

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Online at www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

Today's Bible reading

Mark 4:1-20 ("The Parable of the Sower")

Again he began to teach beside the lake. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the lake and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the lake on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.' And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that "they may indeed look, but not perceive,

and may indeed listen, but not understand;
so that they may not turn again and be forgiven." '

And he said to them, 'Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.' Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Amazing grace (CH:555)
Jesus, lover of my soul (CH:490)

This is the day (CH:194)
Stand up and bless the Lord (CH:202)

When we come across something unusual for the first time, often we find it hard to identify just what it is that we are encountering in that “unusual something”. It might be a TV programme which initially seems to be a documentary but eventually turns out to be drama. Or how about a children’s toy which comes out its packaging in one form, only to be transformed by an enquiring and resourceful five-year-old into something totally different. It could even be an ice-cream which turns out to be a savoury starter rather than a sweet dessert.

There are times in life when we simply don’t know what to think. So hard to figure out; so difficult to pin down. What are we to make of it all?

These kinds of questions, I feel sure, would have been in the minds of the people who encountered Jesus of Nazareth, not least in the earliest days of his ministry before he had established a name for himself and a big reputation in the public mind. Wherever he went he was able to help people with troubles in body or mind. He was also a public figure standing up for right against so many different kinds of wrong. He was also a rabbi with the kind of prophetic voice which would have spoken straight to the heart of the Jewish people. And (so far as the everyday people were concerned) he was also a supremely gifted preacher, teacher, story-teller, who could change people’s lives by the simple yet profound words of his own mouth.

What we know from the gospel accounts of Jesus’ ministry is that people would come out on to the streets of villages and towns to hear what he had to say. And as his reputation spread, keen listeners would even come from miles around, some - no doubt - intrigued to know what all the fuss was about, while others would be coming back for more, as they tuned into Jesus’ Good News of heaven-come-down-to-earth which communicated so very positively and so tremendously effectively.

One of this legendarily gifted teacher’s skills is to be seen in his apparently unrivalled ability to make people think for themselves. And through his persistent use of parables Jesus could tell a proper tale - one which placed a giant question mark right in the centre of his audience members’ heads, ready to be taken home and dealt with in their own good time. There might be the drama of the lost son who comes home to his dad, or the excitement of that one about the foreigner who got beaten up and left for dead. By the end of each parable, the listener is not left with a neat and well-packaged parcel of answers. Rather, the men, the women, the children would all make their way home puzzling over meaning ... significance ... implication for the future. How, they might well ask, could this all relate to me and my life - to us and our community?

Whoever has ears to hear, challenges Jesus, let them hear. This, a first century equivalent of Cyril Fletcher’s line before his “odd odes”: “Pin back your lugholes.”

One New Testament scholar has said that part of Jesus’ great skill was to understand how people think. Most of us will be tempted on hearing a proposition to jump to one of two conclusions. On the one hand, we might get the message and say to ourselves: “Yes, that’s a really, really good point. It’s an idea I completely understand. More, I totally agree with it!” On the other hand, we might find our feathers well and truly ruffled by the alien message: “Total nonsense! This person doesn’t know what they’re talking about. I’m just going to put them and their thinking straight into the drawer marked ‘Rubbish’! And that will be that.”

When Jesus wants to put forward a difficult concept or a daring proposition to set before a crowd, he tends not to come straight out with much in the way of explanation. Instead, he will ask those curious listeners simply to “pin back their

lugholes" opening their minds to what is being said. Through a story - perhaps even a story which might span half an hour or more, featuring jokes and barbs, impersonations and countless interruptions - this Jesus would get into his audience's hearts and minds. His presentation would be a whole lot less about lightning-quick reaction to some theoretical argument. It would be a whole lot more about the "soft skills" of engaging imagination and urging a very personal interpretation. "What do you reckon to my message?", Jesus might prompt. "And how does it make you feel? Take it away and dwell on it. See what meaning might emerge for you in the days to come. Stay curious, and keep on enquiring, just like you did when you were seven years old. Remember that?"

