

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Romans 8: 1-11 ("Life in the Spirit")

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Great God, your love has called us here (CH:484)

Our God is a God who makes friends (CH:792)

Dear Lord and Father of mankind (CH:485)

Thy Kingdom come - on bended knee (CH:473)

Many years ago a lovely gentleman named Bruce Cannon, Director of Communication at the Church of Scotland, was chatting with me about films. "You know," he said, as with the raw excitement of a young child just back from their first brush with Disney, "a really brilliant film is *Apollo 13*. And what makes it so very special is that even though the audience knows what the ending is going to be, the film is still incredibly exciting."

And Bruce was absolutely right. To anyone old enough to remember 11th April 1971, *Apollo 13* will never be forgotten. All I recall of it as a six-year-old was seeing those big NASA parachutes opening and those three astronauts landing safely (with a splash in the ocean). Everyone was happy ... *unusually* happy, perhaps. Though maybe a better word would be "relieved". Years later I discovered that people's relief was quite understandable because of a terrible accident in space which made the safe return of the crew highly unlikely. People back home on planet Earth hoped and prayed for a miracle but those older than six were justified in fearing the worst. Thankfully, through all sorts of circuitous routes and unlikely pathways the crew in space and the scientists on the ground worked together to achieve the near impossible. There was relief all round when the command module made it home.

The film, *Apollo 13* was released 25 years after the event but, as Bruce so rightly wondered, *where would the dramatic tension be found?* How could audiences make anything of what was unfolding on screen when they knew already that the film would end with a beaming Tom Hanks waving to the cheering US Navy personnel on the flight deck of an aircraft carrier? The answer was simple: the film's director, Ron Howard, structured the astronauts' story around the elegant figure of Gene Kranz, Director of NASA Mission Operations: someone who could stay calm in a storm while encouraging his team to come up with solutions (rather than problems). The audience watched the space travellers of *Apollo 13* intently, but the gaze of viewers was often diverted to the enigmatic figure of that dapper administrator with the crewcut and the white waistcoat who kept pacing the floor in Houston as he worked out every possible angle for getting the boys back in one piece.

There is no doubt in my mind who is at the centre of the story, making the whole rescue mission work. The astronauts are floating in space, trying not to think of what might happen to them. The ground crew are racking their brains and scratching their heads, coming to terms with the massive responsibility which is now their own. Meanwhile, the families are watching Walter Kronkite's level-headed reports on the TV with a sinking feeling in the pit of their stomachs. But the centre of this great tale is found in the person of the man in the white waistcoat who goes eye to eye with disaster and who refuses to blink first. True, it takes a capable and committed team of professionals to get the three voyagers home, but at the head of that team there has to be someone both "tough and competent": a three-word phrase which in time would become known as "the Kranz Dictum".

In the Church there are many people - thousands of millions of dedicated believers. But all around this great body of faith (whether here in Scotland or right across the globe) there is a keen sense that we are simply team members who work together to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ in our daily living. We may be subjects of the Kingdom of God but we know we are subservient to - and answerable to - God, the King. The key factor which makes the Church what it is can't just be the disparate sets of Christians working away on the fringes. (We all know that left to ourselves, all we might achieve would be chaos and disaster.) No: what counts is what lies at the centre of it all: the strong will, the compassionate mind, the caring hands of the

one who is in charge at mission control. And that is the “tough and competent” God.

Like any truly gifted boss, *God is in charge*, and that is enough to offer confidence in the full measure. With God in charge we can afford to cut loose from what Paul describes in today’s reading as “the things of the flesh”. And what Paul means by “the flesh” is a little broader than you might at first imagine. Basically, it is anything that might satisfy *purely* human cravings for *purely* selfish gain.

Let’s think of a basic example. How about the person who loves their vintage car? They work on that car, they clean that car, they wax that car. And all of this they do more often than is strictly necessary. They join car clubs, they swap car memorabilia, they attend car enthusiasts’ conventions ... all over Europe, as it turns out. What they don’t do is take old ladies to church in their beloved car, or talk to local schools about what their car is like, or think about doing anything with their car that might cross their own close horizons. As their passion is all-consuming, with no purpose of any kind beyond the selfish pleasure it brings, that passion is “of the flesh”.

