

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Online at www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

Today's Bible reading

Psalm 25:6-22 ("Prayer for Guidance and Deliverance")

Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.

Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O Lord!

Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.

All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

For your name's sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great.

Who are they that fear the Lord? He will teach them the way that they should choose.

They will abide in prosperity, and their children shall possess the land.

The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him, and he makes his covenant known to them.

My eyes are ever towards the Lord, for he will pluck my feet out of the net.

Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.

Relieve the troubles of my heart, and bring me out of my distress.

Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins.

Consider how many are my foes, and with what violent hatred they hate me.

O guard my life, and deliver me; do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.

May integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for you.

Redeem Israel, O God, out of all its troubles. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

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

May the mind of Christ my Saviour (CH:536)

I to the hills will lift mine eyes (CH:81)

Ye servants of God (CH:130)

What a joy it is for me to be back in schools. Whether it is helping Primary 7s to understand fair trade through selling Kilombero rice, or helping Primary 5s to realise that maths is a beautiful subject of mystery and symmetry and intrigue, or helping young students at high school to get deep inside the poetry of Creation as found in the Book of Genesis, working in our schools is (as I so often say) a pleasure and a privilege like no other.

One of my very favourite parts of school chaplaincy involves my frequent visits to our local high school's Enhanced Learning Provision classroom. This is a place of light and hope, with a caring community of around a dozen or so wonderful young people who have additional support needs. It is no exaggeration to say that these young people have given me so much on my visits - once again, a pleasure and a privilege.

During the academic year 2023-24, I am going to "the ELPs" (as they call themselves) to chat with my friends there on a regular basis, leading discussions on the subject of what we might call "international days". What on earth does that mean? Well, let me list the first few international days of our expanding series:

- **International Day of Charity** (which featured Longniddry's own Gillian Couper of the Grassmarket Community Project in Edinburgh);
- **International Day of Older Persons** (where we chatted about what we can do to value and help those who are in their more senior years);
- **World Toilet Day** (understandably the cause of much hilarity, yet also offering a theme that is utterly crucial to human wellbeing and public health); and
- **World AIDS Day** (just around the corner on Friday 1st December).

It should be said that the Church has an issue with this last day: World AIDS Day. It's not a philosophical issue, and it's not a theological issue. Rather, it's an incredibly annoying practicality. You see, ever since its inception in 1988, World AIDS Day has fallen each year on 1st December, simply because the World Health Organization's Global Programme on AIDS thought this would be a really good point in the year to get lots of worldwide publicity. That's all well and good, but as any calendar-wise Christian will attest, the beginning of December also sees the start of Advent, one of the truly great seasons of the Church year. As a result, many congregations (including our own) opt for Advent over World AIDS Day.

We in the Church of Scotland eventually found a neat and workable solution in the form of Souper Sunday which, since 2009, has been part of what we do each January - a little later than December, it's true, but still a very effective way of keeping issues of HIV and AIDS in the minds of worshippers. I am delighted to say that in a couple of months' time on Sunday 7th January, Longniddry Church aims to stage Souper Sunday for the first time since 2020. And this is good news. (All are welcome!)

Even though we can do our own thing in January, nonetheless, I felt that I wanted to remind everyone that we should keep on the look-out for World AIDS Day in less than four short weeks' time, because this vital piece of profile raising is something which we gain much from in both information and inspiration.

Why should we think about HIV? And when we think about it, what should we think? Put simply, HIV has not gone away, and it is a cause of death around the world, albeit a diminishing one. A US Government report recently made this point: "AIDS-related deaths have been reduced by 69% since the peak in 2004. In 2022, around 630,000 people died from AIDS-related illnesses worldwide, compared to 2

million people in 2004 and 1.3 million in 2010.” The report then goes on to say that, “[c]ertain regions of the globe are disproportionately affected by HIV.”

And here is the sad reality: though countries like the UK do well with HIV, in the world’s poorest places, women, men and children still die as a result of untreated infection. And insofar as HIV is able to pass from older people to younger people, the legacy of the virus will most likely pass down the generations. Now is not a time for complacency. Yes, there is some good news out there that is well worth sharing: an HIV death rate which has been reduced by 69 per cent in a mere 18 years is worth knowing about. Still, the struggle against the virus must go on.

