THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches
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Online at www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

Today's Bible reading

Luke 15:1-7 ("The parable of the Lost Sheep")

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

So he told them this parable: 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance. Amen. *(NRSV)*

Today's hymns

While humble shepherds (CH:296)
In the bleak midwinter (CH:305)
Joy to the world (CH:320)
Hark! the herald angels sing (CH:301)

Frowning in a pensive sort of way, the Rev Dr Alwyn Roberts seemed surprised by the object staring back up at him, right there in the middle of the village green. Unable to overcome his curiosity, the minister of Buarth Newydd knelt down to take a closer look and found himself talking to a cuddly toy.

"Now what might you be doing here?" he asked, before furtively looking around to make sure no-one had overheard him.

Realising they were all alone he took the little lamb in one hand and pushed himself up with the other. "There we are. Let's take a look at your label ... Leiden. So you're Dutch. Come on, little one: you're a long, long way from home."

It was one thing to find a child's toy in the middle of a Welsh village, but it would be quite another to track down its far-distant owner. The Dutch Consulate probably had bigger things on their mind than a mislaid toy. …

"Maybe, thought Dr Roberts, "I should enlist the local constabulary."

"Sheep ... black in colour … hand-made by the looks of him," mumbled Sergeant Williams.

"Dutch ..." said Dr Roberts. "From Leiden … in The Netherlands"

"Minor wear and tear to three hooves. Front nearside hoof undamaged."

"Now then ... if no-one claims this little fellow he'll be yours, minister. In two shakes of a lamb's tail, if you'll pardon the expression." …

Meanwhile, far away in London, little Gareth Rees was having a tough conversation with his Mum and Dad.

"No, my darling. Not in the cafe. We've checked. Not at the swimming pool either. They denied all knowledge. Not at Auntie Bronwen's, or at Auntie Bronwen's friend's, or at Auntie Bronwen's friend's next door neighbour's. We've tried everywhere."

"We've not tried everywhere," whispered Gareth, "coz if we'd tried everywhere we'd've found Hugo. And we will find Hugo. We must."

Mum and Dad exchanged nervous glances across the table. "Gareth bach, ..."

"No," he interrupted before his father could sweet-talk him into submission. "I've always, always had Hugo. We've got to go back to Auntie Bronwen's and look some more. ... Please???"

"Auntie Bronwen lives four hours away. And yes, we will be going back, but not until Christmas," said Dad apologetically. "It's tough, I know – we all know. That weekend was so busy. We went all over the place. You could have dropped your lamb anywhere."

"Or <u>you</u> could've." Gareth shot a knowing glare at his blushing father.

"Well," chipped in Mum urgently, "look on the bright side. Only a few weeks until Christmas now, and Oma will be over from Leiden. Maybe she could make you another."

"No-o!" cried Gareth. "There won't be another." …

In far-off Wales a certain minister was checking his diary for December.

"Men's club party ... nursery Santa visit ... Christmas tree festival ... three school concerts ... 26 acts of worship ... one stray wedding ... little Rhian's Baptism ... plus, no doubt, several funerals. That should keep me busy through to Boxing Day. So, where to start?"

Just then the phone rang. It was Sergeant Williams with some news.

"Morning minister," he chuckled, his voice ringing loud and clear down the line. "I am pleased to report that Christmas has come early. Nobody has claimed the stray sheep, so he's now officially your very own. Fascinating animal: turns out he came all the way from Holland." …

The days rolled in, the nights grew long, and soon the family was getting ready to gather for Christmas Eve. Oma Dafne caught her flight at the last minute (same as ever) with Gareth there at arrivals to receive the biggest of grandmotherly hugs. Then it was into their bulging little car for the long, long drive to Wales. Mum took the wheel, with Oma in the passenger seat, chatting away to her daughter in Dutch, and the boys snoozing behind. Four hours later, their journey thankfully over, they drew up to Auntie Bronwen's for more hugs and lots of warming cocoa.

That night Gareth couldn't sleep. He just lay in bed mapping out in his mind all the places Hugo might have been dropped: the community centre ... the shops ... the library ... the village green ... the fire station. It was no use; his little black lamb could indeed have fallen out of Dad's backpack anywhere.

Just then he heard a tiny flurrying of snow against his window. Wide awake, he slid out of bed and quietly pulled back the heavy velvet curtain. The wintry scene was

surprisingly bright, a sparkling of fresh snow lying all around. A real white Christmas, thought Gareth, as he took in the glorious scene before him.

And then he looked up.