By contrast, think of the person who is a gifted artist, who loves to pick up their paintbrush and create beautiful pictures of landscapes and still lifes and the occasional glorious abstract. Their art is their life, *but* they make that passion a springboard for great things: giving pictures to old folks’ homes; offering masterclasses for art students; encouraging amateur painters to try something new to develop their skills. How wonderful! I have no idea if the apostle Paul ever met someone like that, but I like to imagine that he would recognise *something of God* in such a person, as they give and give and kept on giving, “things of the Spirit”.

Looking at this theologically, we are able to view God as more than just the Chief Executive tucked away on the 76th floor, keeping the whole show on the road. God is not in any sense an absentee boss more often than not out on the golf course securing the next big corporate deal. God is rather the kind of boss who on the one hand is approachable and on the other is ready to give. God is at the epicentre of all that is, and so can be seen as the *core* of everything, including each one of us.

Whether through prayer or contemplation or reflection or meditation or whatever else we might like to call that quest for divine closeness, *to draw near to God is to open ourselves to God’s living presence with us and in us and through us and for us*. That’s not something which can be bought or manufactured. And it’s not something which “just happens”. Our devotional life is a matter of discipline as we choose day by day in all of our living to have an eye and an ear open to what God is doing in the world ... and in us. By being ready to embrace God in this life we, like so many others before us, can place our trust in the one who is fundamentally for us: that rock-solid figure at the heart of the control centre, inspiring us to commitment and to doing what is right. With God at the core of our being, we can leave behind any obsession with the things “of the flesh”, as we dive right into the things “of the Spirit”.

We are fast approaching Holy Week and the final journey towards the Cross. Although Paul was active long before any notion of the season of Lent, still it is fair to say that Paul calls us to use the time available to us (including these weeks of preparation) to turn our hearts and our minds in the direction of the Spirit of God, and the power which that Spirit has, to change us in heart and mind and soul:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Amen.

Praying for others

Loving God, maker of all,
we dedicate ourselves again to you.

Give us understanding, so that we may keep your law of love and
observe it with all our heart;
and keep us faithful in your service, now and always.

Lord, we ask you to fill us with your Holy Spirit
for only then can we fulfil your promise.

We pray that our leaders allow your Spirit to dwell in them
that they may be motivated to work for the betterment of the people they serve,
rather than for personal gain or worldly glory.

We pray that filling them with your Spirit leads to life and peace here on earth.

We know that we allow our baser human nature to divert us from your path.

We ask that you help us accept your Spirit into our lives.

We pray that this guides us back to the work you would have each of us do:
work to bring life to others. Bless us so that our efforts bear fruit.

We pray for all those struggling to see the fruits of your Spirit.

We think of families in Ukraine and elsewhere, separated by war.

We remember all those affected by the earthquakes in the Middle East and
who are trying to survive winter on their decimated streets.

We pray for those who find life a trial because of illness, poverty, loneliness or
bereavement. Let your Spirit dwell in them to lighten their darkness.

Give them hope for a better future.

We ask all these things in the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

Ordination: our friend and former student, the Rev William Watt will be ordained as assistant minister of Corstorphine Old, Edinburgh on Thursday 27th April at 7pm. William passes on a warm invitation: he will be delighted to welcome his friends from Gladsmuir and Longniddry Churches on the night!

Sing at 6.30: Sunday 2nd April (Palm Sunday) sees the start of Gladsmuir Church's season of monthly 6.30pm services, spanning spring to early autumn. Come along to hear Fife-based singer-songwriter Bruce Davies as he takes us on "The Road to Easter". Admission free, with retiring offering to benefit Christian Aid.

Monday Matinee: in the Church every week. Doors open at 1.45pm. Film starts at 2pm followed by tea and coffee. On Monday 27th it's a great court room drama starring Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch in a film based on the novel by Harper Lee.

New Age Kurling: every Tuesday afternoon at 2pm in Rooms 3. This is for anyone who might like to exercise their mind and body while making new friends. All ages and levels of physical ability most welcome.

Sporting Memories Group: every Thursday in the halls 10.30am - 12 noon. Come along, listen and share sporting memories with other older sports fans.