

# THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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## Today's Bible reading

*Matthew 5:17-26 ("Concerning Anger")*

'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool", you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. Amen. (NRSV)

## Today's hymns

*You, Lord, are both Lamb and Shepherd* (CH:355; tune 439: Regent's Square)

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

*Fill now our life, O Lord our God* (CH:183)

*Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord* (CH:286)

**W**hen someone finds a really good teacher - one that they like and trust and find themselves inspired by, it is amazing the sheer depth of knowledge and understanding that can be passed on. I well recall that momentous day in June of 1980: that fateful day when Miss Janet Anthony, our cool, laconic and always straight-talking Head of English at Hyndland Secondary, loosed a terrible bolt from the blue upon her class of unsuspecting 16-year-olds. With a wicked smile on her face she handed out copies of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and then toured around our desks a second time with George Orwell's *1984*. We were told in no uncertain terms that not only were the novels to have been read from cover to cover by the first day of the new term, but - and what a big but it turned out to be - we were also to hand in "university-standard" essays comparing and contrasting the two books. Of course, the chorus of "But Miss!" echoed far and wide, yet it was to fall on deaf ears.

I am so pleased that Miss Anthony stood her ground. For me, that summer was a voyage of discovery, in which my life took an enormous shift as I discovered all sorts of mind-expanding things courtesy of Huxley and Orwell.

For a willing student, a great teacher can change everything.

Jump forward 20 years, and you find the same student in a lecture theatre, being addressed by very different teacher, Dr David Mealand, who was a very quiet, deep biblical scholar. I recall his lecture very well, not least because it concerned today's reading from the gospel of Matthew, and what are known as "The Antitheses". And if you don't know (or, far more likely, really don't care) what The Antitheses might or might not be, let me lay it out for you pretty sharpish. "The Antitheses of Jesus" are those bits in Matthew where we find two statements set in opposition to each other. The formula runs like this: "**You have heard that it was said, ... *blah ... blah ... blah ...* but I say to you, ... *something really quite different*".**

Dr Mealand's lecture that day was on the Jewish roots of Matthew's gospel. He set out to show that the legal and spiritual traditions of ancient Judaism had ended up leading the people to obey the Law of the Old Testament via "the head". Jesus came on the scene, and everything changed, because with Jesus, there would be a new standard - a far higher standard - of conduct, worked out not via "the head" but via "the heart". In other words, with Jesus around it would never be enough merely to tick the boxes of requirement when it came to living a life of faith. What was needed would be a willingness and a commitment to leap over much higher ethical hurdles.

Let's be clear. Matthew's Jesus is all about upholding the Jewish Law of old, but upholding it in a fresh new way. For Jesus, outward observance alone is not enough. Instead, as we see in this gospel, believers must *internalise* their commitment to God's standards. Put simply, they have to "mean it" rather than just "do it". This is well summed up in the Sermon on the Mount, when that "antithetical" formula appears again and again:

*You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you ... .*

So the Jesus of Matthew maintains that the Law of the past still matters - it still applies, same as it ever did - but actions are to be regarded not as the be all and end all, but as a product of one's inner commitment. It's who you are, inside as well as outside, that counts in the teaching of this Jewish rabbi Jesus. By extension, following Jesus brings big demands that go beyond mere legalism and meet the believer in real life settings. With Matthew's Jesus, you've really and truly got to mean it ... and mean it deep inside.

Proving Jesus' Jewish credentials is really important to Matthew. He uses, for example, three times as many Old Testament quotations as Mark ever does, and on no fewer than 10 separate occasions he tells his readers: 'this was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet'. (A prophet, that is, from the Old Testament.) Moreover, only in Matthew do we read that Jesus came, "not to abolish the Law and the prophets, but to fulfil them."

Now, I will not claim to be an inspiring teacher like Miss Anthony or Dr Mealand, but when it comes to me talking about this particular passage with members of our Presbytery worship training courses, I use an unusual visual aid. You see, one way of grasping what Matthew is on about here is to consider that classic board game, Cluedo, in which the murderer needs a weapon: a dagger; a candlestick; lead piping; a revolver; rope; or a spanner. With any of these ghastly items, a killer could do terrible, terrible things, whether by stabbing, whacking, shooting or strangling. But in Cluedo there is no actual intention. Cousin George will not shoot someone in the back. Granny will not clobber a fellow participant with the flailing spanner of doom. It's a game, and everyone knows that.

