

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

Issue 112

8th May 2022

Online at www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

Today's Bible reading

Exodus 37:1-10 ("Making the Ark of the Covenant")

Bezalel made the ark of acacia wood; it was two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high. He overlaid it with pure gold inside and outside, and made a moulding of gold round it. He cast for it four rings of gold for its four feet, two rings on one side of it and two rings on its other side. He made poles of acacia wood, and overlaid them with gold, and put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark, to carry the ark. He made a mercy-seat of pure gold; two cubits and a half was its length, and a cubit and a half its width. He made two cherubim of hammered gold; at the two ends of the mercy-seat he made them, one cherub at one end, and one cherub at the other end; of one piece with the mercy-seat he made the cherubim at its two ends. The cherubim spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy-seat with their wings. They faced one another; the faces of the cherubim were turned towards the mercy-seat.

He also made the table of acacia wood, two cubits long, one cubit wide, and a cubit and a half high. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness (CH201)

It's a world of sunshine (CH245)

He is Lord (CH359)

All things bright and beautiful (CH137)

Give thanks with a grateful heart (CH180)

Some of the Bible readings I choose for Sundays are very straightforward. Others Bible readings, like today's one, less so. Indeed, when the word reached our Longniddy technical team that they would be projecting the Bible text we heard a moment ago on to the sanctuary wall, contact was made to the manse to check with the minister that this was, in fact, the right passage.

So then: where should we start? Let's start with the first word of our reading. It's a name: Bezalel (that amazing craftsman whom I mentioned not so long ago). I knew nothing whatsoever about Bezalel, so I had to look him up in a book. And here is what I found: Bezalel was appointed by the Lord to work on the building of the Tabernacle, which was the portable place of worship constructed by Moses during the many, many years when the children of Israel were wandering in the wilderness before they came to arrive in the Promised Land. Bezalel, then, was obviously a figure of note: both an amazing maker (skilled in woods and metals and much, much more) and also a person of great personal faith in God.

In addition to overseeing the construction of the Tabernacle itself, Bezalel was also entrusted with the job of creating the ark of the covenant, as described in detail across today's reading: a pure-gold-covered wooden chest with an elaborate lid known as "the mercy seat". The Book of Exodus makes clear that the purpose of the ark of the covenant was to be the place where the two stone tablets of The Ten Commandments would reside being carried in solemn state whether the people went on their journeyings. So this was no ordinary piece of furniture. And as such it required to be viewed by one and all as being very, very special.

So now we know a little more about Bezalel (you and I both!) let's take a look at his handiwork, and in particular, that box which would hold those tablets which God had given to Moses in that famous mountaintop encounter. To make the ark of the covenant was surely to make something worth celebrating and worth cherishing: a box which (if only it could speak) might declare loud and clear: "Look at me! Do you not know who I am? And can you not guess at what might lie deep inside me?"

A piece of ecclesiastical furniture like this would probably have had a protective purpose, a bit like a safe, to ensure that its precious contents would stay safe from any knocks or falls - or even attacks from hostile tribes. It would likely be carried by soldiers ready to give their lives to keep that precious ark and its legendary tablets secure. But another purpose of the ark of the covenant would have been tied in with something different: *human power*: "Look at us with our mind-bogglingly splendid ark of the covenant! Do you not know who we are? And can you not guess why we, the children of Israel, the people of Moses, are so very special?"

These, let us recall, were violent times when brutality was never far away. Wars and rumours of wars would have been rife across the Ancient Near East, as different nations and many a tribe would be vying for supremacy. Can we even begin to imagine the potency of the symbolism represented in that box with its fragrant acacia wood, its pure gold (inside and out) and its sculptures of angelic cherubim, their wings spread out to conceal the golden mercy seat beneath? Such imagery would have been the stuff of legend, proclaiming to anyone who might be thinking about picking a fight with Moses that this man had something far more powerful than mere spears and swords and bows and arrows at his disposal. No, if you thought you could mess with this travelling nation, you might have to contend not just with their people, but also with their God who had already shown by mighty acts just what he was capable of.

Clearly, the things we make can say a whole lot about us. The same goes for what we do with those things. Consider, if you will, the most dazzling places of worship you have ever visited. Some, like St Paul's Cathedral, might speak to you of beautiful architecture dedicated to the glory of God. Others, like the Duomo in Florence might in all their opulence and splendour take us back to an age when merchants and money lenders had cash to burn, and that cash was syphoned off for the construction of grand showpieces of religion.

