

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

Issue 122

17th July 2022

Online at www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

Today's Bible reading

Luke 7:1-17 ("Jesus Heals and Raises to Life")

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, 'He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.' And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, 'Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go", and he goes, and to another, "Come", and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this", and the slave does it.' When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.' When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, 'Do not weep.' Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, rise!' The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has risen among us!' and 'God has looked favourably on his people!' This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Morning has broken (CH: 212)

Be thou my vision (CH: 465)

Love Divine, all loves excelling (CH: 519)

Ye servants of God (CH: 130)

What's the difference between Bing Crosby and Walt Disney? The answer, as you probably know, is that Bing sings ... and Walt disnae. While that proudly Glaswegian joke is a classic of its kind, other very similar questions may need a bit of careful consideration before any reasonable answer appears. How about this one?: What's the difference between Matthew and Luke?

Here, of course, we are not talking about famous people but famous books of the New Testament. Had we asked what Matthew and Luke have in common, that would have been quite easy: they are both gospels telling the story of Jesus' birth, life, death and Resurrection. *But their differences?* That's a whole lot more tricky.

Biblical scholars are quick to tell us that one of the principal differences between these two ancient books concerns their readership. Matthew is filled to overflowing with quotations from the Old Testament, inserted by the author to point his readers towards the Jewish identity of Jesus. All the ways through, it's as though Matthew is saying: "Look, this bit of Hebrew Scripture shows who the Messiah will be ... and now we can see that the Messiah is none other than Jesus of Nazareth!"

This, in turn, makes those clever experts conclude that whoever else might have been reading Matthew's gospel, the book was most definitely intended for a church community made up principally of Jewish converts to this new Christian faith. These folk would grasp Matthew's Old Testament references and they would find them really helpful in understanding a deeply Jewish identity in this person Jesus.

Luke's approach is really very different to that of Matthew. Luke also offers a variety of references to Jesus as a person of Jewish heritage, but he also points far beyond Judaism, in the direction of "the outsider" - the kind of person who may very well find themselves sidelined in life ... looked down upon ... even seen as an enemy. Luke's worldview is one that looks both down and out:

- ♦ consider the Christmas story, where the message of the angel presents, "good news of great joy for all the people" (emphasis added);
- ♦ consider the Good Samaritan, an outsider who performs the most wonderful act of dedication and kindness, while a priest and a Levite pass by on the other side;
- ♦ consider the one single person cured of leprosy (out of a group of 10 who are healed) who takes the trouble to thank Jesus in person. He too is a Samaritan;
- ♦ consider how at Jesus' trial Luke is keen to show readers that the pagan Roman Pontius Pilate declares Jesus' innocence not once, not twice, but *three* times; and
- ♦ consider how Luke concludes his book by gazing far out across the panorama of human history towards what he calls, "the times of the Gentiles".

All of these elements of Luke's writing show us a concern for those who are beyond what we might imagine to be the standard, conventional Jewish faith community of Jesus. And if we dig a little deeper we can see Luke's clear interest in painting a pretty sympathetic picture of - would you believe? - the Roman Empire. Amazing!

Take a look at today's reading where we come face to face with a Roman Army officer who is not a threat, but rather is kind to people of the Jewish faith and also concerned for the wellbeing of his slave, whom he respects and values. While we might be tempted to think of Rome as the enemy of both Judaism and Christianity, Luke includes this story to guide readers along a different avenue altogether.

Jesus has arrived in the town of Capernaum. He is approached by some Jewish leaders on behalf of the senior soldier. "He is worthy of having you do this for him," they claim, "for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us."

As Jesus approaches the man's house, some folk come out to meet him. The message they bear is one overflowing with trust and confidence: "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed."

Luke tells us that Jesus is quick to praise this Roman high official - a Gentile from beyond the fold of Israel: "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."

And with that the man's slave is healed. But Jesus doesn't stop there: having answered a request from a Roman, he now turns his attention to someone else who is also most definitely an outsider - not on account of her community or belief, but on account of her gender and poverty. In moving from a confident Roman official to a poor woman in despair, Luke seems to be showing his readers a broad range of human need which Jesus is pleased to embrace through his love and his care.

