect of fierce conflict between Jesus and his sworn enemies there in the Temple. These are respected figures in good standing with the ruling elite: religious leaders who cannot tolerate the challenge which a radical, rough and ready figure holds up to long-cherished ways of being. The scribes and the Pharisees look at Jesus and see only a figure of threat whose values are so dangerously different from their own. Again and again they observe him in action, questioning where his authority might come from and plotting his downfall. Yes, they listen closely to his words yet still they find little to which they can relate, so rooted are they in the old familiar ways.

These leaders feel convinced that they know what faith in God is supposed to be about: dripping with tradition and form and ritual that span the generations. They would surely have to acknowledge that the Scriptures which they hold as their own are the very same Scriptures from which Jesus himself preaches and teaches. They might even ask themselves what kind of foolishness would seek to change such a time-served, proven system? More, what kind of action might be needed to make this foolishness disappear once and for all?

The answer to that question (both stark and horrific) would be found in the form of a Roman cross.

Imagine if God could have found an all-conquering champion to knock the world into shape by heavenly power. Surely the Maker of the universe could have found such a fighter in an instant. Why then did God not simply send the world some kind of superhero? Or to turn this question around, why did God choose to send Jesus, a vulnerable person of flesh-and-blood whose teaching and example would end up leading to his own human death? It seems to make no sense. Foolish, even.

But listen, because this idea is addressed by Paul in today's reading, as he points to: ... *Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

Brueggemann speaks about this vulnerable, human Christ as the one who brings "newness" into a settled world. He goes on to say that in reality this world's very familiar settledness - settled wisdom and settled wealth and settled power - can know nothing of newness ... perhaps because to be settled is to close one's eyes to that which is so deeply unsettling.

For us there is a need throughout this season of Lent to take in the facts of our world with eyes *not closed* but wide open to the prospect of doing some serious unsettling:

... eyes wide open to those settled disparities between those who play the game of life according to the world's rules and those who yearn for a fairer way;

... eyes wide open to the settled gulf which exists between those few who are rich and those many who are poor;

... eyes wide open to the settled culture of empire, in which the very lives of ordinary folk are viewed as mere poker chips to be thrown down and wasted.

In Jesus, God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. And still today God comes to those ready to be fools for Christ. Amen.

## Praying for others

Lord,  
we live in a world where the wisdom of man indeed seems folly,  
where dictators and military juntas oppress their own people,  
invade their neighbours, locking up or even murdering  
anyone who disagrees with them.  
Though it seems hopeless, we pray that the wisdom of these men  
be seen as the foolishness it is, so that your wisdom would prevail.  
We ask that peace be brought to Ukraine, freedom to the people of Myanmar and  
to the Uighur population in China.  
We ask this in the hope that is embodied in Jesus Christ.  
God of all the earth,  
we live in a world where strength is seen as a virtue.  
But you remind us that the greatest strength by far  
is in the apparent weakness of Christ on the cross.  
Help us to overcome violence with the weakness of love.  
We pray for refugees fleeing violence – in Ukraine  
but also Syria and Afghanistan and elsewhere.  
Let our governments show the strength of love by offering them sanctuary here.  
Let us show the strength of love by welcoming and supporting them.  
We ask these blessings in Jesus' name. Amen.

## And finally ...

*Robin Hill considers coming back home to church on Sunday:*

How often have I typed ... or written ... or spoken these words: "Since March 2020"? The answer is: a lot. At times it has seemed as though "since March 2020" would stretch on to eternity, yet March 2022 now promises to be a time of change. Already there have been developments, chief among them our ability to get back to our Sunday pattern of 9.45am at Longniddry and 11am at Gladsmuir. And although this is just getting under way, already it feels very good indeed.

One of the privileges of being a minister is that you get to walk into the sanctuary on a Sunday morning, looking out to see everyone gathered for worship. Often people are sitting near a friend with whom a happy chat or a word of timely support has already been shared. That kind of experience is central to the idea of congregational fellowship. And, let's face it, little conversations are themselves part of the glue of community, bonding people together in meaningful ways.

One final thought: though live-streaming may have its ups and its downs, its pros and its cons, Zoom and YouTube undeniably offer a way of helping people at home, in hospital, in care or on holiday to be part of our services. This technology has been our help in time of need and has well and truly found its place in church. Many challenges lie ahead (that much is clear). Yet with worship, fellowship and connectedness we find ourselves in a good place. Be thankful for such gifts.