

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Ephesians 4:1-13 ("Unity in the Body of Christ")

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said,

'When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive;
he gave gifts to his people.'

(When it says, 'He ascended', what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

All people that on earth do dwell (CH63)

Let's sing to the Lord (CH126)

Blessed assurance (CH561)

God is working his purpose out (CH235)

Around this time of year different people start feeling a bit uneasy, and for a range of reasons. Many folk look to the sky around nine o'clock in the evening and think to themselves: "The night's really are drawing in. Did I just miss the summer altogether? And is autumn upon us so soon?" Others (mainly pupils, students and teachers, parents and grandparents) realise that another academic year is under way, running all the way round to June. They think: "That's a huge way to go to Christmas ... and then to Easter ... and then to the long break."

Ministers, on the other hand, sometimes get to this stage in the year and think something quite different: "It's Church of Scotland Stewardship season, when I'm supposed to come up with something fresh and encouraging and useful to say about all that we have and all that we can give. But how am I going to do that???"

The truth is that Church of Scotland stewardship season requires an annual sermon (or maybe even two) on a particular set of topics, which can broadly be summed up as, "Time, Talents, and Money". In the interests of being totally blunt, the Church expects its ministers to challenge congregations with one of three questions each autumn. (And these three questions I will now paraphrase for you):

- ♦ What do you do with your time (apart, that is from rushing around at the pace of a racing car, over-stretching yourself in a whole range of ways?); secondly ...
- ♦ How, as church members, can you share your God-given talents for the benefit of church, parish and the wider world?; and the third - inevitable - question ...
- ♦ Can you give us more of your money, please?

In their own ways, the topics of time, talents and money are vitally important, but after 20 years in this job you can understand that I have been around the stewardship cycle quite a few times. It's hard to come up with anything new, so this year I made up my mind to move away from the "same old same old" of those three stewardship topics. But could I find a fourth topic? That was the challenge I was facing until four days ago. For it was on Wednesday there that I received an e-mailed reflection from the American theologian Donna Schaper. She focused her message for Wednesday on the Christian stewardship of self. And all of this she did very persuasively under the single-word heading of "Sabbath".

Now, I don't know about you, but I have always found in this term "Sabbath" to be a word that is as hard as nails; a word, indeed, that has been used by churches across the centuries to say: "Thou shalt NOT ...". Whether buying a couple of pints of milk in the Co-op after church, or slipping off to Tynecastle or Easter Road of a quiet Sunday afternoon, sabbath thinking within the Presbyterian Church has tended to be a bit Old Testament-based, and not much fun. According to the thought of bygone generations, Sundays were for A) the worship of God; B) a healthy and improving afternoon walk through the unpleasant drizzle of a park or a beach; and C) going back to church in the evening for more of A) the worship of God.

And all of this thinking was locked in place by generations of ministers who (certainly up until the Victorian period and maybe long after it) did their best to frown upon ordinary folk who might have done their Sunday knitting by the fireside, or hang out the week's washing on the line a day early. Such sabbatarian teaching ruled Scotland for centuries, notwithstanding the curious 2000-year-old wisdom of someone named Jesus, as found in the gospel of Mark, chapter 2:

The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.

It's good to consider the setting of this brief line. It is the day of rest, and Jesus is going with his friends from one place to another. Getting hungry, the disciples begin

picking ears of corn from the fields and eating them. Unfortunately for them, there are some legalistic Pharisees out and about that day. They ask Jesus a very direct question, no doubt trying to catch him out: 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?' Jesus points to an old story in the Bible which showed that human need should always be taken seriously. Then he comes out with that line: 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath'

How interesting! If Jesus says that the sabbath is a gift to humankind which is not to be taken as some sort of imposition upon it, then surely the sabbath's purpose is to offer a benign and lovely form of stewardship - stewardship not of time or talents or money, but stewardship of the self - which amounts precisely to stewardship of each one of us: body, mind and soul, cared for by our selves and by those around us in the wider community of faith.

At this point, enter stage left the aforementioned Donna Schaper, she of the e-mail which came in four days ago. Over many years I have found her thoughts fearless and forthright, always bringing out a quirky way of looking at life and - in this case - an undeniably quirky way of looking at the sabbath and what proper sabbath living can mean in terms of Christian self-care. So, what's it all about Donna? Over to you, as you tell us what life could - and should - be like, when it is lived in the presence of the God ... the God who is deeply concerned for our well-being:

"Sabbath is the best of time. It is time that doesn't feel like "it's too late." Or rushed, which has the sound of that car behind you honking at you for not going faster. It is sacred time, not debased time." [*Emphasis added.*]

And then, moving into words of prayer, Donna Schaper approaches the great Almighty carer with this heartfelt plea for a new approach to living:

"Grain-picking God, help us dethrone speed and put the sacred back on its throne, both at work and at play. Amen." A short prayer, but very much to the point.

How lovely it is to grasp a sense of rest and recreation that is "sacred" ... of God ... ordained by God ... sent to us from God: the God who cares for us in all our need. And when we think about this more fully, it makes perfect sense for us who have found ourselves - often against our better judgement - caught up in a world of speed and haste and work and exhaustion. In my lifetime alone, we have gone from thinking of the things of work (phones, computers, spreadsheets) as being "labour-saving" to realising that people have often become little more than wage slaves within a system which keeps demanding more and more. Little wonder that folk burn themselves out in an effort to earn the cash they need ... to pay their mortgage ... to raise their kids ... to keep up with the Jones's, day in and day out.

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians gives us a blueprint when he says that we Christians are to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Does that sound like a life struggling to do yet more chasing after work? No way.

Let's close with more words of Jesus, which might inspire us to change our living: *I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ... Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Amen.*

Praying for others

God of time, God of calmness, God of peace,
in this life in which our waking hours seem ever frantic, never mindful,
turn us in our tracks and guide us into the rhythm of your Holy Spirit, we pray.

As we seek more and more action, make us aware of our real desire for space,
where we can rest in your love and marvel at the glories
of meadow and hillside, moor and glen, river and loch and sea.

May we become more and more attuned to your pace,
slow and steady in all that is good and godly.

As hours and days flash ever onward, with screens gleaming boldly
with the fervent brightness of despair,
draw us away from their glow so we might at last find our sabbath of the soul
in which we are recharged not by plugs and cables,
but through your holy wisdom alone.

Free us from the slavery of "more", and place our lives within the beat of your heart,
as we leave behind us the rushing and the racing of this clamouring culture,
to be united in your quiet presence, there to be renewed and reshaped for you.

May we be led to new ways of meeting the need around us, without jeopardising
the healing and the health which are so vital to life for us ... and for all.

Lead us by your still waters all the days of our lives, when once again we will find
our reason for living in the Life which - for ever - you hold out to us.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

"Sing at 6.30" grand finale!: On Sunday 8th September at 6.30pm, Gladsmuir Church will be opening its doors to many an instrument (trumpet, trombone, saxophone, flute, piano, guitar, bass, drums and percussion ... plus voices too!) as the Heart & Soul Swing Band brings its own brand of gospel rhythm and blues to East Lothian. Everyone will be welcome at this, our final "Sing at 6.30" service for summer 2024. The evening will revolve around congregational singing, band numbers and maybe even the occasional jazzy instrumental along the way. There will be a retiring offering to benefit the Church of Scotland HIV Programme. And, as ever, refreshments will be served at the close.

Gladsmuir Coffee and Craft Group: Fortnightly on a Wednesday from 10-11.30am in Gladsmuir Church. Come along on 4th September 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.