

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

Issue 203

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Today's Bible readings

Psalms 106:1-5 ("A Confession of Israel's Sins")

Praise the Lord!

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures for ever.

Who can utter the mighty doings of the Lord,
or declare all his praise?

Happy are those who observe justice,
who do righteousness at all times.

Remember me, O Lord, when you show favour to your people;
help me when you deliver them;

that I may see the prosperity of your chosen ones,
that I may rejoice in the gladness of your nation,
that I may glory in your heritage. Amen. (NRSV)

Matthew 25:41-46 ("The Judgement of the Nations")

Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

As a fire is meant for burning (CH:252)

God is our refuge and our strength (CH:36)

We cannot measure how you heal (CH:718)

Sing to the Lord a joyful song (CH:184)

Last week in church we were considering the thorny and difficult topic of “judgementalism”: the terrible sin of looking down upon others in negative, destructive ways. This week we turn to an equally thorny and difficult issue, namely “judgement”.

Few congregations like to be subjected to sermons on eternal damnation, although it is a topic which appeals greatly to a certain type of preacher. (That type of preacher, I should say, is not my type.)

In common with a great many ministers, priests and pastors I tend to skirt around questions of eternal hellfire, preferring to deliver a weekly sermon on more gentle and positive themes such as love, light, grace and peace. In this way I would freely admit that the gates of hell are rather neatly avoided. (A bit too neatly, some would argue.) Yet it is impossible for me to open my Bible, whether at the Old Testament or the New, without soon landing upon words which clearly speak of blessing on the one hand and cursing on the other.

In our reading from Matthew today, we heard words of blessing for those who come to the aid of people whose lives are difficult, mired in despair. But if we had read on, we would have heard Jesus in a very different frame of mind, addressing those who just don't care for the plight of their neighbours. To those who are apathetic, or positively antagonistic, he says this: “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

I remember chatting with a biblical academic who happened to be a Quaker, and in our discussion he certainly made me think. This peace-loving scholar pointed out to me that if you want to see where in our Scriptures damnation is written about with some considerable clarity, you would do well to search the gospels. In other words, it is Jesus who tells his listeners about judgement and damnation - a fact from which no sweet-talking Christian believer should ever shy away.

But let me pose you a question which I reckon might well be worth considering: what does your Jesus look like to you? Is he tall and athletic? Or small and muscular? Is he engaging and cheerful? Or perhaps a little reserved and reflective? If you found him with a drink in his hand would that beverage be a mug of tea or a pint of Tennent's? And no, I'm not going to take us all down the road of the Middle Eastern Jesus versus the Scandinavian American Jesus, though we could easily pause to consider that topic ... if we really wanted to.

For many of us I suspect that the Jesus of our imaginations would be a playful friend with the wee ones, a pastoral listener with very old folks, and – of course! – a fabulously compelling communicator with everyone in between, powerful in his oratory and convincing on topics of real importance. But – and here is the point – could it be that (whatever we might think here) our view of Jesus is just too simplistic, like a life-sized, two-dimensional cardboard cut-out of Robert Powell with his long hair and that piercing, unblinking stare? What we are lacking in that image is subtlety ... or complexity. So it may be that we have to replace the mug of tea and the pint of Tennent's with a cup of intriguingly fine Brazilian coffee and a large measure of a particularly peaty single malt. See Jesus. See complexity.

Yes, with Jesus maybe we have to think a good deal about his complexity, and admit to ourselves that for whatever reason, we should never ignore the hellfire, even if we don't quite understand it:

♦ “every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire”;

- ♦ “the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire”;
- ♦ “Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age”;
- ♦ “the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”.

Four hellfire examples there, drawn only from the first half of the gospel of Matthew. Other gospels will, of course, continue the same theme.

So, what are we to make of that?

At the time of Jesus’ preaching and teaching, notions of an eternal afterlife were still relatively new. More than this, in the 1st century AD the Jewish faith was actually quite divided over an eternal heaven and an eternal hell. Those religious leaders called the Sadducees didn’t make any of this a big part of their beliefs. In contrast, their great rivals in the faith, the Pharisees, were positively “into” thinking about the afterlife as a hard and fast reality. And when the Pharisees did think about the afterlife, who do you think they reckoned would be the ones to gain entry through the golden gates (or their first century equivalent)? None other than those who knew their Bible, those who worshipped in the right way, those who had a certain standing within the community, those who had shown their success through the blessings of wealth, those who were fit and able to look after themselves. In other words, people ... just ... exactly ... like the Pharisees. When they imagined heaven, the folk they pictured there were carbon copies of themselves.

