

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible readings

1 Corinthians 4:14-21 ("Fatherly Admonition")

I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me. For this reason I sent you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus, as I teach them everywhere in every church. But some of you, thinking that I am not coming to you, have become arrogant. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. For the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power. What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness? Amen. (NRSV)

John 16:12-15 ("The Work of the Spirit")

'I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Great is thy faithfulness (CH: 153)

Make me a channel (CH: 528)

The great Love of God is revealed in the Son (CH: 358)

To the name of our salvation (CH: 471)

It is one thing for followers of Jesus Christ to talk the talk. It is quite another thing entirely for us to walk the walk. That is the tough and uncompromising lesson offered by the apostle Paul to the young church in Corinth. We know from the pages of the New Testament that Paul cared passionately for all the little churches which he helped to establish all across what today would be called Turkey and Greece. He had travelled far and met many a danger in his time. He had preached in public places and debated long and hard. In short, Paul knew his stuff and was prepared - through not merely his words but also his *actions* - to prove the commitment and concern that were at the very core of his faith. In short, not only did the apostle Paul talk the talk, he also walked the walk.

Our reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is hard to understand without a bit of background, so here goes with my attempt to show you why it should be that this writer to the Corinthians is more than a bit upset. Actually, let's start at the point where Paul realises there is a problem, and no small problem at that. He has come to recognise for himself that the Corinthian Christians are at each others' throats over what can only be described as hero worship. The church in Corinth is divided over the question of who is the greatest. Is it (in the red corner) Paul, their great teacher who brought them to faith in the first place? Or is it (in the blue corner) a bloke named Appollos, a church leader some of the locals have really latched on to? Paul - never one to shy away from a tricky situation - is insistent that these are not the right issues to be grappling with in Corinth.

Listen to his words from slightly earlier, back in chapter 3, and hear for yourself how Paul points these Christian squabblers away from their childishness, away from their petty bickering over nothing, ordering them to grow up and set their sights much, much higher. Interestingly, he accuses them of being, "of the flesh" (which implies that their lives are orientated towards human sinfulness in the general sense of the term) rather than having the maturity of an adult faith.

Paul's words ring with a sense of frustration and dismay as he takes on a big issue: *And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, 'I belong to Paul', and another, 'I belong to Apollos', are you not merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. [Emphasis added]*

For Paul, then, this cult of personality which has been jumped on by the Corinthians involves a fixation on celebrity which is far from healthy. Not only is the church divided as between followers of Paul and followers of Appollos, but yet other Christians in the city think that Peter (or Cephas, as he is known) is the best leader of the bunch. Paul tells the church that it needs to get its priorities straightened out once and for all. These human beings: who are they? The answer, says Paul, is simple: they are *servants of God, called by God, deployed by God, used by God* to bring the people to faith in Jesus Christ. And as for the task facing those leaders, they are simply gardeners in the field, with Paul planting the seeds and Appollos watering them. Important roles for sure, but it is God alone who gives the growth.

Celebrity: too often people find themselves swayed by the tarnished allure of fame. That seems to be what happened with the chattering classes of Corinth, supporting *their* Paul or *their* Appollos ... or *their* whoever. In the end that emphasis on

personality led to splits as people behaved more like first century equivalents of sports fans or pop music groupies than the members of the Body of Christ which they were called to become.

In our day and age, such bickering is made the stuff of everyday life thanks to tabloids, gossip columns, glitzy magazines, social media and the internet where so much time and effort are wasted on idle, empty (and often damaging) chatter. The American actor Andrew Garfield put it well when he remarked on how celebrity really skews people's thinking and even their behaviour. He said it this way: "I have no interest in being known as a celebrity; 'celebrity' is a pretty disgusting word. It's part of the brainwashing of the culture, part of the false idolatry of those that are only human, and I don't want to participate in that."

To talk the talk, then, is nothing. Anyone can do it. But life is not about tittle-tattle. Life, in the final analysis, has got to be about concerted *action* for that which is right. *That* kind of action has real power at its heart. "For," as Paul says, "the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power."

And when it comes to power Paul knows what he is talking about. Living close to God, he has a powerful track record of powerful actions lived out fearlessly for the benefit of people in real need. Paul is not remotely interested in earthly influence or fleeting popularity; he is passionate about heavenly power at work in the earthly setting of a troubled world. And that is what we should be passionate about in our own time, engaging with the kind of difficult questions which need answers not simply through words but through actions. Consider these questions for starters:

- ✦ When it's clear that the first two or three years of life are so unspeakably crucial to the development of any child, why do so many young families lack the help they need to give their babies and toddlers the start they need and deserve?
- ✦ Why should so many university students from economically deprived areas drop out of higher education (the very thing which should be lifting them up)?
- ✦ What about drugs and alcohol and gambling and pornography: snares that trap so many and keep them in their vice-like grip?
- ✦ And then there are so many tragic issues surrounding poverty, social exclusion, debt, self-harm, suicide. The list, it seems, is endless.

If you take time to consider those painful questions which I have just put to you, I hope that you will see that each one is intended to take us a long way beyond the realm of fine words and good intentions. Questions like these need firm plans which with real determination will lead on to action. They call for joined-up thinking by policy makers, though that should never let ordinary folk like us off the hook in terms of what we can and should be doing.

No, we may not be politicians, but we can still make a stand for justice and fairness here and now in our own communities. And no, we may not be super-smart diplomats, but we can get properly involved with the work of agencies like CrossReach and Christian Aid in their great efforts to turn wrong things right, whether at home or abroad.

The Christian thinker John Edgerton understands exactly what is at stake when he says this of Christians who are ready to talk the talk without walking the walk: "If you want to know who is right in a theological debate, look for those healing the wounded and welcoming back the outcast. That is divine power. The realm of God is not a matter of talk but of power." Amen.

Praying for others

Lord God,
we pray for our world that you have made.

As we look out upon it our hearts are deeply troubled –
so many people in such desperate need.

As we look within our own society, here also we see so much need.

We pray for young children: that our society may better support their families.

We pray for young people as they move through high school:
that our society will teach them and educate them well
so they may become good citizens and find good and meaningful work.

We pray for protection for people, young and old, from the scourges of addictions;
help our society to find ways to counteract the several forms addictions take.

We pray for those in our society, even some within our own community,
who feel lost or useless and are despairing.

Help us all to work for the healing of their spirits and their souls.

Lord, have mercy upon us all and fill us up with hope.

Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison considers holidays:

We are entering peak holiday season. For those of us who don't need to stick to school holidays June is a great time to go away. Those of us with school age children or who work in schools will probably head off in the first half of July (to avoid the clash with the English holidays). We enjoy the lovely long evenings of summer in the northern hemisphere, the warm weather (hot, even, if you head to Europe), the green abundance of July gardens and fields.

But why are holidays so enjoyable? After all, on the face of it, they don't make much sense. Why is packing up your clothes (already perfectly well kept in a nice chest of drawers), shovelling yourself and your family into a small car, train or plane (when you have a lovely spacious home) and going somewhere new where you can't speak the language and don't know where anything is (when you have long since learnt to understand Glaswegian and know where to buy a pint of milk at home) so enjoyable?

For me a significant part of it is leaving all those daily routine tasks behind for a short while. I really like being away when I don't have to worry about whether I ought to go and dust the living room or sow more carrots or write a set of Kirk Session minutes. When I'm away I can do none of those things, so I don't feel the pressure of "ought". I can sit down, guilt-free, for a coffee and watch the world go by. I can relax and enjoy the moment. It recharges my batteries so I can tackle my list of "oughts" with renewed vigour.

That is why holidays are so good.