

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Luke 10: 17-24 ("Jesus Rejoices")

The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!' He said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.'

Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, 'Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.' Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Come, children, join and sing (CH: 185)

Lord of all hopefulness (CH: 166)

Will your anchor hold in the storms of life (CH: 737)

Through the love of God our Saviour (CH: 562)

This year's General Assembly of the Church of Scotland was a fairly grey affair. In truth, that was no major surprise because, as we all know, the entire Church of Scotland from Unst in the north to Jerusalem in the south, from Vatersay in the west to (again!) Jerusalem in the east, every parish of our national and international church is facing change as it has never faced change before ... and that includes us. The assembly saw anxiety etched on the faces of commissioners, with speakers fearful of what lies ahead. And yes, there is a great deal to be anxious about, whether in our big cities with far too many buildings, or in our rural areas with far too few ministers to share around small and ageing congregations.

Having started on the Saturday, the assembly arrived at Monday afternoon and the report of the Ecumenical Relations Committee. The convener, Lothian Presbytery's very own Rev Sandy Horsburgh of Dalkeith, told everyone about their proposal to have the General Assembly accept a new declaration of friendship between the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland. After generations through which our nation's Christian community has often seemed more divided than united, the idea of actively *building friendship* was warmly received by those in the hall. And when it came to the climax of the debate, hundreds upon hundreds voted in favour, with the tally against a mere four. In the midst of so much bad news, here was something to be truly delighted about - a moment for rejoicing.

That term, "rejoicing", can be a tremendously important word. Most of what we do day after day is ordinary, tied in with routine and obligation by and large. But there are certain points which actively call upon us to "rejoice!": a child's birthday; a wedding anniversary; a Platinum Jubilee. All are special, and none comes round all that often. When we rejoice, as the General Assembly rejoice when the Moderator and the Archbishop shake hands as fellow-travellers on the Way of Christ, we know we are caught up in something wonderful - something which calls for celebration.

The gospel writer Luke has a big place in his heart for rejoicing. Possibly because his book is a pretty long one, he has time and space to get into the emotion of what he's writing about. By contrast, the tiny gospel of Mark fairly zips along from incident to incident - "And then ... And then ... And then ... And then ..." - dividing up his book into wee parcels of story with only enough detail to get the raw basics across rather plainly. And that in its own way is magnificent, because Mark manages to convey the Good News of Jesus *directly* to the reader with a true sense of urgency. Still, while there's certainly a place for directness, there is also a different and equal place for detail, which is just what we find Luke giving us: detail and artistry.

How does Luke build the Good News of Jesus into an atmosphere of great jubilation? He spreads joy out across the wide expanse of his writing:

- ✦ the angel telling Mary she "will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at [Jesus'] birth;
- ✦ Jesus turning the sting of hatred and exclusion around for those who are reviled for their faith: "Rejoice in that day," he says, "and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven ...";
- ✦ when Jesus calls the leader of a synagogue a hypocrite for condemning a healing because it took place on the Sabbath, Luke tells readers that "the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that [Jesus] was doing";
- ✦ lastly, Luke's three linked parables of the lost sheep, lost coin and lost son each point the reader towards celebration when the lost is at last found. "Rejoice with me," says the woman with the coin, "for I have found the coin that I had lost."

The writing of Luke, then, is overflowing with joy, even as it recounts Jesus' long and arduous journey to the Cross. In fact, Luke even depicts struggling folk - those who are poor, or cast out, or sick - as possessing a joy which those who are rich and powerful often miss. True rejoicing, it seems, is there for those who need it most.

For today, we are going to consider a story from the gospel of Luke which is so filled with up-beat, feel-good, high-fiving that its title simply reads, "Jesus rejoices". We find it in chapter 10, following the sending out of the 70 followers to tell the Good News of Jesus far and wide. Off they go, two by two, to prepare the way for Jesus' arrival. Off they go, like lambs among wolves. Off they go, without purse or bag or - we are told - even shoes. Jesus would undoubtedly have known what he was doing with such a risky exercise, but still it must have been more than a bit of a concern for him. Would the 35 couples do their job effectively? Would they come back in one piece? Actually, would they come back at all? So much risk ... so much uncertainty.