And for us, here in an economically developed country, what is the big issue of HIV today? For the most part it is less to do with viral transmission, illness or death, and much more to do with stigma: that terrible human failing which entices us to label someone in order that we might distance ourselves from them, based on a lack of awareness and understanding, of coupled with fear and prejudice.

This is something which the psalmist knew well, millennia before HIV entered our human experience. From generation to generation, society had found ways of consigning people into opposing groups: a success or a failure; “in” or “out”; “us” or “them”. And who, of course, wouldn’t want to be “successful”, or “in”, or “us”?

Listen again to the psalmist’s plea, as he turns to God in despair at being cast out, vilified, made to feel ashamed, worthless, useless ... stigmatised:

Consider how many are my foes, and with what violent hatred they hate me.

O guard my life, and deliver me; do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.

May integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for you.

In 1987, just as the HIV / AIDS crisis was emerging into a then helpless and naive world, the Iona Community published the first volume of its “Wild Goose Worship Songs”. Now, more than 35 years later, many of these powerful songs of John Bell and the late Graham Maule are standards in our Church of Scotland hymn book, and so many other hymn books around the world. In particular, one hymn from that collection hits home in its message of Christian action: “Will you come and follow me if I but call your name” (CH: 533). It poses searching questions, prompting us to assess just how true and how meaningful our Christian commitment truly is:

- ♦ Will you go where you don’t know?
- ♦ Will you leave yourself behind?
- ♦ Will you risk the hostile stare? And then the one meant to shake us to the core ...
- ♦ Will you kiss the leper clean? (*Seriously???*)

If any hymn seeks to challenge our presuppositions and our comfort, it is this one.

In closing, I would urge you to go online and watch an immensely powerful one-minute video made by the HIV charity, the Terrence Higgins Trust. It is the first TV advertisement on HIV in 40 years, launched last month with Scottish Government funding. What is so, so special about this ad is that it’s not to do with illness and death, or needles and condoms, or testing and self-care. It is about stigma. And its message is tailor-made for a country in which - thank God! - there is free access to HIV medication. One single tablet per day means the virus is 100 per cent disabled, yet so very few of us know this. As the Trust says: “just a third of Scots [are] aware that people living with HIV and on effective treatment can’t pass it on to partners.”

And the clear message of this campaign? Truly, and astonishingly, in the Scotland of 2023 the message is this: “Stigma is more harmful than HIV”. Amen.

Praying for others

God of love,
it is so easy for us to fear those live with the HIV virus,
because we do not know the facts,
or because we find ourselves reluctant to engage,
or because we simply do want to think about the issues.

Rather than turning our backs, may we stand firm in our support
of women, men, girls and boys whose lives know the sting of stigma.

We know that stigma is a most terrible sin:
one which so easily creeps up on us unawares.
Guard us from the harsh realities of unfairness and discrimination,
ensuring that we treat our neighbours who live with HIV
as people of shared humanity and God-given dignity,
with lives to live, with hopes to realise.

And in our world's poorest countries
help us to recall that the struggle against AIDS is still very much alive.

May the scientists, the politicians and the health services
work together to bring yet more remarkable advances where they are needed most.

Bless the people of this world with health and wholeness,
for we ask this in the healing Name of Christ our Lord. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

Longniddry Guild: The next meeting of the Guild is at 7.15pm on Wednesday 15th November in the church halls. The speaker is our very own Rev Dr Robin Hill and the topic is Christmas stamps. All are very welcome.

Christian Aid Quiz: the Longniddry Christian Aid team are holding a quiz in Longniddry Community Centre at 7.30pm on Friday 17th November. Tickets cost £7 each and team sizes are between four and six. If you would like to book a table please contact any member of the team (Peter H, Abigail, Blythe, Sheena, Robin C or Jim J) . It's BYOB and food, as usual. We look forward to seeing you!

Gladsmuir Craft Group: Wednesdays from 10.30am each fortnight (next meeting 22nd November) in Gladsmuir Church. All welcome!

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.