

# THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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## Today's Bible reading

*Matthew 7: 1-12 ("Judging Others")*

'Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbour, "Let me take the speck out of your eye", while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye.

'Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.

'Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.' Amen. (NRSV)

## Today's hymns

*Lord of Creation (CH 500)*

*One more step along the world I go (CH 530)*

*Praise waits for thee in Zion, Lord (CH 44)*

*Put all your trust in God (CH 270)*

*We have heard a joyful sound (CH 249)*

**W**hen you heard today's Bible reading, I wonder if you maybe found it a wee bit hard to follow ... almost as though it was flitting around from one theme to another. Here's a reminder for you: first we heard about the dangers of judging other people when there's a whole lot to criticise in our own life without worrying about the lives of our neighbours. Then the emphasis shifted a little to highlight the dangers of casting our "pearls before swine". No sooner had we heard those words than Jesus changed again to remind us of the words which many of us learned from a well known children's hymn:

*Ask and it shall be given unto you,  
seek and ye shall find; knock, and the door shall be opened unto you;  
allelu, alleluiah.*

Last of all came what is known as "The Golden Rule" of Jesus, which in only 21 simple little words says so very much about the way we should choose to live our lives close to the ways of God as we respect our neighbours:

*In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.*

What is it about this section of Matthew's gospel that makes us think Jesus is fluttering around from theme to theme like a butterfly visiting this flower, then that? The answer lies in the fact that the words we have just heard read from the Bible form part of the so-called "Sermon on the Mount", which covers Matthew chapter 5 to Matthew chapter 7. And although we think we know what a sermon is (long or short, gripping or dull) the Sermon on the Mount is actually not a sermon at all, but a collection of sayings of Jesus all gathered together in one place.

We cannot know how it might have been that Matthew ended up grouping these little lines in the way he did. Maybe he had finished writing the entire story of Jesus from birth to death and Resurrection, only to find a big pile of snippets left over by the edge of his desk. You can imagine how he might have taken all the valuable little bits and pieces and formed them into a completely free-standing body of teaching, covering so many different aspects of faith and life. However it may have been that Matthew pieced it all together, it is probably just as well that he did, because in the Sermon on the Mount we find some of the true gems of the Christian faith. (Why not see for yourself, reading from Matthew chapter 5, verse 1 through to the end of chapter 7? The Sermon on the Mount is well worth a look!)

For us today, let's home in on that piece of teaching in which Jesus points out the hypocrisy of people who criticise others for the speck of dust in their eye while conveniently ignoring the log of wood in their own. This certainly seems a strange - almost funny - way of putting things, and that might not be too surprising when we stop to consider the way in which Jesus would set about teaching his audiences. Going from place to place he might draw together a crowd of folk in a town square or down by the local well. In settings like these he would need to make a snappy point in a memorable - most likely visual - way. And even 2000 years on, we too can imagine Jesus' image of an unthinking individual who draws attention to the tiny failings of other people, all the while ignoring his or her own all-too-obvious flaws.

The image of the log in the eye may be very, very strange, yet we can readily understand just where Jesus is coming from as he weaves his words to great effect, forcing people first to smile at the ridiculous scene in their mind's eye, before he makes it all very personal by suggesting that maybe the listeners themselves might be guilty of double standards in their own everyday living.

But is there something more going on in the story of the speck and the log? It may be that Jesus is making more than just a general comment about how people (you and I even) live lives which are unfair in their judgmental probing. It may be that Jesus had his sights set on the religious authorities in Jerusalem whose thinking was so centred on keeping The Law in all its minutest detail. Take the Sabbath regulations, for example: it wasn't just a case of not working on the day of rest; all sorts of very ordinary activities were ruled out, with people being seen as second class citizens if they overstepped the mark in the tiniest of ways. It got to the point where keeping Sabbath rules was regarded as more important than helping someone in need, if by helping them you came into conflict with the stark letter of The Law. And Jesus, of course, fell foul of this himself, being criticised for being a healer whose calling spanned every day of the week. And so he found himself on duty all the time, tirelessly helping those in real need irrespective of regulations.

