THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches
Issue 217 19th May 2024
Online at www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

Today's Bible reading

Acts of the Apostles 2:1-21 ("The Coming of the Holy Spirit")

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: 'Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

"In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.
And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Amen. *(NRSV)*

Today's hymns

Come, Holy Spirit, come! (CH594) *Like fireworks in the night (CH584)*
She sits like a bird (CH593) *Praise the Spirit in creation (CH588; t:CH355)*

How are we to think of the human Jesus who is also the heavenly Christ? I would like to suggest that one way of considering this transition from earth to heaven would be as a kind of bridge. And here's an interesting idea for us to consider: although the Bible never once uses the actual word "bridge" in any setting or any context, we find that acts of "bridging" from one situation to another often crop up in the pages of Scripture. Consider the ancient folk tale of Noah and his small family all closed up in that big ark there upon the floods. In common with lots of ancient religions from the Middle East, the Hebrew Bible offers us this kind of episode as a story of humanity gone wrong. What happens, of course, is that God steps in with a lifeboat for a tiny packet of humanity to brave the waves while absolutely everyone else is lost at sea. The Noah clan then emerges onto dry land to experience a new start, having "bridged" themselves over from past human failure to future divine hope.

Then what about the prophets of the Old Testament? Often we hear these people bold and eloquent tellers of truth decrying the failure of an impious generation who have allowed themselves to be led astray, far from the caring embrace of God. And it is not merely enemies and renegades who have been doing the sad and regrettable straying - it is the Jewish people themselves. Prepare yourselves, say the prophets, to make a new start. Look forward to the coming of the Messiah. And so, Isaiah, Daniel, Zechariah, Malachi (among others) can serve our Christian viewpoint as a kind of bridge from the Law of the past to the Grace of the future, as each one points us towards the day when there will be a new God-given arrangement set in place through the Incarnation of the eternal Christ.

The same kind of bridging goes on in the person of John the Baptist. Looking back to Isaiah, it is John who encourages the people of the first century AD to:
'[r]epent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

Once more there is a biblical figure who bridges between the old and the new.

And so to Jesus himself, this manifestation of God in human form. He is born one of us. He lives his life. He dies a death on the Cross and rises at Easter to reveal the full extent of his divine identity and purpose For some 40 days after the Resurrection he appears to those awe-struck disciples, until that point arrives when at last he tells his followers what is about to happen:
Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

So ends Matthew's gospel with the Risen Lord commissioning his followers to go onward, to move forward, and to trust in God. The time of the earth-bound Jesus of Nazareth is drawing to a close, as the cosmic Christ prepares to return to his heavenly Father, giving his friends a parting message:
'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white

robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

Yes, in the act of Ascension we identify a great bridge beyond our understanding - a bridge which Jesus alone would cross, moving from earth to heaven. Jesus leaves his disciples all alone on one side of the bridge to heaven while he relocates to the other side. But remember that these Jesus followers then become something rather different: followers of the Risen and Ascended Christ. Before Easter they had lived a life of half-knowing and half-fearing, on the one hand convinced that the man from Galilee was the chosen One of God, yet on the other hand struggling to make sense of what this might mean for them and for the world. The disciples as they had been on Good Friday would, I feel sure, have been deeply troubled by the sudden disappearance of Jesus at the Ascension, vanishing away and leaving them isolated and vulnerable here below. But these, we must remember, are not the disciples of Good Friday, but are now the disciples of the Easter Christ. And in that fact there is huge significance.

There is something very positive and tremendously heartening in learning what happens shortly after the Ascension. Those 11 disciples have been through so much, and we might well imagine them realising in the fullest sense the enormity of their friend's departure from among them. Jesus is no longer present in bodily form, but what does this mean? A return to that desolation of Good Friday, perhaps? No. Not at all. Here is what we read about the Ascension at the end of the gospel of Luke:
Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God. *[Emphasis added.]*

Clearly, the friends of Jesus were far from troubled at the realisation that he had left them. The Ascension meant new hope - so much so that they went right back into the Temple, the very scene of such terrible conflict on the Monday of Holy Week, when Jesus had well and truly become Public Enemy Number 1. What courage it must have taken for those supporters of the revolution to enter into the Temple in full view of everyone. Yet it seems that the conditions were right, as they "returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and … were continually in the temple blessing God."

And so to one final bridge: the Day of Pentecost, when God's Holy Spirit comes to create the Church, there in the city of Jerusalem. God might have stayed safely in heaven, yet that was never the intention. Just as Jesus himself had suggested, on this day - the very birthday of the Church - the pathway to earth was crossed once more, with Pentecostal power made real among the believers, and St Peter boldly declaring that the Good News of heaven had again bridged its way to earth.

Pentecost marks a new beginning: a new beginning for all followers of Christ, as they cease to be simply a gathering of believers and start to be the Church. As those in present in Jerusalem that day must have realised, the drama of the Holy Spirit's descent echoed that message which Jesus had previously stressed to his friends:
" …you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The Church is born at Pentecost. The Spirit equips the faithful with power and determination. The promises of Jesus Christ are seen to be true not just in word but also in the flesh and blood of his Church. Have no fear, for God is with us. Amen.

Praying for others

Spirit of God unseen as the wind,
we pray for your power in these times of great anxiety in our troubled world.
We are most troubled by the wars we see causing death and destruction.
We pray at this Pentecost time that flames of wisdom may burn in the hearts of leaders so that peace may come; that quiet may come after dreadful noise,
that joy may come after sorrow.

We pray for your power in the minds of all people throughout the world,
here in our own land and among our own community.
There are many who do not know or feel your presence
and yet they yearn and seek for meaning in their lives.
May we in this church and family show our faith and lead others by our example.

We pray for your power to work among us
so that the many needy people may have their needs met.
We pray for the homeless and for the hungry;
we pray for the lonely and the abused; we pray for the sick.
Help us to have our small part in the betterment of our society.

Spirit of God, show us the Saviour's love.

These and all our prayers we ask in the presence of the Holy Spirit and
in the name of Jesus, Our Lord. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

Longniddry Christian Aid Plant Sale: This will be held on Saturday 18th May from 10am to 12 noon on the green space in front of the shops on Links Road, Longniddry. (In the event of heavy rain we will switch to the church halls). If you have plants you wish to donate just phone or text the Christian Aid team on 07508 846007 or bring your plants along to the sale just before 10am. Thank you!

Gladsmuir Coffee and Craft Group: Fortnightly on a Wednesday from 10-11.30am in Gladsmuir Church. Come along on 29th May for the next friendly gathering. All welcome!

Sing at 6.30: Gladsmuir Parish Church's next big sing evening gathering is on Sunday 9th June at 6.30pm. This month's theme will be the writing of Dr Isaac Watts, hymn revolutionary and creator of some of the world's favourite songs of praise - should be great fun! All are welcome. Refreshments served. Admission free, with offering for Christian Aid.

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 from10.30am – 12 noon in Room 3, Longniddry Church.

Printed and published by Gladsmuir Parish Church (Church of Scotland): SC005996; and Longniddry Parish Church (Church of Scotland): SC016556.