THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches
Issue 194 10th December 2023
Online at www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

Today's Bible reading

1 Peter 2:4-12 ("The Living Stone and a Chosen People")

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:
'See, I am laying in Zion a stone,
  a cornerstone chosen and precious;
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'
To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,
'The stone that the builders rejected
  has become the very head of the corner',
and
'A stone that makes them stumble,
  and a rock that makes them fall.'
They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.
Once you were not a people,
  but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
  but now you have received mercy.

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge. Amen. *(NRSV)*

Today's hymns

The God of Abraham praise (CH:162)
Come, thou long-expected Jesus (CH:472)
Christ be our light (CH:543)
The race that long in darkness pined (CH:290)

Today's "story sermon" brings us a very unusual voice: that of a stately and solid 700-year-old building set in the English countryside. This has been home to a congregation whose faithful worshippers - down across the centuries - have witnessed the changing landscape of England while the building has remained a constant.
As we hear this voice of wisdom and experience, we are drawn into considering all that has changed from generation to generation, as well as the eternal truth of God's love, past … present … and future.

I cannot say if you and I have met before, though I suppose it seems quite possible. I am a building, and a very old one at that: a place of worship crafted by hands long stilled by death. I have offered sanctuary in troubled times. I have been a place of tranquillity to weary ones seeking rest from life's rigours. Above all, the peace which I have both embodied and instilled across the centuries ... well, it pleases me.

For generations more than I could number I have welcomed so many worshippers just like you. I have smiled as couples have gone from aisle to altar, ready to make the happiest vows of their young lives. I have seen babies brought to my font. I have offered tranquillity to the departed, soon to be raised aloft with solemnity and given their place of rest within my graveyard.

Good days, bad days, joyful days, painful days, high days, holy days, all kinds of days ... I have surely seen them all. And still they come seeking the comfort of their God, whose property, and whose place I am pleased to be.

Peace I offer to each as best I can; and some they choose to take that peace for nurturing in their hearts.

When first I stood here, stone upon freshly dressed stone in those far-off days seven centuries in the past, worship was so very different to that which is offered up in modern times.

Ah yes, but change is ever in the air. Nothing save the courts of heaven will last forever, or so they say. My years rolled by and, with them, the world moved on: age to age it went, new knowledge hand in hand with curiosity deep enough to rock many a strong foundation.

Formal schooling brought learning to young minds. Bibles came into print, and in large number, offered in the common language of the day for all to hear and take to heart. Suddenly the message of the Christ-child was in the ears and upon the souls of those who chose to ponder its meaning. Faith sprouted and blossomed, opening up as some gentle flower in rays of summer sun. Sitting within my pews the people encountered an honest faith that was truly there for all to acquire – the very gift of God.

It is strange to recall the mighty catalogue of change I have witnessed across these centuries, whether in language or in liturgy. Perhaps the greatest revolution of all was to come with the advent of industry across this once verdant land. With the blow of a whistle people could venture away from our green fields to find their place in spreading, sprawling towns which grew and grew in noise and billowing smoke.

While cities emerged from steadings and moorland, life changed beyond all recognition upon our farms: fewer labourers, fewer families arriving to praise God upon the Lord's Day.

Those who travelled far away would rarely return, so convinced were they by some bright new future just beyond their reach: a clattering, clamouring world of grime and betrayal.

Then there were the wars. For year upon hate-fuelled year the tear-stained folk would come for prayer all dressed in black, weeping bitterly for sons – and sense! – all gone, all gone. These were troubled times when faith held true for many, while others turned their backs upon the Prince of Peace, their nightmares all too vivid and too real, poor souls.

And so I stand, a witness to some 700 winters, and still largely as of old.

There might be spots of wear and tear, 'tis true. Yet I pride myself on having willing helpers who keep me bright and clean, draft-proof, water-tight, year in, year out, as I worship God in this quiet little corner of an English village.

