

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Hebrews 11: 1-7 ("The Meaning of Faith")

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and 'he was not found, because God had taken him.' For it was attested before he was taken away that 'he had pleased God.' And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith. Amen. (NRSV)

John 13 : 21-35 ("The New Commandment")

When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.' Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Our children, Lord, in faith and prayer (CH 632)

For everyone born, a place at the table (CH 685)

For the beauty of the earth (CH 181)

Be still, for the presence of the Lord (CH 189)

Sing for God's glory that colours the dawn of creation (CH 172)

This week's sermon has been prepared by the Longniddry Christian Aid team.

This time last year we were getting ready to mark the 75th anniversary of Christian Aid. The focus then was on climate change and in particular the disproportionate impact this has on the people of the very poorest countries. The global pandemic had served only to make life harder, through the ravages of an indiscriminate virus and the disruptive effect on food and medical supply chains.

As we approach this year's Christian Aid week, neither the virus nor climate change have been defeated - far from it. Instead, war in Ukraine has cast its ominous shadow across the globe. Take Zimbabwe as an example. It may be 7,000 miles away from Ukraine but the conflict there will drive up food prices both in Zimbabwe and the rest of the globe.

It is reported that, collectively, Russia and Ukraine are responsible for more than a quarter of global wheat exports and for around 80% of the world's supply of sunflower oil. Russia – along with its ally, Belarus, is also a huge source of fertiliser, accounting for around 18% globally. Just like the virus, the pain will be felt greatest by those least able to cope. Already vulnerable families will be pushed deeper into hunger.

In rural Zimbabwe, seven out of ten women rely on farming to earn a living and provide for their families. But the climate crisis has brought intense droughts that have left their land barren. With no rain, families can't grow enough food and women struggle to provide for their children. Drought starves. It robs both women and men of the chance to farm, and drives their families into hunger. Conflict does nothing but exacerbate the problems.

Jessica Mwedzi is a central character in this year's Christian Aid Week. She is one of the many women at the mercy of the climate crisis. Drought makes every day a struggle for her survival. Jessica is hungry: hungry for a good meal; hungry to earn a decent living; hungry to provide a more hopeful future for her family. She toils on her farm, but no food can grow on her ashen dry land.

As Jessica explains: "One year, we had no rain. The scorching sun burnt my crops just as they were about to bloom. It was so painful and disheartening. My children crave a good meal, but I can't provide. We often go to bed on an empty stomach. It pains me to send them to bed hungry."

Drought makes women like Jessica hungrier, poorer. It robs them of the chance to earn a living with dignity.

She watches her sons and daughters play outside as the golden sun fades across the sky. They hold hands, dance and sing. She finds a ray of hope that she will overcome this tough time. One day, Jessica will be able to provide her much-loved children with good food, and a full life, free from hunger. To borrow one of Christian Aid's straplines, Jessica has 'Hope in times of Crisis'.

But what is 'hope'? How does it help Jessica? And how does hope bond us here in East Lothian to Jessica in Zimbabwe, someone thousands of miles away and a woman we are very unlikely to ever meet in person?

For such a short word, hope is a very complex word. On one level we can use it in an almost unconscious way as in, for example, "Hope you have a good holiday", or "Hope you enjoy your birthday". Used in this way, it's little more than a trivial, albeit genuine, way to convey an optimistic and positive message of goodwill.

When I hope that my football team wins its next match, I know that my hope is based on less than a certain outcome – there is every chance my hopes will be dashed, not least because the other team will be doing its best to destroy my hopes in order to realise their own. In this context, hope of that nature is going to do little for Jessica.

When we look at the word hope in the context of our Christian faith, however, it takes on a much firmer and certain meaning. Used in this context, hope rests in the confident belief and expectation that God will provide for all our needs both now and in the future. In the Letter to the Hebrews, we are told “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”. Hope therefore is the bedrock of our faith; it is a sure and certain constant in our lives.

But still we ask the question, how does this more certain meaning of hope help Jessica? Could it be that real hope comes from action? Indeed, could it be that hope without action reverts to little more than the trivial type of hope mentioned earlier?

In today’s reading from John’s gospel we hear that very familiar passage where Jesus gives the disciples a new commandment to love one another: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another”.

As much as this passage may be familiar to us, to the disciples the idea would have been quite new. Throughout their lives they would have been used to being asked to devote themselves to God but this new commandment – to love one another – was new in its scope and inspiration, spurred by the love that Jesus had for them.

It’s not that they wouldn’t have been familiar with the commandment to love their neighbours, but this new commandment required the disciples to love one another as he had loved them. Jesus implores the disciples to demonstrate their love for him by loving one another in a committed and costly way: the way of the Carpenter of Nazareth who gave all that he had on the cross of Good Friday.

Turning to the present day, it is out of the fullness of the love poured into us by God that we in turn pour out love to our sisters and brothers. When Jesus uses the words “*Just as I loved you*”, he doesn’t mean in some vague, fluffy, non-committal way. In his love for us, he suffered and died on the cross so that we could be saved. Crucially, it was a love that required action.

In order to love our neighbours, near and far, we need to act too.

Through Christian Aid we can take action to bring justice for the oppressed, the hungry and the marginalised. Those acts may involve the giving of our time, our talents and our gifts to Christian Aid. It may be campaigning for justice by raising our voices with our politicians. It may be praying that families stay strong and be provided for during times of drought and challenging conditions.

Love acts. Our love for others brings justice, and for people like Jessica, love brings hope. In these times of crisis, may we never give up loving. May we never give up hoping. Amen.



Praying for others

Creator God, cultivator of our faith,
thank you for the privilege of living in this global garden planted to bear your fruit,
to delight our tongues, to fill our bellies, to energise our bodies.

You have given us life in all its fullness.
You have given us life, yet millions still hunger.

May we be the seeds from which your Kingdom grows.
In our hunger for peace, we pray for the people of Ukraine.
But may our concern for them not stifle our concern for the people of Zimbabwe,
Afghanistan and Syria and all those other places to whom our hearts have become
hardened through over-familiarity.

In our hunger for change, we pray for our government and politicians
that their decisions may be guided by you.
But may our concern for them not stifle our concern for your little ones, children
who go to bed hungry, whose parents struggle to provide for them
in times of desperate drought.
And in our hunger for love, we pray that you will fill us with your love, your hope,
your passion and your life, that we may go out from this place to give, act, love,
hope and pray, so all who hunger to provide may be filled to overflowing.
In the name of Christ: farmer, gardener and cultivator, Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison considers Christian Aid week:

The address in today's service is about Jessica Mwedzi and her struggles to feed her family. Christian Aid Week aims to raise funds to help people like Jessica. Your gift could help her grow drought-resistant crops, set up water taps on her farm and learn how to grow food in a harsh climate.

The village Christian Aid Group is arranging two activities to help raise funds. The first is our annual delivery of donation envelopes to every household in the village. Donations can be dropped into these and then returned either to Church (Sunday service time or Tuesday afternoons between 2pm and 3pm) or to the plant sale (more of which in a moment). We will not be returning to homes to collect filled envelopes this year. Thanks to the dozens of folk who help drop off the 1,300 or so envelopes - we really appreciate it.

We are also holding a plant sale (a very fitting way to help those struggling to grow their own food) between 10am and noon next Saturday 21st May on the green space outside the shops (or in the church if it is tipping it down). Please come along, make a donation and take some plants. If you have any plants you want to give to the stall, bring them along before 10am or give me a shout to arrange a collection.

Hope does not disappoint. Hope lives in you.