

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Isaiah 55:1-11 ("An Invitation to Abundant Life")

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.
See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.
See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.
Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.
For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Lord of all hopefulness (CH:166)

We cannot measure how you heal (CH:718)

Thine be the glory (CH:419)

It is well and truly possible that you will find the following statement totally incomprehensible, yet it is completely true. And just in case you are shocked by what I am about to tell you, you might care to brace yourself. Here goes:

The older I get, the less I like chocolate.

This story starts away back in the 1960s when chocolate options tended to involve the battle between Cadbury and Mars. Were you a Flake fan? Or did you prefer a Milky Way? In all honesty, as a wee boy I would probably have eaten either - or, ideally, both. These exotic confections were sweet, sticky and the stuff of dreams.

In my student years (a time of economic recession) Cadbury launched in 1983 the Wispa bar, which conveniently took expensive chocolate and combined it with far-from-expensive air to produce a lightweight treat which frankly fooled very few people. I was not impressed. Nor was I impressed when seven years later Mars took a perfectly reasonable product name ("Marathon") and inexplicably renamed it "Snickers". The point was what, exactly?

By this stage I had grown a bit fed up of Easter eggs, Christmas selection boxes and all sorts of other sweet and gooey tooth-rotting produce which first made me feel like I needed more and more of it ... until that point arrived where I suddenly realised I had "crossed the line" and eaten too much. And I well remember the fateful day in the mid-1990s when I met a friend in a city centre diner and ordered a dessert bearing the name, "Death by Chocolate". In the aftermath of that brush with high octane caffeine, I was buzzing for the rest of the day and much of the night.

These days, for me at least, the word "chocolate" and "binge" simply don't go together. Feed me a single Kit-Kat and I will be very happy indeed. Another one? Actually no, though thank you all the same.

In my experience, while other foods may bring me great pleasure, chocolate just doesn't satisfy, and satisfaction is something we all crave. Consider our reading today: this short passage from the book of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 55. I will read from the King James Version ('coz frankly, it's just so cool):

Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good ...

In this quaint old call there is an energy. (How could there not be when the very first word of the reading is "Ho"? It is almost as though the prophet is wandering through a crowded marketplace in the height of the working day, looking to find the best place to issue his great, no strings attached bargain offer:

"You're thirsty? That's good! Make your way here. And it doesn't matter if you're broke either. Come! Buy! Eat! There's wine too! And if don't think much of wine, there's milk! Free of charge, and being given away. Why would you spend your money on rubbish that isn't good for you? And why would you work so you can buy bad stuff? Just listen to me ... eat what satisfies."

That's quite an offer, and quite a message.

The call of Isaiah comes to us from hundreds of years before the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth, yet these words perhaps ring a certain bell for us. As we move from Old Testament to New, we find Jesus around a table in an upper room in Jerusalem, feeding his disciples. We have absolutely no idea what was on the menu at that famous Last Supper, yet this much we do know, courtesy of the gospel writer Matthew:

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Just as with Isaiah, so too with Jesus: here is a free offer of food ... food with no price tag. And this food is simple stuff, but really great. It may only be breakable bread and pourable wine, but this will be for you something more special than you might imagine: food for your soul ... food which will satisfy.

Almost 40 years ago I was a member of a British ecumenical group which met every couple of months in Birmingham. In one of our many weekend gatherings we were struggling to work out what the group's policy on Communion should be when our membership spanned Roman Catholic, Anglican, Reformed and non-aligned members. Honestly, we went round and round in circles getting absolutely nowhere. We were totally unable to come up with any common understanding of Mass, the Eucharist, Communion, The Lord's Supper (call it what you will). In the midst of our great debate, our General Secretary paused to tell a story from years gone by when an all-age group of Christians were chatting heatedly about the nature of this Sacrament. To break the deadlock, each person (young or old) was asked to take a small piece of paper and write a sentence about what Communion meant to them. The papers were all gathered in and read aloud in turn. Everyone in the room had a vote on the understanding which had impressed them most. And when all was said and done - surprise, surprise! - the Communion insights which had struck that group the most had all come from children, not adults.

Do we try too hard to figure out the facts, when instead we need only taste and see? Different people have different views of what the bread and wine of this Sacrament are all about. But - goodness me! - we don't half make things complicated for ourselves. Unless, of course, we happen to be children, for then we can see and hear and smell and touch and taste what's going on in Communion, using our senses perhaps more than we would ever use our brainpower ... our rational minds.

Truly, it makes no rational sense for Isaiah to come out with this call:

"You that have no money, come, buy and eat!"

Does it make much more sense for Jesus to tell his friends this?:

"Take, eat; this is my body."

Our overstretched minds might make no sense of what's going on at the Table. Yet our tastebuds and our souls might quietly be taking it all in.

Across the ancient world, bread and wine stood for a very great deal when food was so frequently in short supply, with water often being a polluted, dangerous liquid. For the people of the Ancient Near East, if dependable supplies of basic food were not available, they would really struggle. By contrast, in the 21st century our supermarkets, our fridges, our cupboards and our shelves contain so many varieties of food and drink that a simple reality of old can so easily be lost on us: people were once dependent upon bread and wine for bare survival.

For us, the implications of Jesus' actions are stark. As we eat the bread and drink the wine, we are meant to acknowledge our own dependence upon the God who comes to us whenever we eat and drink this solemn act of remembrance ... together.

In our human need, Christ himself draws near to each one.

In our emptiness, Christ himself fills us with good things. Amen.

Praying for others

Lord God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
we meet at your Table and by your Grace receive your bread and wine
to satisfy our bodies and our spirits.

You call us to go out into your world, as lights into a dark place,
to offer others the satisfying hope of your love and your grace.

Lord, we pray for those places where people are dying and
suffering from human starvation and thirst.

We pray for countries ravaged by war and drought,
where human greed exacerbates already desperate situations.

We pray for aid agencies and their staff and volunteers – may they have the
resources that they need to bring comfort and relief.

We pray for political leaders around the world, that they would make decisions that
break repetitive cycles of debt and poverty in many countries, and that uphold
human rights and the sanctity of human life and well-being for all.

Closer to home in East Lothian, we pray for families and individuals stretched and
challenged by the rising cost of living. We thank you for the volunteers working in
the Foodbanks and charities that provide much needed support.

Bless their work and challenge us all to work together
to find lasting solutions that bring hope in our communities.

Lord, as we leave your Table, go with us, giving us the strength and courage we
need to be your light, and your hope, and your servants in the world.

All these prayers we ask in your name. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

"Sing @ 6.30": Gladsmuir Parish Church's final evening service of the summer season will take place on Sunday 10th September at 6.30pm. Our special guest will be the Rev Bill Wishart who will be bringing us both his preaching and his musical skills. This act of worship will be an evening of old-time gospel music led by our very own string band, "The Coal Road Ramblers", plus lots of fine organ music. Admission free, with a retiring offering to benefit Christian Aid.

New Age Kurling: Tuesdays from 2-4pm in Room 3, Longniddry Church. 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.

Wednesday Club: Wednesdays from 2.30-4pm in Room 3, Longniddry Church. Come along and enjoy a variety of activities, entertainment, chat and tea/coffee. (Contact Janet 07766574123)

Sporting Memories Group: Thursdays from 10.30am – 12 noon in Room 3, Longniddry Church. Come along, listen and share sporting memories with other older sports fans.