How strange it is that while Jesus came to set people free, we (his followers) so often enslave others with our petty judgmentalism. Recall how in living memory people across Scotland were criticised for nothing more than seeing a film in the cinema or going to the dancing. And as for a glass of wine ... *well really!* And although today's standards may be rather different from those of our grandparents' generation, I bet it wouldn't take too much effort to draw up a long enough list of all the things we look down our noses at when we see our neighbours' lives. They may have a speck in their eye, but what about those dirty great planks of wood obscuring *our* vision?

Perhaps the problem for many people today is one of *unnoticed* double standards. We know full well what the wrongs of society are, and (would you believe it?) those wrongs just happen to be wrongs *which we don't do*. And so we are in the clear, home and dry, while those other people are clearly worthy of blame for their rather different life choices. The question here is: are we being fair?

Let's turn it all around and look at this issue from a different angle, because then we might grasp exactly what is going on for us. If we find ourselves doing something that's wrong, we may well work very, very hard at justifying how this wrong is, in fact, able to be set aside. Or maybe we simply try to downplay it, so that a lie becomes a so-called "white lie", or an obvious over-indulgence is treated as "a little sin" that's not worth thinking about. A casual telling of a tale should never be seen as gossiping (of course not!) while our more antisocial habits are neither habits nor, for that matter, antisocial by any stretch of the imagination. In these ways we cherrypick our way through life, fooling only ourselves.

At a personal level this can rightly be seen as hypocrisy, but taking a global perspective reveals why this topic is so profoundly important in the 21st century. As people of the rich, northern countries, the sheer mountain of resources which most of us consume whether in greed or in apathy, truly puts us to shame when seen in light of the grinding poverty which is the lot of billions of our fellow human beings in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Even here at home so much money is spent on things which will never satisfy while countless households find themselves choosing between eating and heating. We may think of ourselves as having an entitlement to use what we have as we please, yet the Gospel of Jesus Christ points us in another direction altogether - a direction which we might not care to consider.

Jesus warns us about the choices we make in life, and he shows us that his Way is very different from the way which our human nature would so often have us go. That's why we need to spend more time extracting those big wooden logs from our own eyes. Then we might just come to see the world a lot more clearly. Amen.

## Praying for others

God of compassion,

please empower your church here in Longniddry, in Gladsmuir and throughout the world, that we may not tire of following the way of Jesus.

Secure in your love, may we give our time, talents and possessions to help build your kingdom on earth, putting the needs of others before ourselves.

As we come to the end of Christian Aid week, we thank you for all those donations offered by people who could well look at the rising cost of living here in the UK and find a reason not to give, or to give less. May the funds raised make a huge difference to the lives of those who might otherwise despair of the odds stacked against them.

We ask for your protection and care for those living precarious lives, where worry and hardship are ever-present realities. May those in positions of power hear the cries and respond with compassion.

Finally, bless Her Majesty the Queen, as the celebrations of her Platinum Jubilee get under way. May she have the energy and vigour to enjoy the recognition of her service to this country and the Commonwealth.

In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

## And finally ...

*Robin Hill considers next week's challenging General Assembly:*

General Assembly week occurs each May in Edinburgh, where ministers and elders gather to consider the issues facing our denomination. Usually, the Assembly brings with it the prospect of a stimulating - even enjoyable - six days of debate, with several "stand out" moments to take home on the Friday afternoon. In 2022, however, things have got altogether more serious, not to say pressing.

This time last year commissioners (the posh name for members) were given hours and hours of debate on the need to bring in radical restructuring before it is too late. The Church faces a double whammy of unenviable proportions: an ever-declining membership across Scotland (many of whose people fail to see the point of organised religion) coupled with an on-going crisis in ministerial recruitment. Put another way, our neighbours are staying away while those in the Church are unwilling to train for ministry. And if we wanted to turn it into a triple whammy, we might also point to a Church which for approaching 200 years has had too many buildings - buildings which are now becoming expensive to repair and in some cases are positively unfit for purpose. Serious, I think you will agree.

For me, the big question is not to do with the decline and disappearance of the Church. Rather, I find myself wondering more and more about the ways in which God might use people of faith in new ways. Are we to keep going as we always have done? Or are we to dream dreams of a radically different kind of future?

The next few days might well reveal much about the future course of the Church of Scotland. Keep our General Assembly in your prayers as it does its best to make sense of both the challenges *and* the opportunities which are to come.