And those who were surely to be cast out by God from the courts of heaven? Well, in the words of the theological writer, Brian D. McLaren, they would be those who were, “uninformed about religious lore, careless about religious rules, socially suspect, economically poor and physically sick or disabled”.

McLaren goes on: “one of the most striking facets of [Jesus’] life and ministry was the way he took the Pharisees’ understanding of the afterlife and turned it on its head. [For Jesus,] who was going to hell? Rich and successful people who lived in fancy houses and stepped over their destitute neighbours who slept in the gutters outside their gates! Proud people who judged, insulted, excluded, avoided and accused others! Hypocrites who ‘strained out gnats and swallowed camels’! In other words, who [according to Jesus] was going to hell? People just like the Pharisees! The judgement they so freely pronounced on others, Jesus turned back on them. And who, according to Jesus, was going to heaven? The very people whom the religious elite despised, deprived, avoided, excluded and condemned. ... God is the one who loves everyone, including the people the rest of us think don’t count. Those fire-and-brimstone passages that countless preachers have used to scare people about hell, it turns out, weren’t intended to teach us about hell: Jesus used the language of hell to teach us a radical new vision of God!”

It is said that in the Ancient Near East of the 1st century, people understood very clearly what exaggeration was about. They got what the purpose of “hyperbolic language” is (that is, not unlike the hyperbole of British politicians in our lifetime). Taking both ideas and language to a new height makes people think, and it makes them remember. And so, a joke for you ... a girl comes home from school and says to her dad: “Do you want to see my new book on hyperbole?” Her father takes a glance at the cover then says: “That old thing? I must’ve read that a million times!”

We might smile, but when it comes to Jesus and hyperbole, perhaps it pays to realise what the message truly is all about: Jesus turning us around to make us see that God’s great love has the last – and the everlasting – word. Amen.

Praying for others

Father,
your Son gave us the template for living in your image.
We are to give food to the hungry.
Bless all those who support the work of foodbanks and food agencies here in East Lothian and around the world.
Help us to see those who struggle to feed themselves and to remember their plight even when they are not right in front of us.
Jesus asked us to give drink to the thirsty.
Bless ministers and preachers who help provide relief for spiritual thirst.
Support us all in preaching the Good News even when we find it uncomfortable.
Your Son asked us to welcome the stranger.
We pray for refugees and immigrants across the globe.
May they find a warm welcome at the end of their journeys.
We ask that the governments of the world work for peace and prosperity in every land so that none may feel compelled to flee their homeland for safety or for work.
Father,
you want us to care for the sick and visit those in prison.
We pray for those who are ill.
We ask your blessing on doctors, nurses and all carers –
give them strength, wisdom and compassion in their work.
We pray for support for those who are unwell, whether in body or mind.
We ask your blessing on them,
especially if they feel they are prisoners in their own bodies.
Let them find release, we pray.
We ask all this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

Celebration Lunch: Gladsmuir and Longniddry Churches are having a buffet lunch to celebrate 20 years since Robin was ordained into our charge - and (the same!) 20 years since Douglas became Longniddry Church's Treasurer. The lunch will be in the Longniddry Church halls at 12.30pm on Sunday 18th February. Donations to help cover the cost of the lunch will be welcome on the day. Please let Frances Cunningham know by this coming Sunday, the 11th, if you plan to come. All are welcome from both congregations.

Sunday guest: Also on Sunday 18th, we will have an overseas guest with us at 9.45am (Longniddry) and 11am (Gladsmuir). The Rev Tara Curlewis is the recently inducted minister at the Reformed congregation in Rome. She has become our Presbytery's overseas partner, so it is our pleasure to have Tara with us in our acts of worship (and at our lunch). We look forward to learning about what she does and how we can build up a relationship with our brothers and sisters in Rome.