

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

John 12:20-36a ("Jesus Talks about His Death")

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. The crowd answered him, 'We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains for ever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?' Jesus said to them, 'The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.' Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Let us build a house (CH198)

Longing for light (Christ be our light) (CH543)

Through the love of God our Saviour, all will be well (CH562)

In Christ there is no East or West (CH624)

This week in each of our congregations we are delighted to be welcoming as our preacher Father Mark Elliott Smith, Rector of Our Lady of the Assumption & St Gregory, Warwick Street in central London, as we celebrate together the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. For this issue of The Sunday Focus, Robin offers this reflection on what the churches should do to move from separation towards a practical unity.

When we think about our faith, when we read our Bibles, when we pause to reflect upon Jesus and all that he stands for, I believe that something should jump out at us and grab us by the imagination. Taken together, all the various strands of theology, biblical studies, church history and personal experience can lead our minds in the direction of the God who moves us closer and closer towards Christian unity – unity in Christ.

To think about the early poetic stories of Creation (as we did in church only last week) is to recognise a wonderful vision of all that God beheld in joy: the heavens and the earth; the plants and the wildlife; the human beings who were to enter the picture on “day six” of seven. Indeed, we are told on more than one occasion in the opening chapter of the book of Genesis that the Almighty looked at each category of his Creation ... “and God saw that it was good”.

There was indeed so much profound goodness to be found on the sparkly new planet Earth, but then human beings used their God-given freedom to live in selfish, excluding ways. And so that which had been “good” found itself challenged in some very big ways.

Across the pages of the Bible we find arguments and disputes, battles and wars, death and destruction, sadness and shame. The psalmist laments human frailty, the prophets warn the people of their wrong-headedness, and a terrible shadow creeps across a cracked, crazed world of imperfection.

But then we come to the Incarnation. Jesus appears in the opening pages of the New Testament and we find a fresh beginning, a new direction that is geared towards bringing us back to where we ought to be – bringing us back in the direction of God’s essential unity. Barriers of estrangement are seen to be breached by this man from Nazareth. The wounds of division are bound up as healing manifests itself wherever Jesus walks. Reconciliation takes centre stage, with - in time - the people of an emerging faith becoming alive to the boundless possibilities of Easter, sensing for themselves the dazzling reality of Pentecost in their lives and their Church.

Wouldn’t it be nice if that happened to be the end of the story? Wouldn’t it be great if the message of the Early Church - as we find it all across the Acts of the Apostles - represented a brilliant and effective model of church for all time coming?

But no. While the Church is rightly viewed as The Body of Christ, that Body is made up of imperfect believers like you and me whose motives often seem more earth-centred than heaven-directed. Take a look at the rifts, the schisms, the agony of Reformation, the seeds of separation. There you will see that, in truth, unity is a hard, hard prize to grasp. We look to the Eternal while all the time we find our feet mired in some very earthly clay.

Still, the Church from its earliest times right up to the present day recognises a divine calling to overcome estrangements in the greater quest to become one with God and one with our brothers and sisters in Christ. In short, we are stuck between our frustrated selves and the people of faith we are called by God to become.

Think of a young married couple upon their return from honeymoon. It had been a big wedding – a *very* big wedding – with lots of guests and piles of gifts. Now back

from their fortnight in Mauritius, the new Mr and Mrs set about opening this present and that gift and the next kindly-meant piece of clutter for an already bulging new home. Together they struggle to find shelf space for all that they have accumulated from so many caring people. By the end of the first evening they are surrounded in wrapping paper. More than this, they quickly come to see that all they have acquired will fill - and over-fill - their tiny flat. Something must be set in place to get things sorted, weeding out all that is not needed before packing it off to the Oxfam in a nearby town (where, conveniently, no family or friends live).

But still they struggle with clutter. It's so dispiriting as they set in place the new microwave from Auntie Laura, the new food processor from Auntie Doreen, the new slow cooker from Auntie Carol, the new four-slot toaster (with detachable crumpet rack) from Auntie Marj. And all the while the kitchen is getting more and more stuffed full of shiny new items they neither needed nor particularly wanted. If that house is going to work in a "clutter-free" state, they decide, certain unimportant, needless things also need to go. (Like a detachable crumpet rack.)