Off in the distance there shone a great star high in the sky, bright as bright could be. And right below it the little Welsh chapel where Auntie Bronwen played the organ Sunday by Sunday. He would stay up really, really late tomorrow and get to go to the half past eleven Watchnight Service, falling asleep in the gentle candlelight, no doubt, just as he had always done before. The warm, vivid memory of past Christmas Eves was enough to make him feel drowsy, so back into bed he crawled, counting black sheep until at last he was asleep. …

Some twenty-four hours later, the little chapel was glowing with warmth and buzzing with late night excitement. The family arrived just in time, and were hastily ushered to a vacant pew tucked in by a side window. This suited Gareth fine as it meant he would be near to where Auntie Bronwen was seated at the organ. It's good to be here, thought Gareth – good to be in a special place on a special night.

The service got underway in traditional style. Once in royal David's city rang out, filling the old building with spirited Welsh singing. Then came a prayer. It was a long prayer: long and dull, with far too many old-fashioned words. Gareth started to fidget, opening one eye and then the other, peeping out this way and that. Bored stiff by the monotonous voice of Dr Roberts, he decided to take a look around the beautiful sanctuary with all its decorations twinkling in the candle light. Mum, Dad and Oma sat with heads bowed, eyes firmly shut. It was just the same with all the other folk too.

Gareth decided to pop his head round the side of the pew to look at the Nativity scene which filled the chancel with Christmas beauty. There was a knitted Mary, a Joseph, some shepherds and their sheep: three big white ones plus ... a little black lamb who was looking straight into Gareth's eye. While Dr Roberts droned on and on with his thees and his thous, his wherefors and his therefores, Gareth tiptoed silently out from his pew, not a single soul looking his way – except for a smiling organist who wasn't about to distract her nephew in any way. Up crept Gareth to that manger scene, removing one particular hand-made cuddly toy and feeling for a familiar label which might confirm the hopes of his now pounding heart. In the tiniest of letters he mouthed the words:

To baby Gareth with all our love, Oma Dafne & Opa Hugo, Leiden

Before The Lord's Prayer was even half-way through, the little boy had given his auntie a triumphant thumbs-up, receiving a wink and a noiseless "Shhhhhh" in return. Seconds later he was tip-toeing gingerly back to the pew, the others blissfully unaware of the unlikely reunion that had taken place right in front of their closed eyes. And before the organ could strike up *Away in a manger*, a little lamb and a little boy were fast asleep together, safe and sound once more. …

Christmas Day dawned bright and early for a little shepherd boy resplendent in his dressing-gown cloak and tea-towel headdress. And there, under a protective arm, a little black sheep smiled knowingly, safely home once again to almost everyone's utter astonishment. This, said a very relieved Dad, had to be a little bit of a Christmas miracle. But there was no time for pondering ... not yet anyway.

"Come on!" yelled Gareth (who – truly – had never imagined the story ending any other way). "Everyone knows me and Hugo have a baby to visit on Christmas morning."

Praying for others

Lord God, our loving Heavenly Father,
you have made the earth and all its creatures and all its people,
you have made the stars and galaxies, the filaments and voids of the universe.

We offer up to you our prayers for all the people of our world.
We have lit our candle of hope – give hope to the hopeless.

We have heard the cry of our brothers and sisters and we have not lit our candle of peace; bring peace where there is no peace.

We have lit our candle of joy, but we remember so many
where there is no joy because of suffering and want.
Lord, bring joy to the world that it may suffuse all people.

We have lit our candle of love. May your love flow among us and among all people; may it melt the bonds of hatred so that wars may end and peace may come.
Lord, bring light in the darkness.

In these days of Advent when we await the wondrous birth,
may the lights of our candles go with us and lighten the darkness of the world.

We pray for all the people on earth; among them we pray for our own communities and families. Our hearts are greatly troubled by the bad things we see in the world. But they are also properly thankful and joyful for this most wonderful season when we receive the outpouring of your love.

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in; be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

Christmas services 2023:

Sunday 24th December:	9.45am Morning Service, Longniddry*
	11am Morning Service, Gladsmuir
	7pm Christmas Eve Family Service, Longniddry*
	9.30pm Carols by Candlelight Service, Gladsmuir
Monday 25th December:	10.30am Christmas Day Celebration, Longniddry*
Sunday 31st December:	11am Morning Service, Gladsmuir

* Also on the "Gladsmuir and Longniddry Churches" YouTube channel

Biscuits and chocolate: Tranent Community Pantry and Longniddry Community Centre between them received over 100 gifts of biscuits, selection boxes and chocolates from Gladsmuir Parish Church and Longniddry Parish Church. These will go into food parcels to be distributed to those who may otherwise struggle to provide lovely treats at Christmas. Thank you everyone for all your donations.

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