

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Luke 5: 17-32 ("Jesus and Two Men")

One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting nearby (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. Just then some men came, carrying a paralysed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. When he saw their faith, he said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven you.' Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, 'Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?' When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven you", or to say, "Stand up and walk"? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he said to the one who was paralysed—'I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home.' Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, 'We have seen strange things today.'

After this he went out and saw a tax-collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up, left everything, and followed him.

Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax-collectors and others sitting at the table with them. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax-collectors and sinners?' Jesus answered, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.' Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Praise to the Lord, the almighty (CH: 124)

It's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer (CH: 493)

How deep the Father's love for me (CH: 549)

Moved by the Gospel let us move (CH: 247)

A fortnight back we considered the Christmas story as the “overture” to Luke’s gospel. Last week it was time to “raise the curtain” on the drama of this great book. And now, a little further into our summer season on the longest volume of the New Testament, we are thrown into the intricacies of Act 1 as we find Jesus in conflict with people in political authority and human power. Not once but twice in quick succession we witness Jesus doing remarkable things while the Pharisees and the scribes look on in dull consternation. Just what is the gospel writer Luke trying to tell his readers? And what can we, in our time, draw from these two scenes of division and of discord?

Let’s start with the idea of “sin and sinners”, because these are very significant terms in each of today’s two short stories (one a healing, the other a calling). Indeed, the notion of sin features big and bold all across Luke’s gospel because he is so intent on sharing a key truth with his readers: if Jesus Christ is the bearer of the very best Good News to our troubled world, it makes perfect sense for this to be Good News for sinners.

And here is the reality of it: if you do an internet Bible search for the word “sinner” and total up the number of times you come across it in the gospels of Mark and of Matthew and of John, that total will still be *less* than the number of times Luke alone uses that word “sinner”. But don’t worry about Luke being hard on sin, because his message is not a message of damnation but rather a message of salvation in Christ who is, as the writer so radically puts it, “a friend of sinners”. And that, of course, is precisely what we see in the encounters we can glimpse in today’s reading.

First there is the disabled man who is brought by his friends and let down through the roof. But hold on! ... before we discuss this, Let’s ask a question. In what possible way could sin and disability go together? Isn’t it just plain cruel to place the two in the same sentence??? Well, of course it is, when looked at through the long lens of medical science which is ours today. But our 21st century view of medicine can so easily give us a faulty historical perspective if we don’t watch out. Here’s why: 2000 years ago, the people of Judaea looked at anyone from so-called “lepers” to so-called “cripples” not so much as being ill or disabled as being unacceptable and impure. In an age long before any kind of welfare State, to be troubled, whether in mind or body, was to risk being cast out of the community, excluded from family life, from social gatherings, even from acts of worship. People must have had a deep and lingering personal anxiety over the threat of impurity, so when they perceived that anything was less than perfect in those around them, that fear might rise to the surface manifesting itself in terrible ways. If you were clumped into the category of “sinner” then you were “out”. And if you wanted back “in” then you had to find some form of religious ritual to make you both “whole” and “holy” once more.

Sinners were in grave danger of finding themselves “lost”, yet in Luke (more than any other gospel) we see a passion for Jesus as the one who *finds* the lost and who places them back where they belong. Both the parable of the lost coin and the parable of the prodigal son are found in Luke alone. Meanwhile, the parable of the lost sheep is not included in either Mark or John. So, if you want to see a Jesus who is all about restoring the outcast and subverting society’s faulty standards, the very, very best place to go is Luke’s gospel. There you will meet desperate folk who have been labelled and cast out as “sinners”. There you will observe the powerful elite humming and hawing, plotting and planning. And there you will find an *extraordinary* ordinary bloke just doing what needs to be done ... and damn the consequences. There is a breath-taking daring about how Jesus goes about his work.

So then, back to these two stories in a bit more detail to see what Luke is saying.

Starting with the healing story, Luke brings on to the stage for the very first time those religious leaders who are probably much more at home in the big, bustling city of Jerusalem than in the poor, dusty lanes of the countryside. What they are all about are first the rigorous keeping of religious regulations, and (flowing from this) the requirement for an attitude of obedience in personal life. Either way, what the Pharisees and scribes have their eyes on are tough standards: standards of the highest and most demanding sort which will keep some safely within the obedient fold, while others are unceremoniously cast into the shadows of exclusion. And maybe, in truth, we can associate *ourselves* with some of this. So many people love to invest their lives in doing the very best they possibly can. They might call themselves perfectionists, quietly working and working and working to make whatever it is that they are doing the *finest* it can possibly be. Yet even the most fastidious of people must surely recognise that everyone falls down, getting up only to fall down once again. We're *not* perfect, and we should recognise that fact.