I suspect that the history of the Church is a bit like that, with more and more theological clutter going into our faith over the centuries, filling up the wonderful, free, open space which arrived with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Different denominations brought their different priorities and their different emphases, with *this* piece of teaching subtly disagreeing with *that*. As the dogmatic stances built up ... and up ... and up, barriers emerged closing off one tradition from another and before too long leaders stopped talking about their commonly held Christian faith. In some cases, it even turned violent, whether in mediaeval wars or through those shameful divides whose sad legacy we can still see in the Scotland of today.

What kind of a religion behaves in such a way? In truth, perhaps most, because religion is practised by people who might tend to disagree, one with another. This human model of faith is one which has turned itself from the virtue of unity to the vice of apart-ness. How very fine then that in 2022 the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland and the Church of Scotland decided to make a public stance together through their joint signing of "The St Margaret Declaration". This joint statement seeks to take us away from past separation and move us forward together in friendship and renewed understanding. At the signing ceremony a very powerful liturgy was shared. This is part of what was said ... and said together:

Before God and before one another, we recognise the hurt and the harm that our forebears did to each other in times past, and we repent and ask forgiveness of one other. ...

We also recognise that, even in more recent times, much could have been said between us more kindly, written more magnanimously, and done more charitably, to promote pardon and healing and friendship among Christians in our land. ...

We acknowledge that there remain points at which we have not yet found a meeting place, and that some questions still divide us. ...

None the less, we reaffirm that what we hold in common is often greater than what divides us, and we commit ourselves to continuing our pilgrimage towards greater unity, as we believe that it is the Lord's will that we be one. We trust that such developing unity in Christ is the Lord's work and the Spirit's doing. ...

And so, as our different denominations look to new opportunities for co-operation in exciting fields of action, may we in our turn reflect upon the Cross which unites us, pointing each and all to the Christ whose message on unity is this: "... I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." Amen.

Praying for others

Dear Lord,
you would have your people united and not divided,
open to one another in love and not closed off from each other
by narrow beliefs or prejudices.
May those of us who follow Jesus learn his way of welcome and
develop his heart of compassion.

May all who come to this place of worship for the first time
feel the warmth of your love and never feel judged, excluded or overlooked.

May we value the humanity that binds us together and
not the differences that might keep us apart.

May we look beyond our congregation and build bridges
with Christians whose traditions or practices
are different from our own but
who follow the same saviour:

may our lives together be marked by faith in the God who is always there for us,
where hope in a future where racism, inequality and injustice are done away with
and where love reigns in our hearts and in our lives.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

Longniddry Parish Church recently received a kind e-mail from our friends at **The Grassmarket Community Project** on receipt of our donation from our Christmas services:

Thank you again for the Church's very kind donation from your collections of £353.00 which has arrived safely in our bank. This is hugely appreciated especially at this time when many of our Members are struggling. Every 90 minutes five households are made homeless in Scotland. 1 in 5 people in Edinburgh live in poverty and we're seeing dramatic increases in people accessing our free meals, our mental health support and our community - facing desperately long waiting lists for services, we're often the only place people can come and get immediate support, food and connect with others. ... Your donation will help us sustain our support over what will be one of the most difficult winters our members have faced ever.

Monday Matinee: in the Church every week. Doors open at 1.45pm, with the film starting at 2pm followed by tea and coffee. On Monday 23rd it's a 1963 wartime prisoner of war film with a well-known motorbike sequence!

New-Age Kurling: our second "come and try" event takes place on Tuesday 24th January from 2-4pm in Longniddry Church's Room 3. Last week's session was a big hit, so come along and join the stone-sliding fun! Admission free.

Wednesday Club: for senior citizens, Wednesdays in Room 3, Longniddry Church Halls, from 2.30-4pm. Come along and enjoy fun activities, entertainment, chat, tea/coffee. (Contact Janet on 07766 574 123.)