

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Psalm 14 ("Denunciation of Godlessness")

Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'
They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds;
there is no one who does good.
The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind
to see if there are any who are wise,
who seek after God.
They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse;
there is no one who does good,
no, not one.
Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers
who eat up my people as they eat bread,
and do not call upon the Lord?
There they shall be in great terror,
for God is with the company of the righteous.
You would confound the plans of the poor,
but the Lord is their refuge.
O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion!
When the Lord restores the fortunes of his people,
Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

You are before me, God, you are behind (CH96)

Be still, for the presence of the Lord (CH189)

My song is love unknown (CH399)

Christ the Lord is Risen today (CH411)

Things are not what they seem. That is the message of the conjurer who, after showing the audience a glass jar with a white die very obviously sitting inside, shakes the jar to reveal that what was once white has now “magically” changed to red. We could, of course, take it one stage further, declaring for a second time that “things are not what they seem”. Did the conjurer really - *really*??? - transform a white die into a red die before their very eyes? The performer might insist that this did indeed happen, yet there will always be the on-looker who will cry: “Smoke and mirrors!” And quite right too, for this has nothing to do with that deceitful term, “magic”, and everything to do with plain illusion and simple drama.

Psalms 14 is one of the shorter of the 150 offerings from the Book of Psalms, yet within this tiny packet of Old Testament writing there is a lesson for all people of faith. In very simple terms, Psalm 14 tells the individual reader (and the community of faith as a whole) that what at first sight might appear to be common sense is, in fact, a gravely mistaken understanding of the lived reality which we occupy.

Here is the scenario: the on-looker scans the horizon to see what lies in every direction: north, east, south, west and all the way round to north once more. What is discovered? Violence, poverty, illness, moral bankruptcy, debt, corruption in high places, the vanity of human beings. As that on-looker goes about their business, noting down this horrendous happening and that dismal situation, they see no sign of hope in any direction. And checking over their catalogue of earthly shortcomings they come to one grim conclusion: there is no God. If God were real and present and - more than this - good, then such things would not happen. Our on-looker reckons he has come up with a pretty smart conclusion, namely that we live in an inept universe devoid of any heaven; a universe in which the only sensible way of thinking is to dismiss the divine as nothing more than a cheap deception.

A world with no God? A great many people might very well think so, and many smart philosophers have embraced that point of view down across the centuries. We might go further, saying that even the person of strong and resolute faith can find their faith challenged by exposure to personal tragedy or global disaster. Whether in the face of loss or of injury, of flood or of earthquake, of volcano or of plague, it is easy to arrive at an understanding which hinges on the ultimate isolation of human beings, marooned on a sea of heartache and loneliness. Things are wrong, and who is there to put them right? For God is nowhere in plain sight, it would appear. Who but an idiot could think otherwise? Yet into this space of sadness steps the psalmist, secure in a different understanding of how things are to be viewed:

Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'

Or to put it another way: things are not what they seem.

Just what is this ancient writer telling us? And in what sense can his message from a bygone age speak into our oh-so-sophisticated lives? In short, the psalmist is concerned with the state of community, of society, of the world at large. Just as we are troubled by so much that we see in our land and in our time, so too the psalmist is angry at what is going on in his own setting of a nation beset by suffering. This writer addresses the allegations of the on-looker in very direct language as the interpretation of a fool who is either unable or unwilling to arrive at the truth.

It should be said at this point that our English word, “fool”, has a great breadth of possible meanings. For us, fools can be inept or silly. They might be a clown or a buffoon. But not here. The word which the psalmist uses to describe the kind of foolishness he is hinting at is one which has a very specific meaning. In this psalm

the fool who is a person who first decides and then acts on the basis of a wrong assumption. Their conclusion may be well-intended, yet the foundation upon which they had chosen to build their argument - here, their case against the existence of God - suffered from a weak foundation which would never prove fit for purpose.