Well, they did indeed come back from their adventure of faith, as Luke tells us:

The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!' He said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit ... [Emphasis added]

Yes, in this passage we find joy on the very lips of Jesus. His call to reach out in the mission of God has been heeded, and the task of preparing the way has been accomplished. His divine message of peace has been given out and now the 70 messengers are home safe and sound. It's as though he has carried out a test to check that everything would operate just as God intended, and everything has worked like well-oiled clockwork. In going out in Jesus' Name they have entered a hostile world bearing his powerful words of hope, and now they have returned *in great joy*. All is well. All is ... well and truly ... well!

In Jesus' words of celebration there is something maybe a little confusing to our modern eyes and ears: that reference to Jesus watching Satan "fall from heaven". Even if, like me, you think Jesus' words here are intended to be metaphorical, you are still left with a rather bizarre image. What does this mean, and why should it be sufficiently important as to merit inclusion at all in Luke's gospel? One helpful idea from biblical scholars takes us away back to the original idea of Satan, where he wasn't installed in *hell* but rather (as in the book of Job) found himself the stern and uncompromising prosecutor in the law court of *heaven*. As you might expect, Satan's goal was to seek harsh judgement, rejecting the soft option of mercy. So could it be that Jesus, seeing the safe return of his 35 faithful deputations, is rejoicing that the uncompromising law is firmly being overtaken by something as revolutionary as the sheer gentleness of God's mercy and care? You can have a think about that.

Leith Fisher sums it up really nicely when he says in his fine commentary on Luke: "We can interpret Jesus' words as meaning that the success of the work of the 70 has played its part in dethroning the Satan of implacable judgement; now heaven can be seen as the throne of peace and the source of all grace. It's not heaven that's important here, it's what's happening on earth; the reality that through the disciples' work the gospel of grace and peace is releasing many people into freedom."

I don't know about you, but I reckon that such a great and glorious truth is certainly worth rejoicing over, whether then, or now, or at any time. Amen.

Praying for others

God of all the earth,
we pray for those facing the challenges of famine, pollution and greed
so often inflicted on them by others.
May governments across the globe work together to ensure that everyone is fed.
We pray for Christian Aid and the many other charities
who work tirelessly for this end.
We ask your blessing on those nearing the end of their time on earth.
Let them step fearlessly into new life with you.
We pray for those at the start of their lives.
Help us all to create societies where everyone can reach their full potential.
Bless health care workers, social workers, psychiatrists and psychologists, and
all who work so hard to heal troubled lives and troubled minds.
Bless our political leaders and remind them of those who are poor and
disadvantaged. Guide them to deliver policies that help those most in need.
We pray for those whose skill lies in their hands. Bless them as they build our
homes, mend our plumbing or sew our clothes.
Let us value their handiwork as we should. Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison considers the week that was:

Well, what a week! We enjoyed (suffered?) record-breaking temperatures last week. Over 40 degrees Celsius in England and the low 30s in Scotland. Time was we'd spend good money to go overseas to enjoy such heat on holiday. Now it is coming to us. This sounds good - Mediterranean conditions in Scotland, what's not to like? Well, quite a lot, as it turns out. It seems out you can't do anything in the heat because you get hot, sweaty and exhausted. On holiday this matters little but in the rest of life it matters a lot. In my case this meant housework undone (to be fair, this is not unusual for me!), weeds un-removed from flower beds and jam unmade (the thought of making jam in 30 degrees was just too much for me to cope with). Hardly drastic. But I believe productivity in business and industry takes a dive in hot weather. We can ill afford that.

Secondly, plants either peg it with dehydration or we have to waste precious water keeping them alive. For garden plants it's not much of a choice - mine have to take their chances without water, except my vegetables. But for farmers it's not easy. We now face water shortages. In Scotland!

And of course, extreme heat kills people. We have seen the tragic deaths of several youngsters in UK after they got into trouble taking a swim in very cold water. We will probably see an increase in deaths of more vulnerable people from the effects of heat over the coming weeks.

If we don't take climate change seriously, in our own actions and what we ask our politicians to do, there will be much, much more of this to come.