Now, let's shift over to the real world in which horrible things really can happen. I would hope that not a single one of us would have any plans to kill another human being, whether by gun or knife or, indeed, by flailing spanner. But the Jesus found in Matthew teaches us this: what matters is not actual bodily harm. We let ourselves down when we miss the far trickier standard of what we think and what we feel:

- ✦ "See my boss and all the work he puts on my desk at half past four on a Friday afternoon: you know, sometimes I could shoot him!"
- ✦ "That woman in the doctor's waiting room who just talks and talks and talks: if only I had some lead piping!"
- ✦ "Honestly! That neighbour: what I wouldn't give right now for a length of rope!"

In Matthew we see Jesus saying that external right action is important, but internal right thinking and internal right feeling are what govern truly righteous living. Anything less is failure. For Matthew, following Jesus brings big, big demands – demands which go beyond legalism and which meet us, front and centre, in real life - and, indeed, in our every day living. In this sense, perhaps Matthew offers his readers an ethical challenge which they simply don't find in any of the other gospels. The big, big question he poses for each one of us is surely this: "How do you live your life as a follower of the living Christ? In a Christ-like way, or not?"

That lecture by David Mealand on the ethics of Jesus in Matthew's gospel truly turned me around in my tracks. Up until that day I had always just imagined that doing the right thing is what counts in this world of ours. But keeping hearts pure and our consciences clear is altogether more demanding, as we struggle with our human nature, and as we work so very hard to keep our thoughts and our feelings on track. And I've come to realise that this matters, because for Jesus, a respectable demeanour is nowhere near sufficient. Appearance is never enough.

Each one of us has a keen responsibility to monitor just exactly who we are ... and what we stand for ... and how we operate ... and the way in which we see ourselves, both in relation to God and in relation to others. The season of Lent is a time of discipline and reflection. Just think what a massive difference we could make to the way we approach our faith, if we were simply and consistently to turn our thoughts in a Christ-ward direction.

After all, for a willing student, a great teacher can change everything. Amen.

## Praying for others

God of life and love,  
we look to you for healing in a broken world.

We pray especially for children who, across the globe,  
have never suffered greater hardship than in present times,  
innocent children who know not how to look to possessions or power for  
completeness, but look only for love and kindness.

As global conflict continues to rage, driven by the greed, anger, hatred and  
selfishness of competing world powers, Lord be with all children,  
that they may feel your peace, comfort, and compassion -  
thus, having known it, they might choose it for themselves,  
seeking your ways of gentleness into adulthood, heralding some hope of  
bringing an end one day to the current cycle of terror and conflict.

Lord, as democracy faces unprecedented threat in the world,  
give children and young people their voice – fuel their natural impulse for  
constructive action, for their hearts are still open to positive transformation for  
world leaders to act justly and fairly.

We ask that channels of communication stay open, for global healing depends on a  
future of collaboration and co-operation.

Place our children first - may their voices of innocence, hope and love form the core  
of decision-making concerning our common future.

We are all children at heart. We need only turn to you, Lord God,  
for fullness and completeness, through the love of Jesus Christ, your Son. Amen.

## Weekly Updates ...

**World Day of Prayer:** Our annual service (with worship materials prepared by the WDP Committee of Palestine) will be held in Gladsmuir Parish Church at 3pm on Friday 1st March. Please come along and join us.

**Monday Matinee:** As winter (hopefully!) gives way to spring, we are suspending our classic films for now. Many thanks to all who attended and who volunteered!

**Gladsmuir Coffee and Craft Group:** Fortnightly on a Wednesday from 10-11.30am in Gladsmuir Church. Come along on 6th March 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.

**Thanks from Robin and Ailsa:** The celebrations to mark 20 years of Robin's ordination in February 2004 were very, very special and greatly appreciated by us both. A big "THANK YOU!" to all who took part last Sunday, and to others who passed on their greetings. (So memorable - and it doesn't feel like two decades!)