

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Psalms 42 ("The Prayer of a Man in Exile")

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

When shall I come and behold the face of God?

My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'

These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me.

By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.

I say to God, my rock, 'Why have you forgotten me?

Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?'

As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

From all that dwell below the skies (CH: 146)

Do not be afraid (CH: 191)

Dear Lord and Father of mankind (CH: 485)

Behold, the amazing gift of love (CH: 478)

Of all the many searching questions across the pages of the Bible, surely one of the most blunt and most crucial is the question: "Where is your God?" We can sing bright and lively hymns to God, convinced that we are but a hop, a skip and a jump away from his throne of grace. We can bask in the confidence we find in an upbeat sermon or a nice piece of news about something good that has happened to our congregation. Yet we know that there is something momentous and probably unavoidable about the question, "Where is your God?"

We might be pushed towards that question by a personal moment of anguish or anxiety, as when life gets altogether too much, or when we experience the kind of life event which makes us stop in our tracks and re-assess where we have come from and where we might be going. Then again, we might be troubled and appalled by a world event which rocks us to the core of our being as we take in the enormity of what has just happened.

Where were you 21 years ago today on what became known around the world as "9/11"? If you are old enough to remember that terrible day when 19 Al Qaeda terrorists hijacked four jets in United States airspace, I feel sure that you will have a very clear memory of the moment you first heard about the atrocities which followed. Possibly you witnessed them for yourself live on TV. I was at a conference of Church candidates for the ministry - no more than 60 or so people, yet two of our number had very real concerns for a family member: one an office worker in Manhattan's business district, the other a steward on an American airliner. The ripples of terror spread far and wide on 11th September 2001, changing the world in incalculable ways and touching so many families right around the globe.

At times such as that the question "Where is your God?" assaults the mind of even the most devout person of faith. And why shouldn't it? Faced with the murders of 2,996 people in just a few minutes, it is quite natural for us to look at the world around us and wonder about the location - the very *existence* - of a loving Creator who cares for his children. In full view of such suffering ... where is God?

Yet ...

We also know that we live in a world of free will in which human beings have immense power to choose to live for good or for evil. We can never diminish the anguish of 9/11, nor should we try to do so. Instead, we can recall all the acts of bravery ... and of sacrifice ... and of kindness ... and of prayer ... and of heartfelt remembrance which together spoke of something bigger than hatred. Bigger even, perhaps, than that human tendency of ours which might tend to inhibit us from really engaging with a world tragedy on a deeply personal scale. From cathedrals to mosques, from schools to prisons, people took time to mourn and to remember, simply because they were inescapably drawn to such communal acts of solidarity and of blessing.

"Where is your God?" That's where.

I need hardly say that such powerful acts of memorial will never change the basic equation. After 9/11 wicked people kept on doing wicked things, and sometimes you couldn't tell who were the good guys and who were the bad guys, for the simple reason that each of us carries the potential for good and evil all the time - absolutely *all* the time. In early Western movies all you had to do was look for the cowboy in the white hat and you could see immediately who it was who would eventually ride in to save the day. And reassuring though that model may be, the reality of human nature is that there are no dependable white hats in our world.

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. For that reason, people of faith need to be very careful in what we believe about human nature. And that is where safeguarding comes in. Everyone is precious to God. Everyone is loved by God. And from this basic tenet of our faith, we in the Church of Scotland actively and intentionally seek to ensure a safe Church for all. The work of the Church of Scotland Safeguarding Service is at the heart of making this real, day by day, supported by countless volunteers across all Presbyteries and congregations - including volunteers in both Gladsmuir and Longniddry Parish Churches.

This Sunday we are marking Safeguarding Sunday: a time when we can highlight and celebrate all this vital work, thanking our volunteers and encouraging everyone involved in the life of the church to do their bit to ensure the precious goal of a safe Church for all: young and old, stronger or more vulnerable.

The principles of Safeguarding are very basic and astonishingly simple: love, protection, care. And these big human qualities are found displayed right the way across Scripture, inspiring us to weave *our* love, *our* protection, *our* care into all aspects of our church life together.

Today we have an opportunity to broaden our understanding of how Safeguarding works in the Church of Scotland. The very term, "Safeguarding", is often one that makes people feel nervous, confused, or worried. Either that or it's seen as a heavy-handed or needless imposition upon long-serving pastorally engaged volunteers or staff members whose reputation itself should *surely* be enough to demonstrate their entitlement to some exemption from the regulatory frameworks of Church and of government. But Safeguarding is vitally - *vitally* - important in creating a sure foundation upon which community can be built, with the subject being aired (rather than being swept under the carpet) and with threats to people's personal safety being looked out for and acted upon with great commitment and efficiency. So when it comes to Safeguarding, there is no need for nervousness, or confusion, or worries, and there is no room for complacency, or so-called reputation, or any "turning a blind eye" when standards might look like slipping.

Ministers, elders and other people involved in the pastoral work of the Church of Scotland are rightly required to be PVG checked by the State. More than this, we are instructed by the General Assembly to undertake regular training courses which cover a wide variety of relevant topics. And as for us today, exploring this topic together as a community of faith: this service will hopefully help everyone to feel included and reassured that the policies, processes and training in place right across our Church are there for the purpose of keeping everyone *safe*.

There is a beautiful little prayer which has been attributed to the great Roman Catholic martyr, St Oscar Romero, a Cardinal who was himself murdered by terrorists in 1980. This prayer helps us to imagine a world in which all are protected from evil and given what they need to thrive. We close with that prayer in the hope that we will all live by its aspirations:

Grant us, Lord God, a vision of Your world as Your love would have it:

- ✦ *a world where the weak are protected, and none go hungry or poor;*
- ✦ *a world where the riches of creation are shared, and everyone can enjoy them;*
- ✦ *a world where different races and cultures live in harmony and mutual respect;*
- ✦ *a world where peace is built with justice, and justice is guided by love.*

Give us the inspiration and courage to build it, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Praying for others

God, our eternal safeguarder, defender and protector,
we pray for all who are homeless, including refugees and victims of trafficking.

May your arms shelter them and support those
whose mission is to provide help and sustenance.

We pray for all places of war and violence.
Protect all who are maimed, injured or fighting for life and
all who endanger their own lives to provide aid.

We pray for those who suffer ill-health.
Stay with them in their pain and with all those who administer healing and care.

We pray for the broken-hearted, bereaved and lonely,
for those whose purpose in life feels lost.
Hold them close and keep their carers strong.

We pray for our ailing world, and
for all who suffer the desperate consequences acutely.
Comfort those engulfed in poverty, fear and worry, and
empower those who seek to rebuild and restore.

Grant us, Lord God, the vision to see your world as your love would have it,
staying awake, ever-watchful of others, through your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison considers food:

Over the last couple of Sundays Robin has been considering stewardship with a particular focus on the cost of living crisis affecting so many. One of the effects has been a huge increase in the numbers of people being referred to foodbanks. East Lothian Foodbank, based in Tranent, delivers much-needed food all over the county. It recently reported a 77% increase in users compared with a year ago. In June, for example, the Foodbank fed more than 920 people, over a third of whom were children. Despite an increase in food donations over the year demand still outstrips supply.

One of the obvious things we can do to help folk during these difficult times is to reinstate our Foodbank collection box. We stopped collecting donations of food during the pandemic but the trusty box is back by the entrance to the halls.

So please, if you can, pop some non-perishable items of food into the box: tinned produce such as soup, veg, meat or fruit; cartons of UHT milk or long-life juice; tea, coffee; biscuits; cereals – that sort of thing. Your donations will be taken up to the Foodbank where they will be put to good use.

Thank you.