There is a Jewish context for us to consider here. Remember that the experience of a Jewish believer had always been one tied in with the long and often excruciating story of suffering across the ages. Think of Moses and his 40-year journey with the children of Israel through a physical and spiritual wilderness. In this cherished story of liberation from slavery, there had been much pain and suffering, and a whole lot of idolatry as well. Yet, through it all, the Jewish people perceived a God who was present with them through all their arduous exodus out of Egypt towards a new hope and a fresh beginning. Recall, for example, how the people were led:

They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

In other words, the inherited story of salvation from the time of Moses (right down to the writings of the psalmist) was a story of persistent trust in God's provision. Go back to these and similar Old Testament stories and you see an on-going battle between God's holy presence and humanity's waywardness in which the minds of the people were constantly being drawn this way and that in a battle of wills: the divine will against the often contrary human will. This powerful story - this overarching narrative - was nothing less than a big part of what it meant to be Jewish. You were not merely someone who had a vague belief. You were part of a people whose identity, generation by emerging generation, was utterly bound into the presence of God, right at the very forefront of the communal mind. To be Jewish was to be a traveller with God: the God of their ancestors and of their offspring.

For a person within this Jewish tradition to declare the words, "There is no God", would be to deny the collective faith of the generations. But what about us in our day? The cry of "there is no God" is not the utterance of a lone fool. It is the mantra of society as a whole, either spoken from conviction in the case of the atheist, or else whispered as some kind of vague likelihood by those who don't know or (more likely) don't care. For us, in our Christian tradition, there is a shared biblical legacy with our Jewish sisters and brothers. The God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of King David and of the prophets: that God is described to us in the very same Scriptures which were so familiar to Jesus himself. Yet our faith is not Jewish, but Christian. And in that Christian teaching we look to the Cross as a unique moment in history which is our be-all and end-all. And beyond Good Friday we look to Easter Day and on to the coming of God's Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

So, while our faith has a heritage lost in time, for the Christian that heritage is joined and transcended by our conviction that, through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, God is near in all of life: approachable, not concealed; Incarnate, not hidden. And in that knowledge, the one thing we can depend upon is this: There is God - the God who draws close to all who call upon his Name. Thanks be to God!

A prayer by Jennifer Wild. Let us pray:

*Go-between God,
inweave the fabric of our common life,
that the many-coloured beauty of your love
may find expression in all our exchanges. Amen.*

Praying for others

Almighty God,
we bring before you all the broken, troubled and war-filled places in the world.

We pray that you will raise up leaders and peacemakers,
so that your peace will be brought to all who are suffering today.

We pray for women and girls in Afghanistan, who are facing even stricter limits on their freedoms, after three years of Taliban rule. We ask that you would grant persistence and courage to those who speak up for justice and equality.

We bring before you those in particular need at this time:
the unemployed, those experiencing in-work poverty and all who find the current costs of daily living a huge challenge.

We pray especially for those pensioners who depend on winter fuel payments, but who may no longer be eligible. May ways be found to prevent this group of people suffering and becoming ill through lack of adequate heat in the coming months.

As we go into this new week, please make us attentive to the needs of those around us, and help us to share love and grace to all we meet.

In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

Blindwells Saturday activities: Between now and December there will be a selection of activities hosted by local churches in Blindwells new town: Harvest collection and thanksgiving (28th September); Winter clothes exchange (26th October); Act of Remembrance (9th November); and Christmas fun (14th December).

All are welcome! More information (including timings) from Robin or Abigail.

Bible Study: Our autumn groups will be starting soon, as we spend six weeks looking at Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. There will be two options each week: Tuesday in person at Longniddry Church's gathering space (2pm until about 3.30pm on the 8th, 15th, 22nd, 29th October and 5th and 12th November). You might prefer Wednesday evenings on Zoom (7pm until about 8.30pm on the 9th, 16th, 23rd, 30th October and 6th and 13th November). To find out more contact Abigail, Frances or Robin.

Gladsmuir Coffee and Craft Group: Fortnightly on a Wednesday from 10-11.30am in Gladsmuir Church. Come along on 18th 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 2, 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.