One of the big, big themes of the parables is that of "the Kingdom of God" (or, as we find it in Matthew's gospel, "the Kingdom of heaven"). In typical Jesus style, he puts this idea out there for his listeners, painting it with a pretty broad brush without the aim of specifying any of the Kingdom of God's precise attributes.

Avoiding any temptation to give a detailed lecture on deepest theology, Jesus shouts out to his engaged and willing crowd: "Here is what the Kingdom of God is like ..."

And in saying what it "is like" Jesus forces the people to conjure up in their individual minds an image of what God's Kingdom is like to them. At the end of the session, away they go to their homes, thinking and chatting and comparing notes together, so potentially opening out the possibilities of heaven on earth ... for them.

With the parable of the sower - unusually! - we find Jesus providing a commentary for his nearest and dearest followers. And so he gives them a brief tutorial:

Do you see how this story works? All my stories work this way. The farmer plants the Word. Some people are like the seed that falls on the hardened soil of the road. No sooner do they hear the Word than Satan snatches away what has been planted in them. And some are like the seed that lands in the gravel. When they first hear the Word, they respond with great enthusiasm. But there is such shallow soil of character that when the emotions wear off and some difficulty arrives, there is nothing to show for it. The seed cast in the weeds represents the ones who hear the kingdom news but are overwhelmed with worries about all the things they have to do and all the things they want to get. The stress strangles what they heard, and nothing comes of it. But the seed planted in the good earth represents those who hear the Word, embrace it, and produce a harvest beyond their wildest dreams.

I can (rightly or wrongly) imagine Jesus tutting at his friends and saying: "Honestly! Can you people not just listen to what I'm saying about the vast importance of God's Kingdom, rather than trying to work out every last detail?"

But then, in imagining that, I am forced to place myself in among the crowd, because I know that I would be just like the disciples, struggling to make sense of all those little details. "Jesus," I would say, "you mentioned thorns a moment ago. Would these be the kind of thorns you find on thistles, or alternatively the kind of thorns you find on roses? I think it would be useful just to distinguish between the two, if at all possible."

How is Jesus to respond to my frankly daft interrogation? With, I suspect, a smile and a chuckle and a gleam in the eye. And his weird invitation to take this story away in my head and in my heart for a whole lot of further consideration.

"But really, Jesus," I reply, "there's just so much to look at here. You mentioned worries ... oh, and also the love of riches. What are we to do about all these?"

"OK," says Jesus calmly. "Hear the message ... accept it ... and bear fruit."

Amen.

Praying for others

God of the tiny seed and the enormous tree,
lead us, we pray in your ways of wonder and of truth.
Help us to see that with you to guide and to guard us in our journeying
we can find and experience real growth in our faith and our lives.
Transform our faltering minds into the mind of Christ,
that we might work for a world where your justice reigns.
Change our hearts into hearts fit for your service,
moved by compassion to bring healing
where now it is so sadly lacking.
Fill our mouths with Good News to be shared
across a community which needs your Love and
around a world which struggles with such pain and division.
Call your Church, Lord, and inspire us to walk forward
in the company of your Son, in whose Name we pray. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

Father Mark Elliott Smith was delighted to receive the good wishes of our congregations (along with those of the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland) last Sunday when Robin preached at the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption and St Gregory in central London. It was a wonderful service with the warmest of welcomes for Robin and Ailsa from clergy and members alike. We are now planning together for Father Mark to return to our churches in January 2025, as we celebrate the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity once again.

Winter films: On Monday 29th January at 2pm in Longniddry Church, we will be enjoying the 1989 film about an old woman and her African-American chauffeur in the American South whose relationship grows over the years. The film (certificate U) is a tale of a powerful friendship which stands up to the racial tensions of the era. All welcome at the church. Free of charge.

Gladsmuir Coffee and Craft Group: With a new year, a new time - fortnightly on a Wednesday from 10 to 11.30am in Gladsmuir Church. Come along on 7th February for the next friendly gathering. All welcome!

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 from 10.30am - 12 noon in Room 3, Longniddry Church.