

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

Issue 207

10th March 2024

Online at www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

Today's Bible reading

Matthew 6:24-34 (note the headings below ...)

Serving Two Masters

'No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Do Not Worry

'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

'So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Immortal, invisible, God only wise (CH:132)

I am the Church (CH:204)

Lord, bless and pity us (CH:45)

The Lord Is King (CH:129)

Have you ever stopped to think about which parts of the Bible are actually ... "the Bible"? In other words, of all the black ink that you find on the Bible's white paper, which bits are truly Scripture and which are in reality nothing more than later "add-ons" from generations that followed so much later?

What's this all about? Let's start with something incredibly basic: page numbers. Are page numbers scriptural? Or are they later additions?

"Well," you might say, scratching your head, "I've never thought about that before, and why should I have thought about it at all? But if I must, it seems clear that over time publishers will change the size of their print, or alter their margins. So the Bible's page numbers would need to be revised every so often. Page numbers, in that case, are not part of the Bible."

"Correct!" I would respond. "Still on numbering, what about chapters and verses?"

"Oh," you might say, "the numbering of a book's chapters and also its verses will always be very important, so surely the writers would have added them in as they went, to make sure people knew what went where, just like with those helpful chapter numbers which we find in the books of today."

"Nope!" I would say with an annoying smile. "All of that "chapter and verse" stuff came many centuries later. Now what about book titles? Your 'Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers ... your Matthew, Mark, Luke, John?"

"Hmmm," you might well ponder, with furrowed brow. "We all know that the Bible's books have titles alright, and *presumably* they go away back to olden days."

"Yes, you might think that," I would reply, "but in reality these book titles came along a fair bit after the texts first emerged in written form. So no, while the Bible's books certainly have names which we recognise today, the names themselves were added by editors in the dim and distant past. (And - amazingly - we don't even know the real names of those famous gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.) One last one for you: the headings above individual stories or sections."

"Ha-haaaaah!" you laugh. "I'm not going to get caught out a third time. They were added in at a later stage too. That's what I'm guessing."

"And you'd be right, of course. Well done!"

That was a bit of Bible detective work for you, although it might help us to understand better the reading from Matthew's gospel which we have before us today. This text is split into two separate sections, one headed, "Serving Two Masters", and the other quite differently headed, "Do not worry". Or ... are these two sections really only **one** section? There are two tell-tale pieces of evidence to back up the idea that these passages are actually only one - and are meant to be read as such. First of all, consider the initial assertion which Jesus is putting forward: *"No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."*

In these brief couple of lines Jesus is making a really important point about big things that draw us in different directions throughout our lives: namely, God on the one hand and wealth on the other. The mission of Jesus is to say (first to the Jewish people and then to the wider world) that God is near ... and that God loves you ... and that Jesus is God's Son in whom we could and should place our trust. As a result of this world-changing message of hope, the Good News of God issues us all with a challenge, and one that demands our response. Are you going to follow in the Way of Jesus, embracing God's invitation to draw near in worship and in

service? Or are you going to look at your lifestyle and your diary and your interests and your friendship groups and - not least, perhaps - your possessions and your bank balance? Might you then conclude that life is altogether too busy, so God can just go elsewhere and knock on other people's doors? "Those other folk might be willing followers of Jesus," you say, "but not me. Not right now. Cheerio."

The second and perhaps better piece of evidence for these two readings actually being one rather than two is that unmistakable single word, "Therefore", which comes right at the very start of the (supposed!) second part. It very obviously flows on in a natural way from what has gone before, showing us that one section bridges over into the next. The impact of this bridging is - unsurprisingly - to demonstrate that all the introductory stuff about serving two masters is essentially linked to the much longer section, the theme of which is "worry". So now, let's connect them ...

People often think that wealth, whether in its monetary form or in many forms, is what we need if we are to lead lives free of worries and concerns. What joy the Hollywood film star must feel getting paid big bucks to act in movies which will not only make their names but provide lives of security. As it turns out, there can be a darker side to fortune. Only this week a newspaper article told of an actor who became "an overnight star" three decades ago with a blockbuster film which earned her \$500,000. (Nice work if you can get it.) The article, however, went on to say that, "she wasn't prepared for what that entailed". Fans kept invading her privacy whether she was driving in her car or eating a meal in a restaurant. Soon, "she found she needed the money, to pay for all sorts of things she'd not needed before - security, publicists, managers, a more secluded house. In the years after, she could tell that people thought she was 'arrogant' for demanding large pay cheques for her work; but she didn't care. 'It's very expensive to be famous,'" she said.

Wealth doesn't remove worries. Wealth can create them. Have you ever visited a house where the carpet is too expensive for people to walk on it, or where the dining room table is constantly covered by an ugly cover in case the valuable-if-never-seen walnut top should accidentally be scratched or dented? In some cases, people end up worrying and worrying about a stock market crash or a robber raiding their precious nest of diamond necklaces and platinum bracelets.

Many Romans of 2000 years ago took a highly materialistic view of life. While ordinary folk lived in cramped and badly constructed tenements over their tiny shops, the bigwigs of Roman society would have magnificent residences, each with a courtyard, a private bathing area and maybe even a well-stocked library. In our reading, Jesus describes these people as "the Gentiles who strive" yet who clearly fail to win his sympathy. Instead, he steps in with a suggestion so simple ... so powerful ... so accurate that this one single observation might have the true potential to change the world (if only his wealthy listeners might pause to reflect upon it. Listen with fresh ears to an almost unimaginably huge challenge for many people, as Jesus spells out a better way, free of wealth - and free of worry:

"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you — you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Amen.

Praying for others

God of all love,
on this Mothering Sunday we come to you
celebrating mothers everywhere.

We thank you for their readiness to bring us into this world
despite so many dangers which childbirth involves.

We thank you for the care, the patience, the education which mothers bring
in so many ways and at so many stages of life:
through infancy and childhood, when demands are so very great;
during teenage years and young adulthood, when parenting is stressful;
in later years, when a mother remains a mother in so many ways.

We pray not only for our own mothers, but also for those
whose many skills are stretched to breaking point because of terrible pressures
in areas of warfare, oppression and poverty,
remembering especially the mothers of Ukraine, of Gaza and of Israel at this time;
in places where children's life opportunities are limited by poor food,
lack of clean water, urban violence and rural poverty.

Grant to mothers everywhere the wisdom of Mary, the mother of Jesus,
who knew both the wonders of the manger and the terrors of the Cross,
yet who remained true to her Lord and her Saviour,
in whose Name we pray. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

Gladsmuir Coffee and Craft Group: Fortnightly on a Wednesday from 10-11.30am in Gladsmuir Church. Come along on 20th 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.

Longniddry Newsletters: printed copies of the Longniddry newsletter are in the Longniddry Church gathering space magazine rack and also on the church website. The OCK (Our Community Kitchen) newsletter is also in the magazine rack.

General Assembly Stewards: Can you help with stewarding at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland? Stewards are required for the Assembly from Saturday 18th to Thursday 23rd May (excluding Sunday). Individual shifts last for three hours and volunteers can select the day(s) on which they are to help. Those interested in volunteering should please contact Sandy Gemmill via the email address: assemblystewards@churchofscotland.org.uk.