

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Ecclesiastes 3:1-14 ("Everything has its time")

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

a time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

a time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

a time to tear, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

a time to love, and a time to hate;

a time for war, and a time for peace.

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I know that whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Immortal, invisible, God only wise (CH:132)

I waited patiently for God (CH:31)

May the Lord, mighty God (on screen)

For all the saints (CH:740)

This week, Gladsmuir and Longniddry Parish Churches will be welcoming a guest preacher, the Rev Robin Allison, minister of Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church. The two Robins and Frances will be exchanging pulpits allowing the three congregations to meet a neighbour or two.

This week's issue of The Sunday Focus carries a sermon from November 2012.

The ancient Book of Ecclesiastes famously tells its readers that there is a time "for every matter under heaven". Then the writer lists all sorts of opposites in helpful pairs: planting and reaping; killing and healing; breaking down and building up, and so on.

In church a while back, we looked at this passage with the benefits of wisdom found in the writings of a biblical commentator, Marcus Borg. Professor Borg very helpfully told us that these "times" referred to in Ecclesiastes, are not to be seen as options for us to choose between in our living. This isn't a list of decisions for us to make. Neither is the list some kind of declaration that everything happens in life and we suffer it all, taking the bad with the good. No. Borg's line on Ecclesiastes 3 is quite different. He tells us that the writer of this ancient passage is telling us that in all of life's many and varied events and times and seasons, we must "be present to what is". The instruction of Ecclesiastes, then, is something like this: "Live fully, whatever time it is."

This is such an important message for us today, as we consider the time which is ours and how we engage with it. "Live fully, whatever time it is."

There is a story from the dark days of the Second World War about an Australian Army Sergeant caught up in the fall of Singapore. The soldier's name was Sydney Piddington, still only a teenager who found himself with a real problem. These are Sydney's own words:

"Waiting with other Australian POWs to be marched off, I tried to decide what I should take in the single pack permitted. The only limit was what a weary man could carry the 17 miles to Changi. Our officer thoughtfully suggested, "Each man should find room for a book. So I stuffed into my pack a copy of Lin Yutang's "The Importance of Living" - a title of almost macabre appropriateness - and began a reading habit that was to keep me sane for the next three and a half years. Previously, if I had been really interested in a book, I would race from page to page, eager to know what came next. Now, I decided, I had to become a miser with words and stretch every sentence like a poor man spending his last dollar."

What young Sydney had started out on was a plan to keep his one single book going for as long as possible. But what he soon discovered was that super-slow reading (as he called it) can bring huge benefits to the reader. By reading a book exceptionally slowly, you get to know it deeply, and you allow it to communicate its contents more fully to you.

Perhaps we all need to consider the benefits not just of super-slow reading, but of super-slow living. If we make time and space (real time and space) for our devotional encounters with Bible or prayer or contemplation, we may very well find that those points in our lives become very, very meaningful.

This is exactly what Christians discovered many centuries ago. Monasteries were places with few luxuries of any sort. There were not even enough Bibles to go around, and in any case not everyone knew how to read. So monks would gather

together to hear the Bible being read aloud by one of their number. And not only did they listen to the Bible with their ears. They were encouraged to listen to it with their hearts as well, using the Bible as a way of feeding their religious contemplations. As you might expect, this whole process was not only slow, it was also reflective ... and effective. This spiritual discipline became known as "Lectio Divina", and many thousands of people all over the world use it even today, particularly in the Roman Catholic tradition.

Here's what readers do in order to follow the pattern of Lectio Divina, either as individuals or as part of a group: first, they choose a passage from one of the gospels or one of the letters of the New Testament. The passage doesn't need to be long: usually just ten or fifteen verses. A really good resource here might be a section of the story of the Road to Emmaus. They quietly read the chosen verses - and they do this reading aloud, in order to let them physically hear the words with their own ears. Once they finish the reading, they pause ... to think for a while about whether some particular word or phrase has stood out for them in some way. If so, they then take time to reflect on those particular words, considering any insight, or feeling, or understanding that those words contain for them at that moment.

And then, they go back and read the passage all over again. Why? Because by this stage it will have a fuller meaning.

Catholic scholars say that this style of Bible study is tremendously important, because reflective listening allows the Holy Spirit to deepen our awareness of God as we read from the Bible.

Now, of course, that's not very Presbyterian. In our tradition, there's great emphasis placed on the quantity of Bible reading which we do. When I was a teenager, our church gave each member of its Youth Fellowship a copy of the Bible, and we all undertook to read and to read and to read, almost as though it was a race to see who could get through a biblical book first.

As the months and years went by, these YF Bibles became grey around the edges, dog-eared and tattered. And I'm sure that's no bad thing. At least the Bibles were being read and discussed. But actually, I wonder whether it might have been better for us to have been given two things rather than one: firstly a Bible, but secondly permission to read that Bible in a super-slow way, savouring its content, reflecting on its meaning, and applying it to our lives. No haste. No hurry. And certainly not the slightest hint of any sprinting being required. Just a quiet expectation that we would use our Bibles with depth rather than with speed.

If you recall, Sydney Piddington's one single book in his backpack was a volume by the writer Lin Yutang. That Asian author said something very wonderful about taking your time. These are his words, which I think are particularly relevant in our frazzled and frantic 21st century when many people are trying to cram in so much "stuff" into over-busy lives. And I am more than happy to conclude this reflection on "time" by offering you this impressively wise piece of writing:

"There are two kinds of reading, reading out of business necessity, and reading as a luxury. The second kind partakes of the nature of a secret delight. It is like a walk in the woods, instead of a trip to the market. One brings home, not packages of canned tomatoes, but a brightened face and lungs filled with good clear air."

If we as modern-day Christians can use our time to feed our devotions, then we will find that our devotions will end up feeding our time. May that be so for us all. Amen.

Praying for others

Lord,
you welcome every human being with open arms and abundant grace.
We pray that we and all your servants welcome
the stranger, the refugee, the homeless with the same love you show us.
Forgive us when the differences between us sometimes inhibit our ability to
welcome and love others as you would have us do.

Help us to look beyond the superficial, seeing the whole person and
responding to their needs.

Your son ate with those considered sinners, and in doing so transformed their lives.

They in turn transformed the lives of others.

We ask that those with power across the world
- whether politicians, business leaders, anyone with influence over others -
remember those on the outside of society.

We ask that they remember those living with addiction,
those who are mentally ill, those imprisoned,
and work to transform their lives.

We pray that we may be transformed by your grace too.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison considers our Christmas appeals:

We have three remaining projects that we are supporting to help people who may be struggling over Christmas and winter. Here is one of them: if you were in church or online last Sunday Douglas Clarke told us how Longniddry Church is working with East Lothian Council's Preston Seton Gosford (PSG) Area Partnership on how we can respond locally to the issues our community is facing due to the cost of living crisis and, in particular, fuel poverty. I repeat much of what he said here in case you missed it last week. Emma Brown, who is the Connected Communities Manager for the PSG area tells us that the Area Partnership is gathering financial donations to allow a bulk order of new blankets, hot water bottles, hats, scarves, gloves, etc., which can be made available for collection at Community Centres and be delivered in Christmas and New Year parcels.

The church is collecting money to pass on to the Area Partnership and we've already had a great response. If you still want to make a donation Douglas needs to receive it within the next week (he needs to pass our donations on by mid-November). If you would like to donate then you can either give Douglas a cheque (payable to Longniddry Church) or make a donation to the church bank account. If you don't have the church bank account Douglas can give you details - please ask him.

As Emma says: any amount, no matter how small, will help to provide essential support to local families. It will make a difference.