But a place of worship doesn't need to be glorious or extravagant to make a big impact on a visitor. Just wander into a highland kirk or a Quaker meeting house and you may find yourself struck by their very touching sparseness and simplicity. Nothing at all is grand, nothing is needless. In such plain places there can be found a haven of piety and peace where worshippers gather week after week.

Why, I wonder, doesn't Longniddry Church's building look like Durham Cathedral? And why doesn't Gladsmuir Church's building look like St Peter's Basilica in Rome? The setting, the culture and the theology of the Church at the time will all certainly have something to do with it. Equally, the budget available to the builders must have played a big part both in the design and construction of churches in days gone by. But one other factor of real significance certainly has to be the times in which each building was constructed. So let's come close to home. When Gladsmuir Church was built in the 1840s, it probably seemed perfectly natural to have a 450-seater stone-built place of worship set in a tiny hamlet. Its purpose was to bring large families together from across all the nearby farms - farms which were dependent upon the labour of many, many workers. And so from up the hill and down the hill and all the way off to the very Firth of Forth, people streamed to Gladsmuir. Was it filled week by week? Perhaps it was. What we *do* know is that this was a building geared to the worship of God. Indeed, its very firm purpose was to "worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness". And such beauty!

Now fast forward less than a century to the year 1925. Longniddry Church's building came into being after The Great War, when times had well and truly changed. The Church of Scotland could have copied Gladsmuir's building but, significantly, they didn't. Instead, an adaptable space sufficed, able to be used in different ways for different purposes. This place would be smaller than Gladsmuir but a whole lot more flexible for a growing community in a changing world.

Fast forward a further century and more: by the time I (perhaps!) get to celebrate my 88th birthday, some 30 years from now, there is *just* a chance that the new town of Blindwells *might* possibly have been completed, with shops and schools and businesses and recreation space and a whole, *whole* lot of houses. Lots and lots and *lots* of houses. Oh yes, *and* a church building. That building will not be a robust Durham Cathedral. And it will not be a gorgeous Notre Dame. And it will not be an elegant St Paul's. In truth, it will not even be a calming Gladsmuir or a strikingly simple Longniddry. The rather exciting reality is that *we cannot know what Blindwells Church will be* because its time and its place and its people will need to work together with God's Holy Spirit to come up with a mix of bricks and mortar and faithfulness and imagination which will be right for its time and place. Just right, in the same way as all of the above have been right in their own time and place.

To conclude, the theologian Jennifer Brownell, puts it very neatly ... like this: "Too often, we try to force our old things to work for us in new times. Instead, we are invited to receive what we've been given with enough gratitude to recognize that it must change along with us, to meet the times we are in." Amen.

Praying for others

Good and gracious God, be our shepherd and our guide:
lead us out of darkness into life and light eternal;
and when we wander bring us back to you and your love.

We pray for the people of Ukraine who are engulfed in war.
May the nations find common cause so as to help bring about an end to the terror.
May there be peace for the people who are now so grievously disturbed by violence.

Strong and gentle God,
we pray for the peoples of all the earth that they may live in peace,
that all may have enough, that children may be fed and loved,
that the lonely may have friends and the desolate find comfort.

We pray for our own land and our own communities.
May we know, as we go through each day, that you are not so far away and
that you know our every need and every care.

Lord of this lovely spring season of blossom and new leaves and bright birdsongs,
make us faithful in knowledge of your goodness and help us to serve others;
however small our service, we will be serving you. Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison considers the benefits of lockdown:

The Covid-19 pandemic is still with us though it does feel we are moving to the stage where it is endemic and we've, largely, learnt to live with it. I don't want to trivialise the disease - it is often pretty horrid to suffer from, can have lingering effects (fatigue and brain-fog being key amongst them) and it does still kill some folk though, mercifully, far fewer than before. But life is returning to something that looks and feels much like it did before 23rd March 2020.

I wonder: am I the only one who is, dare I say it, hankering after some aspects of lockdown? Of course, when we were trapped in our own homes most of the time and unable to see anyone outside our own household we all wanted out! But now that life has got back to its old, frenetic pace I confess that I rather miss the calmness of lockdown. Admittedly, several of us in Longniddry had a burst of activity once our church building shut, helping to put in place the village support scheme and online services. But then - lo and behold! - no meetings, no rushing from A to B, almost empty to-do lists and wonderful weather. I really enjoyed that lack of stress, the walks along the beach, mindful gardening. I missed friends and family hugely but for the first time (perhaps in my life) I could just go with the flow and chill a bit.

Don't get me wrong, I have absolutely no desire to go back to overwhelmed hospitals, surging deaths and ITU patients, as well as not seeing my children for months. But I would quite like to recapture some of the relaxed lifestyle I achieved. Maybe you would too.