This time he is in the community of Nain where he stumbles across a funeral procession. The man who has died was the only son of a widow. The lady is approached and comforted by Jesus and, Luke tells us, he is "filled with pity". He goes to the funeral bier to touch it and then he commands the man to get up. So it is that this dead man is raised to life and returned to his mother.

There is something very touching about this story of the widow of Nain. Unlike the army officer in the previous miracle, she has no standing in society, no secure career, no comfortable income to fall back on. At the start of the story, she has lost both her husband and her son, making her incredibly vulnerable in the first century world. Indeed, she may well find herself on the verge of total destitution. Her first century social standing would have been based on little or nothing more than being a wife, so with her husband gone she would have had very few rights in her own name.

There is one fleeting action here which we could easily wander past, so we should pause now to pick it up. In showing his concern, Jesus touches the place where the dead body has been laid, and that action makes Jesus, from that moment, ritually unclean. He would know that to be the case, simply because *everyone* would know it, but that knowledge does not get in the way of the mercy needed right then.

In Luke's gospel we dip into some deeply-felt emotions, as the writer challenges his readers to view Jesus as the heavenly one whose inclusive, saving mission is clear for the whole world to see, all the way from his birth to his death. We can identify a passion for injustices to be righted. There is a deep concern for those in life's most desperate situations. There is unmistakable passion for those who are marginalised to be brought into the fold and treated with the dignity and respect they are due.

But I wonder if Luke is telling us something more - something which makes his readers look into the distance with a certain sense of anticipation. This writer is absolutely convinced of Jesus and of his determination to "journey on" from incident to incident, always intent on meeting his God-given destiny in his destination: the Holy City of Jerusalem. There will be many meetings and many confrontations in the chapters to come, but right now could it be that Luke is telling his audience - indeed, is he telling *us*? - that in the raising to life of a dead son, we might just hear the hint of another death overturned by new life? As one Bible scholar says of Jesus saving the widow of Nain from certain despair:

"There is more than an understanding look and a sympathetic word. There is a resurrection that reclaims the future. In a sense, then, the raising of the widow's son foreshadows the raising of God's Son, where the power of death is defeated once and for all." Amen.

Praying for others

An abridged prayer of David Adam:

Lord, among the busyness and bustle of the world,
make us to be still and attentive to your presence;
keep our ears open to your call,
keep our hearts open to your love,
make our minds sensitive to your coming,
that we may rejoice that we are in you and you are in us.
God of grace and goodness, keep us in your peace.

Lord of hosts and hospitality, teach us to be welcoming, open and friendly.
May your church be mindful of the needs of strangers and visitors.
We pray for churches that are struggling because of opposition,
for churches that strive to serve in areas where there is apathy and animosity.
God of grace and goodness, keep us in your peace.

We ask for peace upon all distressed people and communities,
especially where there is the awfulness of war.
We remember before you all who feel neglected or ignored,
all lonely and troubled people.
We ask that friends and loved ones who are ill may know your love and protection.
God of grace and goodness, keep us in your peace. Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison considers the place of art in life:

Every year (well, every year bar those with a pandemic in them) the Edinburgh Festival rolls into the city near us. Between the formal Festival and the Fringe there are hundreds, possibly thousands, of performances of plays, comedy shows, operas and music. Every year I say I must book some of those performances because they are on my doorstep. And almost every year I don't quite get round to it. But this year I have sorted myself out. I am off to see four classical music concerts over the three weeks of the Festival including the closing concert. This is Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* - one of my favourite works.

As I purchase my tickets, I often feel slightly guilty at spending money on these things. Surely I should use the money for some more obviously worthy cause? It sometimes seems as if attending a concert is an indulgence. But is it really? It undoubtedly is if you can't afford to buy enough food for your family. But every society indulges in the arts. Painting, sculpting, singing, dancing - they are all fundamental aspects of human nature. We were created to be creative.

Art is one of the things that makes life worth living. What is life without the joy of singing, be that at an opera or in church on a Sunday morning? What is life without a whirl round the ballroom with the person you love, or a lively ceilidh full of laughter and many wrong steps? What is life without a Monet or a Velasquez or even the famous green Chinese woman, if that's what floats your boat? I would say it is no life at all. We were created to be creative.