Here I bear witness to the One who made my stones longer ago than even I could tell. And it is good indeed to cast my mind back upon the ways in which I helped to nurture peace across so many generations, over all the circling seasons: Lent; Easter; Advent; Christmas ...

Ah yes, the blessed feast of the Nativity! My favourite time of all. Across those rolling centuries the truth of the Messiah's birth has captured minds and captivated hearts unnumbered. How good for them to hear again the message from on high: *Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.*

And once all words were done, and carolling complete, how good for me to feel the remnant of warmth from candle-glow on dim December night, those worshippers trudging back to home and hearth. Now filled with hope to fuel another year unfolding, reflecting on their shadowy world now wreathed in softest light, all wrapped in wonder of the Incarnation which once again was theirs to take ... if only they would choose.

Down to this day the message of heaven's peace rings true – as it did on Bethlehem's plains so long ago. For in this wisdom of old, our world might encounter comfort in the Word of God made flesh: that gentle babe from heaven high, laid upon a manger.

Perhaps that is why many still make their way to my oaken doors on a winter pilgrimage of peace. In their curiosity, may the green shoots of Jesus' birth herald for them new life at Easter.

And now I should rest, but here's a thing to send you on your way ...

Some people call me 'church': a building which can look back over so many centuries of care and service, and can look forward in similar vein to more miracles of faith. Yet there is a strangeness here, for really I am no church at all: I am but a fragile vessel built of stone and wood and glass, destined for mortal destruction as we all must surely be, whether soon or in time as yet unknown.

So listen well ... for you, in truth, are the stones who make up the Church: the Church formed of flawed humanity that will always be renewed in Christ; the Church even yet made visible on earth wherever the faithful play together at being Bethlehem.

Christ's Peace be upon you …

… you who are the Church. Amen.

Praying for others

God of Advent Peace,
you give us security and calm,
safe within the shelter of your embrace.

All nature cries out for your saving grace,
that your beloved Creation might be nurtured and cherished,
not destroyed for selfish gain and misplaced comfort.
We know that all who come to you for sustenance will be fed and watered,
so we can trust that when we can put others first,
we will not go hungry or thirsty.

Bless your Church across this troubled planet,
and place within the heart of each zeal for all things good which come together
to reveal your will for a world gone wrong.
With Jesus as our foundation and cornerstone,
you call us to work together
as a body, interdependent, respectful, encouraging,
forgiving of each other in the building of your house here on earth.

As we look towards a distant light from heaven,
keep our eyes open, we pray, and alert to the signs of
your coming, your promise, your peace.
In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

Monday Matinee: Join us at 2pm on Monday 11th December for Whoopi Goldberg's famous movie from 1992 in which a witness to a gangland murder is placed in a convent for her protection. In time, the nuns' choir is transformed, thanks to the newcomer's unexpected but much appreciated musical guidance. All adults welcome. Refreshments served. Admission free. (Certificate PG)

Gladsmuir "Tree in the Park": An all-age outdoor celebration of Christmas in Gladsmuir Play Park (Gladsmuir Church bad weather alternative). Join the fun on Sunday 10th December at 3.30pm, as we await the lighting of the tree around 4pm, with music, a seasonal message and warming refreshments. (There might even be a Christmas-themed illusion or two!) To find out if we are inside or outside between 3.30 and 4pm, just follow the sound of the music, the laughter, the quaffing of hot beverages, etc.

Concert at Cockenzie Old Parish Church: Organist David Gibson is having a concert with fellow musicians and singers in Cockenzie Old Parish Church at 7.30pm on Friday 15th December. Tickets are £10, payable at the door.

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

Wednesday Club: from 2.30-4pm in Room 3, Longniddry Church. Come along and enjoy a variety of activities and tea/coffee. (Contact Janet 07766 574123)

Sporting Memories Group: Thursdays from10.30am – 12 noon in Room 3, Longniddry Church.

Printed and published by Gladsmuir Parish Church (Church of Scotland): SC005996; and Longniddry Parish Church (Church of Scotland): SC016556.