Someone who most certainly recognises that fact is Jesus. His aim isn't perfect compliance with every last jot and tittle of "The Law" (capital "T", capital "L"). Instead, he comes to bring life, and life in all its fulness. What a liberating teaching this is, focusing not on the unyielding ink of the black-letter law, but rather on setting free those whose living has been enslaved to all sorts of masters, some in person and others in their minds. That's why Jesus is here, and that's also why Jesus is opposed by an old guard so keen on keeping things precisely the way they are.

Jesus spots the paralysed man, and he uses the kind of language which will connect with the standard way of making good a wrong in those pre-scientific days. Very simply and very beautifully he tells the man: "Your sins are forgiven, my friend."

No question of penance or fasting, of sacrifice or payments. Only those six words of love and care which raise the hackles of the powerful onlookers: "Who is this," they ask, "who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

OK, retorts Jesus, latching on to their unconcealed sense of outrage. We can do this another way if you wish. ... Get up. Pick up your bed, and go home!

Luke's Jesus not only knows about sinners. He is ready to help them when people who should know better deliberately choose to drag their neighbours down. And, of course, we find this again, only moments later as Jesus walks out of the house, strolls up to a much-reviled sinner in his tax booth and (bold as brass) says: "Follow me!" Off they go to Levi the tax collector's home and a special banquet for Jesus.

Unsurprisingly, Luke tells us about this feast because it gives him the opportunity to show Jesus sharing food in the home of someone whose association with the Roman taxation system makes him unmistakably unclean. No matter - the eating and the drinking go right on ahead, with not so much as a nod to the holiness code which would hold those "righteous" critics back from feasting with sinners.

And so the Son of God socialises with outcasts, leaving the Pharisees to shake their scornful heads. In response to this petty complaining, Jesus goes on the offensive: "*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.*"

This comment, hurled at those who think so very highly of themselves, reflects what has been called the "boundary-bursting grace" of Jesus for those on the margins. Although we are still only at the start of Luke's gospel, we are seeing signs of a radical Jesus who will show no fear in following his God-given calling. Amen.

Praying for others

God of all the seasons,
we thank you for the joy of summer with its warmth and brightness,
its flowers blooming with colour and its evenings long.

For times of rest and for holidays, we give you thanks,
as families take time to be together for happy recreation.

Yet we know that for many in our land such freedom is impossible.

We recall before you those who are struggling with poverty,
unable to pay their bills or to put food on the table.

Bless them, we pray, and challenge us to be your agents of change.

We recall before you those who are carers of loved ones,
dedicated to meeting so many needs in so many ways.

Bless them, we pray, and challenge us to help where we can.

We recall before you those who face challenges in going about their daily lives
because of the ways in which society excludes them,
based on a narrow view of "ability".

Bless them, we pray, and challenge us to learn from the many people who are
working to break down barriers and build a world that is enabling for all.

Just as Jesus freed people from the snares of sin,
so too may we, his followers, bring light and peace and hope.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

And finally ...

Robin Hill considers dull summer weather:

If we had wanted sun, so the saying goes, we'd have moved to Barbados. The fact that we haven't may depend on a range of factors: family ties; work commitments; fear of flying; loathing of mosquitoes. The list is probably a long one.

So far this summer hasn't covered itself in glory, as is often the case. That's a particular shame for school kids who have worked hard all year and have been looking forward to freedom to play outdoors in shorts and teeshirts, only to find that anoraks and hats might be more appropriate.

But consider this: we live in a profoundly beautiful land where the predominant colour in front of our eyes is a lush shade of green. And that doesn't happen by accident. I well remember the first time I visited Tentsmuir in North East Fife: it offers a stunningly beautiful combination of mature Scots pine forest and gold-sanded beach and is a never-to-be-forgotten place for a day close to nature.

Within minutes of arriving there I said to our hosts that we were lucky to have such a glorious piece of scenery in Scotland. Had it been in Spain, or Florida, I mused, someone would have put up high rise hotels as far as the eye could see. But then, who would risk an investment like that in a cool, damp country like ours?

Appreciate our beautiful land as a gift from God .. whatever the weather.