THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches
Issue 219 2nd June 2024
Online at www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

Today's Bible reading

Romans 8:1-17 ("Life in the Spirit")

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. Amen. *(NRSV)*

Today's hymns

For your gift of God the Spirit (CH603)
Spirit of God, unseen as the wind (CH600)
And can it be that I should gain (CH396)
Christ is made the sure foundation (CH200)

Over the course of the last few weeks in church we have been thinking about the nature of God, and especially about the nature of the Holy Spirit in this season of Pentecost. Two weeks ago we took a historical glance back to the coming of the Spirit on the birthday of the Church in Jerusalem, after Jesus had ascended into heaven. Last week, we reflected on how the Holy Spirit was recognised hundreds of years later as relating to God the Father and God the Son. And so today, it falls to us to get altogether a bit more personal, as we contemplate the Holy Spirit and the "us" of the here and now.

Our first task this morning is to consider the word "Spirit" itself - that's "Spirit" with an upper case "S". Now, had we been focusing on the word "spirit" (with a lower case "s") we might have got ourselves all tied in knots, as this word has a whole range of different meanings, some a little more obvious than others:

- spirit as life force, operating deep inside any living creature;
- spirit as soul, staying with us as we live, and departing when we die;
- spirit as a mythical being, as with a mischievous sprite in old stories from long ago;
- spirit as an inspirational memory, like that famous footballing spirit of 1966; or if that is altogether not quite Scottish enough for you, how about:
- spirit as strong alcohol which is distilled, perhaps matured, and then bottled?

My dictionary gives no fewer than 25 quite distinct definitions of the word "spirit", showing just what an influential and adaptable term it has become over the centuries.

But recent Sundays have not been focusing on that kind of lower case "spirit" at all (and probably just as well); in speaking about the upper case "Spirit" we move into an area which is both much more precise in meaning, and much more compelling in levels of mystery.

When the Bible speaks about "Spirit" it is pointing towards two important and related ideas: firstly the idea of "breath". There are certain words of Latin origin that are interesting here: simple, everyday words like "respiratory". Hidden away inside "respiratory" we have S … P …I … R … exactly as in the word "Spirit". What we find is that "Spirit" and "breath" go hand in hand in the Bible.

Secondly, the biblical notion of Spirit is tied in with our trinitarian God. And so, we might pose this question: Who is it that breathes the Spirit? And, of course, that would be God. Going one stage further again: what happens when God's Spirit is breathed upon us? We are quite literally … "inspired" (though perhaps this would become a whole lot more obvious if we possessed a word like "in-Spirit-ed").

Let us keep focusing on the upper case "Spirit" of God, because in understanding the presence and the working of the Spirit we might be able to drag ourselves away from the idea of God as the boss who sits on a heavenly throne above the clouds, ordering this or that action miles and miles away down there on earth. If that is our approach to what God is like, it becomes very easy for us to bypass the power of the Spirit altogether. Yet if we allow ourselves to see God as the God who flows, who channels, who breathes into our living and our being, we suddenly discover that God is not remote, but present … with us … in us … here.

Cast your mind back to the Day of Pentecost and the arrival of God's Holy Spirit in the Church. Though Jesus was no longer physically with the believers in human form, still the faithful knew that they were in the presence of divine power and love.

Through the sensing of God's Spirit in their lives, those first Christians gained confidence amid a world of oppression, and found hope amid a climate of despair. The Spirit of God changed everything, as people once fearful were fired up with the "in-spir-ation" to go to new places, with fresh challenges to be lived out in new ways, as the Good News of the Gospel spread far and wide … through new daring.

All of this is summed up in the final verse of a Pentecost hymn which we sang two weeks ago:

Thus God our spirits lifts fresh daring to inspire;
as common folk get gifts to change the world entire:
the tongues of flame at Pentecost ran through the world like forest fire.

What does the God-breathed Holy Spirit do? Among other things, the Spirit causes daring to break out, left, right and centre. Not dull and lifeless theologising, but big, impressive acts of Christian bravery and enterprise writ large upon the Church, and passed through the Church to wider society and out across the world in a mindset of Christian mission. How would this be? Through the action of the Spirit upon human hearts and minds and bodies and souls.

Just consider the words of the apostle Paul, writing to the young church in the city of Rome, as he considers how worldly values of the "the flesh" need to be contrasted with heavenly values of the Spirit, built into the very fabric of the believer's life:

… you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

According to Paul's way of thinking, as members of Christ's Body - the Church - we don't need a membership card in our purses or our pockets because we know the Spirit of God in our hearts and in our souls. And so we come to grasp the difference between Christianity as a value system and Christianity as a faith. If what we own in the Church are the values of Jesus of Nazareth, gained from studying the gospels, then we have something of great usefulness, as we seek to live lives of justice and peace, kindness and forgiveness, reconciliation and community. Looking at the life of our Church's key figure we can easily see so much which we might adopt and adapt and make part of our daily living. Indeed, if all the world were to focus on this one, single, singular life, we might even have good reason to expect that our world might be transformed by a new passion, a new discipline lived out just as Jesus lived his life with passion and discipline.

But there is a difference - a world of difference - between regarding Christianity as a value system and grasping it as a faith. If we are truly open, not just to the values of Christ but to the presence of Christ, it follows that we will come to live not just by principle but by practice. For the Christian, life is not about doing our utmost and living the best we can through teachings that have been handed down across the centuries. Instead, our lives are to be lived "in the Spirit", recognising that the Spirit of God finds a home inside the Church … and inside each member of the Church. Indeed, it is the hallmark of the Christian that she or he has recognised that God dwells within. And so, if the God of Easter does truly dwell in each one of us, we should expect our life with the Spirit to be a life of energy and inspiration in which our beings are inspired to fresh daring, day by day. Amen.

Praying for others

Merciful God,
we pray that you will strengthen us in your service
so that our lives will witness to the love and
compassion of your Son Jesus Christ,
who showed us how to be open to all people and
to see everyone as our neighbour.

We pray for all those in Gaza who are terrified
about what might happen to them or
who are living with the consequences
of recent attacks – injury, loss, despair.
May those who are working for peace prevail and
Gazans get the help they so desperately need.

As we approach a general election in our own country,
may politicians not over-promise simply to gain votes.
May this country get a government
that works for the good of all people and
finds ways of resolving some of the problems
that have left so many people
poorer and less secure.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

Longniddry Communion Services: The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper will be celebrated together at Longniddry Church at our 9.45am service this Sunday (2nd June) with a second Communion service at our contemplative 6.30pm service. Alternatively, if you would like to participate from home at either act of worship simply go to the "Gladsmuir and Longniddry Churches" YouTube channel, and have your bread and wine/juice ready towards the end of the service..

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.

Gladsmuir Coffee and Craft Group: Fortnightly on a Wednesday from 10-11.30am in Gladsmuir Church. Come along on 12th June 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 from10.30am – 12 noon in Room 3, Longniddry Church.

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